

THE CHURCH IN JAMES COOPER'S DAY

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James Cooper was born at Elgin on 13 February 1846 into a Scotland which was divided ecclesiastically. It was less than three years since the Disruption of May 1843 as a result of which almost half of the members and a third of the ministers had left the established Church. The Disruption was the latest of a series of divisions in the Presbyterian family and in 1846 there were no fewer than six Presbyterian churches - the Church of Scotland, the Reformed Presbyterian Church, the United Secession Church, the Original Secession Church, the Relief Church and the Free Church. The Auld Licht Burgher Church had rejoined the Church of Scotland in 1839 but had gone out again at the Disruption. The year after Cooper's birth the United Secession Church joined with the Relief Church to form the United Presbyterian Church.

The Disruption of 1843 and the Union of 1847 meant that throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century the Church of Scotland faced two formidable rival Presbyterian churches, the Free Church and the United Presbyterian Church. The right of the Church of Scotland to be the established Church had been called in question as early as 1829 and a vigorous movement for distestabishment was promoted by the UP Church, usually in alliance with the Liberal Party. To begin with, the Free Church remained aloof from the disestablishment campaign remembering that Thomas Chalmers had declared "We are not voluntaries. We quit a vitiated establishment but would rejoice to return to a pure one." But during the long and unsuccessful negotiations for union between the Free Church and the United Presbyterian Church 1863-73 many in the Free Church, notably Robert Rainy, began to favour the disestablishment of the Church of Scotland.

It is clear from the autobiographical fragment prefixed to HJ Wotherspoon's *Memoir* that Cooper was very much more concerned about another division in the Scottish Church, the rift between the Church of Scotland as established in 1690 and the Episcopalians who were unable to concur with that establishment:

"I was never opposed to such an Episcopacy as we had in Scotland, when the Bishops were subject in spiritual things to the General Assembly and acted in their several dioceses in conjunction with our Scottish gradation of Church Courts." (JC p23)

Cooper had little use for the veneration which was accorded to the Covenants from 1838 onwards:

"I could not have signed either the National Covenant of 1637 (*sic*), or the Solemn League and Covenant of 1643 . . . I often wonder whether people who speak of the Covenant(er)s have ever taken the trouble to read them."
(JC p26)

He felt that it was the revived interest in the Covenants which had led to the Disruption:

"It was the notion which the Evangelical leaders of 1843 learned from McCrie that led to the separation of 1843: Mr Begg and the more constitutional members of the party advised them to remain in the established Church and carry on their agitation till they got the country on their side."
(JC p26)

Cooper was not opposed to the various movements for Presbyterian reunion but his support was at best fairly lukewarm. In a letter written to an Episcopalian clergyman on Easter Day 1907 he makes these points:

"A *merely* Presbyterian union would not be safe in the interests of the Catholic Faith, or of such remnants of Catholic order as we have retained. The wider union would conserve both.

A union with the UF Church only would mean the surrender of the Establishment *principle* which many of us value and will not let go.

It would not unite the Reformed of Scotland but would deepen the ditch between us and you . . .

An alliance with Presbyterians alone would proceed on the principle that the Church's supreme law is *not* the declared *will of Christ*, but the (supposed) inclinations of the Scottish people. As if it were

more important to be Scottish than to be Christian."
(JC p246)

In the autobiographical fragment Cooper makes what is probably his definitive statement on Church union:

"I am profoundly convinced that without an acceptance of the Historical Episcopate that visible unity for which our Divine Master prays can never be achieved. His will not ours, must give law to the whole Church."
(JC p29)

When the Aberdeen Ecclesiological Society was founded in 1886, Cooper was concerned about the possible usefulness of the society in giving a common ground to Christian people of different communions as well as promoting an interest in church architecture and liturgies. Cooper was of course very interested in the improvement of the worship of the Church of Scotland and had joined the Church Service Society (founded in 1865) in 1873. The following year he became a member of the Editorial Committee of the Society and also of the General Assembly Hymn Committee. The *Scottish Hymnal* was first published in 1870.

The third Society with which Cooper was actively associated was the *Scottish Church Society* founded in 1892. Cooper was the first Secretary of this Society and thoroughly supported its general purpose

"to defend and advance Catholic doctrine as set forth in the ancient Creeds and embodied in the Standards of the Church of Scotland, and to assert Scriptural principles in all matters relating to Church order and policy, Christian work and spiritual life throughout Scotland."

The Disruption of 1843 had been a grievous blow to the Church of Scotland but during the succeeding decades of the nineteenth century it made a remarkable recovery. This was shown for example in a vigorous and sustained programme of church extension. Cooper played a part in this when he was ordained in April 1873 to take charge of the new St Stephen's chapel in Broughty Ferry. Two years later he was inducted as the first minister of St Stephen's Parish and admitted to membership of the Presbytery of Dundee. On that occasion the Moderator of the Presbytery commended Cooper's work which had made St Stephen's "one of the largest,

most influential and prosperous congregations" within the bounds of the Presbytery.

In view of Cooper's later difficulties at Aberdeen, it is worth noting what else the Moderator of Dundee Presbytery had to say of Cooper's work:

"While avoiding everything that might be thought contrary to the genius of Presbyterianism he has by the exercise of good sense and refined taste improved the service at St Stephen's to such an extent as to make it not only more acceptable, but beautiful and effective."

In 1874 Cooper introduced a Christmas service at St Stephen's and in 1878 he began holding services in Holy Week, probably the first to do so in the Church of Scotland. In 1880 a chancel was added to St Stephen's, one of the first purposely erected in Scotland.

Cooper was keenly interested in Church architecture and the nineteenth century was of course a great era of church building. He is said to have opened and dedicated more churches than any other man of his generation.

(Fasti 7,409)

In November 1873, about seven months after Cooper's ordination at Broughty Ferry, the American evangelists, Dwight L Moody and Ira D Sankey first visited Scotland and soon Moody was preaching to vast crowds while Sankey accompanied the singing of new hymns on a portable organ. Cooper was somewhat perplexed by the Moody and Sankey meetings. He records the impression of earnestness and simplicity made on an acquaintance. But then he says:

"I went to hear a Bible Reading by Messrs Moody and Sankey in Free St Paul's Church. I cannot say I liked the kind of thing; and I really went wanting to be profited." (JC p100)

On 1st February 1874 Cooper preached a sermon on Proverbs 28:13, "He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy" and identified the error of the American Evangelists, the presentation of a faith that does not include repentance - a powerless dead faith. Cooper was sceptical of the value of the evangelistic meetings held about this time in the local public hall: "We never get any new hearers and create a false excitement in those who habitually come." (JC p101)

It is probably significant that HJ Wotherspoon's *Memoir* makes no mention of Cooper's contemporary from the North East of Scotland, William Robertson Smith. Smith was a few months younger than Cooper but went up to Aberdeen University two years earlier. Both were ordained as ministers and became professors and were hauled before Church courts. But Smith was a member of the Free Church and his offence was his attitude to the Bible and the Old Testament in particular. Cooper seems to have had little sympathy with the new Biblical criticism. He makes this comment in a letter written in 1915:

"I have long feared that the critical and philosophical extravagances of Germany were sapping the authority, alike of Scripture, of the Church and of Christ; now the result is palpable, and I hope all our British Churches will take the lesson." (JC p275f)

This letter is written in the context of the First World War which has been described as "The Last Crusade." Cooper had been delighted to be appointed as chaplain to Glasgow University Officers' Training Corps on its formation in 1911. He enjoyed the contact with youth and the romance of arms and tents and soldiering in general appealed to him. The outbreak of war in 1914 seems to have come as a shock to him. Although now sixty eight years of age he volunteered his services as a chaplain but the OTC members were individually commissioned and dispersed. Four hundred volunteered within two days of the declaration of war. Cooper disapproved, however, of the ministers who volunteered their services as combatants. As the war dragged on far beyond its expected length, one after another of Cooper's students, past or present, was named in the terrible list of the fallen and wounded. Sometimes Cooper had three or four letters of condolence to write in a single day. His very last sermon was preached to the OTC in the Bute Hall in March 1922. Cooper would thoroughly have approved of the War Memorial Chapel of Glasgow University and delighted that a prayer desk has been placed there in his memory.

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ABBREVIATIONS

JC HJ Wotherspoon: *James Cooper : A Memoir* (London 1926)

Fasti *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticanæ* (Edinburgh 1928)