

George Washington Sprott : 1829-1909

“ It is well known to all who are interested in the Church of Scotland ’’, said Dr. A. K. H. Boyd of St. Andrews in 1869, “ that for several years past there has existed a strong desire in many of her members and ministers, both for more solemn and decorous places of worship than have hitherto been common in this country, and likewise for greater propriety and dignity in the forms and arrangements of the worship itself. The rude and ugly buildings which since the Reformation have generally been thought good enough to serve as churches, are being slowly superseded by others with some pretensions to architectural grace and beauty ; though still sadly inferior to the churches of the Middle Ages Then, besides the change in the outward aspect of many of our churches, there are changes for better in our worship. There is a greater reverence in God’s house. No one but the most ignorant will now enter that holy place unless with uncovered head. In many churches the congregation, instead of irreverently rushing out the instant the Blessing is pronounced, as though eager to escape from imprisonment, pauses solemnly for a little moment to ask God’s grace in silent prayer In singing God’s praises, the natural and becoming attitude of standing is supplanting the unmeaning and irreverent posture of sitting which I have never heard any human being defend, unless by the very bad argument that the ugly custom is an old one. In prayer, likewise, instead of that protracted and wearisome standing, which commonly passes into lounging or fidgeting, and which commonly too goes with staring about and inattention and indevotion, you will find that fittest of all attitudes, the knee bowed unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ ; that attitude of due humility so easy to maintain for any reasonable time, and which makes it so natural to withdraw our attention from things around, and to concentrate all our thoughts upon the act of prayer. And for those distressing sounds, not in any way worthy to be called music, which are a grievous hindrance to many who are both cultivated and devout, and which excite the ridicule of the young and thoughtless, we often find a careful and decorous service of song, elevating and heart-warming, simple so that it may be joined in by all, keeping melodies familiar in Christian worship for hundreds of years ; and

helped, too, by that grand Instrument of music, that seems as though made only for sustaining sacred strains, and with which even the most unhappily constituted minds can have no associations but grave ones. Surely all these things, to us poor human beings, add dignity and solemnity to God's worship '' (1).

Dr. Boyd said this just four years after the founding of the Church Service Society. He was speaking as one who was to live through the significant changes in the public worship of the Church of Scotland which took place in the latter part of last century. He was speaking just one year after the publication of a new edition of Knox's Liturgy, edited by two young ministers, Thomas Leishman and G. W. Sprott. For the next fifty years G. W. Sprott was to exercise greater influence than any other single individual upon that aspect of the revival of public worship which is not specifically mentioned in the quotation from Dr. Boyd—the form and content of the prayers used in the Divine Service. Other leaders in the movement for the reform of public worship in Scotland shone by their gifts, ecclesiastical statesmanship, or even by their eccentricities. Dr. Sprott worked quietly away amassing and arranging a corpus of liturgical material drawn from all over Christendom, but excluding rigidly anything which could not be fitted into the doctrine and form of worship of the Church of Scotland as established by law. To his patient and untiring scholarship the Church of Scotland owes a debt of gratitude. A glance through the 1905 edition of *Euchologion*, with its introduction and appendix, will indicate the extent of that debt. Then, if we compare this book with Dr. Robert Lee's *Prayers for Public Worship* (1867), we shall be reminded how through the work of Dr. Sprott and others the Church's devotions were gradually ordered with purpose and understanding and enriched with beautiful and dignified language. If any error was made, it was that of imagining that the form and phrases of *Euchologion*, which had in time influenced directly or indirectly the devotional language of a large part of the Church, were sacrosanct. Another generation demanded liturgical language less turgid and ponderous. When, in 1923, the masterpiece of Scottish liturgical composition, *Prayers for Divine Service*, was authorized by the General Assembly for use in the Church, it was not (as we now see it) the rejection of the work of Dr. Sprott and earlier liturgical writers. It was the fruition of their labours.

(1) A. K. H. Boyd: *The Place of Ritual: A Sermon preached at the Re-opening of Anderston Church, Glasgow*. London, 1869.

Dr. Sprott was peculiarly well equipped for the work of reforming the public worship of his time. He could see the Church of Scotland with the critical and detached eye of one who looks on from a distance. He was a student of her history. He believed that she had been cheated of her true inheritance in public worship, and he made it his constant endeavour to defend that Church's position as a true branch of the Catholic Church, inveighing against the sin of heresy at a time when, amid the exuberant life of Presbyterian Dissent, all too few Scots saw it as sin at all, and working for Christian unity on sound doctrinal principles. Dr. Sprott thus occupied a strong position as an advocate of reform in public worship. Others, whether they agreed or disagreed with his interpretation of Scottish Church history and his view of orders, recognized in him a man of principle, far removed from the many "innovators", "trimmers" and "decorators" who were all too ready to borrow from any ecclesiastical tradition hymns, stained glass, church design and liturgical practice, without considering the theological significance of what they were doing in the years of *laissez-aller* which followed the General Assembly's failure to give an authoritative ruling in the Greyfriars' Case.

Born in Nova Scotia in 1829, the son of a Presbyterian minister who had emigrated from Scotland, George Washington Sprott was educated there and at Glasgow University. Licensed by the Presbytery of Dunoon in 1852 "for work overseas" he served as an assistant at Halifax, Nova Scotia, at Greenock and at Dumfries. He was chaplain to the Scots Church in Kandy, Ceylon (1857-64), and acting chaplain at Portsmouth in 1865. Thus before he settled in Scotland as a parish minister (at Chapel of Garioch, 1866-73, and thereafter at North Berwick) Dr. Sprott understood the experience of the Scot living abroad, cut off from his church sometimes where there was no resident minister. He had no prayer book to provide a link with the worship of his own people. Also, even where there was a minister, the conduct of worship often looked uncouth and disordered, when seen out of its usual context or along-side Anglican worship. "On the arrival of a new clergyman," said Sprott, "in the Colonies, I confess I have often felt more anxious that they should conduct the devotional service well than preach well . . . Our people abroad, and the higher classes at home are all familiar with the decency and good taste of the English Liturgy and they feel uncomfortable

if these qualities are wanting in the services of their own church ''⁽¹⁾.

A diffident aping of Anglican worship was certainly not Sprott's idea of reforming the public worship of the Church of Scotland. In his first (anonymous) pamphlet of 1863,⁽²⁾ he boldly asserted that "Deference to Anglicanism in the Church of Scotland is a crime. In a few things she might approximate to Episcopal usages, but it should only be on the very few points where she may be closer to the primitive and the Reformed Church than her present practice." He lamented the loss to the Church of "Irvingite men, who would have corrected the Zwinglian notions of the sacraments, and the hard austerities of a Calvinism which is not Calvin's and restored the authority of the ministry ''⁽³⁾ A great part of Sprott's life work was to lie in this very direction—seeking to establish that the ministry and sacraments of the Church were fully valid in the light of Scripture and the teaching of the primitive Church and to recover a proper understanding of sacramental and ordination grace ; setting up the worship of the post Reformation Scottish Church as a "golden period " of church worship from which modern Scottish Presbyterianism had sadly fallen away ; resisting the exclusive claims of Anglo-Catholicism on the one hand, and (as he saw it) warding off the danger of Presbyterianism lapsing into Congregationalism, on the other.

Dr. Sprott could remember the time when practically no training at all in pastoral theology was given to divinity students ; when probationers modelled their prayers on the "liturgy of stock phrases " then current in the church, on Matthew Henry's : *A Method of Prayer with Scriptural Expressions Proper to be used under Each Head*, or on the remembered prayers of their own parish minister, and when the newly inducted minister might memorize a prayer of thirty minutes' duration which would then serve him throughout his entire ministry. He himself has recorded some of this prayer phraseology.⁽⁴⁾ "We bless Thee that Thou hast cast our lot in a land of light and liberty, and that we can worship under our own vine and fig-tree, none daring to make us afraid. We would set up our Ebenezer and say, "Hitherto hath the Lord helped us . . ." "We would come before Thee with our hands on our mouths and our

(1) G. W. Sprott : *The Worship, Rites and Ceremonies of the Church of Scotland*. Edinburgh, 1863.

(2) *Op. cit.* p. 53.

(3) *Ibid.* p. 53.

(4) *The Public Prayers of Yesterday*.

mouths in the dust, crying out, God, be merciful to us sinners . . .”

He could recall the time when no service at the grave was usual ; when on the occasion of Baptism or Marriage the Sponsors did not know beforehand what vows they might be expected to take. His own lectures on pastoral theology published as : *The Worship and Offices of the Church of Scotland* (1882) must have been a beacon light in a day when Scottish churchmen were forsaking the old and groping to find the new path in the practical concerns of the Ministry of Word and Sacrament. Although, like so many within Presbyterianism who have taken upon themselves to give guidance on pastoral theology, he does not always give good authority for what he says.

Some will not now agree with Sprott's view of the continuity of the Church and Ministry in Scotland at the Reformation, or with his insistence on blaming the Brownist influence so unequivocally for the non-liturgical, and in some ways untypically Reformed development of public worship when *Knox's Liturgy* fell into disregard ; but all must acknowledge that the Church of Scotland found in him a man raised up by God for his time. At that time when “ innovations ” in worship had become popular, folly and sentimentality could have taken the helm. The influence of modern theology had freed the Church from its old, rigid orthodoxy at a time when she was under constant attack from Dissent. If today we believe in the Church of Scotland that we are the Church of Christ in Scotland, the National Church, Catholic and Reformed, that our ministry and sacraments are valid not only within our own branch of the Church but within the Universal Church, and that in our worship we must express accurately the Church's faith and offer the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving with freedom and sincerity, with dignity and reverence, incorporating all that is truly Catholic, yet conserving what is sound and unique in our own tradition, we owe this belief in large measure to George Washington Sprott.

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