Melrose: The Church and Parish of S. Cuthbert

On the soil of Melrose Christian worship has been offered up for fully thirteen hundred years. The congregation of Melrose S. Cuthbert's Parish Church can thus trace its spiritual ancestry throughout that period by links which, if not formal, may justly be described as organic, by way of the Reformation to the famous Cistercian Abbey, and thence to the ancient Celtic monastery at Old Melrose two and a half miles away.

The Celtic Monastery : The Monks of S. Cuthbert

Old Melrose is little known and still less frequented. On the road between Leaderfoot and Dryburgh at its highest point of vantage, now known as " Scott's View ", Sir Walter was accustomed to halt, both to rest his horses and himself to enjoy the romantic landscape. From that point one looks across Tweed to a broad tongue of land almost enclosed by a loop of the river, with the Eildon Hills behind sheltering the place from the prevailing south-west winds. This tongue of land is Old Melrose.

Here in the early part of the seventh century the Celtic monastery was founded, reputedly by S. Aidan of Iona himself, and quite surely at his instance, with a colony of monks deriving from Columba's own monastery. Here also Cuthbert, Celtic " Apostle of the Borders ", Roman Bishop of Hexham, anchorite of Lindisfarne and saint, entered on his novitiate. It is recorded by the Rev. Adam Milne, a minister of the parish during the first half of the eighteenth century, that in his day stones of the enclosing cincture of the monastery were still to be seen above ground. Nothing now remains to distinguish the site except some relatively modern cottages and outbuildings. The rest is fields and deep woods. Many have regarded it from the other side of Tweed only as part of " Scott's View ", without knowing its name or recognizing its significance. The place, once a base for the fervid Celtic mission, has returned to a consecrated stillness.

The later and greater fame of the medieval Abbey at modern Melrose has obscured the fact that this Celtic monastery endured for a longer period than the better-known Cistercian one. From a missionary point of view

the Celtic record is not only the longer, but unquestionably the more illustrious. Not unnaturally, a greater number of local place-names perpetuate the memory of the opulent and powerful Ciscercians: Abbotsmeadow, Abbotsford, Prior's Walk, Vicar's Knowe, Friar's Hall, and so on almost endlessly. The remoter connection with the truly dedicated Celtic saints, Columba, Aidan, Boisil, Cuthbert and others, is disguised under names now heavily corrupted: Colmslie for Columba of Hii (*i.e.*, Iona), Lessudden possibly for Lis Aidan, St. Boswells for St. Boisil. The name of Cuthbert is more widely celebrated in names such as Cuddy's Green, Cuddy-Ha, and other variants of Cuddy.

Abbey and Parish

It was on the Celtic foundation, already ancient in the twelfth century, that David I., the "sair sanct for the croun", imposed in the fourth decade of that century a colony of Cistercians drawn from Rievaulx, the monks of S. Cuthbert being compensated for the loss of their Church by the gift of the Church of S. Mary at Berwick.

Finding the restricted site at Old Melrose unsuited to the special interests of a Cistercian monastery (agriculture and stock-breeding), the new colony removed under a fresh charter from the King to the site of the present Abbey at Little Fordell, now called Melrose, from which it became the mother of other Cistercian foundations in Scotland. But while King David's schooling at the English Court and the Romanising piety of his mother, the saintly Margaret, were to fruit richly in the founding and endowment of numerous other abbeys, in a special way that at Melrose remained throughout its history the refuge of kings and the object of royal benefactions. Alexander II. was buried there, as was the heart of King Robert the Bruce.

For all except the specialist, time has laid softly to rest the detailed story of four undistinguished centuries of Cistercian rule, abbatial opulence and clerical influence in affairs. The Order of Melrose has left to posterity little that is worth remembering except the imperishable loveliness of the Abbey. It is a monument unique in Scotland for its range of side-chapels and for its carving, skilful, richly worked and extraordinarily lively.

It is of curious interest that the Abbey Kirk evidently served as the place of parish worship before as well as after the Reformation, a circumstance somewhat unusual where a

Cistercian monastery is concerned. The late Dr James Curle wrote :

> " The nave of King David's Church must have formed in early times the choir of the conversi. It was a normal practice of the Cistercian plan. There can be little doubt, however, that later the nave was utilized as the parish church, although that would appear to be an unusual feature in a Cistercian monastery.
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> " In England the conversi seem to disappear about the time of the Great Pestilence in 1349 ; many houses ceased to admit them, and paid servants took their place . . . . As early as 1267 it has been noted that certain abbeys had none. It was probably much the same in Scotland.
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> " In 1394 Matthew, Bishop of Glasgow, founding on a bull of Pope Gregory IX., declared that the Abbot of Melrose was at liberty to appoint a priest of his order and convent to administer the sacraments in the Chapel of Melrose to the servants of the monastery as other parish priests within the diocese were wont to do. This certainly suggests that when the conversi disappeared, the servants who took their place were admitted to the Church . . . "(1)

Further, in 1443 a papal mandate, referring to Melrose, speaks of " the bounds of the parish of the church, which is parochial, of the said monastery ". In a footnote to this information Dr. Curle added the interesting comment :

> " Miss Cameron suggests that Melrose as a parish was something of an anomaly. A Cistercian monastery was superimposed upon a Celtic foundation and incorporated the ancient chapel or Church of St. Cuthbert (which under the Celtic system was apparently the equivalent of the parish church) . . . "(2)

Finally, almost on the eve of the Reformation—the date is Easter Eve 1558—it is on record that the prior " Dene Raulphe Hudsone ", in presence of the Convent and also " in presence of the parroschin of Melrose convenit for gud service ", made certain announcements regarding occupation by certain parishioners of some yards and houses belonging to the Abbey, provoking the occupiers, who were present, to acts of grave disorder within the Church.(3) There are doubtless other pictures of the parish within the Abbey Kirk.

A year or two later the Dean referred to passes from remembered history. The last of the abbots, Andrew Durie, had already been forced to resign in 1541, in order that a natural son of James V. might enjoy the fruits of the benefice *in commendam*. The writing was on the wall. It was soon translated vigorously in terms none could

(1) *A Little Book about Melrose*, by James Curle, LL.D., F.S.A., F.S.A.Scot., p. 34.

(2) *op. cit., in loc.*

(3) *op. cit.* p. 35.

misread when, in 1566, the last extant documents are signed by Dan (or Dene ? *i.e.*, Dean) John Watson, " onlie convent ". And if indeed Dean, surely strangest of Deans without a Chapter !

Abbey and Parish at the Reformation

The point of absolute deflation was to prove the key-point of renewal. In John Watson, it seems, as well as in the parochial functions exercised by the monastery, lies a curious link between the medieval and modern parishes. For the " onlie convent "—and Dean ?—evidently made friends with the forbidding aspect of the times. Whether the shrewd winds of the Reformation had in fact searched John Watson's conscience and quickened his monkish imagination : and whether he would still have conformed without the spur of sharp necessity, are wholly matters of surmise. It is known, simply, that in 1562 James Pont appears in the record as the first minister. of the parish, while John Watson is still signing, and will yet do so for several years, as one of the convent ; but that in 1568 James Pont, Minister, gives place to " John Watson, Reader ". With John Watson's resilience the last formal traces of popery, even in the great Abbey itself, had been erased by Knox's rough sponge.

On what date the final Mass was said, on what date the first reformed service was held in the Abbey, or what length of time, if any, elapsed between the two, is also guesswork. There was a possible obstacle in the condition of the building. Already in 1556 the sub-prior and three monks were protesting in the ear of a Commendator always reluctant and finally growing " crawbit ", that the Abbey Kirk, never seriously repaired since Hertford's devastation of it twenty years earlier, was in desperate condition and, " without the kirk be repairit this instant sommer God Service will ceise this winter ". Whether it did so cease, and when the parish re-entered as a reformed congregation, is apparently not known.

That the Abbey had not been repaired adequately even by the beginning of the succeeding century, is clear from a Minute of the Presbytery of Selkirk, in which the parish of Melrose was then contained. The date is 1617, the minister, translated from Lauder in 1584, being a grand-nephew of the arch-reformer, and of the same name. The Minute reads :

> " 12th August 1617. The visitation of Melrose . . . Trial of the minister. Mr. John Knox being removit, no fault was found with his doctrine. He teaches before noon and afternoon. He ministers the Communion once in the year and examines the people only before the Communion. The landward paroch resorts but slowlie to the Kirk: their bairns are baptized nevertheless by his testimonial by other ministers, only he does give testimonial in winter and no other time. He complains that the town of Melrose repairs not to the Kirk on the Sabbath. The minister is ordainit to discipline them. It is complainit of that there is no schulemaster. The minister is ordainit either to discharge him that presently keipis the schule, namely Alex. Wishart, or ellis to see that he diligentlie attend upon it in tyme to come. The alms is verie small, yet distributed. The parishioners are ordainit to be more liberal in their alms . . . The Kirk of Melrose is verie ruinosis. The Presbytery and parochiners (*i.e.*, heritors) concludes that the minister, with the advice of some of the Presbytery and some masons and wrights shall advise what is the best way to repair the Kirk of Melrose betwixt this and the day 14 days . . . . "

The congregation was clearly then in regular occupation of the Abbey Kirk, an occupancy which was to last for two more centuries.

In the years following 1617 there is further correspondence, between the patron, Thomas Earl of Melrose and Mr. John Knox " anent the bigging or reparation of the Kirk of Melrose ". The material result of all this grudging concern for what was still, in certain respects, Scotland's most glorious monument in stone, may be seen to-day in the ungainly reinforcement of the north wall of the monk's quire by a ponderous mass of rubble work which remains the one blemish upon the symmetry of the Abbey, even in a state of ruin. This quire, closed in at both ends to form a parish kirk, must have been a depressing place of worship indeed. When, at a much later date, psalm books came into use, additional fenestration had to be provided, it is said, in order that the people might see to read them.

It was probably with few regrets that the people of Melrose witnessed in 1810 the opening of a new parish kirk on the Weirhill overlooking the river, though a tale survives that one zealous woman, in the sturdy tradition of Jenny Geddes, persisted in seeking entrance to the Abbey and in demanding a service in the place and after the manner to which she was accustomed. Her plea was not granted. Thus did the medieval Abbey pass finally from the uses of the Kirk into the hands of the Dukes of Buccleuch, by the gift of one of whom it ultimately became the possession of the nation. The historic connection with the Abbey is still recalled each Sunday by the ringing of the Abbey bell at

the time at which formerly it summoned the people to worship there.

By all accounts the first parish church on the Weirhill, opened in 1810, was a typical "heritors' kirk" of the period, with a central pulpit entered by a door leading from the tower. The baptismal basin was placed in a ring attached to the pulpit, the child being carried up the pulpit stairs for baptism. The building, later readjusted to admit an organ, was characteristically furnished with box pews and ample galleries. Here the congregation worshipped for almost exactly a century.

In 1908 a new heating system, at its first trial, proved only too successful. The church was thoroughly destroyed by fire, the spired tower alone escaping substantial damage, The funds received by way of insurance proving insufficient for the erection of such a building as was now projected, considerable further sums were raised by subscription. The architect, Mr Dick Peddie, was thus able to incorporate the old tower into a new building on a scale and of a dignity which distinguish it as one of the more notable churches in the Border area. The foundation stone having been laid on 25th September, 1909, the church was opened and dedicated for public worship on 11th May, 1911, by Dr. Pearson McAdam Muir, then Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland and Minister of Glasgow Cathedral.

The Present Church

The church occupies a commanding site on the Weirhill, in a sloping park fringed with trees.[1] The lofty nave, the ceiling of which is arched and panelled, is separated from the aisles by six stone pillars on either side. Over the aisles the ceilings are simply groined. Ceilings and walls throughout are white. The chancel is approached by a central aisle.

The chancel, raised by three steps above the level of the nave, is balanced at the opposite end of the nave by a putative chapel—sometimes referred to as the Lady Chapel —which, however, is furnished with pews as an integral part of the nave. At all four corners of the nave there are porches leading directly into the church. The building is furnished throughout in a soft-toned African mahogany, quite free from the reddish tinges of conventional mahog-

[1] The main axis of the church is from east to west, the chancel being at the west end. The accompanying description, however, follows the usual ecclesiological usage, treating the chancel as the "east" end of the church.

MELROSE S. CUTHBERT'S: THE NAVE.

MELROSE S. CUTHBERT'S: THE CHANCEL (BAPTISTERY ON RIGHT).

MELROSE S. CUTHBERT'S: THE FONT.

MELROSE S. CUTHBERT'S.

anies. The chancel is panelled in this wood, the only notable carving being a single large spray of richly carved flowers and fruit on each of four wooden pilasters.

A new Communion Table, designed to repeat the existing features of the church and its furnishings, and executed by Messrs Scott Morton of Edinburgh, was gifted in 1952 in memory of the Rev. Robert Nelson, formerly of the parishes of Newmachar and of Abbotsford, Glasgow, by his widow and son. With the Table the donors also presented a tapestry woven carpet designed and executed on his own hand-looms in Melrose by Mr. R. McDonald Scott, some of whose work is also to be seen in Glasgow Cathedral. The carpet carries as its central device a Maltese cross, flanked by the *mel* (mason's hammer) and the *rose*, these being the traditional *rebus* for the name Melrose. The Holy Table occupies the dominant position at the crossing and is used solely as a Communion Table, on other occasions carrying no ornament or furnishing except, on the Gospel side, a brass lectern with open Bible facing the congregation. The Communion Table previously used stands against the east wall of the chancel in the altar position. Upon it rest the brass alms-dishes and flowers. It is flanked by six-branched candelabra, the gift of Mrs. Fairbairn in memory of her son.

The pulpit is placed at the south side of the chancel steps. At the north side is a prayer desk in the manner of an *ambo*, repeating the style of the upper part of the pulpit. Attached to this *ambo* is a wooden desk for the reader's Bible. Dependium and markers in the dominant colour of soft green, with gold, were embroidered and gifted by Miss Isabella Curle.

The Baptistery is distinctively sited in the south-east corner of the nave, the baptismal laver resting in a wooden font attached to the lower panelling of the organ case. The organ is a three-manual instrument of considerable specification by Brindley and Foster.

Four of the six Communion Cups are of fine hammered silver, made by James Anderson, silversmith in Edinburgh in the year 1730. (Two other cups are exact replicas of these, and were gifted by the late Mr. A. Curle in 1893). Four heavy flagons and two plates, all of pewter and no longer in use, also date from 1730, the pewterer being W. Scott of Edinburgh.

The chancel window, in three lights, was designed by Mr. C. W. Whall of London, as the gift of Mr. Roberts of Dry-

grange in memory of his wife. The central light, some details in which were taken, with acknowledgements, from the drawings of Holman Hunt and others, might be considered somewhat overloaded with symbolic imagery, except that the central theme, the Crucifixion, dominates the treatment, the rest being commentary. The colouring is rich. The side lights portray, on the right hand S. Cuthbert, whose name the Church bears, and on the left S. Margaret of Scotland, whose son, David I., was the pious founder of the Abbey. The window, while lacking the freedom of design and the improved techniques in glass of the best modern work, rises far above the stilted crudities of much earlier stained glass. It is a good example of work from a transitional period, and is not without intrinsic interest.

All other windows, fittingly in a setting of trees and hills, are of clear glass. In the view of many it is desirable that they should remain so.

The interior of the building as it stands and is furnished to-day forms an artistic unity. It is functional, simple and harmonious. Spacious and dignified, the impression is of stateliness and light, and few improvements are called for. In the view of the present writer, a Cross upon the east Table would complete the furnishing of the chancel, which, in the absence of flowers at least, lacks an adequate focus at eye-level. Possibly also the widening of the central space of the chancel by the removal of a row of choir stalls on either side would be an advantage: the existing choir stalls are sufficient to seat fifty.

Past and Present

The present Congregation is a union of the Old Parish with S. Aidan's (sometime Free Church). After the union in 1946 it was called "Old and S. Aidan's". In 1951 it became known as Melrose S. Cuthbert's Parish Church.

Ministers of the parish of Melrose since the Reformation.

1562 James Pont (Kylpont or Kynpont),
1568 John Watson, Reader.
1569 John Wilson, Reader.
1574 Thomas Halywell, Reader.
1584 John Knox, M.A.
1627 Thomas Forrester, M.A.
1640 Alexander Scott, M.A.
1641 David Fletcher, M.A. (later Bishop of Argyll).
1665 Alexander Bisset, M.A.
1690 Robert Wilson, M.A.
1711 Adam Milne, M.A.
1748 James Brown, M.A.
1768 Frederick Maclagan.
1788 George Thomson.
1836 William Murray.
1866 James Chalmers Herdman, D.D.
1898 Robert James Thompson, M.A.

Ministers of S. Aidan's (from the Disruption).

1843 A. J. Campbell.
1859 William Cousin.
1878 Robert Sanders, M.A.
1911 James Irwin, M.A.
1919 Henry Crombie.
1935 John W. Coutts, D.D.

Ministers of Melrose S. Cuthbert's Parish.

1947 John Symington, M.A.
1950 Thomas Henry Keir, M.A.

Of these John Watson and John Knox have already received mention. Thomas Forrester (1627), an ecclesiastical satirist, ribald and polemical, was finally deposed by the Presbytery of Glasgow. David Fletcher (1641) was a Scottish Vicar of Bray: of prelatist sympathies while minister at S. Cuthbert's, Edinburgh, but conformist while at Melrose, he afterwards became Bishop of Argyll, ultimately being commemorated by an imposing memorial in one of the side-chapels in the Abbey. Adam Milne (1711), who did much for Melrose and its industry, was the author of *A Description of the Parish of Melrose.* George Thomson (1788) had a son who is the putative proto-type of "Dominie Sampson". Dr. Herdman was a notable Convener of the Foreign Mission Committee. The wife of the Rev. William Cousin was the authoress of "The sands of time are sinking."

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NOTE.—The writer of this account is indebted to the Rev. Robert James Thompson, M.A., Minister-Emeritus of the Old Parish, for much research into local post-Reformation records, also to Dr. Gordon Donaldson of Edinburgh University for guidance in certain matters connected with the Abbey. The official Guide to the Abbey of Melrose, by Dr. J. S. Richardson and Dr. Marguerite Wood, is an invaluable source of information, as is the late Dr. James Curle's *A Little Book about Melrose.*

THOMAS H. KEIR.