

Another Wrestling Jacob

It was quite a number of years ago that in reading one of the twenty-nine volumes of A. K. H. Boyd's works which have so far reached my bookshelves (it must have been one of the last four books of reminiscences), I came across the brief entry recording a Sunday in St Andrews, which closed with the words "Jacob Primmer in church". I had a vague idea that Jacob Primmer had been some sort of iconoclast who perambulated Scotland towards the end of last century and interrupted services which he was not pleased to approve, but who exactly had he been? Evidently he had been sufficiently well-known before 1899 for Dr. Boyd to leave his reference unexplained, but the case seemed rather different half-a-century later. I mentally noted the subject for later investigation.

Lately, in reading Dr A. L. Drummond's stimulating book, *The Church Architecture of Protestantism* (T. & T. Clark, 1934), I met Jacob Primmer's name once more, this time with enough explanatory matter to take me considerably further (op. cit., pp. 89, 213, 272, 275 and 310), and my own persistence eventually produced the volume, *Life of Jacob Primmer* by his son, Dr. J. Boyd Primmer, which was published in 1916 under the imprint of William Bishop, Market Street, Edinburgh and J. A. Kensit, of 3 and 4 St Paul's Churchyard, London. I borrowed this book through the Scottish Central Library, and read it attentively. It certainly had much to tell me, and while its contents are probably quite familiar to my elders and betters in the Church of Scotland, I felt that one or two reflections upon it might be of real interest to lesser men.

It runs to 318 plus XV pages of reasonable size, and contains considerable food for thought. To summarize the story with the utmost brevity, Jacob Primmer owed his surname to an English father, who was a merchant seaman, drowned in Leith docks when Jacob was three and a half years old. Jacob himself was born in that port less than a year before the Disruption; he left school at twelve and worked in a draper's shop before becoming a compositor. His first religious enthusiasm appears to have been stirred by the discovery of Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, and this led to a "determination to fight against Rome". Fighting against

something more or less identified in his mind with Rome seems to have been his ruling passion thereafter. "When about fifteen" he writes, "I began to write letters to the newspapers. They invariably dealt with religious matters. Since then I have written some hundreds of letters, and have been engaged in many newspaper controversies. This is one of the best ways of exciting an interest in a subject, and of getting people to read what is written". Attendance at the Anti-Popery Classes instituted by Mr John Hope, W.S., followed, and Sunday School teaching, the distribution of tracts and participation in Mission services took up most of his energies. His church connection was somewhat tenuous, but the Sunday School teaching was for St Thomas's, Leith. Conversion followed, on traditional revivalist lines, and he became a communicant member of North Leith Parish Church about 1860.

By extreme economy, by undertaking printing work in the evenings and by various other means, he succeeded in getting through Edinburgh University and receiving licence. The evangelical Professor Charteris encouraged him, and Dr Phin, Convener of the Home Mission Committee, found him a post in the mission station of Gardentown, Banffshire. Here, his work was strongly coloured by the influence of the Moody and Sankey mission, and two characteristics first appear—close association with the ultra-evangelical elements in religious bodies outside the Church of Scotland, and unflinching zeal in the cause of total abstinence. Four years later, he writes most revealingly, "My affections being in the south, and also being anxious to fight Popery, Ritualism and Rationalism, I decided to leave Gardentown. I felt my work was done in this place. I received a letter offering me an assistantship to a minister, and also a letter from the Rev. John Pitt, then minister of the second charge of Dunfermline Abbey, urging me to come to Townhill, to gather a congregation and build a church there. He guaranteed me £105 of a salary, in addition to what the people might give". So began his Townhill pastorate, on the 29th of April, 1876: it lasted until his retirement in 1904. He died on the 14th of August, 1914.

There is ample evidence that he was a faithful pastor to his own flock, that he was personally generous, as far as his always limited means permitted, and that he was not devoid of a fairly elementary sense of humour. He had considerable physical courage and an unquestionable fidelity

to his objects. Yet the prevailing impression left upon the present-day reader of his life is inevitably one of fanaticism. The obvious danger attendant upon "assurance" in the old technical sense, consequent upon the phenomenon of conversion, is unthinking intolerance, and it is hard to avoid the conviction that to Jacob Primmer Oliver Cromwell's famous words might most fittingly have been addressed: "I beseech you by the bowels of Christ think it possible you may be mistaken". No uneasiness on that score ever seems to have entered the head of the self-appointed *censor morum* in his Dunfermline Vatican.

His first fight (the word is his own) against "innovations in the worship of God" was undertaken in his first year at university. The unfortunate minister of North Leith Church was desirous of introducing an organ, so Jacob opened fire by getting up a petition against the use of anthems and prose Psalms, which had already been introduced into the services; this he followed up by writing letters to the daily press against the introduction of organs. The disturbance thus created achieved its purpose, and no organ came to North Leith Church until several years later, under another minister and even then only in the teeth of a minority opposition.

Once placed at Townhill, he first came into collision with the Presbytery over the use of unfermented wine at Communion. It is interesting nowadays to note that by a majority the Presbytery forbade him to use unfermented wine. Jacob, of course, never dreamt of submitting to a mere decision of Presbytery, and took the case to the General Assembly, where a speech by Principal Pirie of Aberdeen, warning the brethren against irritating any congregations, since the Disruption was so recent (the year was then 1880), carried the day by a small margin, and Townhill was permitted to go on using unfermented wine.

Passing over the record of various disturbances within his own congregation, and the Home Board's reduction of his salary on account of dissatisfaction with his work there, we find that in 1886 he launched his first attack against the "Popish images in St Giles' Church", linking this with a brisk attack upon the practice "in St. Giles' and other churches" of observing Christmas. The Presbytery of Edinburgh declining to interfere, he had the case taken to the General Assembly of 1887, which refused his petition by 100 votes to 40. Jacob was by no means done with St. Giles', and he raised the same issue at the Assembly of 1888, with

no greater success. By now it is clear that he regarded himself as the chosen champion of pure Protestantism, and we find him trouncing Queen Victoria for sending jubilee gifts to the Man of Sin, otherwise known as Pope Pius IX. At the instigation (and expense) of Mr Hope, he also composed "The Romanising Church Service Society", "The Scottish Hymnal saturated with Popish Error and Idolatry", "Revolution of the Worship of the Church of Scotland—Attempt to Impose a Liturgy" and a brisk attack upon Dr. A. K. H. Boyd, who had "defended Newman and Popery" in that incendiary organ, "Life and Work". At this period, Jacob resolved to be thoroughly consistent and to accept nothing that had not Scriptural authority, so he swiftly anathematized the Scottish Hymnal, his pulpit gown, his bands and the use of the title "Reverend", substituting for the last the style "Pastor". Convinced (as indeed, he might well be), that sitting at prayer is irreverent, he instructed his congregation to revert to the old use and wont of standing at prayer and sitting for praise. 1889 and 1890 saw him return to the charge against St. Giles' "images" at the Assemblies, still unsuccessfully. The new "superstitious and Popish" adornments of the pulpit in Dunfermline Abbey sent him to Presbytery, Synod and Assembly once more. By this time he had particularly singled out for attack Dr. Boyd, Dr. Cooper, Professor Story, Dr. Rankin of Muthil and Dr. Sprott. How elegantly he phrased his attacks may be shown by a brief quotation from a sermon preached in Townhill Church in 1891: "It is evident that this sanctimonious hypocrite (Professor Story) wants to be made patron of the whole Church of Scotland, and to foist his namby-pamby 'cultured' priests on their congregations. But his bare-faced audacity in seeking to rob them of their rights will only rouse the indignation of the people of Scotland. The lawlessness which reigns in their church must be put down. They saw the Confession of Faith practically abolished, their worship revolutionized, and now their Church government is to give place to intolerant Prelacy. But he was sure that the people of Scotland will never tolerate the destruction of what cost their martyr fathers so dear to wrest out of the grasp of Prelacy and antichrist." Not altogether surprisingly, Professor Story requested the Presbytery of Dunfermline to take notice of this language. The Presbytery eventually passed a vote of censure upon Mr Primmer, but he of course appealed to

the Synod, which astonished many by sustaining the appeal and referring the case back to the Presbytery, which then proceeded to withdraw its censure and depart from the matter. This is particularly notable as indicating how the wind was to blow in later years.

Having trounced individuals and decided that the Church Service Society was a "Romanising" junta, the energetic wrestler as briskly disposed of another sinister body. Let him tell his own tale. "On 27th September 1897, the Aberdeen Ecclesiological Society held a ritualistic function called an 'office'. About seventy persons were present in Leuchars Parish Church. At the close I rose and said: 'I enter my protest against this illegal performance in a parish church of Scotland, especially the church of Alexander Henderson, who in the General Assembly of 1683 declared: 'Now we have cast down the walls of Jericho, let him beware of the curse of Hiel, the Beth-elite, who dare set them up again'. The performance was thoroughly Popish and illegal, as I recorded at the time. The faces of Drs. Boyd and Cooper were a study. They looked amazed". (That is not surprising to us, since they may have recollected that as Alexander Henderson died in 1646, his utterance at the Assembly of 1683 ought never to have been forgotten by anyone. 1683 being in the middle of the Second Episcopate seems unlikely as a date for the utterance of such sentiments, and in point of fact no General Assemblies met from 1653 until 1690, so we may take it that Mr Primmer's "1683" is a printer's error for "1638", the year of the Covenanting Assembly. If Mr Primmer did not in fact utter "1683", then the striking expressions of the arch-ritualists may have been occasioned by something else.) Here, let it be recorded, Mr Primmer met with "many present" who afterwards spoke to him and congratulated him. Two months later, he was enthusiastically denouncing Dr. Alexander Whyte of Free St. George's for "rank Popery" and Mariolatry. In May, 1899, he made vocal protest in St. Giles' against "the High Church Ritualistic function called 'The Assembly "Holy" Communion'". Professor Story raised this matter at the Assembly, and Mr Primmer was summoned to the bar to answer for his conduct. Dr. Cameron Lees was for letting the matter drop, but a large majority thought otherwise, and the Moderator (Dr. Pagan of Bothwell) said: "If you had legitimate ground of complaint, it was open to you in legal form to bring the matter before this House for its

judgment ; but acting as you did was not only unseemly in the highest degree, but dishonouring to God and a scandal to religion. In view of these facts, it is my painful duty, in name and by authority of the General Assembly, solemnly to admonish you of the impropriety of your conduct, and to warn you against the repetition of it ". This had rather less than no effect upon Jacob, who " in a loud voice " said, " I accept it as a great honour ", and carefully recorded that " a number of the members of the Assembly shook hands with him, declaring that he had achieved a great victory ." Again I ask readers to note this.

One more quotation must end this retrospect. In 1901, he virulently assailed Professor Cooper in such terms as to call forth the very mild rejoinder : " Rev. Dear Sir—I am credibly informed that at a public meeting held in Glasgow on Sunday last you said : (1) That Lord Balfour of Burleigh in 1898 appointed a Popish priest as Professor of Church History in your (Glasgow) University—they appointed him, and his name is Cooper—Dr. Cooper ; (2) that I have proclaimed " that the Church of Rome is the true Church of Jesus Christ " ; (3) that I " believe in the Popish Mass " ; and (4) that I signed an address to the Pope and committed perjury. Every one of these statements is an absolute falsehood. These and such like utterances of yours, spoken through many years, have given me a great deal of pain ; and they are more injurious than perhaps you are aware to my character and usefulness. I have therefore to ask you to give them through the newspapers as public a denial as your statement of them, and to apologize to me for stating them. We are ministers and members of the same Reformed Church, and I am unwilling to think that, thus appealed to, you will refuse to do me this act of justice or continue to act towards me in this unbrotherly fashion. I am, sir, very sincerely yours, JAMES COOPER ". If Professor Cooper really supposed that quiet dignity and courtesy would avail with the redoubtable controversialist, he was sadly mistaken. Not the vestige of an apology for the four " absolute falsehoods " was ever uttered ; indeed, Jacob promptly used the Professor's letter as a proof either of weakness or of " Jesuitical " dishonesty at his next public meeting in Dundee, and followed this up with a scathing epistle, containing such choice olive branches as " traitor to the Church whose bread you eat " and " I am thankful that I have, on your own confession, been able to counteract your wicked Romanising

'usefulness' ". Professor Cooper then petitioned the Presbytery of Dunfermline on this matter, but that Presbytery, remarking that "the Professor had the Civil Courts open to him", refused the petition.

Here, then, we may well take stock. The remaining dozen years of Jacob Primmer's life simply continued the catena of denunciations and protests, his hammer descending upon St. Margaret's, Barnhill, the "altar" in Crathie Church, the "images" in St. Cuthbert's and "idolatrous processions" of Scottish Episcopalians with equal fervour. My old music-teacher told me the other day that when he was travelling in a train before the Great War, and some Englishman asked on seeing the Wallace Monument at Stirling, "What is that?", another passenger in the compartment obliged with the chuckling reply, "That's a monument to Jacob Primmer. He's no dead yet, but it's waiting for him". I think we might very well ask ourselves just how much truth there is in that gnomic utterance. Jacob has left these scenes, and we may trust that he has been scandalized by no hint of Popery or even Ritualism in the Presbyterian realm to which he has gone; but has he in fact really gone? Is he not in some sense an earth-bound spirit yet, a soul still marching on in the Scottish Church to-day?

The question is not asked idly. It is asked because it seems necessary that it should be both formulated and answered now. The Church of Scotland in the second half of the twentieth century is almost as enigmatic a congeries of conflicting characteristics as the Church of England has been since 1841. It has received back into its bosom the bulk of the United Free Church and, more recently, most of the Original Secession Church. In all the now mingling streams of formerly separate traditions, there was clearly a mixture of strength and weakness on almost every point. The great problem was, as it so generally is in all Protestantism, dubiety as to the seat of authority. What would seem a guiding principle to men such as Cooper, Story, R. S. Simpson and Millar Patrick would rouse the most violent opposition from wrestling Jacob and his sympathizers in all the Presbyterian Churches. Let us note the word "sympathizers", for, indefatigable and fanatical as he was, Jacob alone might have receded into history as "an ecclesiastical curiosity". As it is, his name may mean very little to the present generation, but his ends are still served with tireless zeal.

In this necessarily condensed review of Jacob's wrestlings, especial care has been taken to point out that sheer persistence has a remarkable way of paying dividends. That there was a veritable renaissance of Scottish worship in the period from 1865 to the end of the nineteenth century is sufficiently obvious: that it subsequently lost its momentum is perhaps less obvious, yet it seems to the present writer that it is discernible. At the very beginning of Jacob's career of protest, we hear of anthems and the chanting of psalms in a Leith church: it would be very interesting to know exactly what kind of service is commonly rendered in that church to-day: I for one should be pleasantly surprised if we were to hear chanted psalms now. A brief reference to Dr. A. K. H. Boyd's writings shows that in the eighties and nineties of last century he had a far more complete and elaborate form of service in St. Mary's Church than is to be heard in the Parish Church of the Holy Trinity, St Andrews, to-day. I have rummaged around in what is still fairly described as a West-end church in Edinburgh and found dust-covered piles of the old Scottish Prose Psalter; no copies of the present book are to be seen anywhere, and since the old system of pointing would never be used to-day, we may take it that it is a very long time since psalms were chanted in that church. What it all seems to add up to is that many ministers were once stirred by the mighty wind of the Church Service Society and were able to carry their congregations with them in a considerable advance towards seamliness and Catholicity of worship. Then the great Jacob strode upon the scene and sufficiently terrified the majority by his sheer unreasoning dogmatism and appeal to what the late Bishop Henson once referred to as "the Protestant underworld", with the result that the advance was halted and not a few of the original gains subsequently lost. It is a great pity, incidentally, that Jacob did not have a tilt at that very definite "innovation", the "individual cup" at Communion services: he might well have annihilated it, and so succeeded where the Scottish Church Society has largely failed.

On the face of it, the Church Service Society at the end of last century certainly had the best arguments and the most distinguished men: Jacob's arguments were mainly unsound and his avowed supporters undistinguished. Yet, surveying the scene to-day, it is hard to resist the conclusion that Jacob has been the victor. The Church Service Society's principles have, of course, continued to commend

themselves to thoughtful lay and clerical members of the Church, and where there has been either a strong minister in the last generation followed by one in this generation who is not obsessed with the current shibboleths, or an unusually cultured congregation conscious of an ingrained tradition, things are somewhat better than they would have been one hundred years ago. But in far too many cases there has been no advance since 1910 or thereabouts, and in some there is a continuing decline. Without the slightest fear of contradiction, it may be asserted that on the musical side standards are decidedly lower at least in the city churches than they were a generation ago, and this might probably be said even of the country churches as well, for the mere substitution of a cheap electronic organ for a superannuated harmonium does not automatically produce either an enthusiastic choir or a competent organist. Choir unions and festivals seem to have died out altogether, and as a result there seems to be neither standard nor incentive set before local musicians. Certainly, magnificent Church music can be heard on the radio (almost all of it from south of the Border), but so can some remarkably inferior stuff, and the "Radio Times" does not warn the simple which will be which. The salaries we are offering to our organists give a fair indication of the value we apparently set on our worship: it is quite a common thing to find churches paying their organist to-day exactly what they paid him (or his predecessor) before the War—the figure being in the region of £40 or £50 per annum. The only fair method of treating this question would surely be to establish a sliding scale between organist's salary and minister's stipend: thus, if Drumsleekie Parish Church had a minister with £350 and an organist with £40 in 1938, it should now have a minister with £700 and an organist with £80. In most industries, however, there is a greater rise at the lower end of the scale, so probably our organist should now have at least £100 p.a. How often do we find this?

If Jacob is not to be entitled to have his name cut on the Wallace Monument, it appears high time that the Church Service Society, the Scottish Church Society and a few other of Jacob's "Romanising" Aunt Sallies shook off some of their senile slumber and did something quite unapologetic in the way of supplying a lead, as once they did. On the whole, they did not show to advantage against Jacob when he challenged them, not because their case was weak but because they made the frequent error of supposing that a

noisy opponent is not worth answering. The result, all too patently, has been that the average man in the pew came to the conclusion that the "Romanisers" did not answer because they dared not—and so Jacob, no longer in the flesh, still sits grimly in our pews and keeps the Church of Scotland where he wanted it, far, far away from that dreadful conception, "one, holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church". Jacob was not, and is not, unanswerable, but who is there who has the courage to answer him to-day?

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