



Remembering the 1859 Revival in Scotland

'The marvellous Revival of '59 and the sixties was in no way different from former revivals of religion, except that it was much more stupendous'. So wrote Dr TT Matthews (missionary in Madagascar) in 1910 in an introduction to a jubilee collection of revival reminiscences printed by Aberdeen University Press. That Matthews was correct in his selection of the term 'stupendous' is borne out by all the evidence which has come down to us. It has been estimated by one noted more recent writer on revivals, Dr J Edwin Orr, that perhaps one person in ten of the total population of Scotland, then around 3,000,000, may have been added to the Christian Church.

TT Matthews' Account

TT Matthews' own summary of the revival is worthy of being given at length:

'It was the most stupendous movement that the country had seen since the days of the Covenanters. Scotland has been said to be 'pre-eminently a land of revivals'; but it may be doubted if ever even Scotland had a revival of greater depth, or one that shook the country more from its centre to its circumference than the Revival of '59 and the sixties did. For it was a very great deal more than a mere outward reform of conduct and manners. It was a marvellous visitation of the Spirit of God'.

A little later he goes on to say: *'The years that followed the great Revival of '59 and the sixties were the most fruitful in the annals of Christianity in this country of any since the Reformation. All the mission movements — home and foreign — philanthropic schemes, and measures for the alleviation of human suffering, have been mainly manned and maintained during the last fifty years by the converts of the Revival of '59 and the sixties, and those who sympathized with it. There are men and women still living, many of them of birth, rank and intellectual ability — to say nothing of the host of home ministers, foreign missionaries, evangelists, and others — who were converted, or received a never-to-be-forgotten quickening and impetus to their spiritual life, during that time. Many of these gladly confess that they owe all they are, have been, or ever hope to be to that Revival'.*

General Assembly Accounts

Contemporary ecclesiastical sources fully corroborate what Matthews observes. The 1860 General Assembly of the Church of Scotland heard an Overture on Revivals of Religion from its Dundee Presbytery, following which:

'It was moved, seconded and unanimously agreed that the General Assembly, taking into consideration the gratifying evidences manifested in many countries, and in various districts of our own land, of an increased anxiety about salvation and deepening interest in religious ordinances, followed in so many cases by fruits of holy living, desires to record its gratitude to Almighty God; and — while by no means committing itself to an approval of all that may have accompanied recent religious movements — agrees to recommend to all Ministers and Elders of this Church special watchfulness and prayer in regard to the progress of vital religion in their parishes — watchfulness, lest that which is holy should be abused, or that which is good discouraged — and prayer, that God may be pleased still farther to revive His own work in the midst of the years, and to grant unto His Church and the world a yet fuller outpouring of His Holy Spirit'.

Still more enthusiastically, the Free Church of Scotland Assembly, referred to by the Moderator Dr Robert Buchanan as the 'Revival Assembly', agreed to *'collect from the ministers and members of the Church authentic memorials of the present work of grace in the land, and, in particular, of such incidents connected with it as are more remarkably illustrative and confirmatory of the power of the word and of prayers, with the view of their being preserved as the most precious records in the history of this Church; and further, if judged expedient, of publishing such selections from them as may appear more especially fitted, by the Divine blessing, for general edification'*. In his closing address, Dr Buchanan rousinglly declared that:

'I think I may venture, without hesitation, to say that scarcely ever before have we had an Assembly whose time and attention was so largely occupied with the peculiar and paramount business of a Christian Church. Some of us are old enough to remember Assemblies of a very different kind — Assemblies in which the state of religion and the progress of the gospel were all but lost sight of and forgotten amidst long legal pleadings and wearisome disputations — in which points of form and matters relating to the Church's merely temporal rights and interests as a civil establishment were elaborately handled as the grand questions of the day'.

How great and how blessed the contrast between the spirit of that cold and secular Moderatism and the warm Evangelical life that has characterised the proceedings and breathed through all the deliberations of the present Assembly.

'In this Assembly, time absolutely failed for the recounting of the Lord's wonderful doings in almost every part of the land. We had thought, many of us, that through the ordinary channels of public information the whole extent of the present religious awakening was already generally known. But how striking and how delightful was it to find that the half had not been told! In the course of that long and much refreshing day that was occupied with this blessed subject, as one brother after another rose to address the House, the fact became increasingly manifest, that in countless districts of which no public mention had ever previously been made at all, the Spirit from on high had been dropping as the rain and distilling as the dew to refresh God's weary heritage, and to revive His work in the midst of the years. From East Lothian to the Outer Hebrides — from the shores of the Moray Firth to those of the Solway — and all through the great central mining and manufacturing districts of the kingdom, we heard of scenes which carried us back to the days of the Lord's wonderful doings at Shotts, and Stewarton and Cambuslang. Unless we greatly deceive ourselves, no former revival of religion which our Church and country have witnessed has ever spread over so wide a field, or stirred more powerfully the hearts and minds of those among whom it appeared'.

The United Presbyterian Church also, the third largest denomination in Scotland, reported that within their congregations 129 new prayer meetings had been started in the previous year and over the past two years attendances at prayer meetings had doubled.

Testimonies of Those Involved

We can further convey some idea of what was taking place in Scotland by looking at some testimonies of those who were involved in the revival there. The Rev John Milne of Perth wrote in 1860 that:

'After nearly two years of prayer and waiting, the Lord has visited us in unexampled mercy. At the close of the meeting on the second night, the City Hall presented a scene never before witnessed on such a scale in Perth: it was like a battlefield, a harvest-field; hundreds were seeking the Lord, or rejoicing that they had found Him. Blessed be God for such a season'.

Milne was a close friend and associate of M'Cheyne, the Bonars and WC Burns, and he had witnessed the great work of grace in Perth in the winter months of 1839 and 1840. Even so, he could not depict the later revival of 1859 and 1860 as anything less than an *'unexampled mercy'* and *'a scene never before witnessed on such a scale in Perth'*.

Similarly, Dr James Buchanan, speaking to the Free Church of Scotland's Report on Revival during the 1862 Assembly, described the effect of the revival in Dumfriesshire:

'I have been privileged to witness the effects of the revival in the country district in which I reside in summer — a district contiguous to the sphere of Dr Wood's labours. For the last seventeen years, during which I have had the summer at my own disposal, I have been in the habit of preaching regularly on the Lord's Day evening, in the open air, in Dumfriesshire. During these seventeen years, I had no evidences of fruit resulting from my labours. I had no doubt that the seed sown was not thrown away, but I could not lay my hand on a single case of decided conversion. Last year, suddenly, and without any apparent human instrumentality to account for it, the whole district was visited with an outpouring of the Spirit of God. And now in my immediate neighbourhood I can point to many households where, for the first time, family worship has been established and is now regularly maintained. I was struck last summer with one circumstance that the rural police mentioned to me, namely, that during the whole year they had only two cases of petty theft. The whole morals of the district seemed to have undergone a complete change, and, as the rural police expressed it to me, their office was all but a sinecure.'

Many other lengthy testimonies might be produced from contemporary sources, but enough has been shown to establish the fact that the 1859-60 revival in Scotland was widespread and a mighty effusion of the Spirit of God — probably the greatest that Scotland had enjoyed since the glorious days of the seventeenth-century Covenanters.

Special Features

The 1859-60 Revival in Scotland was not only remarkable for its power and extent, however. It was also notable for certain distinct features and characteristics which marked it off from similar visitations of divine grace. This aspect of the revival was well described by WJ Couper, writing in the year 1918:

'Hitherto it has been possible to associate the beginning of each revival with a distinct place, and even with a special person, while its development outwards from the place of origin could be traced with more or less minuteness. Ministers have been the chief agents in each successive awakening, and the ordinary means employed have been the usual exercises of public worship; the Revival of '59 changed these things. No particular place in Scotland can be claimed as its starting point. Laymen for the first time took the most prominent share in the work...'

The surprise we feel at this need not lead us to doubt that it was a genuine work of God.

Considering the greatness of the Revival of 1859-60 in Scotland, it is nothing short of astonishing to the researcher today to realise how little it has been appreciated and how largely it has been forgotten. For one thing, there has never been written what might justly be termed a definitive history of the revival. Furthermore, one of the principal sources of information, the weekly magazine *The Revival*, edited by RC Morgan, is only available in full in the British Library and the Evangelical Library, both in London. No copies of this appear to exist in any of the main Scottish reference libraries for the crucial years 1859 and 1860. Still more regrettably, few if any centenary celebrations appear to have been held in Scotland to commemorate the Lord's work a century before, so that it might without exaggeration be called today yet another 'forgotten' revival. The Revival may be said to have begun in the autumn of 1859 and to have continued till the spring of 1861, when it gradually subsided. During the intervening twenty months the entire land was brought by the extraordinary power of God into a condition of unusual susceptibility to spiritual impressions. The first place to be aroused was Aberdeen, as early as November 1858. Glasgow began to feel the stirrings of grace in July 1859, south-west Scotland by August of that year and remote parts of the country by November. Certain areas such as the Borders had a 'second wave' in 1861.

Among those who supported the revival were scholarly academics such as Principal David Brown of Aberdeen and Professor George Smeaton of Edinburgh. The saintly Bonar brothers also supported it. Persons from among the aristocracy, such as the Duchess of Gordon at Huntly lent their help.

The Duchess of Gordon

The Duchess of Gordon began her life as Elizabeth Brodie. She was born in London on June 20, 1794. Her family were in the Church of England. She became Marchioness of Huntly in due course and came to Scotland in 1815. Wearied eventually with the ceaseless round of empty pleasures which characterised the lives of the idle rich, she turned to her Bible and found Christ.

In 1844 she had become a much more serious Christian. Like other aristocratic ladies of the past she had a zeal to serve Christ. After 1857 she opened her Castle Park for preaching meetings and erected marquees for large prayer gatherings. Sometimes as many as 10,000 were present. She died in 1864. The Duchess not only employed such preachers as Duncan Matheson and Hector MacPherson, but she actively encouraged Grant of Arndilly, Reginald Radcliffe and a large number of other evangelists in their itinerant labours in that period. But of greater significance still, she was instrumental in the awakening of Brownlow North, whom 'Rabbi' John Duncan was later to call an 'untrained theologian' and a 'born theologian'. The Free Church of Scotland, in a unique gesture, recognised Brownlow North in its General Assembly as an 'evangelist' extraordinary. The 'overture' to recognise Brownlow North was laid before the General Assembly of that Church in May 1859 and bore, among many others, the signatures of Robert S Candlish, George Smeaton and James Begg. The recognition was only just. North was to prove one of the most powerful preachers Scotland ever had. His service to Christ in this period was exceptionally important.

Brownlow North

Brownlow North was a grand-nephew of Lord North, Prime Minister to George III. He was born on January 6, 1810. His mother had taught him to pray but he soon developed worldly habits and turned to a life of gambling and shooting. He might have got through his fortune speedily had not God aroused him to eternal things at the age of 44. The earliest awakenings in his soul are traceable to a conversation with the Duchess of Gordon.

This is how the Duchess herself described the event: 'He was staying in Huntly, engaged in shooting and utterly careless and ungodly. Some friends of his wrote to me, asking me to take some notice of him, with the view to withdrawing him from his evil ways and companionships. I promised to do so, and gave him an invitation to dinner. When we were at dinner, he sat beside me and suddenly said to me with much gravity, 'Duchess, what should a man do who has often prayed to God and never been answered?' I lifted up my heart to God to teach me what to say. I looked him quietly in the face and said, so as not to be overheard by others, "Ye ask and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts" (Jas. 4:3). His countenance changed, he became very greatly moved, was very quiet during the evening and thanked me ere he left'.

This serious impression was deepened not long after by the death of his son, also named Brownlow, and through a book lent to him by the Duchess. The effect was that he determined to 'change his life' and to enter the Church of England's ministry. He decided to consult his friend, Frederic Robertson (later of Brighton), who was then an undergraduate at Oxford and he accordingly entered Magdalen Hall as a Gentleman Commoner. He was not yet converted however and he later returned to a life of sport. But in 1854, when he was almost 45 years of age, he was awakened and powerfully brought to Christ, as the following narrative in his own words relates:

'It pleased God in the month of November, 1854 one night when I was sitting playing at cards, to make me concerned about my soul. The instrument used was a sensation of sudden illness, which led me to think that I was going to die. I said to my son, 'I am a dead

man; take me upstairs'. As soon as this was done, I threw myself down on the bed. My first thought then was, Now, what will my forty-four years of following the devices of my own heart profit me? In a few minutes I shall be in hell, and what good will all these things do me, for which I have sold my soul? At that moment I felt constrained to pray, but it was merely the prayer of the coward, a cry for mercy. I was not sorry for what I had done, but I was afraid of the punishment of my sin. And yet still there was something trying to prevent me putting myself on my knees to call for mercy, and that was the presence of the maid-servant in the room, lighting my fire. Though I did not believe at that time that I had ten minutes to live, and knew that there was no possible hope for me but in the mercy of God, and that if I did not seek that mercy I could not expect to have it, yet such was the nature of my heart and of my spirit within me, that it was a balance with me, a thing to turn this way or that, I could not tell how, whether I should wait till that woman left the room, or whether I should fall on my knees and cry for mercy in her presence. By the grace of God I did put myself on my knees before that girl, and I believe it was the turning-point with me. I believe that if I had at that time resisted the Holy Ghost — of course, I cannot say, for who shall limit the Holy Ghost? — but my belief is that it would have been once too often. By God's grace I was not prevented. I did pray, and though I am not what I should be, yet I am this day what I am, which at least is not what I was. I mention this because I believe that every man has in his life his turning-point. I believe that the sin against the Holy Ghost is grieving the Spirit once too often'.

Scarcely less wonderful is the way in which he was first led to begin to preach. The incident is related by his biographer, K. Moody-Stuart:

'He had gone up to see his beloved mother, now rejoicing over the conversion of her prodigal, her long prayed for, and now penitent son, and when in London he went on a Sunday afternoon to see a Morayshire young man, who had been appointed secretary to a Young Men's Christian Institute. This young man had himself been converted in a sudden and remarkable manner; and, filled with zeal for God and love to souls, used to spend his Sunday afternoons in street preaching. When Mr North called on him he was just preparing to visit one of his stations situated at Kings Cross and asked Mr North to accompany him. They went together. The young man took up his station at his accustomed corner, and after devotional exercises began to address a promiscuous but not very numerous assembly. His words did not tell, and were received at first with indifference, and soon with angry opposition and a torrent of the foulest blasphemy. Mr North was beginning to doubt the wisdom of thus casting pearls before swine and giving occasion to the worst blasphemy he had ever listened to, when several voices were heard calling upon him to speak. 'We'll hear that stout man with the dark eyes'. Thus called on, he felt constrained to speak. Instantly every eye was fixed on him. He riveted and retained the attention of all'.

Such was the improbable start of his life-work as a great evangelist. Once begun, he never stopped preaching. His early labours were in the North East, in and around Dallas. Here he preached in congregations of the Free Church of Scotland and elsewhere. But he was to become an evangelistic preacher of exceptional power. Before long his fame was so widespread and his popularity and usefulness so great that he was being compared to George Whitefield. His zeal and service only ended with his death in 1875, twenty years later. In the intervening years he was instrumental in bringing hundreds and, more probably, thousands, to Christ.

The Aberdeen Revival

Over the years a stream of eminent preachers, from the Highlands especially, had passed through Aberdeen University's Marischal College. A time of fresh spiritual visitation was now at hand. On Sunday 3rd October 1858 there arrived in Aberdeen a zealous young Ulsterman, fresh from the stirring revival scenes of his native land. His name was the Rev H Grattan Guinness, a member of the famous family of that name in Dublin. He commenced a mission in the Granite City, using for his meetings the Bon Accord Free Church in the mornings and St Paul Street Presbyterian Church in the afternoons. There were good attendances. The people listened with attention and in certain cases with conviction. Enquiries followed.

A month later, in November 1858, Brownlow North arrived in Aberdeen to conduct meetings — not for the first time, for he had preached there before. The preaching of these two servants of Christ was blessed. But it was largely a preparation for what was to follow and what was to become a work of grace on a large scale. On 27th November 1858 Reginald Radcliffe arrived in the city. Seeing that Brownlow North was enjoying popularity and having success he modestly kept himself in the background, conducting meetings for children in premises at Albion Street and counselling those awakened by Brownlow North. But after the latter had departed, Radcliffe preached almost every night during the winter of 1858-59 mainly in Greyfriars Church of Scotland, whose minister, the Rev James Smith, was a hearty supporter of the awakening which now began, even though his support brought him no little criticism from his Presbytery. Great crowds attended Radcliffe's services and it was generally agreed that his preaching was more effectual than that of the two men mentioned earlier. It may be added that there was initially opposition to the preaching of laymen from some good ministers and men. This opposition, however, was not bitter or prolonged, as the nature of the awakening was seen increasingly to be from heaven and the disapproval appears to have passed away. Before long the revival was nationwide in scale and importance. The initial disapproval respecting the labours of Brownlow North melted away so that in the Free Church Assembly of the same year, 1859, Brownlow North was given unique recognition as an evangelist.

The words used by Professor William Cunningham, the moderator for that year, deserve to be quoted in part as they show the fair-mindedness and candour which he and the Free Church as a whole felt towards preachers called in an unusual way to their work:

'I have had a strong and growing conviction that the Church ought to make provision for occasionally deviating from her ordinary arrangements. I never could see the warrantableness of any Church of Christ, however deeply impressed with its importance in ordinary circumstances, venturing to lay down as a resolution that she would not see, and would not recognise, gifts for preaching or for the ministry, except in men who had gone through the whole of the ordinary curriculum. No Church has a right to lay down that rule. This Church has not laid down that rule, and I trust never will'.

The Aberdeen awakening was the first outstanding such work at this period and it continued for several years. Students witnessed to their fellow-students. Open-air services were held. Children's meetings flourished. In 1864 Richard Weaver came to assist, invited by Reginald Radcliffe.

Other Areas

During the months of 1858-9, reports had increasingly reached Scotland and other parts of Britain about the amazing religious revivals taking place first in America and then in Ireland. Inevitably these reports kindled new expectations that Scotland might be visited in turn, especially as the tide of blessing was plainly travelling from West to East. These expectations were not to be disappointed. The secular and religious press began to report unusual spiritual occurrences by the month of August, 1859.

K Moody Stuart was not the only writer to notice that the progress of the revival, when it did come to Scotland, followed a significant path:

'As the late Professor Millar remarked, when he announced in our house the first news of its (the revival's) having touched the Scottish shores, it came just in the track that cholera would have come, crossing the Channel (ie the Irish Sea) at its narrowest point, and appearing first on the coast of Ayrshire, from which on a clear day a keen eye can identify the outline of the hills of Antrim'. Stuart went on, evidently with necessary caution, to write: *'This fact does not reduce that remarkable awakening to a mere epidemic, though it was accompanied by physical phenomena'.*

Contemporary sources are available to show that the 1859/60 revival in Scotland, which began now to show itself in the areas of Clyde and North Ayrshire, shortly after spread to more or less all parts of the land from Ness in Lewis to Stranraer, and from Wick to Eyemouth and the Borders.

The men who were instrumental in this growth were all remarkable men. The zealous James Turner alone is reputed to have been the means of converting 1,000 souls in the North-East-coast fishing villages. As for Robert Cunningham, he had a voice that sounded like thunder. Duncan Matheson was a born open-air speaker and had *'a voice like one of the bulls of Bashan'*, according to Alexander Whyte. Of Reginald Radcliffe it was said that *'there was something in his face that smote opposition out of a man before he uttered a word'*. There can be no mistaking the kind of preaching which these men gave to their hearers for Brownlow North was sometimes termed *'the brimstone preacher'*, such was the power and seriousness of the sermons he delivered.

By any interpretation, the 1859-60 revival was a glorious visitation of the Spirit of God. We conclude with an abridged account of one of the scenes described in the press at the time. It refers to the town of Glengarnock in north Ayrshire and must have been typical of many similar occurrences in the time of the 1859-60 revival in Scotland.

Account by Mr Steel, minister of Dalry

'About six weeks ago I preached at the Cross of Dalry, in an open space, capable of receiving four or five thousand people. Every possible effort was made that one night to put me down ... There was a perfect sea of faces looking up to the preacher ... An immense crowd, however, turned out to hear the preaching of the Word — a multitude that I could not number, accustomed as I am to open-air meetings. They continued to listen with solemn attention, in the midst of a heavy shower of rain, but they were so closely packed together that the rain could only reach their head and shoulders...

'We were driven into the Free Church school, which will hold, when full, about 500 persons. The noise continued outside, but the school was filled with an attentive audience. About ten o'clock, a person rose and said that we ought to kneel and engage in prayer. A working man then rose, and, with a heart like to burst, poured out a most earnest prayer to Almighty God. I cannot tell whether it was at the close of the prayer or after we rose that, all of a sudden, the whole meeting seemed to be moved by an invisible power.

'Here and there through the whole schoolrooms there were persons crying out for mercy, and strong men crying in such manner as I had never heard before. I have seen persons suffering under various stages of cholera, I have seen much agony in my day, but never such a sight as this. I felt myself utterly powerless. I believed that I had the coldest heart and the most suspecting eye in that assembly, and sat down in a corner, feeling that I must sit still and know that He was God. But it was wearing on to 12 o'clock, and I felt that I must do something. A number were carried out, stricken down, as people have been in Ireland, and the elders and working men were busy speaking to anxious souls. At length I said, I will engage in prayer; and I poured out a prayer to God such as I had never uttered before. While I was thus engaged I heard them carrying strong men past me, and when I rose, wherever I went I found anxious souls...'

The question which rises up spontaneously in the mind in the light of these stirring acts of God in past times is, When will God visit us like this again? Never did Scotland seem more in need of such a work of divine grace as at this hour. It is a vision to be cherished and a dream to be prayed for. Ought we not to spend, each of us, some special time each week, in prayer for God to revive us again? Why not set aside half an hour each week on a Friday morning to cry to God to send his Holy Spirit down upon us again?

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