

# CENTENARY OF THE SCOTTISH DISRUPTION

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THE summoning up of a Disruption into the remembrance of things past appears to be a curious, perhaps an eccentric, indulgence of historical piety. It is almost as unnatural as the family celebration of a divorce anniversary. Emphasis is given to such objections when the proposed commemoration refers to an ecclesiastical rupture (now happily all but healed) that took place a hundred years ago not even in Canada but in Scotland, where religious schism had become almost a form of national self-indulgence. How far removed indeed from the modern mood of unity and reconciliation in matters of faith and order!

The famous Disruption of the Scottish Kirk that took place on 18th May, 1843, was, in Carlyle's phrase and in Carlyle's sense, an "incident in modern history." Events are more than ordinary and commonplace when they point beyond themselves. The changing scene becomes alive with meaning when it is viewed in the light of interests more permanent than of momentary and incidental character. For the present-day mind the Disruption is recalled chiefly because it is a classical engagement in the long war between the authorities of Church and State. This conflict, in turn, is the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual tension in human life between the claims of the eternal and of the secular, between the heavenly and the worldly, between the voice of God and the voice of man. It is an old story, old as the Bible, yet ever new, as modern as Niemöller in his German prison. Great books have been written on the subject, of which St. Augustine's *Civitas Dei* is chief, and great men have been shaped in character and destiny as their lives have become a meeting-point for the two contesting authorities. In Scotland, in one dramatic event a whole nation was involved.

The scene of this particular battle might be described as classical soil. When Andrew Melville is reported to have plucked King James VI of Scotland by the sleeve, he "laid his hands on an anointed King" calling him "God's silly vassal." "There are two Kings and Kingdoms in Scotland," said Melville, "There is Christ Jesus the King and his Kingdom; the Kirk, whose subject King James VI is and of whose Kingdom he is not a King nor a Lord, nor a Head, but a Member." Into that one

defiant utterance centuries of Scottish history were compressed. The Disruption was but the last entry in a long record of consistent witness; but, being the ultimate event in a series so long protracted, it was also the first movement towards a new settlement that has attracted world-wide notice.

In Canada the Disruption had not only its echoes but its effects, of which some mention must be made. With what seems nowadays a strange and perverted colonialism of mind, the Scottish Kirk dispute split Canadian Presbyterianism asunder. It nearly slew the infant Queen's University in its cradle, although, as an interesting by-product, it certainly gave one distinguished Principal—probably two distinguished Principals—to that same institution. But on Canadian soil, although at the time the fight worked much needless havoc, eventually it acted in radical fashion to give the Presbyterian Church in Canada a truly indigenous character. To this very day a sensitive and experienced observer can walk through certain towns in Canada and by the very exterior configuration of the ecclesiastical buildings identify the nature of their Presbyterian ancestry—Auld Kirk or Free Kirk or (most likely) Anti-Burgher. But, who among our moderns even understands the meaning of such terms that a hundred years ago were hotly debated on Saturday nights in Upper and Lower Canada? So far have we travelled in the course of a century!

On 18th May, 1843, the ancient city of Edinburgh had put on what to this very day can only be described as her General Assembly airs. The Lord High Commissioner had come to revive for a season the regal state that once had graced the city even if only with the limitations of a vice-regal authority. Ministers and their wives, accompanied by their elders, had arrived from distant parishes for the debates of the Assembly. But this year there was an atmosphere of excitement and crisis. Faces were grim and set; everywhere there was talk of things having come to an end, in which grave decisions could no longer be avoided. Outside St. Andrew's Church, in which the fathers and brethren were meeting, a great crowd had gathered in expectancy of something more than a Lord High Commissioner's show. Then, from out of the doors of the Assembly, a remarkable procession emerged. Headed by the Right Rev. David Welsh, Moderator, accompanied by the great Dr. Thomas Chalmers and Dr. Gordon, a considerable body of the Commissioners marched to a prepared place of meeting to carry on what they called The Church of Scotland Free or (as it came to be known) The Free Church of Scotland. Such was the actual Disruption.

It was of this event that Lord Cockburn wrote in his *Journal*—"It is the most honourable fact for Scotland that its whole history supplies." On hearing of it, Lord Jeffrey exclaimed "I am proud of my country. There is not another country upon earth where such a deed could have been done". Such evaluations ring with an air of extravagance in our ears to-day. Clearly they demand some interpretation.

The actual Disruption came as the climax to a period of tension within the Scottish Church that has come to be known as "The Ten Years Conflict." The question in immediate dispute was the right of congregations, subject to the judgment of Presbytery, to "call" their own ministers. Behind that lay a deeper question still, proposed by the historical temper of Scottish religion engaging itself with the current mood of the time. In contrast with the Reformation in England, the great upheaval of the sixteenth century in Scotland came not from the throne, but from the people. It was at once a spiritual protest and a social revolt, both made in the name of the common man, trembling only before the sole sovereignty of God. Alike in Calvinistic faith and in Presbyterian order, its inspiration came from Geneva. These characters imparted themselves to the Scottish Church, sometimes flaming into active revolt as in the times of the Covenanters, or again becoming occasions for ecclesiastical separation when contentions for principle took protesting groups into secession from the national Zion.

The early nineteenth century saw great changes in Scottish life. James Watt had perfected his steam-engine at the University of Glasgow, and all around that ancient city vast quantities of coal and minerals had been discovered. The power-loom, the locomotive and the steam-ship were setting up a new order of economic life in which rural folk began to flock into cities and towns. The terrible problem of the Scottish city slum made its appearance. In the North the mountains and glens were being stripped of their ancestral inhabitants by heartless landlords masquerading as highland noblemen, although many of these lairds were only upstart intruders who, after the affairs of the '15 and '45, had been rewarded for their share in quelling the Jacobites. There had also been a revival of true religion among the people, especially in the Highlands and on Clydeside, and while the Disruption was a national movement, it made a special appeal to the North and West.

The relative importance of men and movements will always provide a subject for disputation in the study of history. You

may accept Carlyle's thesis or Trotsky's. Either history is "but the biography of great men" or "the distinguishing tracts of a person are merely individual scratches made by a higher law of development". The prophet and his times are never separable. Certainly the Disruption gathered its strength and leadership around the massive figure of Dr. Thomas Chalmers. This remarkable man united a powerful intellect with a deeply religious character. Moreover, he had what has been described as an "experiencing nature". The movements of his times became an inward apprehension. He grasped their meaning not only with his mind, but with his heart and soul. He combined intense conviction with masterful ability. His writings on political economy can still be purchased to-day in a cheap popular edition. With inflexible determination and practical genius he set the course that led at last to a break with the Establishment.

The crisis in the Kirk became more acute as repeated overtures to Parliament failed to bring redress. At last a "Claim of Right" was adopted in 1842, being a final appeal to Her Majesty's Government, at once protesting spiritual rights and seeking redress for grievances. The Claim was rejected by an uninformed English parliamentary majority, and when the Assembly met in 1843, the limit of endurance was reached. Disruption became inevitable.

It has to be recollected that the ministers who marched three abreast from St. Andrew's Church that May day were indulging in something more serious and final than a gesture of rebellious defiance. They were abandoning their Kirks, but not their parishes; they were deliberately surrendering their livings and manses, and above all, they were splitting asunder the national Church of their fathers. Moreover, they were proposing not to set up a new body, but to continue the ancient Church on what must be a new basis. The teinds or tithes were no longer available. Not only new churches, but new schools had to be erected, for in 1843 there was as yet no public system of education in Scotland. But proof was speedily given that the Disruption sentiment was no ecclesiastical manoeuvre to compel the State into a change of policy. The decision of the Free Churchmen met with a practical response that astonished the leaders of the movement. The organizing genius of Dr. Chalmers matched his inspiring personality. A sustentation fund was created for the support of the ministry; churches and schools were erected; a college was instituted, and so great was

the enthusiasm that for missionary objects the sums contributed to the Free Church soon exceeded the entire givings for similar purposes in the previously undivided Church.

It would be a profound mistake to suggest that, with the departure of the Free Churchmen, all virtue went out of the "Auld Kirk", as the Church of Scotland was now familiarly called. The Church was not only wounded and bleeding, it was rent asunder. Many of her noblest ministers had parted company with her fellowship, and she was faced with an immense task. Parishes were left vacant, in some cases the churches were almost deserted. But there were bright spirits left behind, and they set themselves to repair the damage. Chief among them were the great Macleods, Drs. John and Norman, who with Celtic fire and eloquence defended their loyalty to the Established Church. Soon there were to appear the brothers Caird of Glasgow, and Charteris, destined to inaugurate a new day in social endeavour for the Scottish Church and to wear again the mantle first assumed by the great Chalmers himself.

At the time of the Disruption, the Presbyterian Church in Canada had a rather ill-defined status. Presbyteries had been set up, but for the most part they had some kind of connection with the Church in Scotland, although attempts had been made to create Canadian synods. In Lower Canada the effects of the Disruption would certainly have been much greater but for the fact that the earliest Presbyterian ministers were supplied not from the Church of Scotland proper, but from branches of that Church already in secession long before the Disruption. For similar reasons different groups had already left the Established Church, and it was from their ranks that the majority of the first Presbyterian ministers came to Nova Scotia. Chief among them were Drs. Macgregor and McCulloch, *nomina praeclara et venerabilissima*. On first inspection it seems strange that these men who breathed the very atmosphere of anti-Burgher Presbyterianism with all its virtues and defects, should have made such an impressive appeal to the Scottish highlanders of Pictou. Anti-Burgherism was practically unknown north of Highland line in Scotland. At the time of the great migrations, the Church of Scotland along with the Roman Catholic Church held unbroken sway over the loyalty of the Highlands. But these men of the North and the isles had long memories, and driven out as they had been by the rapacity of their landlords, they had little respect left for a Kirk or a ministry that drew its support from duke and laird. When the Disruption came in Scotland,

the Kirk in the Highlands was swept bare and desolate. In the County of Sutherland only 219 members were left in the Auld Kirk, and on the island of Lewis only 460 retained their loyalty to the Establishment. It may be said, therefore, that in Lower Canada the Disruption to a large extent had been anticipated.

Nevertheless, the Church of Scotland was not unrepresented. The Glasgow Colonial Society had been formed in 1825 for the express purpose of sending ministers in connection with the Church of Scotland to promote "the moral and religious interests of the Scottish settlers in British North America". The activities of this Society were not exactly welcomed by Drs. Macgregor and McCulloch, and the Kirk ministers made little headway. At the Disruption what remained of the Auld Kirk influence greatly diminished. Most of their ministers went home to Scotland to fill vacant parishes, and the result is that the main stream of Presbyterianism in Lower Canada never really came directly from the National Church. To this very day the marks of anti-Burgherism are on the Church of the Maritime Provinces, in government, worship, and the very method of celebrating the Sacraments.

One brave attempt was made by the Church of Scotland to retrieve the day. The great Dr. John Macleod himself of Morven came to Pictou and moved the hearts of the Highlanders as he preached and dispensed the Sacrament. The voice of the Mother Church was calling them, and the response was immediate although the permanent influence was not great. But among the worshippers were the father and mother of D. M. Gordon who, that day, dedicated him to the ministry and so Queen's University got a Principal. Dr. Grant, his predecessor, was a product of the same movement. Thus the Disruption was not without its effects in Lower Canada.

In Upper Canada the Church of Scotland had a much closer connection with the earliest Presbyterian Churches. However, there were also associations with the American and the Dutch Reformed Churches. The burning question was the clergy reserves, around which the Presbyterian ministers were defending the ancient rights of the Church of Scotland to maintain a status equal to that of the Church of England. Already steps had been taken to set up a college for the education of a Canadian ministry, and Queen's had begun its work in 1842. In 1843 the Church was split asunder, and a considerable body of ministers and people separated themselves from connection with the

Establishment. The infant Queen's was bereft of nearly all her professors and students, and eventually Knox College in Toronto was created by the "Free" Churchmen who now formed themselves into the Synod of the Presbyterian Church of Canada. Thus the Disruption hastened the inevitable movement to set up a truly Canadian Church of the Presbyterian order.

Both in Scotland and in Canada, in the long-drawn movement of history, the tragedy of the Disruption was turned to permanent gain. In the old land, where the Church was broken apart, slowly the claim of the Free Churchmen was recognized not only to be a point of view at which conscience had reached its border, but to be a valiant witness that was the genuine testimony of historical religion in Scotland. On the other hand those who remained with the Establishment had conserved a heritage hardly less important—that a nation is not simply a political organization. Scotland would be unfaithful to herself without a truly National Church. These two ideals combined in 1929 to unite the sundered Scottish Church into a reconstituted Kirk of Scotland, again made one, catholic in faith, Presbyterian in order, continuing the inheritance of St. Ninian, St. Kentigern and St. Columba with that of John Knox. In Canada it gave to the Dominion an indigenous Church, preserving the noblest elements of the ancient with new adaptations that are the best proof of an essential vitality.

On the whole, the judgment of W. E. Gladstone made thirty years later stands:

I was one of a number of gentlemen—now very small—who watched with much interest the progress of the controversy which began in 1834 and ended in 1843; and I did not at that time scruple to state in print my opinion, that so far as the traditions and principles of the original Scotch Reformation were concerned, the Free Church—those who afterwards became the Free Church—whatever might be the compatibility of their views with national establishments, were certainly the heirs of the principles and of those theological traditions that are associated with the Scotch Reformation.