

The First Tractarian Bishop

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The Scottish Episcopal Church emerged in 1689–90 when the Catholic King James VII of Scotland and II of England was ousted in favour of his Protestant daughter Mary and her Dutch Calvinist husband William of Orange. Although he preferred episcopacy to presbytery as an ecclesiastical system, no doubt for supposed ease of political control and rather against his theological judgment, William allowed the reformed Church of Scotland finally to rid itself of its episcopalian element. He had very little option, since the bishops felt that they could not break their oath to the deposed and exiled monarch. For that matter, it was only a small minority among the ministers who had presbyterian convictions. At the time, furthermore, it must have seemed that a fresh turn in political events might soon lead to a restoration of episcopacy. Anyway, led by a General Assembly drawn entirely from the south of Scotland, the convinced presbyterians succeeded in forcing out hundreds of ministers in 'the most drastic purge the Church [of Scotland] has ever known' (Rosalind Mitchison). It took years to establish Presbyterianism in Aberdeen and the northeast. In and around Edinburgh, however, a fairly fanatical Presbyterian party rapidly prevailed. The grim measure of their fanaticism may be estimated by their success in 1697 in having Thomas Aikenhead, an Edinburgh University student, aged about eighteen, hanged for blasphemy. (Less than thirty years later David Hume was a student.) Indeed, it was well into the eighteenth century before the Kirk settled down. By 1733, for example, it was strong enough to survive the first of many secessions of an anti-erastian tendency that were to culminate in the Disruption of 1843 and the formation of the Free Church.

The expelled episcopalians rapidly formed their own congregations after 1690 but the sympathy for the Jacobite cause which they continued to show for the next fifty or sixty years, misguidedly as it turned out, gradually marginalised them. It might even be suggested that their mistake was what left the space free for the consolidation of Scottish Presbyterianism. In 1715 the bishops openly endorsed the Jacobite uprising. By 1745, however, years of harassment by the Presbyterian/Hanoverian establishment in Edinburgh had so greatly reduced the Episcopalians in numbers and in self-confidence that they

failed to show public support even when it looked, for a few weeks, as if the new British state was on the point of collapse. Few of the clergy joined the uprising and only two were executed after Culloden. A fairly large number of Episcopalians, especially from the north east, fought on the Jacobite side, while the Hanoverian army contained some Presbyterian troops. In 1792, after a formal declaration of allegiance to the Hanoverian dynasty, the Episcopal Church was granted legal recognition and its doctrines and liturgy at last had to be tolerated. (In the previous year Roman Catholics who took the prescribed oath were freed from the Statutes of Recusancy and the Oath of Supremacy, Catholic worship and schools were tolerated and certain posts in the legal and military professions were opened to Catholics.)

By that time, the better-off Episcopalian families were becoming increasingly anglicised as they prepared their sons to bid successfully for jobs in the government of the British Empire. Alexander Penrose Forbes, born in 1817 into a large traditionally Episcopalian family in Edinburgh, lawyers on his father's side and north-east gentry on his mother's, was educated at the new Edinburgh Academy, founded in 1825 by local businessmen who believed that the old Royal High School, run by the town council, did not provide the right sort of 'English' education for prospective rulers of the colonies. He then went to Haileybury in Hertfordshire, a new college founded by the East India Company to train its staff. At the age of twenty, then, Forbes found himself trying minor criminal cases in a rural district near Madras but susceptibility to malaria unexpectedly ended his career in India.

In 1840 Forbes went to Oxford, intending to take orders. He won a scholarship for Sanskrit, bringing him to the notice of Edward Bouverie Pusey, which led to the most important friendship of his life. Ordained priest in 1845, Forbes was given charge of the Boatman's Floating Chapel, a barge moored on the Oxford canal which was used as a school during the week and served as a chapel for boatmen and their families on Sundays.

On a visit home to Edinburgh he met the Tractarian Marchioness of Lothian who suggested that he should work for his 'own Church'. In 1846 he took charge of the Episcopalian congregation in Stonehaven, dating back to 1690 and composed predominantly of fisherfolk with no sympathy for Puseyite theology or anglicizing ways. A year later, through Pusey's influence, Forbes moved to a large suburban parish in Leeds, where he at once sought to put into practice the Tractarian concern to bring workingclass people into a strongly eucharistically-based community.

Within months, at the age of thirty, Forbes was back in Scotland, consecrated Bishop of Brechin, the very first Tractarian to become a

bishop. He was elected (by six votes to three) by the diocesan clergy, but his name had been put forward by W.E. Gladstone, visiting his Liverpool tycoon father at his recently acquired Scottish mansion in the Mearns. Between the establishment of the Tractarian college at Glenalmond in the 1840s (Gladstone's idea) and the foundation of the massive cathedral in Edinburgh in the 1870s (designed by George Gilbert Scott), the Episcopal Church was at last securing its position on the Scottish religious and social scene. Although tiny in membership, it was — and is — conscious of its continuity with the reformed Church of Scotland as it existed prior to the parliamentary imposition of Presbyterianism in 1690. Although somewhat identified with the anglicised gentry in popular perception, and sometimes even described as 'the English kirk', it has always been an autonomous church, completely independent of the Church of England, with a very different system of government and its own liturgical traditions.

Brechin is a lovely old town in Angus, built of local red sandstone, with a much reconstructed but still recognizably 13th century cathedral which is now the main Presbyterian church. The pastoral responsibilities which Forbes inherited lay somewhat to the south, in the rapidly expanding industrial city of Dundee. Although in existence in Roman times, and near where Kenneth mac Alpin set out about 840 to conquer the Picts, Dundee suddenly developed in the early 19th century as the world centre of the jute industry—making bags, initially, for the American and Caribbean sugar plantations (where the elder Gladstone also made his money). The grand mansions were soon going up in Broughty Ferry and many Dundonians had sons and brothers in India and elsewhere. Bishop Forbes, however, was more concerned with the people in the crowded tenements. No doubt with a certain gracious paternalism, he demonstrated his Tractarian commitment to welfare work among the labouring poor. He even lived among them, with a small group of assistant clergy, forming exactly the kind of quasi-monastic community that Pusey advocated for ministry to the urban poor (Forbes never married). He also insisted on the importance of thorough-going Chalcedonian dogma as the only hope for Christianity against the religious doubt and secularism of an increasing number of educated people in the mid-Victorian period.

In 1860, in the most sensational episode in his life, Forbes found himself being tried for heresy in the Freemasons' Hall in Edinburgh (not the present building). For some years he had encouraged his clergy to hear confessions and give spiritual direction. He also advised the use of Catholic devotional literature (purged of Mediterranean excesses). Mainly, however, his eucharistic doctrine had come to seem far too

'Romanist' for many of his colleagues. He consulted Pusey in Oxford and John Keble came north to lend support. The controversy lasted for three years and the trial itself took more than a month. One by one, his six fellow bishops rejected his doctrine, more or less radically. But a certain vagueness about the procedure for determining orthodoxy left Forbes neither formally condemned nor of course acquitted. Although his eucharistic doctrine was thus repudiated by all the other bishops, in favour of a somewhat Calvinistic virtualism (the bread and wine remain unchanged after the consecration but the communicant receives the virtue or power of the body and blood of Christ), he was not forbidden to go on teaching it. The upshot was that the Episcopal Church, having been thus rudely awakened theologically, stumbled eventually into being theologically quite tolerant.

Forbes himself was deeply upset. For most of the following decade he remained undecided whether he should resign his see and seek admission to the Roman Catholic Church. In 1862, for example, he called on Newman in Birmingham but found him away from home, much to the relief of his friends Pusey and Keble, who feared that he was about to defect. A year later he was unsettled by Manning's pamphlet in defence of papal authority. During these years he devoted his leisure to scholarship, publishing an edition of the Arbutnot Missal, the only surviving example of medieval Scottish liturgy, with his elder brother George Hay Forbes (described by Edmund Bishop as 'facile princeps among those who have dealt with Western Liturgy'). He joined Pusey's campaign to promote reunion with Rome. In 1868 he published his major theological work, *An Explanation of the Thirty Nine Articles*, intended to provide an acceptably Catholic interpretation of the Anglican formularies in view of the Vatican Council. He attacked virtualism and explained transubstantiation as simply the way in which Catholics interpreted with greater definition the words of Jesus at the Last Supper. Forbes holidayed in Italy several times and became friendly with the monks at Monte Cassino. At the secularization of religious houses by the Italian government in 1866 he took part in the campaign to have the monks left in possession. He had dreams of attending the Council to promote his reunionist proposals but the papal invitation exclusively to the Orthodox bishops (not that there was any chance they would have accepted) convinced Forbes that his episcopal orders were not recognized by Rome. Having spent much of his holiday in Bavaria in 1869 with a certain old scholar in Munich, he was already beginning to see the Council as the unstoppable victory of the most extreme ultramontanist.

Forbes got over his Roman fever. Throughout the 1860s he fought

hard and successfully to keep out the English Book of Common Prayer and to retain the Scottish Communion Office. Partly he believed that the latter expressed a much more Catholic doctrine of the eucharist, but partly also he thought that it would be a great betrayal of the Episcopalians who had suffered so much in the 18th century from Presbyterian harassment to abandon their Office. Anglicised as he was in many ways, Forbes thus ensured the continuance into the next century of the most distinctive treasure of Scottish Episcopalianism.

Forbes died in 1875, at the age of fifty eight, having made his confession and received the last rites. His final battle was to maintain episcopal authority over against the movement towards including lay members in synods, thus giving them a say in matters of doctrine. He already feared that the wealthier layfolk exerted far too much influence. He believed that the involvement of laity in matters of doctrine would result in the collapse of the 'dogmatic basis of the church' and the triumph of the 'lax undogmatic Christianity' of the 'liberal' theologians. His last diocesan function was to lay the foundation of a new church in Stonehaven.

As Rowan Strong notes, in his splendid book¹, the history of the Scottish Episcopal Church largely remains to be written. In *The Church in Victorian Scotland 1843–1874*, the standard work published in 1975, Andrew Drummond and James Bulloch dismiss Forbes as having had 'no more effect on the average Scot than had Pusey, let us say, among English Methodists'. As usual with so much Presbyterian historiography, as Rowan Strong observes, that witticism begs the question about just who might count as 'the average Scot' — it evidently excludes Episcopalians by definition. No doubt most Scottish Catholics are descended from families who arrived from Ireland in the early 19th century (some thirteen centuries after the original Scots came over from Antrim to Argyll under the leadership of the legendary Fergus Mór mac Eirc). But, however that may be, the vast majority of the Scottish Episcopalians, as we have seen in the case of the congregation in Stonehaven in the 1840s, tiny as their number has always been in the population of the country as a whole, had (then at least) ancestral roots in Scotland as ancient as anybody else. With his work in the Dundee slums and his Tractarian theology Forbes clearly exemplified the finest principles of the Oxford Movement. On the other hand, with the denunciation of his eucharistic doctrine by his colleagues, he could not be accused of successfully infiltrating Anglo-Catholicism. With his defence of the Scottish Communion Office, indeed, he delayed further Anglicization of his Church.

Shortly before his death, Forbes observed that his health had suffered from living in the centre of Dundee for nearly thirty years. The

episcopal residence that he then proposed was eventually built at Broughty Ferry, among the jute barons' mansions, after his death, paid for out of the large sum of money quickly raised to provide a memorial. Forbes certainly left an indelible mark on the history of the Scottish Episcopal Church. As Richard Church noted in his obituary, recalling seeing him as an undergraduate in Newman's company some thirty five years earlier, Forbes was 'one of those who received and maintained in their purest form the best influences of the great movement with which Dr Newman's name was associated'. As another obituary wryly observed, he was 'more popular as a rule with the extremes of society at each end of the social scale than with those of the intermediate class'. And as Rowan Strong concludes, at the end of his deeply satisfying biography, for all his theological and ecumenical involvement in his own day, 'it is the example of Forbes's sacrificial and unstinting work among the poor of Dundee's streets and tenements which most endures to this'.

- 1 ALEXANDER FORBES OF BRECHIN: THE FIRST TRACTARIAN BISHOP by Rowan Strong, *Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1995*, pp. 281; £35.

Post Critical Contemplation and Do It Yourself Religion

Edward P. Echlin

No description quite captures the fragmentation through which our culture is passing. Post modern, new age, deconstruction, immanentism, emotivism, all are usefully employed — none quite turns the key. In general we may say not that there are no narratives, but that *the* received narrative, the foundational cosmology, the consensus about ultimate reality upon which our societies formerly concurred have receded. Moreover, at least in affluent cultures, the mourning about dwindling consensus is past. Rather than writhe in anxiety before religious fragmentation, people simply accept as the one "luminously self evident reality" that they are alone in the universe making their own meaning. Confusion exists as to what theology is, and what real theologians are. Walter Kasper writes, "It is unfortunately not a redundancy to say that, especially today, a theological theology is the need of the hour."¹