

# 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)

Where there is no vision, the people perish

Proverbs 29:18 (KJV)

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)

I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions.

Joel 2:28 (NIV)

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

Joel 2:25 (KJV)

Run the straight race through God's good grace

Lift up your eyes and seek his face;

Life with its path before us lies;

Christ is the way and Christ the prize.

[John S B Monsell]

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## ***Foreword to First Edition***

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!

Alasdair Gordon

Hamilton,  
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Scotland

July 2013

## ***Foreword to Second Edition***

I am grateful to all of my friends who made comments on the first edition of this booklet. I *do* listen to what people say and in some cases I have taken their comments or criticisms on board.

Some people were kind in their responses. Others received my various thoughts graciously, albeit with politely disguised irritation. Some said nothing at all, which leaves me guessing.

I have revised and considerably expanded my original text for this edition. I have also corrected a number of minor errors and updated certain factual information.

Let me emphasise again that his booklet makes no pretensions to being either a literary or scholarly work. It is written in a conversational style.

As before, I take sole responsibility for all comments and interpretations in the booklet. If there are times when I sound harsh or critical, please bear in mind that the person whom I criticise most is myself.

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Alasdair Gordon

August 2014

## ***Foreword to Third Edition***

I am taking the opportunity to update and slightly expand the second edition. The foreword comments I made on previous editions still apply.

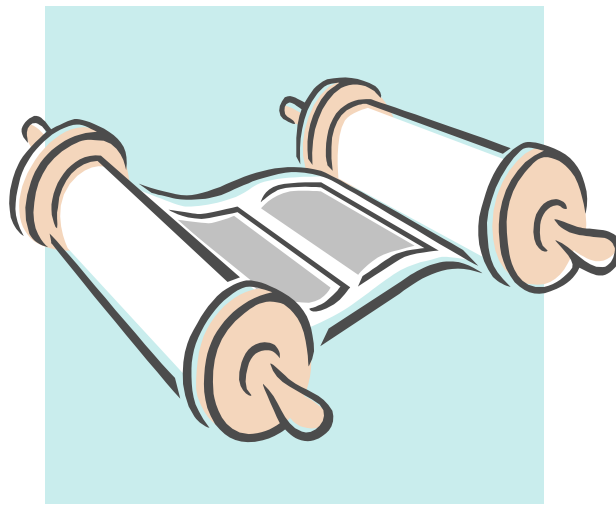
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Alasdair Gordon

August 2015

# Part 1

## This is my Story



## Early Years and First Call to Ministry

I am an only child. This 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 me, 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 to be somewhat of a maverick or perhaps even a loose cannon. I certainly have the reputation across the board for being unpredictable and for often surprising people. My own mother said of me that I was a "dark horse" and she was never entirely sure of what I was thinking. When I was a child, she used to say that she could read me like a book. The truth is that she and I both knew that this was completely untrue!

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 one party line. In Kirk politics, I have often taken a pragmatic approach, which some colleagues at times have found both puzzling and frustrating.

I first saw the light of day 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 still consider myself to be a "Peterheid loon".

Not surprisingly, people can see in me some similarities to both of my parents. However, I am not obviously like either of them. In particular, I do not seem to have inherited many of their respective abilities and talents. My father, Charles Gordon, was somewhat of an intellectual and had about him the touch of a Renaissance man. He did not have an easy young life. His mother, a strong, stable and resourceful lady, died when he was a young teenager. His father had been invalided out of the First World War. Charles very much had to make his own way in the world. After mopping up many school prizes at Robert Gordon's College in Aberdeen (where he was a scholarship boy), he managed to clock up two First Class Honours degrees in different subject areas when such awards were much rarer than they are now. He was a brilliant linguist. Although on paper he only had schoolboy French, he was often complimented (by French people) on his elegant and accurate written French.



Dad had a lifelong interest in cryptic crossword puzzles which would have left most people standing. Even in his last illness and only days away from death, he was still solving the Sunday Times "Mephisto" puzzle! Yet, although most people thought of him as a linguist, he also had a lifelong interest in Mathematics. During the time that he was Rector of Dunfermline High School, if a member of the Maths department was absent, he would willingly step in and teach such areas as calculus, trigonometry and solve complicated algebraic equations. I have often thought that, with his unique insights and knowledge, he would have made a good code breaker. After he retired, one of his neighbours was a lecturer in mediaeval French at Aberdeen University. He used to often bring in texts of documents written in obscure and archaic French mixed up with smatterings of Latin. Dad could almost invariably decipher them.

After his death, I made a point of depositing his personal papers, writings and other items, such as his University Greek medal, to Aberdeen University Library archives for preservation. I am glad that I took that simple step.

In spite of his academic achievements, Charles was always modest and unpretentious. He carried his learning very lightly. Whilst some people have unfavourably compared me with him intellectually, he himself never once made such an unfair comparison. He had no wish for me to be a carbon copy of him, simply to be true to myself. I do readily admit that I am not half the man that he was.

My mother (Gena) was much more artistic. She came from a family for whom music was very important. Gena was a brilliant pianist (LRAM in pianoforte), a competent organist, a good singer and she could turn her hand easily to drawing, painting, embroidery, cooking, baking and such like. How far, if at all, I have inherited any of my parents' talents and attributes, other must judge.

I was always close to both of my parents and still miss them.

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 schoolboy and as a student, 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 and committed church organist in Peterhead from the age of 18 to the age of 80.

My own earliest recollection of church was being taken to an infant Sunday school in Bridge Street Church in Wick sometime around 1945. At the time, my father had recently been appointed Rector of Wick High School. Right through my childhood and my teenage years, God was very real to me and I do not recollect having any particular problems of doubt. This means that I cannot point to a great "conversion" moment in my life when, as it were, I saw the light. I cannot really remember a time when I hadn't seen it although, like most people, I have blown hot and cold over the years.

In 1948, when I was aged five, we moved from Caithness to West Fife, after my father had been appointed Rector of Dunfermline High School. It was a huge cultural shock for me. Apart from Sunday school, I had never really interacted with other children before. People in Caithness speak quietly and avoid eye contact, whereas in West Fife people tend to be rather loud-mouthed and "in your face". It seemed to me that everyone was shouting. I found this scary and I can only describe my first day at school in Dunfermline as among the worst days of my life. Fortunately, I did settle down surprisingly quickly. Children are much more resilient than we sometimes imagine.

Primary school was happy enough for me. It was a very different world and school was certainly low-tech. In the infant class we were still often using slates and the building was illuminated by gas. Paper was in short supply in these somewhat austere post-war years. Sweets were also strictly rationed and I believe that did me no harm. Kids of my vintage were quite fit and well enough fed. There were few, if any, obese children nor did we seem to be affected by the various allergies that seem to dog many children today.

I doubt if any of my former teachers would have described me as in any way troublesome. I was a quiet child and basically did as I was told. I managed to keep out of scrapes. I remember when I was aged around nine, a rather rough boy tried to pick a fight with me in the playground. I punched him so hard that I sent him flying. I am not proud of doing so but it did demonstrate to my contemporaries that, even if I was quiet and solitary, I was not going to allow myself to be bullied.

I remember very vividly the early 1950s with the unfolding of various important events - the Festival of Britain, the death of King George VI,

the conquest of Everest and, of course, the Coronation in 1953. In those times, the general feeling was optimistic and forward looking. Rationing had recently come to an end and people were moving into new houses. Our primary school was wired for electricity. Parents and staff raised sufficient funds to provide a school radio system. There was still a real sense of community. This contrasts with today, where so many people seem to be highly competitive, cynical, disillusioned or angry.

At the time of the Coronation, there were some popular songs surrounding the event. One of these began with the words "Elizabeth of England..." When we were learning it class, I sat silent with my arms folded. The teacher stopped playing the piano and asked me why I was not singing. I replied politely but also assertively, that the Queen was not the Queen of England, that she was Queen of Scotland too and that it wasn't fair! The teacher gave me the strangest look - a mixture of smile and frown. Anyway, nothing more was said and I always remained silent at any class renderings of this trivial ditty. Once again, I had demonstrated my unpredictability!

Not long after this event, when I was aged ten, I contracted viral pneumonia. This is the only time in my life to date when I have been seriously ill. The doctor was in a state of considerable anxiety as he had lost a strong young farmer to the same virus only the week before. Antibiotics were of no use as it was a virus. I was comatose and withdrawn. I sensed something was wrong because of my parents' forced jollity and their whispering with the doctor outside my bedroom door. Children may be small, but they are not stupid. The doctor was visiting me up to three times a day, although unable to do anything of consequence. I thought that there was at least a possibility that I was going to die. In fact, I asked my mother if I was going to die and her immediate denial of such a suggestion was totally unconvincing.

I wasn't really afraid because I did actually believe, with a simple and childlike faith, that Jesus would take me to heaven. I was a bit worried, however, as to how I was going to manage without my Mum and Dad to look after me. I did not realise at the time how difficult it must have been for them to face the real prospect of losing their wee boy. In any event I made a full recovery and have enjoyed remarkably robust health throughout my adult life. This is something that I do not take for granted and hope that I never will. We can never know what lies ahead of us.

During our twenty year stay in Dunfermline I went to Sunday school at Dunfermline Abbey and, as a young man, I was actively involved in the life of Erskine Church which was, at the time, located in the centre of the town.<sup>1</sup> This congregation subsequently moved out of the town centre and relocated in a residential area. On my last visit to Dunfermline in 2013, I was sorry to see my old church boarded up and derelict.

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 the momentum, just as had happened in the previous century with the revivals of Moody and Sankey.

There was, at the time, a young doctor in Dunfermline who had a severe drink problem. He was on the verge of losing his career, livelihood and family. In those days, the police were able to turn an occasional blind eye to drink driving in a way that certainly could not be tolerated today. However, he was on his last warning. Without telling anyone, the doctor in question 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 on a school holiday 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 often seemed to apply in Presbyterianism! As this was before Vatican II, the Mass was still being said in magisterial Latin, which aesthetically greatly appealed to me, although I make no pretensions to being a classical scholar. Anyway, the Roman Catholic Church had a narrow escape in that this adolescent phase soon passed and I returned to the fold of the Kirk.

Both as a child and as a teenager, I was somewhat of a mystic and a day-dreamer. I was often, it seemed, somewhere else. I generally preferred

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<sup>1</sup> *Autumn Leaves* Volume 2: 25-46. Also *Whose Faith Follow* pages 10-19

my own company to that of my peers. Even now, I still value a degree of solitude.

My parents were concerned that I spent too much time on my own and felt that I would benefit from the company of other young people of my age. I was sent to join first the Cubs and then the Scouts. I think it was good for me and in many ways I enjoyed it. I did not much care for the annual camps with their rain-sodden tents, terrible food and unspeakable sanitary arrangements. However, in those days such conditions would have been considered as character forming. Maybe they were. At a later date, I was connected with the Boy's Brigade, an organisation for which I also have considerable respect. Dual nationality can sometimes come in handy when it comes to organisations.

At school, I was very interested in religious studies. In my time, the exams for the Higher Leaving Certificate 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 as a religious studies project to go in search of Saint Serf, a Celtic Saint, known as the Apostle of the Ochils. I cycled for miles over several Saturdays, accompanied by a long-suffering school friend (whose daughter, Rev MaryAnn Rennie, is now the Minister of Dunfermline Abbey).

We were very fortunate at Dunfermline High School in having a specialist teacher in Divinity, Rev Edwin S Towill, an Anglo-Scot who came originally from Carlisle and had enjoyed a very successful parish ministry in Edinburgh. He had a remarkable understanding and tolerance of teenagers, whilst at the same time establishing and maintaining appropriate boundaries. He had his own unique way of opening up religious debate and making people think. He also had a wide knowledge of church history and understood its many traditions.

He was one of the few people whom I have met who could actually be "all things to all men" and yet maintain his own position and integrity. He seemed to be equally comfortable in preaching in Dunfermline Abbey as in the local Baptist church where he was an established favourite. I think he taught me to see that it is important to know what you believe and why you believe - but equally important to understand why others sometimes take a different position - and to be able to respect that tradition. Mr Towill did a great deal to foster my own self-esteem and I owe him a considerable

debt. It is with regret that I say now that I don't think I ever thanked him properly.

In my sixth year at school, with Mr Towill's encouragement, I wrote a booklet entitled "Lochore and Ballingry - A Parish History"<sup>2</sup> which was also serialised in the local newspaper, "The Dunfermline Press". My teachers and peers expressed considerable surprise. Teenage schoolboys do not generally write articles for newspapers. I was told (neither for the first time, nor for the last time) that I was a "dark horse". The articles gained me the school Divinity prize, one of the very few prizes that I have ever won throughout my entire life.

I was very well behaved at Dunfermline High School, although by no means academically distinguished. As my father was Rector of Dunfermline High School, I maintained a low profile throughout my time there. Some fellow pupils and teachers were a little wary of me, fearing that I might tell tales out of school. I never did, nor would my father have dreamt of putting me into such an invidious position. Nevertheless, my experience at school did tend to foster my existing tendency to be somewhat solitary.

I was told in later life that, both at primary and secondary school level, I enjoyed 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 in that respect.

At school, I absolutely hated games and gymnastics, I suppose largely because I am not a natural team player. I was fortunate in that my gym teacher at school was very understanding and did not force me. I was allowed to go running or swimming on my own or with one or two pals to count as the equivalent of a gym period. I still have no interest in any kind of sport, either as a participant or a spectator.

I also have had a great interest in hypnosis and altered states of reality since I was a schoolboy. I see no problem with hypnosis being used in Christian circles although some people will rush to condemn it, usually out of ignorance and prejudice. I also see great value in the responsible use of Christian meditation. I am interested to see the increasing use of Mindfulness, even though its origins are not specifically Christian. To me, the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. It may seem odd for someone who is known to be in the evangelical tradition of the Church of

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<sup>2</sup> *Autumn Leaves* Volume 2: 12-24



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 any party line.

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

After leaving school I read for a degree in law (LL.B) at Edinburgh University. It was actually easier at that time to get into Law than into Arts, provided the applicant had a pass in Latin. I note with some amusement that when I applied for admission to the Law Faculty, I was accepted by return of post even with my minimal entrance group. Those were the days! There was, however, a high drop-out rate at the end of the first year. I was greatly relieved not to be among that number.

In the early 1960s, only some ten per cent of young people went on to University. We Scottish students all got our fees paid (by memory the fees for the whole year amounted to around £35!) plus an allowance from the Scottish Education Department. Even wealthy students received a minimum grant of £50 per year, worth much more then than now. There was no anxiety about finding employment after graduation as there were more jobs available than people to fill them. Life was simpler and, relatively speaking, cheaper. We did not have computers or smart-phones. Students did not leave University with huge debts as some do today. Indeed, in those days, nobody wanted to lend money to students. We were expected to be impecunious.

I enjoyed the Law course well enough, although my heart was not entirely in it. I studied harder than I needed to as I still 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. I was surprised to find that I was passing the law exams quite comfortably. I made some friends at the time and went around with a pleasant crowd of young men, with all of whom I have now lost touch.

I well remember my graduation day in the McEwen Hall in Edinburgh. In fact, I had what would now be called an "aha" moment. I had always assumed that if anyone went to University s/he would emerge at the other end knowing a great deal. Actually, I somewhat ruefully realised that although I had managed to pass a lot of tiresome exams, I had forgotten most of what I had swotted up and that I probably did not know very much that was actually worth knowing. This was a very significant discovery for

me. I believe true wisdom often lies in being aware of what we do not know. Whilst I do value the privilege of University education, I realise that it is not the "be all and end all" of everything. The most important lessons of life are not taught there or indeed in any place of learning.

After graduation, I served the traditional two year law apprenticeship with an Edinburgh firm of solicitors. It was a useful experience in some ways although my heart was even less in legal practice than it had been in legal study. I did, however, enjoy conveyancing, which had been my strongest subject at University. I remember spending more time than I really needed, in the handsome search room of HM Register House at the end of Princes Street pouring over copies of (mainly) Victorian feu charters. It was during my time of apprenticeship that I decided to test my growing sense of a 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

Not surprisingly, there were a number of formalities to go through in order to be recognised as a candidate for the ministry. I had to complete the inevitable application form and supply appropriate references. In those far-off days, the selection process for ministry candidates was surprisingly light and informal compared with today. I was invited to attend for an afternoon interview in the Church of Scotland Offices at 121 George Street in Edinburgh. On the basis of the interview, the decision would be made.

I duly presented myself in my uncomfortable best suit and white shirt before a roomful of the great and the good. They were all men, of course, and comprised a selection of senior ministers and 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 and whom I would come to know better at a later date. Though he looked somewhat austere, he had a twinkle in his 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 quite firmly 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 about which I knew next to nothing. Being self-opinionated, this was not such a major challenge as I had anticipated. I am not someone who is generally short of words, although sometimes I can be short on depth and content!

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 certainly bought a very great deal more in 1966 than it would today. It proved to be extremely welcome over my three years of study. Once again, I was also fortunate enough to have my University fees paid and I was awarded a grant by the Scottish Education Department.

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