

This is my Story This is my Song

Reminiscences and Musings of a Maverick Presbyterian

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The time is surely coming, says the Lord God when I will send a famine on the land: not a famine of bread; or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord.

Amos 8:11 (NRSV)

For the time has come for judgement to begin with the household of God
I Peter 4: 17 (NRSV)

Never ask, "Oh why were things so much better in the old days?" It's not an intelligent question

Ecclesiastes 6: 10 (GNB)

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.

Jeremiah 31: 31 (NRSV)

And I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten.

Joel 2:25 (KJV)

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Foreword

This little booklet is at least semi-autobiographical in that it covers certain aspects of my own life and my various careers. The booklet also looks through my eyes at the current state of the Church of Scotland, an organisation for which I have both affection and respect but of which I am not uncritical.

I have divided the booklet into two parts:

- Part 1 (This is my Story) deals almost exclusively with my life history and my somewhat ambivalent relationship with the Church of Scotland.
- Part 2 (This is my Song) looks through my eyes at the current state of the Church of Scotland and how I see things changing and developing in the future.

I was prompted to put pen to paper as I recently passed my seventieth birthday and have come to realise that I am now living in the later chapters of my life.

This booklet is certainly not an academic treatise nor does it pretend to be a work of originality or of great insight. The booklet, especially Part 2, is both unashamedly subjective and opinionative. Some people may well consider it to be highly opinionated.

The reason for including some autobiographical material is to put myself in context. So, I have dug a little bit into my own past. I have done this in summary form and have missed out a considerable amount of what could be tedious and irrelevant details of my personal history. So, it is not a full autobiography.

I have also kept the names of living people to a minimum as I have no wish to embarrass anyone. Responsibility for what is recorded on the following pages rests with me and with me alone.

There are comments in the booklet that some readers could well find upsetting, unsettling or plain downright annoying. I have tried to be honest. I have no wish to offend anyone. I am not setting out to justify myself, score points or settle scores.

If people choose to take offence at anything that I say in the following pages, that is their option and their choice. If I have been unfair or unduly harsh, I am sorry. I hope too that at least some readers will find my comments interesting and stimulating.

We have an established and honourable tradition in the Church of Scotland that principles should not be confused with personalities. I wish to adhere to that tradition.

This booklet was mainly written during the month of July 2013. Subsequent events may cause at least some of my comments to go out of date quite rapidly.

To avoid doubt, I do not consider that my opinion is the last word on any subject.

This is *my* story, this is *my* song!

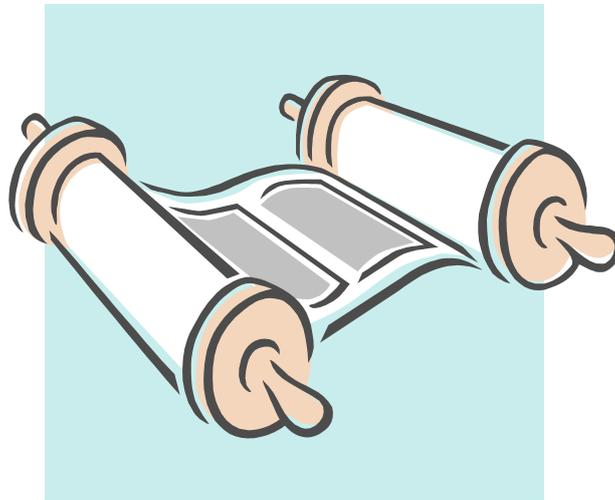
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Part 1

This is my Story



Early Years and First Call to Ministry

I am an only child which may account for the fact that I do tend to be somewhat self centred and self-opinionated. I would not, in all honesty, describe myself as a natural team player. People who know and are well disposed towards me will probably say that I have always been quite an independent thinker. Those who are less well disposed may consider me somewhat of a maverick or even a loose canon. I certainly have the reputation across the board of being unpredictable. So, although I have a very long connection with the mainstream evangelical tradition in the Church of Scotland, I have never been one who blindly follows any party line. In Kirk politics, I have often taken a pragmatic approach.

I was born in Aberdeen during World War II. In fact, I was born on 20 April 1943, the day before the worst air-raid to hit that city. At the time, my parents were resident in Peterhead (Aberdeenshire) and my father was Principal Classics Master at Peterhead Academy.

I have been connected with the Church of Scotland for just about as long as I can remember. My parents were "Kirk" people, although not fanatical in any way. My father was an elder for most of his adult life. As a teenager and young man, he had attended Torry United Free Church in Aberdeen, then, as now, a strongly evangelical congregation. My mother was brought up in church culture as her father - my grandfather - was an enthusiastic church organist in Peterhead from the age of 18 to the age of 80. My earliest recollection of church was being taken to an Infant Sunday School in Wick, Caithness. At the time my father had recently been appointed the Rector of Wick High School.

When I was aged five, we moved from Caithness to West Fife, after my father had been appointed as Rector of Dunfermline High School. During our twenty year stay in Dunfermline I went to Sunday school at Dunfermline Abbey and, as a young man, was actively involved in the life of another congregation in the town.

In my early teens, I was certainly affected by the "Tell Scotland" movement and the visits of Dr Billy Graham. Dr Graham made a particular point of working with local churches throughout Scotland. It was a time of real refreshing and renewal and its effects were long lasting. Even people who were not card-carrying evangelicals surprised themselves by being caught up in it. There was a young doctor in Dunfermline at the time who

had a severe drink problem. He was on the verge of losing his career, livelihood and family. Without telling anyone, he went to the Billy Graham Crusade in Glasgow and "went forward" in the Kelvin Hall. He experienced a remarkable healing and never touched a drop of alcohol again. In typical Scottish understatement, people in Dunfermline remarked that there must be something in this religion stuff, right enough!

In my mid-teens, partly as a result of visiting Oberammergau in 1959, I seriously thought about converting to Roman Catholicism. I loved the ritual and order as well as the more mystical aspects. I was also very much aware that for Catholic people, their religion seemed to make them happy, whereas the opposite seemed to apply in Presbyterianism. Also, as this was before Vatican II, the Mass was still said in Latin, which greatly appealed to me. Anyway, the Roman Catholic Church has a narrow escape in that this adolescent phase passed quite quickly and I returned to the fold of the Kirk.

At school, I was very interested in religious studies. In my time, the exams for the Highers were held just before the Easter holidays. This left us with a summer term that was filled with interesting and non-examinable activities and projects. I chose on one occasion to go in search of Saint Serf, a Celtic Saint, known as the Apostle of the Ochils. I cycled for miles over several weekends, accompanied by a long-suffering school friend (whose daughter is now the Minister of Dunfermline Abbey). In my sixth year, I wrote a booklet "Lochore and Ballingry - A Parish History" which was also serialised in the local newspaper. This gained me the school Divinity prize, one of the very few prizes I have ever won throughout my entire life.

I was ordained as an elder of the Church of Scotland at the tender age of 21, which was probably too young.

Both as a child and as a teenager, I was a bit of a day-dreamer. I was often, it seemed, somewhere else. I was very well behaved at school, although by no means academically distinguished. I was told in later life that, both at primary and secondary school level, I had the reputation among my teachers as being the one pupil in the class who was most likely to ask a really awkward question. Some people might say that I have not greatly changed!

I also have had a great interest in hypnosis and altered states of reality since I was schoolboy. I see no problem with hypnosis being used in Christian circles. I see great value in the use of Christian meditation. It may seem odd for someone who is known to be in the evangelical tradition of the Church of Scotland to be somewhat of a mystic. I am sorry if I don't fit the template. As I have already said, I do not always tow the party line.

I originally took a degree in law from Edinburgh University. In those days, the Law Faculty was really easy to enter, even with my mere minimum entrance group of Highers. I enjoyed the course well enough, although my heart was not entirely in it. I studied harder than I needed to as I had rather low self esteem when it came to academic matters and did not consider myself particularly bright. At school, as I have indicated, I had not been the sharpest knife in the box.

After graduation, I served the traditional two year law apprenticeship with an Edinburgh firm of solicitors. It was valuable experience but my heart was even less in legal practice than it had been in legal study. During this time I decided that I wanted to test my call to the ministry of the Church of Scotland.

For the first time in my adult life, I felt really thrilled and excited.

My destiny was calling me. My life's work was beginning to open up before me; or so it seemed.

Climbing the Mound

There were a number of formalities to go through to be recognised as a candidate for ministry. I had to complete the usual application form, of course. In those far-off days, there was no Selection School for ministry candidates. Instead, I had to present myself in my uncomfortable best suit before a roomful of the great and the good in the Church of Scotland Offices at 121 George Street in Edinburgh. They were all men. There were some ministers and senior elders plus a number of academics, who (perfectly graciously) grilled me for the best part of an hour.

One member of the panel was Professor Norman Porteous, the Principal of New College, whom I liked immediately. Though he looked somewhat austere, he had a twinkle in eye and gave me the impression of someone who was able to carry his considerable scholarship surprisingly lightly.

Professor Porteous encouraged me - in fact, virtually instructed me there and then - to sit the New College Bursary Competition. When I said I did not think I was of sufficient academic calibre, he told me not to put myself down and that the Faculty of Divinity took a very kind view of anyone who attempted the Competition. To cut a long story short, I did attempt it. Part of the exercise involved writing screeds of essay questions on subjects I knew next to nothing about. Being somewhat self-opinionated, this was not such a major challenge as I had anticipated. I came in fourth in order of merit out of five candidates and was awarded the Buchanan Bursary of just over £40 a year, which bought a great deal more in 1966 than it would today. It proved to be very welcome over my three years of study.

Before that, there was the formal acceptance by the Church of Scotland as a candidate in training for the ministry plus the required endorsement by the Presbytery of Dunfermline and Kinross.

Before entering New College, I also had to attempt to master the elements of New Testament Greek in my spare time and pass a prescribed exam. I had studied a little (and I mean "a little") classical Greek at school before dropping the subject like a hot brick so at least I knew the alphabet, if nothing else. In spite of some anxiety, I did manage to pass the exam and, to my surprise, New Testament Greek actually became one of my strong subjects.

We also were required to sit a pre-entry exam, set on behalf of the Church of Scotland, on certain books of the Bible. So, even before I arrived at New College, I felt that I had been well and truly examined.

There were also Church of Scotland exams on the Bible at the beginning of our second and third years of study. Even today, many people seem to assume that the purpose of a Divinity course is to teach students the Bible. In fact, it was assumed that we student were all familiar with Scripture before darkening the door of New College. And the Church of Scotland just wanted to make sure that we were! To fail any of the Bible exams was considered somewhat of a disgrace. I know of one student who did. He kept it very quiet and, when the re-sit came round, took himself off to attempt it at Trinity College, Glasgow!

I had chosen to attend New College because it was nearest to my parents' home in Dunfermline and because I was already a graduate of Edinburgh University. The twin towers of New College are a familiar landmark on the Mound in the Edinburgh. The College was built in 1846 as the nucleus of a new university that was to be set up by the recently formed, ambitious and thrusting Free Church of Scotland. Originally the plan was to found a new university. There were to have been three quadrangles but, as it happened, only one was ever built. The scheme was, even by Free Church standards, over-ambitious. The distinguished architect, William Playfair, had envisaged a building in the classical style but the Free Kirk was having none of such apparent paganism. The result was a mixture of fake Tudor and Gothic.

At the time when I attended New College, surprisingly little had actually changed internally in more than 100 years. The lecture rooms were spacious and well proportioned though somewhat tired in appearance. The antiquated central heating system always seemed to be struggling in some parts of the building. Life at New College was fairly Spartan. There was also a certain degree of "maleness" about the College at that time. Female students were very much in the minority, across the board. There was only one "loo" for women, half way up one of William Playfair's twin towers.

A considerable proportion of the BD students were candidates for the Church of Scotland ministry which, at that time, was only open to men. These candidates included a high proportion of younger men, liker myself, in their twenties. There were also a few in their thirties and forties. The College was further enriched by having BD students for ministry in traditions other than the Church of Scotland, both from the United

Kingdom and further afield. In addition, there was a good cohort of PhD students. Many were from the USA. Religious Studies were also available as components of an Arts degree but, at that time, were taught in the main University and not in New College.

Even in the 1960s, most of the academic staff at New College had some record of service in the ministry of the Church of Scotland although that was beginning to change even by the time I graduated in 1969.

By and large, my time at New College passed happily enough. Although I was still a very young man, I now had the confidence of having already achieved one degree (something I had thought in my schooldays might never happen) and I was no longer a raw school leaver. I realised for the first time that possibly I was reasonable bright. I encountered some very interesting people, both staff and students, who both encouraged and challenged my faith.

At the end of my first year of divinity studies, I accepted a voluntary three month summer student assistantship at the linked charge of Altnaharra and Farr in the Presbytery of Sutherland. It was a useful introduction to the Highland aspects of the Church of Scotland which, culturally seemed a hundred miles away from what I was accustomed to as a town and city boy.

During my student days at New College, I also undertook student assistantships. In my second year, I was assigned to Morningside Parish Church where Professor Porteous, the Principal of New College, was a member. So, occasionally I had to preach to the Principal. He was always very gracious although I used to wonder what he actually thought. In my final year I was attached to Broughton Place Church on the edge of the New Town of Edinburgh. One prominent member of that congregation was one of the judges in the Court of Session. I used to wonder whether he thought I argued my case well, or not!

By the time I began my second year at New College, I felt confident and comfortable in my theological position as a "main stream" Church of Scotland evangelical. I was not and never have been what is commonly called a fundamentalist. I believed - and I still believe - that Jesus Christ is the Saviour of the world and that the Bible is the Word of God. I prefer not to press matters too much further. In Scotland we believe in

using a good modicum of common sense and I believe that this approach can be - and has been - brought to our interpretation of Holy Scripture.

Possibly because of my legal training, I enjoyed systematic and dogmatic theology because it seemed to make sense and to hold together. I know men and women who have less of an attachment to Scripture and doctrine generally than I have and who are certainly just as good Christians as the next. To me, anyone who believes in Jesus Christ is potentially my brother or sister, even if we take up different positions on some areas of theological interpretation.

In my second year of study, I decided that I would take the Honours rather than the Ordinary BD degree and that I would specialise in the New Testament. It was, for me, a close call. I was greatly attracted to Christian Dogmatics and valued being taught by the powerful lectures of Professor Tom Torrance. However, I felt that I did not have a sufficient background in philosophy, so I opted for New Testament.

I remember with appreciation the personal support of Rev Robin Barbour, MC, Senior Lecturer (later a Professor at Aberdeen) in New Testament who always had a genuine pastoral concern for his students. I also had to choose one elective speciality which, in my case was textual criticism. I discovered that I was the first student in about ten years to have chosen this subject. The choice meant that I had regular one-to-one seminars with Rev Dr Ian Moir, who was always a scholar and gentleman and with whom I kept in regular touch after I left New College. He could look at the most obscure and illegible ancient document and read it with as much ease as one might read a newspaper.

I was also particularly fortunate in being able to attend the seminars offered by Professor James S Stewart, still a much respected and charismatic figure. I also remember with affection, the very thorough seminars on the Acts of the Apostles and I Peter provided by the patriarchal Dr Alan Barr from the United Free Church of Scotland.

During my second and third years, I stayed in the New College Residence on Mound Place, immediately next to New College. The Residence was built on the site of a house occupied by Mary of Guise, when she was Regent of Scotland. It commands the most fantastic view over Edinburgh, the Firth of Forth, Fife and far beyond. The building dated from the earlier part of the nineteenth century and was literally creaking at the seams. The

plumbing was antiquated and the electricians decidedly dodgy. The Residence was almost entirely populated by Divinity students and we enjoyed great fellowship, sharing our aspirations, hopes and fears, to say nothing of many good laughs. The Residence in my time was under the supervision of the redoubtable Miss Mackenzie, whom we men-folk liked, respected and sometimes even feared!

I left New College in 1969 with a Second Class Honours degree in New Testament Language, Literature and Theology.

It was an exciting time.

The Northern Lights of Old Aberdeen

I was licensed to preach by the Presbytery of Edinburgh shortly before graduating in 1969.

My first steps into real ministry were taken at the former Church Extension charge of Aberdeen: Garthdee where I served for a year as a probationer assistant. Garthdee was a settled congregation set in the heart of one of the "better" post-war council housing schemes. I was very fortunate in my time there. It was a busy charge and the minister, Rev W P Drummond was a faithful and conscientious pastor with a visiting list that would make many ministers groan.

Mr Drummond gave me the opportunity to take part in all aspects of parish life. At no time did he "dump" tasks on me. I heard from some of my contemporaries that they were much less favourably treated in their assistantships. I have always been grateful to Mr Drummond for the gracious way in which he handled our relationship. In stature, he was a small man, which meant that he was sometimes underestimated. In the things that matter, he was a big man - and also big-hearted. I was sorry that he only lived for a short time after his well deserved retirement.

When my probationary year at Garthdee came to an end, I was eligible to be called to my first charge. This was both an exciting and stressful part of my life. I was not yet married and, at that time, this was a considerable disadvantage. Many congregations still expected the minister's wife to adopt a particular role, including teaching in the Sunday School, presiding over the Guild and generally being a supplier and distributor of bounty and good works. In addition, it was expected that she would maintain the manse like a new pin and provide a 24-hour unpaid administrative and messaging service for the minister.

There were plenty of vacancies at the time although not all that many congregations were interested in a young bachelor looking for his first charge. Yet, things moved quite quickly. I was ordained and inducted into the newly linked rural charge of Fintray with Kinellar & Blackburn ("FKB") on the edge of the Presbytery of Aberdeen in 1970. The vacancy committee told me that the congregations both wanted change and were looking for a young man, like me, to stir things up a bit. I am sure the committee members meant what they said, but it became clear to me at an early stage that they were not speaking for the congregations as a whole. It was

not long before I found that the situation on the ground was rather different.

There were two services each Sunday morning - one at Fintray at 10.30 am and the second service, three miles away, at Kinellar & Blackburn at 11.45 am. This arrangement was all right in summer - although the timing was a little tight - but it was a source of anxiety in winter when the narrow road up the hill to Kinellar Church could be icy and dangerous. Even getting out of the manse, with its long pot-holed drive, could be nerve racking.

Fintray Parish Church was constructed around 1821 to the design of a distinguished Aberdeen architect John Smith. It is a plain and quite handsome building, but far too big for the tiny congregation (20 was a good turn-out) who tended to huddle themselves together in the two side aisles. The result was that when I stood up on Sunday morning, I was mostly speaking to rows of empty pews. I found this both artificial and dispiriting. However, any suggestions that folks might move into the centre area and that I might come down from the very high pulpit were firmly rejected. I was told in no uncertain terms that people would rather not come than move "their" seats. There is no point in pursuing a lost cause and I soon gave up trying to do anything differently.

With honourable exceptions, I found that Fintray, as a congregation, was quite a hard furrow to plough. In spite of the assurances that the congregation wanted change, the opposite was clearly the case, as illustrated by my futile attempt to review the seating arrangements. By and large, the small number of people who attended generally wanted the *status quo* to continue unchallenged. There was immediate resistance to any suggestion that even the smallest thing could ever be done differently. In the popular view, a major part of my role was to be permanently grateful to the congregation for allowing me to be their minister and for the fact that anyone even bothered to turn up on Sunday. It did not seem to occur to many people in the congregation that I could have done with some support and occasional encouragement.

Curiously, the vast majority of the congregation - i.e. those who seldom or never attended or gave any financial support - were equally unwilling to change in any way. They wanted the church to be there for them if and when they might need the ordinances of religion on the assumption that everything would be just as it had been in the time of their grandparents. Even more curious was the fact that many of those nominal members who

were so resistant to change were also among the most vocal critics of all aspects of the church as it was.

A small number of the Fintray elders - and I stress that it was a minority - started what I could only describe as a whispering campaign to ridicule and criticise everything about my ministry. I was constantly compared critically with all the previous ministers who, it seems, had been possessed only of virtues and were without any kind of fault. This grew very wearying.

I remember well that I wrote and published a short history of Fintray Parish Church. It was received in total silence and no one even acknowledged its existence. In 1971, I suggested that it might be appropriate if, in some way, we could mark the 150th anniversary of the building of the present church. This was summarily rejected as unnecessary. Even the suggestion that we might obtain a Church notice board to advertise the service times, was also rejected out of hand. That was fairly typical.

Of course, there are always two sides to any story. I am absolutely sure that there were faults on my side. None of us is perfect. We all make mistakes and misjudge situations. Possibly, because I was a young man I was too impatient and maybe somewhat brash. I wanted to make things change and for the church to move forward and possibly I expected too much too soon. Maybe I did not fully understand country ways. But I did not deserve the treatment meted out to me by some of the people at Fintray.

I want to balance this by reminding myself that there were some ordinary folks in the congregation who were unfailingly pleasant and appreciative. It was certainly not all negative and all of life's experiences surely have something to teach us. On the positive side, I remember that a very successful and encouraging Children's Mission was carried out in the parish by David Tate of the Scottish Evangelistic Council in 1973 at my invitation.

The situation was rather different in Kinellar & Blackburn. The place of worship - Kinellar Parish Church - was a small, pleasant and unpretentious building, completed in 1801 but built on a very ancient Christian site. There was a more enthusiastic, though small, congregation and, in contrast with Fintray, people were generally much more open and did genuinely want to take the church forward. We seemed, however, to be constantly hampered

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