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Contrasting Worldviews in Revival: Ferryden, Scotland, in 1859

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REVIVALISM, ACCORDING to a jaundiced correspondent of the *Montrose Review* in 1859, was 'a vortex of mad excitement', usually 'the result of mental derangement'.¹ Revivals are often thought to be irrational affairs, hysterical outbursts of unleashed emotion that are devoid of intellectual content. Consequently they are often dismissed by historians as hardly worth examination. Two recent works, however, go a long way towards showing how misconceived are the historical neglect and the disdainful estimate on which it is based. In an examination of the

awakenings of the period 1858-62 in the north-east of Scotland, Ken Jeffrey has shown that revivalism was an internally variegated phenomenon reflecting the work patterns and social structures of different adjacent areas.² In a second book Janice Holmes has laid bare how contested were the practices of the Ulster Revival of 1859, with some commentators in Britain as well as Ireland condemning what others approved.³

Revivals, it is clear from these accounts, were complicated happenings which sympathetic Evangelicals assessed in different ways. The present study, which is based on a single revival in the village of Ferryden con-

1 *Montrose Review* [hereafter MR], 4 November 1859, p. 6.

2 K.S. Jeffrey, *When the Lord Walked the Land: The 1858-62 Revival in the North East of Scotland* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002).

3 Janice Holmes, *Religious Revivals in Britain and Ireland, 1859-1905* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2000), chaps 1 and 2.

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temporary with those researched by Jeffrey and Holmes, takes their analysis a step further by exploring the ideas of the people involved in the awakening. It examines the contrasting attitudes of various groups of preachers and converts participating in the events at Ferryden, bringing out their differences of opinion and identifying the roots of their disagreements. It tries to suggest that around a minor episode rival worldviews came into collision. In the microcosm of Ferryden we can witness a clash of some of the cultural forces that competed for the soul of Victorian Britain.

1. The Revival at Ferryden

Ferryden is a village near the mouth of the River South Esk facing the port of Montrose on the north bank. The village stands within the parish of Craig and in the county which in the nineteenth century was called Forfarshire but which is now known as Angus, on the east coast of Scotland about half way between Dundee to the south-west and Aberdeen to the north. Like most other coastal settlements in the region, the village had an economy that was based almost entirely on exploiting the North Sea. In 1855 there were sixty-eight boats and 186 fishermen in a village of about 1200 souls, with many of the other men in related work and nearly all the women regularly occupied in baiting lines.⁴ The revival there in 1859 made a profound impact on the community, leading, according to a

careful estimate, to some two hundred professions of conversion. A local minister, William Nixon, went round transcribing the experience of twenty-four of the converts from their own lips.⁵ Thus, very unusually, we have an insight into the mental world of the converts as well as knowing a good deal about those who preached amongst them. The Ferryden revival is therefore particularly rewarding for careful scrutiny.

It will first be useful to outline the course of events. During October and into November 1859 there was a series of twice weekly evangelistic meetings in the village run by laymen from Montrose.⁶ A few individuals, including two of the cases whose testimony was recorded by Nixon, became anxious about their souls and underwent conversion in their own homes.⁷ On Wednesday 9 November a gentleman evangelist who was due to preach in Montrose, Hay Macdowall Grant, visited Ferryden and was pressed to hold a meeting.⁸ A former West Indies merchant as well as an Aberdeenshire laird, Grant was used to making precise calculations of the spiritual temperature of a place. He was said to have 'computed the influence of the Holy Spirit in fractions'.⁹

⁴ P.F. Anson, *Fishing Boats and Fisher Folk on the East Coast of Scotland* (London: J.M. Dent, 1930), p. 269.

⁵ William Nixon, *An Account of the Work of God at Ferryden*, 2nd edn (London, 1860), p. 17.

⁶ William Mitchell, *Brief but Bright Wilderness Journey* (Montrose, 1860), p. 8.

⁷ Nixon, *Account*, pp. 18, 25.

⁸ *Montrose Standard* [hereafter *MS*], 11 November 1859, p. 5.

⁹ Charlotte E. Woods, *Memoirs and Letters of Canon Hay Aitken* (London, 1928), p. 80.

Recognising that Ferryden was ripe for significant developments, he visited again two days later and returned the following evening to preach, warning the members of the congregation to consider what would be the result of dying that night as unbelievers.¹⁰ While Grant was speaking, five people fell down with prostrations. Crowds thronged to hear another address by Grant on the Sunday evening, and, though there were no prostrations during the sermon, there were more cases at an after meeting for serious enquirers.¹¹ On the Monday, as a convert recalled, 'all the town was in a stir'.¹² On the Tuesday, the Free Church minister preached in the evening on the wages of sin and the gift of God. One fisherman found himself 'seized with a terrible shake', sank into a semi-comatose state for a quarter of an hour and felt a great gloom before springing up with thankfulness to God for his goodness.¹³ On the following evening during a calm address, when, as it was said, there was 'as little to excite as in the ordinary preachings', men and women were 'overwhelmed, crying out, and falling down'.¹⁴ Subsequently there was less public display but there was a continuing series of nightly meetings attended by many professions of conversion. Sightseers flocked to Ferryden, earnest lay evangelists made a beeline for the village and ministers were drafted in from outside to preach

and counsel the anxious. There was scarcely a day without a packed evening meeting down to the end of December.¹⁵ For a few weeks Ferryden was the talk of Scotland.

The spirit of an earlier revival was behind the outburst of 1859. The Free Church of Scotland, which alone was represented in Ferryden, saw itself as the champion of revivals, for Kilsyth, Dundee and elsewhere had been marked by awakenings during the 'Ten Years' Struggle', the period immediately before the Disruption of 1843 when the Free Church was in gestation. In the autumn of 1846, there was a movement in the Free Church of Ferryden itself. Andrew Bonar, the biographer of the earlier revivalist Robert Murray McCheyne and himself an eager participant in awakenings, was summoned to help with counselling the distressed. In September Bonar was aware of thirty who were deeply convicted of sin, and two months later, when he returned to assist the minister conduct a communion, he discovered that some had 'found rest, though most are still tossed with tempests'.¹⁶ One in this category, a young girl who had been deeply swayed but not transformed by the events of 1846, reached that point as a mother in the revival of 1859. The texts and hymns she had learned in the earlier episode returned to her mind thirteen years on.¹⁷ The precedent of the first awakening smoothed the way for the second.

10 Mrs Gordon, *Hay Macdowall Grant of Arndilly* (London, 1876), p. 135. A, p. 49.

11 *MS*, 18 November 1859, p. 5.

12 Nixon, *Account*, p. 52.

13 Nixon, *Account*, p. 43.

14 Nixon, *Account*, p. 31.

15 *MS*, 30 December 1859, p. 5.

16 Diary for 20 November 1846, in Marjory Bonar (ed.), *Andrew A. Bonar, D. D.: Diary and Letters* (London, 1893), p. 99.

17 Nixon, *Account*, p. 34.

Revivals elsewhere, however, played an even larger part. In the new village reading room the people found newspaper accounts of the Businessmen's Revival of 1858 in America and then of the powerful Ulster Revival of 1859.¹⁸ On 9 November, the day when Grant arrived in Ferryden, two correspondents of the *Montrose Review* took up their pens to defend revivals against a critic in the newspaper who was at least as convinced as they were that one was coming.¹⁹ Anticipation of revival was in the air. So it is not surprising that the first Ferryden convert interviewed by Nixon explained that her initial experience took place while speaking to her sister about 'what was going on in Ireland'.²⁰ Crucially, among the Scots who flocked over to witness the scenes in Ulster was the lay secretary of the interdenominational Montrose Home Mission named Mudie and a group of friends from the area. On their return, inspired by what they had seen, Mudie and his party held meetings in Ferryden urging the people to seek salvation and look for revival on the Ulster pattern. The first convert heard an address by Mudie, who also prayed with her. It was Mudie who took Grant on his first visit to Ferryden, forging the link that was to precipitate the first outbreak of religious excitement.²¹ There can be no doubt that the Ferryden revival was in large

measure inspired by what had happened in northern Ireland.

2. The Fishing Community

The types of people involved in promoting the Ferryden revival were all species of Evangelicals. They can be divided, however, into very different groups, and to their analysis we must now turn. In the first place there were those who were converted among the fisherfolk. The fishing community, conditioned as it was by the life of the sea, generated a distinctive set of attitudes. Some of the most compelling experiences during the awakening took place in the North Sea. One fisherman, while shooting out a baited line, heard beautiful music that was the prelude to an awareness of Christ in the boat.²² The great waters were also the source of imagery used by fisherfolk to express their experience. A woman, in describing her conversion, felt that her sins were forgiven. 'And', she continued, 'looking out from the window there to the ocean, I saw Him take them all from off me, and cast them into the depths of the sea.'²³ The perils threatening seafarers were a significant factor in fostering a sense of ultimate issues. Six of the converts spoke of their thoughts about death as a precipitant of their change of direction. Apprehensions about the future concentrated on death rather than hell, which, like heaven, was mentioned in only two testimonies. According to the stereotypes of revival, the prevailing preoccupation should have been with

¹⁸ Nixon, *Account*, pp. 13-14.

¹⁹ *MR*, 4 November 1859, p. 6; 11 November 1859, p. 6; 18 November 1859, p. 6.

²⁰ Nixon, *Account*, p. 18.

²¹ *MR*, 11 November 1859, p. 4. Mitchell, *Wilderness Journey*, pp. 7, 8, 12. Gordon, *Grant*, p. 135.

²² Nixon, *Account*, p. 62.

²³ Nixon, *Account*, p. 54.

the terrors of hell, but in reality the risk of death, so much nearer everyday experience, was much more prominent in the Ferryden mind.

The physical constitution of the village also had its effects. As in most small fishing settlements, the houses were huddled together as close to the sea as possible. Neighbours were inevitably thrown together in a tight-knit community life. Everybody knew everybody else's business so that news flew with amazing rapidity from mouth to mouth. Quarrels might fester, and in fact one of the consequences of the revival was a healing of breaches in the community, something recounted by three of the converts. But a spirit of camaraderie predominated. Intermarriage within the community was normal, the schoolmaster remarking that it created the potential risk of idiocy.²⁴ So many individuals shared the same surnames that, as in many fishing places, everybody was known by a nickname: Buckie, Straikey, Tarvet's Davie, Whiten Beckie, Drummer Sawie's Jemima and so on.²⁵

The crews enjoyed a strong solidarity forged by common ownership of the boats and shared experience of danger at sea. Consequently it is not surprising that one fisherman who had seen his spouse converted 'spoke continually to my neighbours in the boat about what had happened to my wife'.²⁶ But female sociability was even stronger. One woman was crying at night, as she

explained, 'till the neighbours heard me' and some of them came in.²⁷ Most significantly, the report of the conversion of a young married woman in the early hours of Saturday 12 November brought crowds to her home and helped precipitate the revival excitement from that evening. She was, as Nixon justly remarked, 'the most powerful of all the sermons they heard'.²⁸ In the setting of Ferryden revival was contagious.

The family structure of the village also affected what happened there. Repeatedly converts declared that they had been swayed by relations. A sister followed her brother in finding peace; that sister was followed in turn by her husband. Another two cases were sisters, with both being counselled by their aunt. The commitment of wives to bringing their husbands to Christ shines through some of the narratives. One, knowing her husband was in Montrose, 'said she could walk across the water to tell him, and he must come to Christ'.²⁹ Women also tried to influence the other members of their families, one mother being 'full of the belief that her children will all be saved'.³⁰ In the later stages of the revival during December it was principally the young who professed conversion.³¹ But the zeal of the women did not mean that they had a monopoly on the unusual phenomena of the revival. Although

24 Andrew Douglas, *History of the Village of Ferryden*, 2nd edn (Montrose, 1857), pp. 25-6.

25 D. H. Edwards, *Among the Fisherfolks of Usan and Ferryden* (Breachin, 1921), p. 8.

26 Nixon, *Account*, p. 29.

27 Nixon, *Account*, p. 34.

28 Nixon, *Account*, p. 16.

29 Nixon, *Account*, p. 34.

30 Nixon, *Account*, p. 35.

31 MS, 9 December 1859, p. 5. BA, 13 December 1859, [p. 3]. Diary for 19 December 1859, in Bonar, *Bonar*, p. 160.

sixteen of the twenty-four cases in Nixon's collection were female, only two of the six prostrations, two of the four visions and one of the four auditory experiences were reported by women. It is possible that this distribution is the result of deliberate editing by Nixon, who might not wish to convey an impression of female hysteria, but it remains true that a majority of the recorded strange experiences belonged to men. Revival was not gender-exclusive; it was more a family concern.

The people of Ferryden displayed another characteristic that is highly relevant to the awakening of 1859. Fisherfolk in general were known for their superstition, but this village was still supposed, well into the twentieth century, to have preserved a particular awe for signs and omens. If fishermen walking to their boat saw a pig or a minister, it was a portent of disaster and they would refuse to put to sea.³² It is clear that the *mentalité* of the fisherfolk expected physical indications of unseen happenings, often those still to come. Buzzing in the ears was a sign of malicious gossip, itching in the eyes a warning of sorrow and tickling on the feet a premonition of a journey. Physical actions, furthermore, could ward off ill luck. If an inauspicious word such as 'pig' was uttered, it could be remedied by touching cold iron.³³ The physical was an expression of a supernatural world, the two having no sharp boundary. Sometimes Nixon's interviewees showed the influence of this way

of thinking, demonstrating their meaning by gestures. One, in recalling how she rebuked Satan, 'suited the action to the word'.³⁴ What was called superstition was often a sense of the unity of the world, seen and unseen, and the power of human actions to express its reality.

The everyday assumptions of the fisherfolk inevitably coloured their conversion narratives. What they *felt* took pride of place as an irruption of the supernatural into their lives. The favourite metaphor to convey their experience was acquiring a sense of peace, the word or its equivalent 'rest' occurring in no fewer than fifteen of the twenty-four reports. To 'get peace' was virtually a technical term for conversion. The immediate consequence of undergoing the new birth was often joy (a word that occurs in four reports) or happiness (which is in five). The converts generally testified their joy and happiness, a newspaper noted, in singing, which was both very popular and often admired by strangers in the village.³⁵

Another common description of their experience, one reported by eleven of the interviewees, was the sense of a burden weighing them down beforehand but then being carried away. Thus a married woman felt 'dreadfully burdened' but later 'my burden left me'.³⁶ An observer remarked that many used the word 'heavy'.³⁷ Perhaps influenced by *Pil-*

34 Nixon, *Account*, p. 37.

35 *MS*, 25 November 1859, p. 5.

36 Nixon, *Account*, pp. 36, 37.

37 *Brechin Advertiser* [hereafter *BA*], 3 January 1860, [p. 3].

32 Edwards, *Usan and Ferryden*, p. 56.

33 P. F. Anson, *Fisher Folk-Lore* (London: Faith Press, 1965), pp. 47, 38.

grim's Progress, this form of language again indicated the sheer *physicality* of the change of life as it was conceptualised by the people of Ferryden. One husband could not get rest, according to his wife, 'to his soul or body'.³⁸ The two, everybody took for granted, were intimately connected.

That is the context for what outsiders found the strangest aspect of the Ferryden revival, the physical phenomena. Many converts spoke of bodily symptoms, not being able to eat or sleep, a strong pain rising from the feet to the heart or sins coming up the throat to choke them.³⁹ Commonest was 'a great shaking', which was sometimes the prelude to being stricken by a full prostration.⁴⁰ 'The person "struck"', explained the *Mon-trose Standard*, 'is first seized with violent trembling, accompanied, seemingly, by great bodily and mental agony, in which the body is convulsed, and large drops of perspiration start from every pore, the person affected the while uttering piteous cries for mercy.'⁴¹ There were variations on the theme. One woman 'fell back in a swoon; her pulse appeared to stop, she looked like a thing without life, and she remained in this condition for perhaps five minutes'.⁴² A man reported being one of the five or six who at an evening meeting 'went off, one after another, like a shot'.⁴³

Such happenings were by no means unique to Ferryden or even to fishing villages, for they had occurred in abundance in Ireland, they took place in roughly half the Scottish revival centres during 1859-60 and in November 1859, at the time of the events in Ferryden, there was an instance in the city of Dundee.⁴⁴ But as many as six of the converts told Nixon about a prostration. Their frequency in the early stages of the awakening at Ferryden bears witness to their congruence with the worldview of the inhabitants. At the supreme crisis of life, the physical gave evidence of the spiritual.

Several of the interviewees also spoke of seeing or hearing strange things. There were four each who had visions and unusual auditory experiences. Thus a woman 'told what she saw in heaven'; and a man declared that during a prostration he heard singing.⁴⁵ One account, however, stands out for its vivid detail and deserves quotation in full. It is the experience of an old man who fell into a trance for an hour:

I was in a room full of benches, with no chair but the one I occupied. A man came to me with a book in his hand, and a pencil in his mouth, and said three times, Do you believe?...Then five small figures came, the first holding in each hand a large-stalked tumbler, containing what I understood to be

38 Nixon, *Account*, p. 40.

39 Nixon, *Account*, pp. 18, 31, 53.

40 Nixon, *Account*, p. 41.

41 *MS*, 25 November 1859, p. 5.

42 Nixon, *Account*, p. 33.

43 Nixon, *Account*, p. 44.

44 H. M. MacGill, On the Present Revival of Religion in Scotland: A paper read at the Conference of the Evangelical Alliance (London, 1860), pp. 6, 7. *MR*, 25 November 1859, p. 7.

45 Nixon, *Account*, pp. 35, 45.

wine, and offered it to me to drink; then a larger number of persons made their appearance, and I heard them singing, and the singing seemed to be at once loud, and yet at a great distance. The single man who first appeared stood always looking on me; but he spak naething [*sic*] to me, nor I to him, till I was just coming out of the room, when he said, It is all done.⁴⁶

This remarkable account is clearly influenced by Bible knowledge: the single man is reminiscent of the guiding angelic figures in Ezekiel and Revelation; the repeated query recalls the threefold question to the apostle Peter at the end of John's gospel; and the final remark that it is all done is like the cry of Christ from the cross in the same book. But there is also extra-biblical imagery. Perhaps the smaller figures represent elders, one of whom proffers communion wine to the subject of the vision; and the singers may stand for the full congregation. On that reading the convert is being received into the fellowship of the true church by the single individual, Christlike as well as angelic, who possesses something like the Lamb's book of life and a recording pencil. Dreams were held to be significant, often predictive, in fishing communities.⁴⁷ Here was one that conveyed the reality of acceptance by the Saviour in profoundly meaningful terms. It formed a further expression of the cosmology of the converts of Ferryden.

3. The Radicals

A second group falling under the Evangelical umbrella consisted of the radicals who were specially sympathetic to the excitement among the fisherfolk. They numbered in their ranks Hay Macdowall Grant, the original outside speaker, Mudie, the man who took Grant to Ferryden, and Gordon Forlong, another gentleman evangelist.⁴⁸ Forlong, formerly an Aberdeen lawyer and still technically an Episcopalian, was a forthright layman who travelled round Scotland stoking up revival fires. He was already moving towards his eventual allegiance as a leader of the so-called Plymouth Brethren whose work in New Zealand he later pioneered.⁴⁹

Another figure edging towards a Brethren position was Donald Ross, an evangelist who may well have visited Ferryden during the revival. As secretary and superintendent of the North-East Coast Mission, founded in the previous year to evangelise fishing communities from Thurso down to Ferryden, Ross had a measure of responsibility for the spiritual welfare of the village. He took great satisfaction in the awakening and probably spoke there.⁵⁰ The laymen from Montrose who had witnessed events in Ulster were used to their uninhibited style and so were disinclined to discourage similar happenings in Ferryden. The revival there also attracted eager young men from

⁴⁸ *MR*, 24 February 1860, [p. 4].

⁴⁹ Henry Pickering, *Chief Men among the Brethren*, 2nd edn (London, n.d.), pp. 67-9.

⁵⁰ C. W. Ross (ed.), *Donald Ross, 1824-1903* (Glasgow, 1987), pp. 37, 92, 124.

⁴⁶ Nixon, *Account*, p. 46.

⁴⁷ Anson, *Fisher Folk-Lore*, p. 47.

Aberdeen, where thronged meetings under another gentleman evangelist, Reginald Radcliffe, had been proceeding earlier in the year.⁵¹ A circle of lay outsiders criticised by more sober Evangelicals as 'a few crazy enthusiasts' and 'ignorant expounders' was the core of the radical presence in Ferryden.⁵²

The true radicals were laymen, but a number of ministers from outside the area adopted a position that was close to theirs. Although these men co-operated closely with the local ministers around Nixon, their stance was discernibly different. Alexander Moody Stuart, of Free St Luke's, Edinburgh, who was called in to conduct services when Ferryden's minister collapsed under the strain, was the leader of a pietistic group of Free Church clergy whose members were particularly well disposed towards revival. Moody Stuart had been to Ireland, where he concluded that the physical phenomena were no obstacle to the work of grace.⁵³ He stayed in Ferryden for just under a week, from Friday 25 November onwards, visiting homes and preaching nightly.⁵⁴ The visitor, who believed in pulpit spontaneity, was thought 'rather eccentric' and censured in the press for 'preaching in a manner not calculated to compose the minds of his hearers'.⁵⁵ Moody Stuart arranged for a

succession of his intimates to follow him in the Ferryden pulpit during December: James Hood Wilson from Edinburgh, Andrew Bonar from Glasgow and Joseph Wilson from Abernethy near Dundee.⁵⁶ Each of them showed affinities for the radical brethren, with Bonar, for example, urging the instant conversion that we are about to encounter.⁵⁷ This section of opinion was purveying a different style of spirituality from the usual more rational variety favoured by ministers.

Although, like more moderate Evangelicals, the radicals believed in conversion, their understanding of the experience was different. Their distinctive position was eventually to be crystallised in the motto of the *North-east Intelligencer*, the journal of the organisation that Donald Ross was to found as a successor to the North-East Coast Mission:

Eternal salvation is a free, present, attainable, inalienable, imperishable gift – that is, any man or woman in this world, be he or she the blackest sinner in it, may in one moment be justified for ever from every charge of sin, and may rest as sure of eternal glory as he is certain that in himself he never had deserved, and never will deserve, anything but eternal damnation.⁵⁸

That was deliberately formulated as a manifesto to challenge existing assumptions in Scottish Evangelical

51 *Reminiscences of the Revival of '59 and the Sixties* (Aberdeen, 1910), pp. 13, 79–81.

52 *MS*, 2 December 1859, p. 4.

53 Kenneth Moody Stuart, *Alexander Moody Stuart: A Memoir, partly Autobiographical* (London, 1899), p. 138.

54 *BA*, 29 November 1859, [p. 3].

55 *MS*, 2 December 1859, p. 5. *MR*, 2 December 1859, p. 4.

56 *MS*, 2 December 1859, p. 5; 30 December 1859, p. 5. Moody Stuart, *Moody Stuart*, pp. 141, 55, 181.

57 Bonar (ed.), *Bonar*, p. 161.

58 Ross, *Ross*, p. 146.

circles. Conversion, it was generally accepted at the time, is commonly a protracted experience, involving much soul agony. Likewise the general Evangelical view was that assurance of salvation, though desirable, was not an essential requirement before a person could be pronounced a Christian. On both these points the radicals disagreed with the received opinion. Justification, according to Ross's manifesto, could take place 'in one moment'; and a convert could be 'sure of eternal glory'. Instant conversion and full assurance of faith formed the kernel of the 'artificial, hollow, and distempered piety' that, according to a newspaper correspondent, was being spread about by 'ill-informed, unteachable men'.⁵⁹

Behind the specific beliefs of the radicals was a whole cultural ambience. The conviction that it was possible to choose to enter a relationship with God in a moment was a sign of their high estimate of the powers of the will. Again, their strong doctrine of assurance was an indication of their conviction that human beings could be persistently conscious of the divine. The exalting of the will and the insistence on supernatural awareness were both symptoms of the movement of European thought that was known as Romanticism. Although taking its rise around the opening of the nineteenth century in such works as the poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge, views moulded by Romanticism were steadily diffusing through the religious world during the later years of the century. There was a consistent downgrading of

the powers of reason associated with the preceding Enlightenment and, in its place, a stress on faith and simple obedience. These attitudes were formative of the Brethren movement into which Forlong and Ross were moving.

There was much more tolerance of emotion in circles affected by the new cultural mood, so that the radicals were willing to endorse the excitements of the revival at Ferryden. Romantics, furthermore, typically idealised the common people and their folkways, so that physical phenomena posed few problems for them. Knowing that prostrations were often connected with conversions, radicals had no desire to discourage them. On the contrary, visitors of that school accused those who tried to restrain the physical phenomena of having 'quenched the work of the Spirit'.⁶⁰ Moved by presumptions drawn from the latest developments in high culture, the radical Evangelicals identified closely with the happenings shaped by popular culture at Ferryden.

4. The Moderates

The third group of Evangelicals participating in the revival can usefully be called moderates so long as it is appreciated that they had no affinity with the party of that label that had once dominated the Church of Scotland. Those who took a moderate line at Ferryden included in their ranks a large number of clergy. Hugh Mitchell, an amiable bachelor who served as the Free Church minister in the village, was active in counselling converts as well

59 *MR*, 11 November 1859, p. 6.

60 Nixon, *Account*, p. 44.

as preaching before he collapsed under the strain after only about a week of revival and was taken away suffering from 'brain fever'.⁶¹ William Nixon, the man who interviewed the converts, had a long-standing interest in Ferryden because he had preached there at the Disruption.⁶² As senior Free Church minister in Montrose and, as we shall see, a man of domineering spirit, he naturally took over the co-ordination of ecclesiastical affairs in the village.

Nixon's colleague John Lister, minister of Free St George's, Montrose, joined him in visitation in Ferryden and preached in the village on the first Sunday morning that Mitchell was ill.⁶³ The other preacher, apart from Nixon, that day was Henry Marshall, the minister of St Peter's English Episcopal Church in Montrose, who did much to encourage the awakening. There was also sufficient involvement in the revival by Robert Mitchell, no relation of Hugh's, a definite Evangelical who had been parish minister of Craig since the Disruption, to induce him to consider issuing a pamphlet about it.⁶⁴ But the last two men were exceptional, for the great bulk of the clerical participation was from the Free Church. Other local ministers of the denomination were drafted in to conduct special services: John Bain from Logiepert and Alexander Foote from Brechin.⁶⁵ Overwhelmingly the official Christian presence in

the village during the revival was that of the Free Church of Scotland.

The moderate Evangelical position, however, was also upheld by a number of laypeople. A lay missionary named Kerr who had previously served in Ferryden conducted, with others, an evening meeting on 23 November shortly after Hugh Mitchell's departure.⁶⁶ Miss Petrie, the infant school before the 1846 revival, once more served in 1859 as a counsellor to anxious souls.⁶⁷ She had been responsible in the summer for commencing a regular meeting among the village women to pray for revival.⁶⁸ A farmer, a substantial employer, fulfilled a similar function as a male member of the congregation, regarding himself as apart from 'the people'.⁶⁹ A man of even higher status, one of the other landlords of Craig named Patrick Arkley, who served as a sheriff-substitute in Edinburgh, also acted as a spiritual adviser. His family residence outside the village was used by visiting preachers during the revival.⁷⁰ Three of the people interviewed by Nixon also embraced views similar to his own. One, a married woman who seems to have been more well-to-do than most village inhabitants, is described by Nixon as 'a very satisfactory case'.⁷¹

⁶¹ Nixon, *Account*, p. 43. BA, 29 November 1859, [p. 3].

⁶² Douglas, *Ferryden*, p. 33.

⁶³ Nixon, *Account*, p. 35. Mitchell, *Wilderness Journey*, p. 10. MS, 25 November 1859, p. 5.

⁶⁴ MS, 16 March 1860, p. 5.

⁶⁵ MS, 9 December 1859, p. 5.

⁶⁶ MS, 25 November 1859, p. 5. Douglas, *Ferryden*, pp. 55-6.

⁶⁷ Douglas, *Ferryden*, p. 22. Thomas Brown, *Annals of the Disruption* (Edinburgh, 1893), p. 773.

⁶⁸ Mitchell, *Wilderness Journey*, p. 7.

⁶⁹ Nixon, *Account*, p. 31.

⁷⁰ Nixon, *Account*, p. 55. Moody Stuart, *Moody Stuart*, p. 141.

⁷¹ William Nixon, *An Account of the Late Work of God at Ferryden* (London, 1860), p. 2.

Unlike the others in the village, she deprecated experience, 'what I see and feel', as a source of truth.⁷² The other two instances, both married women from the fishing community, received Nixon's approbation—paradoxically—because they could not relate any definite conversion, but had simply become 'more decided' in their religion.⁷³ That frank confession, contrasting with the transports of delight encouraged by the radicals, Nixon found entirely acceptable. So there were people of moderate opinions among the laity and even among the fisherfolk.

5. Calvinism

The moderate section of the Evangelical community was still firmly attached to the Calvinism professed by the Free Church. Nixon, who had been taught systematic divinity at Glasgow in the early 1820s by the Evangelical Calvinist Stevenson MacGill, published two years after the revival a very orthodox sermon on *The Doctrine of Election*, expounding Romans 9:11–13.⁷⁴ He saw the revival events as a vindication of the doctrine of justification by faith and delightedly reported the converts' affirmation of the perseverance of the saints.⁷⁵ Nixon approved of spiritual growth that proceeded gradually rather than taking the form of a sudden leap. The interviewee whom he pronounced a 'very satisfactory case' mentioned that the Spirit had been

working in her since infancy, so that it was 'no new-begun thing with me'.⁷⁶ Likewise growth in grace continued after conversion. The farmer, described by Nixon as a man of 'thorough good sense', declared that it was a great mistake to believe, with the radicals, that the work of God was done 'when sinners get into Christ'. 'There is then', pointed out the farmer, 'the warfare to begin, with the flesh, with its lusts, with evil tempers, and lots of things'.⁷⁷ The Free Church minister and those who thought like him were champions of the Calvinist inheritance of Scotland.

It is possible, however, to be more precise in defining the theological attitudes that prevailed amongst the moderate majority. In decrying the exaggerated appeal to experience of the radicals, Nixon urged that sinners should be taught not just to love and serve Christ for the comfort that he brought them, but also for '*His own sake*'.⁷⁸ Nixon was offering a distant echo of the teaching of the American theologian Samuel Hopkins, who in *An Inquiry into the Nature of True Holiness* (1773) had contended that self-interest, even a desire for personal salvation, must not be the basis of motivation in the regenerate. He went so far as to suggest that penitent sinners should be willing to be damned in order to show that they were truly converted.⁷⁹

⁷² Nixon, *Account*, p. 60.

⁷³ Nixon, *Late Work*, p. 2. A, pp. 37–8, 54–5.

⁷⁴ William Nixon, *Autobiographical Notes* (Perth, 1929), p. 8; *Doctrine of Election*.

⁷⁵ Nixon, *Account*, pp. 63, 64.

⁷⁶ Nixon, *Account*, p. 58.

⁷⁷ Nixon, *Account*, p. 32.

⁷⁸ Nixon, *Account*, p. 58.

⁷⁹ P. D. Jauhiainen, 'Samuel Hopkins', in Timothy Larsen (ed.), *Biographical Dictionary of Evangelicals* (Leicester: IVP, 2003), p. 310.

Nixon was indebted to the tradition of New England theology that included Hopkins, though stemming from Jonathan Edwards and including several other distinguished American theologians of the later eighteenth century. This body of thought was at once broadly loyal to the Reformed doctrinal legacy and in harmony with the chief premises of the Enlightenment. It was rational and imbued with the spirit of investigating the world. This was the theological stance of Thomas Chalmers, the prime mover in the foundation of the Free Church of Scotland, who lauded Edwards but thought he had not moved far enough in the direction of inductive method.⁸⁰ The colossal stature of Chalmers in the Free Church ensured that his doctrinal position was normative in its earlier years. Amongst other places, Ferryden felt the influence of this enlightened version of Calvinism.

There were several symptoms of the acceptance of Chalmers's doctrinal paradigm. Nixon showed a high estimate of the importance of the mind. New converts, he wrote, began to treat their children 'reasonably'; and his highest praise for members of the Ferryden congregation was that they were 'intelligent'.⁸¹ Again Nixon conducted the investigation of his subjects in a scientific spirit. He possessed the temper of a careful observer, judging only those cases that had come 'under my own notice'.⁸² He had once, as a young man, attended Chalmers's *Astronomi-*

cal Sermons, a triumphant integration of science into an Evangelical worldview.⁸³ Hugh Mitchell, Free Church minister in Ferryden, was himself a distinguished amateur geologist, discovering a fossil fish that was named after him and delivering an address to the British Association at Aberdeen on the subject in the very year of the awakening in the village.⁸⁴ These were circles in which the harmony of science and religion could safely be assumed, treating as an aberration the case made out by Charles Darwin in the same year that the universe did not need a divine designer. As two letters in the local press avowed, the moderates believed they could proceed by 'induction' and were familiar with 'mental phenomena' in a way that the radicals were not.⁸⁵ The intellectual expertise of the Scottish Enlightenment was on their side.

It was this scientific perspective that the moderates brought to their understanding of the revival. They assumed a fundamental antithesis between, on the one hand, the mental and spiritual and, on the other, the tangible and physical, which was altogether on a lower plane. Conversion, said a correspondent of the *Montrose Standard*, was 'an inward and spiritual work' having nothing to do with 'outward manifestations'.⁸⁶ The prostrations of the awakening therefore posed a particular problem for them. The fits

⁸³ Nixon, *Autobiographical Notes*, p. 25.

⁸⁴ *A Brief Memorial of the Rev. Hugh Mitchell, M.A., LL.D.* (Aberdeen, 1896), pp. 27-31.

⁸⁵ *MR*, 9 December 1859, p. 6. *MS*, 2 December 1859, p. 4.

⁸⁶ *MS*, 2 December 1859, p. 4.

⁸⁰ Nixon, *Autobiographical Notes*, pp. 46-52.

⁸¹ Nixon, *Account*, pp. 9, 30, 32.

⁸² Nixon, *Account*, p. 22.

afflicting the people of Ferryden seemed to be connected to real conversions and yet they were irreducibly physical. Hugh Mitchell, according to a biographical sketch, took a 'common-sense view' of them, not dismissing the whole movement because of their occurrence.⁸⁷ Nixon tended to be more actively critical, holding that in most instances the 'bodily manifestations' had nothing to do with 'the work of the Spirit'.⁸⁸ He saw the fits as pathological, freely using the terminology of medical science in discussing his 'cases': they suffered from a 'malady', might have a 'relapse' and were under the influence of 'infection'.⁸⁹ He shared the analogy of illness with a critic who on the eve of the awakening censured the entire business of revivalism as an 'epidemic'.⁹⁰ For the opponent of revivalism, everything about an awakening was symptomatic of illness, but for Nixon and his friends who wanted to defend what was happening at Ferryden, the great task was to differentiate the spiritual and mental side of events, which was the authentic work of God, from the physical and debased side, which was something else. The result was a dualistic analysis of the revival that contrasted sharply with the monistic conception of the radicals or of the fisherfolk themselves.

6. Tensions

The worldviews of the different groups came into collision over a range of con-

nected issues. In the first place, there was tension over prostrations themselves. At the height of the excitement the people of Ferryden were eager to be 'stricken' as a seal of the reality of conversion.⁹¹ Nixon, however, took a strong line with this aspiration. His comment on the desire of one man to be 'struck' as well as for his heart to be changed was tart: 'It would have been more scriptural, and better for him, to have cherished only the last wish of the two.'⁹² Secondly there was the related question of visions. When a visiting minister accompanying Nixon round the village heard an account of the elaborate dream of the old man that has already been recounted, the minister 'from his own experience of similar things when his physical frame is disordered, happily showed how little of the supernatural there was in the vision'.⁹³ This deflating response allocated the vision to the category of the physical and so, on moderate assumptions, immediately distanced it from the supernatural.

In the third place there was disagreement over instant conversion. The people expected that any process of conversion would come to a climax in a felt experience at a particular moment. The moderates accepted that sudden conversion could happen, often encouraging it,⁹⁴ but did not regard it as essential. 'Gradually light wore on in my soul', said a man whose experience Nixon approved, 'and still it

⁸⁷ *Brief Memorial*, p. 21.

⁸⁸ Nixon, *Account*, p. 20.

⁸⁹ Nixon, *Account*, p. 22.

⁹⁰ *MR*, 4 November 1859, p. 6.

⁹¹ Nixon, *Account*, pp. 33, 34, 45, 52.

⁹² Nixon, *Account*, p. 45.

⁹³ Nixon, *Account*, p. 45.

⁹⁴ *Brief Memorial*, p. 18. Bonar (ed.), *Bonar*, p. 161.

increases.⁹⁵ It was not always possible, the moderates held, to fix a time when a person passed out of spiritual darkness. And in the fourth place there was conflict over the need for psychological certainty of salvation. The popular quest was for 'peace', a felt sense of assurance. A woman who lacked a sense of peace was on contested ground: her Ferryden friends supposed that, since she had no peace, she was not yet a Christian, but Sheriff Arkley, like Nixon himself, encouraged her to think that she might well be one already.⁹⁶ They were adhering to the older Reformed view that assurance was not intrinsic to faith. In each instance of disagreement, the problem, in the eyes of the moderates, was that the ordinary people were being carried away by their demand to possess a concrete awareness, a physical sense, of what they believed.

The fault of the radicals, according to Nixon, was to encourage these village sentiments.⁹⁷ The Free Church minister was suspicious of laymen preaching at all. In his early ministry, at Hexham in Northumberland during the early 1830s, on one occasion a prominent attender of his Presbyterian congregation preached at a Congregational church. Nixon was horrified by the breach of church order, rebuked him soundly and the man left.⁹⁸ Now in Ferryden similar unauthorised laymen were intruding into the work of the ministry. The resulting tension was exacerbated by the growing feeling

among those such as Forlong and Ross who were moving in the direction of Brethren principles that clergy were, as Ross put it, 'the greatest hindrance in the country to the people's salvation'.⁹⁹ Ministers, in his view, were failing to give adequate spiritual guidance and so would better be abolished. Although Nixon minister praised Macdowall Grant as an 'excellent and earnest layman from the north', he very much disapproved of how Grant operated.¹⁰⁰ On the first Saturday of the revival, Grant held a so-called after-meeting, an innovation drawn from Aberdeen services earlier in the year.¹⁰¹ The scheme was that when a preaching meeting was concluded, those anxious for their souls were invited to stay behind for prayer and counselling. It was at the after-meetings that most prostrations occurred.¹⁰² So tensions over the role of laymen, including even the highly respectable Macdowall Grant, reinforced the ideological differences between moderates and radicals.

The resulting conflict was played out during the events of the revival. After the intense excitement, with many physical fits, of Wednesday 16 November, Nixon determined that it was time to put a stop to them. On Thursday evening he took charge of the evening meeting, and, although there were two further prostrations during his address,¹⁰³ he announced

95 Nixon, *Account*, p. 36.

96 Nixon, *Account*, p. 55.

97 Nixon, *Account*, p. 23.

98 Nixon, *Autobiographical Notes*, pp. 78-9.

99 Ross (ed.), *Ross*, p. 39.

100 Nixon, *Account*, p. 15.

101 Gordon, *Grant*, p. 136. [Jane] Radcliffe, *Recollections of Reginald Radcliffe* (London, n.d.), p. 81.

102 *BA*, 22 November 1859, [p. 3].

103 *BA*, 22 November 1859, [p. 3].

that there would be no after-meeting. Yet on both Thursday and Friday some people insisted on remaining to pour out their distress of soul. The three Sunday sermons by different preachers were 'of a soothing nature', and at the evening service Nixon told the congregation there would be no revival service the following evening at all. The radicals were driven to blank resistance. Some 'zealous laymen', with the church closed against them, held a meeting in the infant school instead. In the face of this lay opposition, Nixon reversed his strategy. He decided to take over the evening meetings. On the Tuesday 22 November his Free Church colleague John Lister conducted the service in the infant school, announcing that from the following evening meetings would once more be held in the church. Safe men were put in charge on Wednesday and Thursday evenings.¹⁰⁴ The dampening down worked: over the following week there were no known prostrations.¹⁰⁵

But then Nixon's scheme suffered another setback. Moody Stuart, the minister from Edinburgh with sympathies for the radical approach, arrived for a week, and his preaching was by no means calming. So Nixon played his master-card: on Monday 28 November he persuaded the Free Church presbytery to appoint him moderator of the session at Ferryden during the illness of the minister.¹⁰⁶ That gave Nixon the formal control he needed. He undertook visitation, arguing down converts

who put stress on fits or visions.¹⁰⁷ The chief risk now, from his point of view, was that fresh disorder would break out at the approaching communion season, a traditional time among Presbyterians for outbursts of revival. He therefore ensured that he himself conducted the opening Fast Day service of the communion season on Thursday 8 December, with a respected and experienced colleague, Alexander Foote, to conduct the Sunday services.¹⁰⁸ There was more excitement during the week than for a while before, but in general it now seemed 'a great work going on quietly'.¹⁰⁹ Nixon had won the tussle for control of events and the radicals were vanquished.

7. Conclusion

The Ferryden revival was therefore a complex phenomenon. At one level it was a challenge to the rough culture of the village by the combined forces of Evangelical religion reinforced by the social aspirations of the people. In that sense it was an undoubted success, changing the ways of the village, generating capable lay preachers and leading to a further, though lesser, revival in 1883.¹¹⁰ But at another level it was a struggle for ascendancy between different sections of Evangelical opinion. It was not simply a rivalry between clergy and laity, for, although the legit-

¹⁰⁴ *MS*, 25 November 1859, p. 5.

¹⁰⁵ *MS*, 2 December 1859, p. 5.

¹⁰⁶ *MR*, 2 December 1859, p. 4.

¹⁰⁷ Nixon, *Account*, p. 19.

¹⁰⁸ *MS*, 9 December 1859, p. 5.

¹⁰⁹ *BA*, 13 December 1859, [p. 3].

¹¹⁰ Edwards, *Usan and Ferryden*, pp. 11-18. James Wells, *The Life of James Hood Wilson*, 2nd edn (London, 1905), p. 216.

imacy of lay leadership was at issue, laypeople were found in alliance with the assertors of ministerial authority and a set of ministers had sympathies with the advanced revivalists.

Nor was there merely a division between folk religion and official religion, for the collision was between three parties, not two. The fisherfolk, conditioned by seafaring practices and kinship patterns, were inclined to express their religion in tangible ways, expecting the coming of faith to affect their bodies and so to be something felt. The radical Evangelicals from outside the village, untrammelled by institutional and confessional traditions, looked in particular for instant conversion and full assurance of faith. The moderates, by contrast, insisted on a type of Calvinist theology and a scientific understanding of the world. Here were convictions that diverged in their estimate of human nature: for the fisherfolk, human beings were embodied souls; for the radicals, they were essentially volitional and emotional; for the moderates, they were preponderantly rational. For all their shared ground in the fundamentals of theology, the three groups diverged over the nature of anthropology. They embraced outlooks that, although uniformly Evangelical, were strikingly different.

Consequently the awakening in which all three sections of opinion par-

ticipated was a contest of ideas. It was not an incomprehensible bout of frenzied irrationalism, but an intellectual disputation between contrasting points of view. Although the battle was fought out in an obscure backwater, major cultural movements came into collision. At Ferryden there was a competition between popular culture, the incoming Romantic influences of the times and the reigning Enlightenment paradigm. Three of the leading worldviews shaping the religion of Victorian Britain were at odds. The radicals, representing the Romantic spirit, were to enjoy greater success in other fishing villages, leading to the creation of a host of non-Presbyterian congregations along the Moray Firth.¹¹¹ In Ferryden, however, the moderates marshalled by Nixon were the victors, ensuring that the currents of vigorous spirituality in the village ran into the institutions of the Free Church. No other denomination established a presence there. Within the village, the Enlightenment beat off the Romantic inroads and disciplined the manners of the people. It may be surmised that, since similar forces were at work throughout the Evangelical world, many other revivals were as ideologically charged as this one. But what is clear is that in 1859 Ferryden was the setting for a clash of cultures.

111 Jeffrey, *When the Lord*, pp. 224-8.