John Blackader of Troqueer:
Field preacher of the Scottish covenant

Not many would claim that the coast road south from Edinburgh to the Border town of Berwick is the most scenic in all Scotland. The routes which draw the tourists are of a more spectacular kind and lie, in general, further North or West. Yet the Berwick road is never dull. Its long, sweeping, inland views are balanced with a seaward picture that reaches right out to the horizon and almost every mile is packed with history of warring kings and marching armies and men of mighty faith. And the road leaves impressions on the mind, with its open spaciousness, of liberty, and freedom that one cannot always associate with the atmosphere of the more conventional beauty spots. This makes it all the more ironic that the visual image which dominates almost all the Southward run is a symbol not of freedom or liberty but of banishment and death. It is known, very simply, as the ‘Bass’.

For a period the Bass was a prison, yet not just a prison, but an island prison. Located near to North Berwick, it rises starkly out of the grey North Sea and its bulk, and height, and shape make it a forbidding place; the old folk of the past described it with a richly Scottish word — ‘Aye, it is an UNCO (meaning, huge, lumpy, great, threatening) place, the Bass’. A rock, rather than an island, it is three-quarters of a mile in circumference and has only one possible landing place. Its former holds and dungeons still mantle its craggy, frowning brow and make it seem, what it once really was, a fearsome place to be!

It was during the Restoration period of British History that John Maitland, Duke of Lauderdale, Scottish implementer of Stuart policies, ruthless tyrant and renegade Covenanter, bought the Bass and turned it into the Scottish Alacatraz’ of the late 17th Century. From 1660 on until the Revolution of 1690 Stuart policies eroded the freedom of the Scottish Church. In 1662 more than 300 of her ministers were turned out of their manses and churches for refusing to acknowledge any king in their Church but Jesus.

These were the years of persecution and killing and imprisonment. The men the Bass held were not the robbers, or looters, or killers of the era, but the cream of the godly; men who ‘loved not their lives unto death’, who preached the Gospel of grace in the face of every ban laid on them — even the ban of torture and death; men whose writings provide proof of their culture as well as of their theological erudition and their compassionate, believing hearts; men such as Thomas Hog of Kiltearn, or James Fraser of Brea, or Alexander Shields or Sandy Peden, such men as would have adorned the ministry of any land in any age. Among those who found release from the dungeons of the Bass only through death was John Blockader, the subject of this short sketch. This Spring marks the three-hundredth anniversary of that event and it is fitting that we should just note, once more, with thanksgiving to God, the work and witness of this godly, and rather remarkable, minister of the Gospel.

The ‘first three’ of the field preachers, as they were dubbed, in the country of Galloway during the terrible years of persecution, were John Welsh of Irongray, Gabriel Semple of Carsphairn, and John Blackader of Troqueer. They were all men of the highest standing among the suffering believers of the day and the demand for their help and their services in ministering to the godly led them into many breathtaking situations. If only the materials were available to us for the writing, the life of John Welsh, great-grandson of the Reformer, John Knox, would read like the adventures of some great hero of fiction. Semple did live to see the Presbyterian Church restored at the ‘Glorious Revolution’ but both his comrades of the fields had gone by the time their church emerged from her furnace experience.
It is a matter of thankfulness that we have a very full account of the life and varied experiences of John Blackader and one of the books which sheds light for us back on those dark days is his Memoirs. The work, which was published as late as 1823, rests on MSS written by himself when a prisoner in the Bass and on an account of his sufferings written by his son. The book came out at a time when the historical writings of Dr Thomas M'Crrie were bursting on to the scene and evoking an interest in the work and witness of the Covenanters; they helped revive knowledge in, and experience of, the great doctrines of grace which had fired those men with a zeal and fervour, a warmth and love, that nothing could quench. There was, in fact, a revival of those doctrines and principles so sturdy and strong that the mind and heart of Scotland was prepared, beforehand, for the Disruption of 1843 — a movement involving the same principles.

Birth and background

Like many of his Covenanting peers, John Blackader belonged to an ancient Scottish House which, by the 17th Century, had fallen on rather hard times. Originally from the 'Merse' country of Berwickshire they had, a generation or two before his time, made their residence at Tulliealan. Our subject was born there — into the position of family ‘Head’ — in the year 1615. We lack information about his childhood, but he must have been a 'well-doing' lad with a bright, keen mind and the will to work, for he graduated from Glasgow University in Theology, where he had studied under the watchful eye of his maternal uncle, William Strang, who was Principal of the University. He seems to have done some tutoring at Glasgow, and perhaps some itinerant evangelism as well, and it was not until he was thirty-seven that he was ordained to the Parish of Troqueer in 1653.

Troqueer — and the name of the parish, like that of the man, has a distinctly Scottish ring to it — lies on the banks of the beautiful river Nith and in the Presbytery of Dumfries. Here, Blackader exercised a keen pastoral and a powerful preaching ministry that, even in its first two years, altered the spiritual state of his people very radically. A work of grace went on among them and soon, it seems, family worship and family religion was the characteristic of every home or hamlet in his parish. He must have been very happy in his ministry there until, in the year 1662, it was rudely interrupted by the policy of what has become infamous in Scottish history as 'The Drunken Parliament'. In common with more than 300 of his ministerial brethren he was forced out of his charge — and, of course, his home — because he was not prepared to comply with Episcopal interference in his work, or conform to Episcopal forms of worship and practice among his people. It was the Episcopacy being forced on the Scottish Church by Charles II and his lackey, Archbishop James Sharp of St Andrews — another renegade of the Covenant — which, those men felt, threatened not only the spiritual independence of the Church but the very Headship of Christ within her courts. Hence their oft-quoted slogan, 'For Christ's Crown and Covenant'. Those men just could not swallow the royal supremacy in church affairs for which the new regime stood and which, as events proved, they would try to force on the Scottish Church with gun and sword.

Farewell to Troqueer

The last Sabbath of October 1662 closed Blackader's ministry in Troqueer and severed the formal, pastoral tie with his people there. His preaching that day was punctuated with the arrival of troops of soldiers come, it was clear, to arrest him and put an end to his ministry. He soothed the ruffled feelings of his loyal people and, when many of them followed him to the manse, he completed the sermon that had been cut short so abruptly. But even when he had done, many people still lingered around, unwilling to leave him. He pleaded with them to go quietly to their homes and not to give the soldiers even the semblance of an excuse for attack.

'Go', he said, 'and fend for yourselves; the hour is come when the shepherd is smitten and the flock shall be scattered. Many are this day mourning the desolations of Israel and weeping, like the prophet, between the door and the altar. God's heritage has become the prey of the spoiler: the mountain of the Lord's house as the high places of the forest ... I recommend you to Him who is able to keep you from falling, and am ready through grace to be disposed of as the Lord pleases'.

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Within a week he left the parish and found shelter in the home of a cousin, the wife of Ferguson of Gaitloch, in Glencairn, a family which was to suffer much in those times. He had hardly left his home when, at dead of night, it was raided by a very rough group of soldiers sent to arrest him. One of his sons tells the story, very graphically, of the search for the minister and its failure and of the eviction from the manse that took place.

'Immediately after, we were forced to pack up bag and baggage and to remove to Glencairn, ten miles from Troqueer. We, who were children were put into cadger's creels, where one of us cried out, coming through the Bridgend of Dumfries, "I'm banished, I'm banished". One happened to ask, "Who has banished you, my bairn?" He answered, "Bite-the-sheep has banished me"'.

(Quoted from Scots Worthies; 3rd Edition, p 501)

In this pitiless fashion the Blackaders were driven from their home in the manse of Troqueer.

The days of the field preaching

For about three months after his extrusion from his charge Blackader did nothing at all in the way of preaching. But soon, little groups of harried believers began to arrive at his refuge and to such he gave what he termed 'private exhortations'. Becoming convinced that his silent Sabbaths were being enforced upon him by an Act of Parliament which could not really invalidate either his calling or ordination to preach the Gospel, he began, along with his two near neighbours in the ministry, Welsh and Semple, the adventurous work of preaching in the fields and the open hillsides. In this work he did not spare himself, and some of the most vivid and gripping accounts which have come down to us of the conventicles (as these open-air preachings were called) are from his pen. They are, clearly, pictures drawn from personal participation in great, exciting and powerful spiritual events.

Making Edinburgh his base, and so hiding right under the noses of the men who sought his imprisonment, he was one of the preachers at the great gathering at the Hill of Beath in Fife when thousands assembled above Dunfermline and where, on June 18th, 1670, a Scottish congregation gathered to worship God was, for the first time, protected by heavily armed men — the 'armed' conventicles had begun.

Blackader preached through the Southern Counties of Scotland for years and officiated at the great communions at Irongray and East Nisbet. His descriptions of those meetings are powerful and moving and could well bear reproduction in the literature of our own day. In all his labours he regretted that he could not preach in Scottish Gaelic, the language spoken by the Highland soldiers drafted in by the Privy Council to try to stop the hill-meetings and field preachings. The soldiers took their orders from the officers who led them and they were all too often used to execute people whose only trial was at the hands of the military. The warm, evangelical zeal of John Blackader had him repeat again and again, that he would have been content to go a thousand miles on foot to have had the 'Highland tongue' — and this just so that he could preach Christ to the very men being used to persecute the Church!

Disagreements and dissensions

One of the sad features of the terrible years that became known as the 'Killing Times' is the suspicion and disunity which began to appear in the ranks of the Covenanting movement. The brave witnesses were sundered and some, of whom better might have been expected, accepted the Royal Indulgence, and thus seemed to others to connive at the very Supremacy which they professed to reject. Some brethren took the extreme course of total separation from those who took the Indulgence (and in most cases this was a matter of life and death) and from any who seemed to give such men even the slightest support, and they separated from all who would not join them in this extreme policy.

John Blackader was saddened by all this and used all his influence and energy, while avoiding both extremes, to prevent the suffering church being completely fragmented. Inevitably this
exposed him, despite his own suffering and his clearly defined witness to Covenanting principles, to misunderstanding on the part of Richard Cameron and his followers. And there is at least one sad instance, at Annandale, of the refusal of other groups to sit under his preaching because he would not go so far as themselves in separating from the Indulged, even though, at that very time, he was being hunted like a bird on the mountains.

In an attempt to lessen the tensions amongst the persecuted Presbyterians, Blackader even sailed to Holland in 1678, and actually achieved a good deal of harmony amongst the exiles of the Covenant in Rotterdam. But in 1681, not long after his return to Scotland, Blackader was captured and sent as a prisoner to the dreaded Bass. There, it is said, he spent a good deal of time in teaching others theology and, in particular, in teaching some to read Hebrew. In this fearful dungeon of a place he spent almost five years; and they were the last years of his life. He died at the Bass early in 1686 and his remains were laid to rest in the near-by town of North Berwick. A handsome gravestone marks his last resting place and a touching elegy is inscribed on the stone. That is good. But better still it is that his memory lingers on, and will, with those who love the Saviour and the great, strong, biblical doctrines of grace which set Him forth as worthy of all the devotion of the heart and soul, command not only their respect but their love.

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