SOME SCOTS WORTHIES

FROM WISHART TO RENWICK

J.R.Broome

Scots Worthies

from

George Wishart *to* James Renwick

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Preface

In Scotland, the years from the death of George Wishart at the stake in 1546 until the Glorious Revolution in 1688 were an era of political turmoil and religious persecution. Yet, in the midst of it, the gospel prospered under a divine hand. The Lord raised up a body of able Reformers and ministers of the gospel, watched over them, and endued their ministry with divine power and much success in the midst of all their sufferings and sorrows. Some died martyrs in the fire, and others at the hands of the hangman. Some died in battle fighting for their religious freedom. Among this noble army of martyrs were ministers like George Wishart, John Nisbet, Richard Cameron and James Renwick, and Captain John Paton.

Opposition to the spread of the gospel came from the Roman Catholic Church and the Royal House of Stuart. Mary, Queen of Scots, James VI (later James I of England), Charles I, Charles II and James II all tried to silence the truth, but the Scots resisted them. The stronger the persecution, the more the gospel prospered, producing a generation of ministers, who 'loved not their lives unto the death' (Rev. 12:11).

John Knox established a basis for the organisation of the Scottish Reformed Church on presbyterian lines in his *First Book of Discipline.* He

had been greatly influenced by Calvin during his time of exile in Geneva between 1553 and 1559. Knox led the Scottish Reformation during the reign of Mary, Queen of Scots. When she eventually fled to England in 1568, first the Earl of Lennox and then the Earl of Murray were appointed regents for the young King James VI. Murray was favourable to the Reformed party, but was assassinated in 1570. During this period, in 1569, the Scottish Parliament formally recognised by statute the Reformed Church of Scotland as the 'only true and holy Kirk of Jesus Christ within this realm.'

When John Knox died in 1572, the Reformed Church of Scotland was still under threat. Both James VI and the Scottish Parliament vacillated over the work of the Reformation. James VI did not like the new faith, and sympathised with Rome, and harboured intentions of restoring bishops in Scotland. But the Reformation was firmly established in Scotland, and the subtle, underhand opposition to it brought about the signing of the National Covenant in 1580. The nation's anger against Rome and Spain was very great, and both King and parliament signed the Covenant as they dared not resist it.

But James VI was developing his ideas about the 'divine right of kings' to rule their subjects, added to which was the 'divine right of bishops', his aim being eventually to remove the work of Knox and restore Anglicanism to Scotland. His mother, Mary, Queen of Scots, after plotting to overthrow Queen Elizabeth, was executed in England at Fotheringay in 1587, the year prior to the Spanish Armada.

In 1599 Robert Bruce, one of the leaders of the Reformed congregation, was arrested when he went to present the grievances of the Scottish church to King James VI, and together with a number of other ministers was confined to the castle in Edinburgh. This action was but a foretaste of what the Stuarts, the dynasty of James VI, would do in England and Scotland to the Reformed cause in the next century. In 1600 the King banned Robert Bruce from preaching in Scotland and forced him into exile in France. When James VI became King James I of England in 1603 on the death of Queen Elizabeth, Bruce had two years respite, but the King continued to persecute him until 1625, when he died and Charles I, his son, succeeded to the throne of England. The treatment of Robert Bruce is typical of the attitude of the Stuarts to the Reformed cause.

Persecution in Scotland increased dramatically under Charles I. It culminated in open resistance when, after Charles had attempted to restore episcopacy to Scotland, Janet Geddes aimed a stool at the head of the dean at a service in St. Giles' Cathedral, Edinburgh. This led in 1638 to the re-signing of the National Covenant of 1580 in Greyfriars churchyard in Edinburgh on the last day of February. Alexander Henderson led the way in the signing, and preaching at the ceremony said, 'This is the day of the Lord's power.' The Covenant was eventually copied and signed throughout the whole of Scotland. King Charles gave way and called a general assembly of the Church of Scotland in Glasgow on 21 November. He said, 'I

have no more power in Scotland than the Doge of Venice.'

Now civil war was fast approaching, and Charles I became involved in conflict with his parliament at Westminster, having ruled without a parliament from 1629–40. Civil war between King and parliament began in August 1642, and ended when the Royalist armies were defeated at Marston Moor and Naseby in 1644 and 1645, and the Royalist centre of control at Oxford surrendered in 1646. Charles then fled and gave himself up to the Scots, who handed him back to the English Parliament.

In the midst of that war, on 25 September 1643, the Scots and English joined at St. Margaret's, Westminster, to sign the 'Solemn League and Covenant', which had been drafted by Alexander Henderson. It amounted to an international league of England and Scotland in defence of religion and liberty. It was accepted by the English members of parliament, by the Westminster Assembly of Divines and by the commissioners from Scotland. It was welcomed in England, Scotland and Ireland in the face of Stuart despotism. The 'Solemn League ... ' agreed to 'endeavour to bring the churches of God in the three kingdoms to the nearest conjunction and uniformity in religion.' In this cause the Westminster Assembly of Divines sat for five years to frame a basis for the union. The representatives from Scotland at the Assembly were Alexander Henderson and Samuel Rutherford.

There now developed a split between the Independents in England and the Presbyterians in

Scotland. While Charles I was being held at Carisbrooke Castle on the Isle of Wight, he took advantage of the conflict that was taking place in England between parliament and the army to negotiate secretly with the Scots, who were hoping to establish a presbyterian church order in England, Scotland and Ireland. In 1648 the Scots invaded England but were defeated by Cromwell at the Battle of Preston.

After Charles I was tried and executed in 1649, in 1650 the Scots proclaimed his son, later Charles II, as King of Scotland. Many gracious Scotsmen wanted the Stuart dynasty restored, if it would accept presbyterianism. In 1650 John Livingstone went to the Netherlands to meet Charles II. Charles deceived Livingstone and the other Scottish commissioners, and the Treaty of Breda was signed, by which Charles Stuart accepted the presbyterian church order in Scotland, and the Scots in return declared him king. The result of this folly on the part of the Scots was that the English army under Oliver Cromwell invaded Scotland and defeated the Scottish army at the Battle of Dunbar on 3 September 1650. At that battle there was the sad spectacle of godly ministers present in both armies.

After the battle Cromwell wrote to John Livingstone to try to bring about some reconciliation, but Livingstone felt unable to respond. Later, in 1654, Livingstone went to London and met Oliver Cromwell, who was now Lord Protector of England, and preached before him. When, after Cromwell's death, the Stuart dynasty was eventually restored in England and

episcopacy was restored in Scotland, John Livingstone was exiled by Charles II and spent the last nine years of his life in the Netherlands.

Restored to the English throne in 1660, Charles II set about destroying the work of the Reformation and establishing his 'divine right' to rule. Religious persecution reared its ugly head again in England and Scotland, and the reign of peace and toleration under Cromwell's government was now supplanted by a reign of terror under the Stuart monarchies of Charles II and James II. In Scotland the Covenanter armies resisted and won victories at Ruillon Green, Drumclog and Bothwell Bridge. John Paton, Alexander Peden, John Nisbet, Richard Cameron and James Renwick were among their renowned leaders. But their greatest victories were won on the scaffold, from the Marquis of Argyll in 1661, to the youthful James Renwick in 1688.

The Covenanters met in secret in the hills and on the moors of Scotland, many dying for their faith, often shot down or arrested at worship. Constantly they moved from one hiding place to another. This persecution lasted from 1662 until the overthrow of James II in 1688, when William and Mary came from the Netherlands and established a Protestant monarchy.

But when peace came, the Acts of the Assemblies and Synods of the post 1688 Revolution churches made no mention of the 'Solemn League and Covenant'. Instead, Anglicanism was restored in England and a Presbyterian Church and General Assembly under the King in Scotland. Sad as that was, in Scotland there

was now peace and religious freedom. Yet it remains true that Scotland's greatest period of spiritual blessing and spiritual prosperity was in the days of persecution.

George Wishart (died 1546)

George Wishart was born in Scotland, and educated at the University of Cambridge, which he appears to have left about the year 1544 when he returned to Scotland towards the end of the reign of King Henry VIII. He is thus, as regards the Reformed truth, a predecessor of John Knox, whose friend he was and whom spiritually he greatly influenced. It is principally from the writings of John Knox that the information about the life and work of George Wishart has survived.

He returned to Scotland in 1544 from Cambridge, and began teaching in a school in the town of Montrose, and it was here that he first began to preach, and later at Dundee. Here he became widely known due to his public exposition of Paul's Epistle to the Romans. The Roman Catholic clergy realised, as they heard the great doctrines of the Reformation expounded, that there was much here that was contrary to their own teaching, and were alarmed at the ready reception which the people of Dundee gave to the truth.

The first Scottish martyr, Patrick Hamilton, had died at the stake on the last day of February 1527, at the

age of 24. From then onwards much persecution had followed and many had been faithful, even unto death. In 1539 Cardinal Beaton succeeded his uncle in the See of St. Andrews. It was this cardinal who was roused by the success of George Wishart's preaching in Dundee in 1544, and made efforts to prohibit him preaching. This caused Wishart to leave Dundee and travel to the west of Scotland, where he continued preaching in the town of Ayr, crowds gathering to hear him.

At the instigation of Cardinal Beaton, the Archbishop of Glasgow forced Wishart to stop preaching in the church at Ayr, and this led him to start preaching in the open air at the market cross. By this time he had some influential hearers who had been blessed under his ministry. When he went to the church of Mauchline, the Sheriff of Ayr put a garrison of soldiers in it to keep him out. Some of Wishart's followers would willingly have used force to remove these troops, but Wishart stopped them, saying, 'Brethren, it is the word of peace which I preach unto you; the blood of no man shall be shed for it this day. Jesus Christ is as mighty in the fields as in the church; and He himself preached more often in the desert and by the sea than in the Temple at Jerusalem.'

And so Wishart continued to preach to great crowds, standing on a dyke on the edge of the moor to the south-west of Mauchline. Here he preached on one occasion for over three hours, and the Lord so blessed his ministry that many were brought out of nature's darkness by it. One outstanding example was the laird of Shield, Laurence Rankin, a very profane man, who,

to the astonishment of all present, wept tears of repentance. Thus Wishart continued for about a month to preach in this area, until news reached him that the plague had broken out in Dundee not long after he had been forced to leave it. This made him decide to leave the west of Scotland and return quickly to Dundee.

There he preached at the East Gate, those infected by the plague standing outside to hear, and those free of the disease standing inside. His text was Psalm 107:20, 'He sent his word and healed them, and delivered them from their destructions.' In his sermon he spoke of the judgments of God that follow those who despise the truth. He felt very much that the plague had come upon them because of his ejection.

Before leaving the west coast, many of his friends there had pleaded with him to stay, fearing that he might catch the disease and die, but Wishart replied, 'The people of Dundee are now in trouble and need comfort. Perhaps this hand of God will now make them magnify and reverence the Word of God, which before they lightly esteemed.' His ministry was made a great blessing during the plague, and while many died, his life was preserved, though he frequently visited the sick and dying.

His enemy, Cardinal Beaton, watched the situation, and planned to assassinate him. He hired a priest, John Wightman, to stab him one day after he had finished preaching. The man stood at the foot of the pulpit with a dagger concealed in his coat. As George Wishart left the pulpit he was remarkably warned of the

danger by a secret intuition, which made him grab the man's hand and snatch the dagger from him. When the congregation realised how near to death Wishart had been, they made an effort to lynch the priest, but Wishart defended him and saved his life.

After the plague had abated, he left Dundee and went to Montrose, where Cardinal Beaton again tried to have him assassinated. A forged letter was sent to him asking him to visit a sick friend, while on the road, about a mile and a half from Montrose, sixty armed men waited to kill him. Wishart set out with some friends on the journey, but after about a quarter of a mile stopped, saying, 'I am forbidden by God to go on this journey. Will some of you be pleased to ride to yonder place (pointing with his finger to a little hill), and see what you find, for I apprehend there is a plot against my life.' As they went forward he returned to Montrose. They discovered the sixty horsemen, and the plot was exposed. When they told George Wishart, he said, 'I know that I shall end my life by the hand of that wicked man [Cardinal Beaton], but it will not be after this manner.'

He now planned to go to Edinburgh to meet some of his friends from the west. The first night after leaving Montrose he lodged at Invergowrie with his friend James Watson. At midnight his friend heard him get up and go into the garden. There he prostrated himself on the ground in earnest prayer for nearly an hour, and then returned to his bed. Some who had watched him asked him why he had risen in the night, and what was the cause. After pressing him, he

eventually said, 'I will tell you: I assuredly know my travail is nigh at end; therefore pray to God for me, that I may not shrink when the battle waxeth most hot.' They said that was but small comfort to them. Wishart replied, 'God will send you comfort after me. This realm shall be illuminated with the light of Christ's gospel, as clearly as any realm ever was since the days of the Apostles. The house of God shall be built in it; yea, it shall not lack, whatsoever the enemies shall devise to the contrary, the very copestone. Neither shall this be long in doing, for there shall not many suffer after me. The glory of God shall appear, and truth shall once more triumph despite the devil. But alas, if the people become unthankful, the plagues and punishments which shall follow will be fearful and terrible.'

After the prediction, which, through the instrumentality of John Knox and others, was accomplished in a remarkable way, he proceeded to Leith, where he arrived about the 10 December 1545. There, on the following Sunday, he preached from Matthew 13 on the Parable of the Sower. Hearing that Cardinal Beaton was soon to be in Edinburgh, his friends persuaded him to leave Leith and go to Inveresk, where he preached the next Sunday to a crowded audience, which included the upper as well as the lower classes. He preached the two following Sundays at Tranent, and in each of these sermons hinted that his ministry was near the end.

He next moved to Haddington, where he preached to a large congregation, many of whom later

feared to attend his ministry due to the threats of the Earl of Bothwell. Wishart was grieved by the withdrawal of so many of his congregation, but was encouraged by the presence of his friend, John Knox, whom he told that he was weary of the world, since he perceived that men had become weary of God, and, in his last sermon there, he warned the inhabitants of Haddington that 'fire and sword' would waste them for their 'neglect of the gospel.' This prediction also proved true, as the English captured the town, while the French and Scots besieged it in the year 1548.

This was Wishart's last sermon. In it he spoke of his death being near at hand. From Haddington he went to Ormiston. John Knox wanted to follow him, but Wishart said, 'Return, one is enough for a sacrifice at this time.' During the night the house where he was staying was surrounded by the Earl of Bothwell and his men. Wishart was captured and taken to Edinburgh, where the governor eventually handed him over to Cardinal Beaton, who took him to St. Andrews for trial.

There, in February 1546, he was tried for preaching the Reformed truths, for teaching that man had no free will, for denying that there are seven sacraments, for denying that prayer should be made to saints, for saying that the Pope had no more power than any other man, and for denying the existence of purgatory. He was condemned to death by burning.

On the morning of his execution the captain of the castle invited him to breakfast, and there at that meal table he preached for about half an hour, and then,

after giving thanks, broke bread, entreating those present to remember the death of Christ. Then, taking the cup, he bade them remember Christ's blood, and having tasted the wine himself, he delivered it to them, concluding with prayer, and saying that he would neither eat nor drink any more in this life. Shortly afterwards he was led out to the stake, where he declared that he felt much joy within himself in offering up his life for the name of Christ.

He said, 'I fear not this fire, and I pray that you may not fear them that slay the body, but have no power to slay the soul.' The executioner then lit the fire, and with a loud voice Wishart said, 'O Saviour of the world, have mercy upon me. Father of heaven, I commend my spirit into Thy holy hands.' Cardinal Beaton and many of his followers watched the execution, and thus Wishart died a martyr for the truth on the 1 March 1546. Remarkably, the Lord avenged his death in the assassination of Cardinal Beaton on 28 May 1546.

John Knox (1505-1572)

Knox was born about 1505 at Gifford, a village in East Lothian. He received his early education at the grammar school at Haddington, where he learnt Latin, and from where he went on to Glasgow in 1521 to the university. The professor of theology and philosophy at the time was John Mair. Scotland was a wholly Roman Catholic country and Glasgow University was no exception to this. But Knox's professor was not by any means an extreme Catholic. He taught that a General Council of the Church had power over the Pope; he denied the temporal supremacy of the Pope; he censured the clergy for their propensity to accumulate money and live well.

In those days, just after the ferment of ideas had been begun by Luther at Wittenberg in October 1517, Europe was alive with criticism of the church, and so Knox came into contact with some of this at Glasgow. But John Mair did not seem to see much beyond the obvious outward abuses in the Roman Catholic Church. His main teaching consisted of the current philosophical and intellectual religion tinctured with superstition. Knox, like Luther and many other of the

Reformers, soon became dissatisfied with this scholastic religion, though he did not break with it all at once. He obtained his M.A., and then taught philosophy in the university for some time. He was ordained a priest a year or two before 1530.

Between 1530 and 1535 a change began to take place in him. He dropped his scholastic studies and was led to the Scriptures. Thomas McCrie in his *Life of John Knox* says, 'Not satisfied with the excerpts from ancient authors which he found in the writings of the scholastic divines and canonists, he resolved to have recourse to the original works. In them he found a method of investigating and communicating truth to which he had hitherto been a stranger, the simplicity of which recommended itself to his mind ... Among the fathers of the Christian church, Jerome and Augustine attracted his particular attention. By the writings of the former he was led to the Scriptures as the only pure fountain of divine truth, and instructed in the utility of studying them in their original languages. In the work of the latter he found religious sentiments very opposite to those taught in the Romish Church, who, while she retained his name as a saint in her calendar, had banished his doctrine as heretical from her pulpits.'

Knox did not at once start to learn the original languages. He studied Hebrew while in exile on the Continent. Greek he did not touch until in middle life. But at this stage in his career he became alive to the hidden treasures which lay buried in the Scriptures.

Scotland in his day was under the domination and blind guidance of the Papacy, which had vast wealth. Tremendous idleness and ignorance were common among the clergy, who often had several parishes in their charge merely to increase their income. There was persecution and suppression of free inquiry—excommunication was the threat which held an awful fear. It was a religion far removed from apostolic simplicity and Biblical truth. Before Knox appeared on the scene, the Reformed faith had made some progress. Patrick Hamilton, a youth of royal descent, had been its first martyr at the stake in February 1528, at the age of 24. In his short lifetime he had been to Wittenberg and met Luther.

Between 1530 and 1540 the flames of persecution began to burn in all directions. Some recanted, some escaped to England, but the truth was spread through the circulation of Tyndale's translation of the Bible, and good books came to Scotland through merchants travelling from abroad. By 1540 many persons of rank in Scotland were numbered among the supporters of the Reformed faith. Between 1540 and 1542 the numbers of those adhering to Reformed views rapidly increased. The clergy reacted by presenting lists of people of rank who were involved to the King to be branded as heretics, but he rejected this proposal. Then, in December 1542, King James V of Scotland died.

In this year it became clear that Knox was a Protestant, and for safety he went to southern Scotland. He was pronounced a heretic by the Roman Catholic Church and stripped of his priesthood. By an act of the

regent of 1542-3, it was declared legal to read the Bible in the common tongue. This was a great help to the Reformers, and Protestant books were now published in Scotland. Knox was helped at this time by George Wishart, a gracious minister who had been exiled to Cambridge but returned to Scotland in 1544. He became a tutor to the son of a gentleman in East Lothian.

In 1547 some members of the Reformed faith seized the castle of St. Andrews, and Knox went there for protection. He gave lectures on the Scriptures and catechised in the parish church attached to the castle. Those who had taken refuge in the castle and attended these lectures urged Knox to preach. After considerable hesitation, feeling his insufficiency for such an office, Knox at last agreed to do so. Of this step McCrie says, 'At length, satisfied that he had the call of God to engage in this work, he composed his mind to a reliance on Him who had engaged to make His strength "perfect in weakness", and resolved with the apostle, not to count his "life dear", that he might finish with joy the ministry which he received of the Lord, "to testify the gospel of the grace of God".'

Very differently did he approach this step from his ordination as a Roman Catholic priest in 1530. At once he struck out against the Papacy, boldly pronouncing the Pope to be Antichrist, and the whole system to be erroneous and unscriptural. This sermon caused a great stir and Knox was called to defend his statements before a committee of learned men. This he did with courage, and put his Roman Catholic

protagonists to confusion. Had they possessed the castle of St. Andrews they would have silenced him.

In June 1547 a French fleet appeared before St. Andrews to help the Scottish government reduce the castle to submission. It was invested by land and sea, and fell to the Roman Catholic forces in July. The lives of all in the castle were spared, but they were taken aboard the French fleet to France. Knox, with others, was confined on board the galleys bound in chains, and treated as a heretic to work at the oars.

In the summer of 1548 the galleys returned to Scotland. By this time Knox's health was very bad. He was taken ill with a fever and it was thought he would die, but on seeing the coast between Dundee and St. Andrews, he said, 'Yes, I know it well; for I see the steeple of that place [St. Andrews] where God first opened my mouth in public to His glory; and I am fully persuaded, how weak soever I now appear, that I shall not depart this life till that my tongue shall glorify His goodly name in the same place.' While getting better he wrote a confession of his faith. He also annotated a work written in a French prison at Rouen by one of his fellow Reformers. His name was Henry Balnaves, and the book was called *Justification*. At length, after a long, tedious imprisonment, Knox obtained his freedom in February 1549—quite how is uncertain.

When freed he went at once to England. Henry VIII had died in 1547 and Edward VI was king under a regency, with Cranmer as Archbishop of Canterbury. The latter needed help, and Knox was a man suitably

qualified to give it. A number of divines had been invited over from the continent as professors at Oxford and Cambridge Universities. Also, a number of able ministers were wanted who could carry on an itinerant ministry in various parts of the country. Knox was sent by Cranmer soon after his arrival in England to preach at Berwick. This pleased him as it placed him in contact with his native country.

In April 1550 he was arraigned before the Bishop of Durham for preaching that the doctrine of the Mass was idolatrous. He ably defended his case before the bishop and a great assembly of churchmen. In 1551 he moved to Newcastle to live, and the Privy Council made him a Chaplain in Ordinary to King Edward VI. In the course of this year he was consulted about the English *Book of Common Prayer*, which was being revised and was to be published in 1552 as the *Second Reformed Prayer Book* of the Church of England. His advice helped to remove the idea of the bodily presence of Christ at the Lord's Supper, and the act of kneeling to receive the bread and wine. In 1552 he was employed in revising the *Articles of Religion* for the Church of England.

For a sermon at Christmas 1552, in which he attacked the Papacy and suggested Roman Catholics were traitors to the crown, he was arraigned before the Privy Council by his enemies, but was acquitted at once. While in London he preached before the court of Edward VI, who very much appreciated his sermon. The Privy Council resolved that for the year 1553 he should preach in London and the southern counties.

During this year his health, impaired on the French galleys, was bad.

In April 1552 he had been offered the living of All Hallows Church, London, by Cranmer, but had declined because he was unwilling to accept a fixed charge in the Church of England, being of the opinion that it was not sufficiently Reformed. At the request of Edward VI he was offered a bishopric, but refused it on the same grounds as he had refused All Hallows.

On 6 July 1553 Edward VI died. Knox remained in London until 19 July when Queen Mary was proclaimed sovereign. He was affected by the demonstrations of joy shown by the inhabitants of London for an event which foreshadowed such danger for the Reformed faith. At once he left London for the north. But since at first Mary showed no signs of violence, in August he returned to the south, preaching to large congregations in Buckinghamshire. At the end of the month he returned to Newcastle.

Liberty was promised to Protestants until 20 December, after which they lost the protection of the law. Knox refused, however, to leave England at once, and went on preaching. In January 1554 some of his letters were seized with the intent of procuring evidence against him. He then set out to go to Berwick, but on the way, against his own inclinations, he was persuaded by his friends to go to the coast and escape to the Continent, which he did, landing at Dieppe on 28 January 1554. During the year 1553 he had married