

DR. WILLIAM MAXWELL, 1760 - 1834

THE CATHOLIC RADICAL

BERNARD ASPINWALL

Conservatism and Catholicism have been synonymous in Britain during the past two hundred years. How that identification came about is debatable. Catholics for tactical reasons may have wished to conciliate opponents of Catholic Emancipation by emphasising their essential social and political conservatism. That image allowed the Church to capitalise on the public sympathy for the French emigre clergy who were pouring into Britain during the French Revolution: Edmund Burke in his *Reflections on the French Revolution*, (1790) was unwittingly the finest modern Catholic apologist. That expedient became, in the wake of the Oxford Movement a permanent feature of a Church still dependent to a degree on wealthy patrons and increasingly conscious of its social status; its hallmark dreamy spires rather than social democracy. If the Church had joined the Tory Party— or the Tory Party at prayer seemed about to return to Rome—then that was grist to the Liberal mill. If anti-Catholicism was the anti-semitism of the intellectuals, then militant liberalism could mobilise those nonconformist sentiments, temperance, disestablishment and evangelical schooling into a crusade against the whore of Babylon. It was in their political interest to portray Roman Catholicism as the bastion of conservatism. With the excesses of European Catholicism during this period the Church was indelibly identified with the most conservative forces in society. But that is to ignore another tradition, that of radical Catholicism whose most outstanding figure is Dr. William Maxwell.

Maxwell was born on 30 August, 1760, and died on 13 October, 1834.¹ His father, James Maxwell of Kirconnell, had joined the Jacobite rising in 1745, fled to France, written a comprehensive account of the Young Pretender before returning quietly to Scotland in 1751 to die in his bed eleven years later. The second of three sons, William was sent with his elder brother, James, to be educated in France. His experience in the France of the Enlightenment seems to have stood him in good stead when he returned to Scotland. In 1778 he was an extraordinary member of the Royal Medical Society, a very distinguished body which

¹ William Fraser, *Book of Carloverock*, 2 vols. Edinburgh, 1873, I. 601.

included the renowned Dr. William Cullen. Maxwell gave two papers to that august body, one on tuberculosis and another on syphilis before he graduated as a doctor from the University of Edinburgh in 1787.² By the standards of the time, he was a man of rare medical ability.

As a Catholic of Jacobite family, educated in the Enlightened tradition of eighteenth century France and Scotland, Maxwell would naturally be critical of the existing social order. As a second son there might be an added element of natural ambition. Be that as it may, his radical inclination was sharpened by his younger brother, Thomas, on a visit to him in Manchester. For Thomas, a partner in a textile concern whose employees included James Watt, Jr., was treasurer of the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society. There together with several Scots, was a radical coterie which included Thomas Walker, a prosperous merchant, later acquitted during the Treason trials of 1794, Thomas Cooper, whose radicalism drove him to America, and James Watt, Jr., who was soon to present an address to the revolutionary assembly in Paris. All resigned when the society refused to send a message of sympathy to Joseph Priestley following the destruction of his home in the Birmingham riots of 1791.³

By then Maxwell was resident in Portman Square, London. He enjoyed an association with the leading Catholic radicals of his day, Sir John Throckmorton of the Catholic Committee, and Rev. Dr. Alexander Geddes, a fellow Scot, who warmly sympathised with the French Revolution. To both men Rev. Dr. Milner and his authoritarian notions of ecclesiastical authority were anathema. While Burke was deserting the Whigs, Throckmorton and Maxwell were joining the radical Whig Parliamentary pressure group, the Friends of the People. Maxwell subsequently went further as a member of the more popular Society for Constitutional Information when he welcomed closer links with the working class London Corresponding Society.⁴

At each stage Maxwell was associating with fellow Scots, in his professional training, his brother, Watt, Geddes, and now with

² Records of the Royal Medical Society, Edinburgh: Matriculation Album, Edinburgh University, Archives. 1778-1789; W. Maxwell, *Experimentum quorundum cum diversis Aerum speciebus in animalibus institutorum, phaenomena edhibens*, Edinburgh, 1787.

³ R. Angus Smith, *A Century of Science in Manchester, Memoirs and Proceedings of the Literary and Philosophical Society*, Manchester. v.9, X 3rd series, 1883, centenary volume: Dumas Malone, *The Public Life of Thomas Cooper, 1783-1839*, New Haven, 1926; Frida Knight, *The Strange Career of Thomas Walker*, London, 1957; Eric Robinson, "James Watt Jr." *Cambridge Historical Journal*, v. II, 1953-55, pp. 349-55.

⁴ *Times*, 12, 13 September, 1792; *State Trials*, ed. T. B. and T. S. Howell, v. 24, 510 and 525; Bernard Ward, *The Dawn of Catholic Emancipation*, 2 vols. London, 1909, vol. I passim; John Mason Good, *Alexander Geddes*, London, 1803; M. G. Hutt, "The Cures and the Third Estate: the ideas of Reform and the pamphlets of the French lower Clergy, 1787-1789", *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, v. 8, 1957, pp. 74-92.

Hardie, organiser of the London Corresponding Society. Subsequently he sought arms from Blair, the famous Scottish gunsmith in Birmingham. The 'out' group clearly wanted to be 'in'. The Scottish democratic tradition demanded no less.

Through his membership of the Society for Constitutional Information Maxwell was drawn into the company of Tom Paine, author of *The Rights of Man*, and the radical American, Joel Barlow, author of *Advice to the Privileged Orders*.⁵ Undeterred by government repression at home and mounting reaction abroad, Maxwell stood firm in his principles. The attack on Paine's work and the Brunswick Manifesto stiffened his commitment. To Burke, "the Duke of Brunswick is as much fighting the battle of the crown of England as the Duke of Cumberland did at Culloden."⁶ So it appeared to Maxwell too.

As the revolution reached a crisis in France in the summer of 1792, Thomas, Maxwell's brother died. His untimely death, however, gave Maxwell an inheritance of £500, a windfall which might be used to revolutionary advantage.⁷ For he was convinced that the revolution had reached a stage where bullets rather than ballots were necessary.⁸ To that end Maxwell dedicated himself. He would secure arms for the hard pressed revolutionary forces, muster British opinion against a counter-revolutionary army.

Maxwell then went to Paris in August 1792. During his visit he had an interview with Servan, the Minister of War, in which he promised to secure arms. Returning to Britain, he ordered, as promised, some 20,000 daggers through Blair, a family friend, and other Birmingham arms manufacturers. Two days later Maxwell was prevented from holding a meeting in support of the French: Burke's verbal, *The Times* printed, and the mob's physical attacks had proved too much.⁹

Though reported as fleeing from England, Maxwell in fact had come to York to secure his allowance from his brother's agents. Adamant in the face of family pressure and deaf to emotional pleading, Maxwell stressed that he was merely doing what he had always said he would do. He was absolutely determined to fight

⁵ *State Trials*, v. 24, 490, 509-10, 525; v. 25, 154, 157, 160.

⁶ Edmund Burke to Lord Grenville, 18 August 1792, *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, eds. P. J. Marshall and John A. Woods, Cambridge, 1968, v. 7 215-17.

⁷ See copies of letters sent by James Maxwell to Dundas, *H. O. 42/22*, Public Record Office, London.

⁸ So Alexander Geddes wrote to Rev. A. Wilks, 26 August 1792, *GD 237, Box 165, bundle 3*, Scottish Record Office, Edinburgh.

⁹ W. Maxwell, *Declaration de W. Maxwell, Citoyen Anglais, Relativement a l'Assemblée qui devoit se tenir chez lui a Londres, le 12 septembre 1792, pour ouvrir une souscription en faveur des Patriotes Francaises*, Paris, 1792. *Times* 12, 13 Sept. 1792. Also see *H. O. 42/22* and *H. O. 42/21* which contain numerous letters regarding Maxwell's activities.

for liberty, justice and France against oppression and ignorance. Only after threatening to put himself into the hands of some unscrupulous moneylender or even to go to Manchester where he would very likely precipitate a riot, did Maxwell obtain his allowance.¹⁰

The British government meanwhile was gripped by panic. Wild rumours were circulating that Maxwell's daggers were intended for an internal uprising or possibly for Ireland. Unfounded reports from government informers were adding to these fears. Maxwell himself was busy. After a brief visit to the Jacobin Club in Paris, he returned to attend several meetings of the Society for Constitutional Information and discuss an address to the French National Convention. He then returned to Paris, signed the Address of the French, Scotch and Irish to the National Convention and joined the National Guard.¹¹

In London, Burke, who had already denounced Maxwell to the government, obtained one of the 20,000 daggers which he sent to Dundas. The following day in the House of Commons, Burke gave his famous 'dagger' speech in which he assailed Maxwell.¹² Whether any of the daggers, monies or boots which Maxwell ordered ever reached their destination seems unlikely.

Maxwell was a member of the guard which accompanied Louis XVI to the scaffold and he allegedly dipped his handkerchief in the blood of the executed monarch. Shortly afterwards, for some reason, whether family pressure, disappointed ambition or loyalty to his homeland is not clear, on the outbreak of war he returned home. At any rate he was back in Britain in time to demand and secure some satisfaction from Burke for his scurrilous attack upon him in the House of Commons in February.¹³ But by then Burke had secured his objective. Panic had worked in favour of conservative interests: revolution had been contained at home and abroad.

Maxwell returned quietly to Dumfries where he took up medical practice until his retirement in 1834. With his friend and patient, Robert Burns, he won some local notoriety as the centre of radical sentiment. But they both were careful to join the local volunteer forces. As Burns's doctor Maxwell won the poet's affection by saving the life of his love:

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ See J. G. Alger, *Englishmen in the French Revolution*, London, 1889, pp. 77-8, and his "The British Colony in Paris, 1792-3", *English Historical Review*, v. 13, 1898, pp. 672-94. Also *Earl Gower's Despatches, English Ambassador at Paris, from 1790 to August 1792*. ed O. Browning, Cambridge, 1885, pp. 260, 268-9.

¹² *Parliamentary History*, v. 30, 189.

¹³ *Times*, 28 February 1793 and *Parliamentary History*, v. 30, 551-54. Also W. Maxwell to E. Burke, 28 February 1793, *Burke Mss*, Sheffield Public Library.

“Maxwell, if merit here you crave,
That merit I deny:
YOU save fair Jessy from the grave!
An Angel could not die.”¹⁴

He continued to look after Burns until his death. Thereafter Maxwell remained in Dumfries as a respected and successful doctor, corresponding with Jenner and other medical authorities, contributing papers to professional societies and journals, and aspiring to succeed Dr. Gregory in the chair of Medicine in the University of Edinburgh. From this last ambition, his uncle, Menzies of Pitfodels dissuaded him by a skilful combination of financial, family and religious pressures. Menzies of Pitfodels, a member of the Catholic Committee and the man most responsible for the renewal of Scottish Catholicism in the early nineteenth century, put Maxwell into more acceptably orthodox ways.¹⁵ On his retirement, Maxwell moved to Menzies' home in Edinburgh. There within four months he died in the arms of another resident, Bishop Gillis. A French-speaking Scottish-Canadian, Gillis, later presented Burns's pistols which he had inherited from Maxwell to the Scottish Society of Antiquaries. In his address on that occasion, Gillis contributed to the conservative Catholic myth.¹⁶ Naturally as a friend of the French liberal Catholic royalist, Bishop Dupanloup, and one dependent upon French financial contributions, Gillis was reluctant to publicise his penitent's radicalism. He attributed it to youthful exuberance—though Maxwell was over thirty at the time.

When Maxwell died the debate between Catholicism and Liberalism moved on. As the Reform Act was passed in Britain, the Church was about to excommunicate Lamennais. Plus ca change plus c'est la meme chose. Today the debate between Maxwell and Burke continues within the Church in the differences over Africa, the Tridentine Mass and the nature of the Church. The question is constantly posed, can Catholics be Marxists, or Liberals. No one seems to ask whether Catholics can be conservatives.

¹⁴ “To Dr. Maxwell, on Miss Jessy Staig's Recovery” in *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley, 3 vols, Oxford, 1968, vol. 2. 258-9.

¹⁵ E. Jenner to W. Maxwell, 19 March 1821, and also Maxwell's correspondence with Menzies in GD 237, Box 165, bundle 3, Scottish Record Office, Edinburgh; *Edinburgh Medical and Surgical Society*, v. 21, 1824, pp. 72-78 and vol. 22, 1824, pp. 9-14.

¹⁶ Bishop Gillis in *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, v. 3, 1857-60, pp. 239-44.