

# 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)

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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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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.

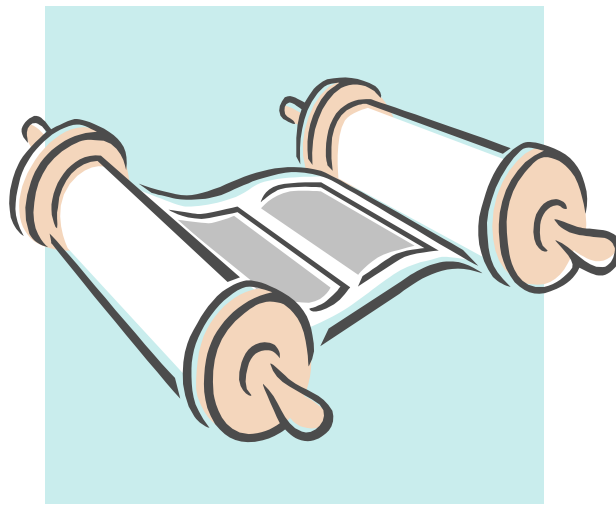
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Alasdair Gordon

August 2014

# 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.

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.

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 was somewhat of an intellectual. After mopping up many school prizes at Robert Gordon's College, he had also clocked up two First Class Honours degrees in different subject areas when such awards were much rarer than they are now.

In spite of his academic achievements, he was always modest and unpretentious. Whilst some people have unfavourably compared me with him intellectually, he never once made such an unfair comparison. I do readily admit that I am not half the man that he was.

My mother was much more artistic. She was a brilliant pianist (LRAM in pianoforte), a competent organist, a good singer and could turn her hand easily to drawing, painting, embroidery 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 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.

When I was aged five, we moved from Caithness to West Fife, after my father had been appointed Rector of Dunfermline High School in 1948. 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, whereas in West Fife people tend to be rather loud-mouthed. 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 give them credit for.

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. 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. 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.

I wasn't really afraid because I did 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.

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.

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 would 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 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! Also, 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

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

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 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.

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).

In my sixth year at school, I wrote a booklet entitled "Lochore and Ballingry - A Parish History"<sup>2</sup> which was also serialised in the local newspaper. My teachers and peers expressed considerable surprise. 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 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. 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

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

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 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 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 although some people will rush to condemn it, usually out of ignorance and prejudice. I see great value in the responsible 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 any party line.

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

I originally took a degree in law (LL.B) from 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 very minimal entrance group. Those were the days! There was, however, a high drop-out rate at the end of the first year.

In the early 1960s, only some ten per cent of young people went on to University. We Scots 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. 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. 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 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 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 significant discovery for me. I believe true wisdom often lies in being aware of what one does 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 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. During my time of apprenticeship, I decided that I wanted 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

There were a number of formalities to go through in order to be recognised as a candidate for ministry. I had to complete the usual 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.

I duly presented myself in my uncomfortable best suit 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. 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 self-opinionated, this was not such a major challenge as I had anticipated. I am not someone who is generally short of words, although often short on 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 was awarded a grant by the Scottish Education Department.

There duly came my formal acceptance from the Church of Scotland as a candidate in training for the ministry plus the required endorsement by my home 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 comfortably and, to my surprise, New Testament Greek actually became one of my stronger subjects.

We were also 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 students were all thoroughly familiar with Scripture before darkening the door of New College. And the Church of Scotland just wanted to make quite sure that we were. To fail any of the Bible exams was considered to be somewhat of a disgrace. I know of one fellow-student who did. He kept it very quiet and, when the re-sit came round, took himself off to sit it covertly 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 opened 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 complete 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 is a curious mixture of fake Tudor and Gothic.

At the time when I attended New College, surprisingly little of the building had actually changed internally in more than 100 years, although it has since been radically modernised. 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 definite

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. The male students used the impressive brass and black marble General Assembly toilets in the basement!

The majority of the BD students were candidates for the Church of Scotland ministry which, at that time, was only open to men <sup>3</sup> although that position was to change during my time at New College. Ministry candidates included a high proportion of younger men, like me, in their twenties. There were also a few "mature students" 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. As time has gone on, Religious Studies has proved a major growth area whereas the numbers of men or women seeking to enter ministry via the traditional BD route has considerably shrunk.

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 had a bit more confidence, 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 at least reasonable bright. I had no real difficulty in passing the exams. 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 (usually referred to as Bettyhill) 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.

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<sup>3</sup> Ordination of women to ministry was approved in 1968.



I was puzzled at the communion practices whereby the communion "season" lasted for several days. Even more puzzling (to me) was that at the actual communion service, only a tiny handful of the well attended congregation came forward for communion.

The season was officially opened on Thursday morning with a service attended by pupils from the local primary school. There were further preparatory services on the evenings of Thursday, Friday and Saturday. Communion was dispensed on Sunday morning with a thanksgiving service in the evening. Some churches even had a further service on Monday evening.

The communion season was a feat of endurance and usually a visiting minister preached at the preparatory services. Even more puzzling was the so-called "fast day", on the Thursday. I subsequently attended a Thursday morning service at Elphin, a crofting township in Assynt, about 15 miles north of Ullapool. The Free Church folk, almost next door were (as is their custom) observing communion at exactly the same time as the Church of Scotland. The clergy and elders from both churches adjourned to a local bed and breakfast where we were served with one of the biggest lunches I have ever seen. Even for a hungry young man, finishing the meal was quite a struggle. I asked why Thursday was called a "fast day", when we ate so much. Judging by the silence that followed, I had asked the awkward question, not for the first time (or the last time) in my life.

I spent three full months at Bettyhill, preaching most Sundays at Altnaharra and also in the little "tin tabernacle" church of Syre at the head of Strathnaver. On two Sundays, armed with the confidence of youth, I travelled south to conduct the morning service at Lairg Parish Church which, at the time, was vacant. For me, this was all good experience.

During my days at New College, I also undertook student assistantships during the term. In my first year, I was assigned to Saint Paul's Parish Church in Dunfermline, which provided a good introduction. Sadly, this handsome hexagonal building was later destroyed by fire and the congregation was dissolved.

In my second year, I was assigned to Morningside Parish Church, Edinburgh 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 in his comments although I used to wonder what he actually thought. He did give me one useful piece of advice that I remember to this day. He told me

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