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# JAMES CLERK MAXWELL AND THE 1859 ABERDEEN REVIVAL<sup>1</sup>

BRUCE RITCHIE

In the year 1879, one great scientist died, and another was born. We know why Albert Einstein (1879-1955) is deemed a great scientist. But why is James Clerk Maxwell (1831-1879) also considered to be such? When Einstein was asked if he stood on Isaac Newton's shoulders, he replied: 'That statement is not quite right; I stood on Maxwell's shoulders.' Einstein also stated that, before Maxwell, people used to consider physical reality as a compilation of material points, whereas, after Maxwell, they conceived physical reality as represented by continuous fields. Einstein regarded this transformation in the conception of reality as the most profound change for physics since Isaac Newton. In other words, Maxwell fostered a totally new way of understanding the universe.

What did Maxwell achieve? He linked Light and Electromagnetism. He developed the notion of Field Theory in physics. He made science rethink the nature of reality, as a continuum. He set out the initial 'Maxwell Equations', which are fundamental to modern physics. (When Richard Feynman was asked in 1962 by the Californian Institute of Technology to present a course on the fundamentals of physics then, without hesitation, he started with Maxwell's equations.) Maxwell also did pioneer mathematical work on the Rings of Saturn, with his theories confirmed by satellite fly-pasts in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. He established the principles of the theory of colour;<sup>2</sup> and, along with his assistant Thomas Sutton (1819-1875), he produced the first colour image in photography. Maxwell's theoretical work provides the foundation not only for contemporary science, but for much of modern life.

## A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

James Clerk Maxwell was born at 14 India Street, Edinburgh, on the 13th of June 1831. A few weeks later an entry was made in the local Church of Scotland *Birth and Baptismal register*:

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on: Bruce Ritchie, *James Clerk Maxwell: Faith, Church and Physics*, (Haddington: Handsel Press, 2024). It was presented as a paper to the 2024 Highland Theological College Scottish Church History Conference 'Outlanders for the Faith.'

<sup>2</sup> Red, Green, Blue: rather than: Red, Yellow, Blue.

John Clerk Maxwell of Middlebie esq., Advocate, and Mrs. Francis Cay his spouse, St. Stephen's Parish, a son born 13th June 1831, named James. Baptised 29th July 1831 by the Rev Dr David Ritchie.

After two years, the family moved to Glenlair estate, in the heart of Galloway, in the south-west region of Scotland. At Glenlair his mother gave him his early education, both general and spiritual. Later in life, Maxwell said that it was his mother who taught him to 'Look through nature to nature's God'. As a small child he wanted to know how things worked. Toddlers can exhaust parents and grandparents by constantly asking 'Why?', but he went one better. His repeated question was: 'What's the go' o' that?' In other words: why does it work the way it does?

In 1839, his mother died of cancer. Soon afterwards, the decision was made for him to attend Edinburgh Academy. During term-time he stayed with his father's sister, Aunt Isabella, at 31 Heriot Row. On James' opening day at school, he arrived with two problems! First, his father had designed his clothes! Second, he had a broad Gallovidian accent. He was immediately called 'dafty!', and though the 'dafty' nickname faded out, his Gallovidian accent never did.

During his years in Edinburgh, he attended St. Andrew's Church of Scotland, George Street, in the morning; and St. John's Episcopal Church, Princes Street, in the afternoon, with his Aunt Jane, who was his late mother's sister. In one he learned *The Shorter Catechism*. In the other he read Dean Ramsay's *Catechism for Young People*. At age fourteen his first paper was read to the Royal Society of Edinburgh. He was in Edinburgh at the time of the Disruption in 1843, with the schism taking place at the Church of Scotland General Assembly which was held in his family church of St. Andrew's. The Maxwells stayed in the 'Auld Kirk'.

After leaving school, Maxwell attended Edinburgh University, from 1847 to 1850, though as a non-graduating student. This left him free to audit various courses in chemistry, physics, mathematics, and philosophy. He loved the philosophy lectures given by Sir William Hamilton (1788-1856)—not to be confused with the later mathematician William Rowan Hamilton (1805-1865) whom Maxwell also knew. Though Sir William Hamilton, the philosopher, came from a family with an impeccable Covenanting pedigree, he was himself agnostic. Yet, though Maxwell and Sir William differed on faith, Maxwell drew heavily on Sir William's philosophy, with much of it impinging on Maxwell's overall view of science. Throughout his life Maxwell reflected on the philosophical and metaphysical questions which impinged on his science.

Maxwell went to Cambridge in 1850, graduating in 1854, and staying on for two additional years as a Fellow. Cambridge saw him go through a

crisis of some type in 1853. Some have interpreted it as Maxwell's conversion to a more evangelical faith. More probably, it was a crisis which deepened an already existing piety. During that time Maxwell also presented several creative papers to various societies and journals, including some of his initial work on light, electromagnetism, and field theory.

In 1856 he became Professor of Natural Philosophy at Marischal College, in Aberdeen. At that time Aberdeen had two Universities: one was Marischal College, the other was King's College. In Aberdeen his work on Saturn's Rings won him international acclaim. It was there that he also met and married Katherine Dewar (1824-1886), daughter of Daniel Dewar the Marischal Principal. Every morning, James and Katherine read the Bible together. Even when apart, Maxwell would write to her with his thoughts on the reading for that day, with his letters to Katherine giving insights into his Christ-centred faith. He stressed the Christian's union with Christ, and he wrote of knowledge of God coming through Christ.

In Maxwell's inaugural Professorial lecture, of November 1856, he stressed that the aim of a University should not be about becoming an academic conveyor-belt. Instead, it should be about enabling graduates to serve God in Church and State. Thus, at the very start of his professorial life, Maxwell set the study of science within a religious and civic context. Significantly, he was in Aberdeen during the Aberdeen religious revival of 1859, though we can refer to the period 1857 to 1860 as part of the Revival.

The two Aberdeen Universities fused in 1860. Maxwell was then appointed by King's College, London. During his time at King's, he further developed his electromagnetic theory. At all times Maxwell saw Michael Faraday (1791-1867) as an inspiration. Faraday was also a strong Christian, and it is arguable that Maxwell's greatest accomplishments were in extending Faraday's ideas and giving them mathematical rigour. It was as he reflected on Faraday's theories, that Maxwell realised that the nature of reality needed to be rethought. It needed to be seen, not in terms of individual particles as in Isaac Newton's thinking, but as continuous fields. It was this which Einstein had in mind when he said: 'Before Maxwell, people used to conceive physical reality as material points; whereas, after Maxwell, they conceived physical reality as represented by continuous fields.' Importantly, Maxwell always stressed that Faraday had pointed the way.

Maxwell's father died in 1856, making Maxwell Laird of the Glenlair Estate, just outside the village of Corsock, near Castle Douglas. After he resigned from London in 1865, he and Katherine spent the next six years at Glenlair. He was now free from academia and could write and think unencumbered by academic responsibilities.

As soon as Maxwell inherited Glenlair, he became a 'heritor'. This made him, along with others, responsible for maintaining and funding parish institutions including the kirk and the minister. In 1863, he was ordained an Elder of the Kirk in Corsock. When he was invited to become an elder, he knew that he was required to affirm *The Westminster Confession of Faith*. He had already read it, but he reread it very carefully before going forward for ordination to the eldership. He was a conscientious elder. He did his cottage visiting. He prayed with his parishioners. He was involved in discipline cases. In later years the Corsock folk remembered his pastoral visits with deep affection, especially his prayers. His minister was George Sturrock (1832-1902), who was also interested in science. On Sunday afternoons, Maxwell's habit was to read the great Puritan theologians such as John Owen and Jonathan Edwards.

Maxwell was also a poet and a hymn-writer. One of his hymns was '*The Student's Evening Hymn*', from which the following stanza is taken:

Give me love aright to trace, Thine to everything created.  
Preaching to a ransomed race, by Thy mercy renovated.  
Till with all thy fulness sated, I behold thee face to face.  
And with ardour unabated, sing the glories of thy grace.

In 1871 Maxwell was enticed back to Cambridge, to teach Natural Philosophy and to set up a new research laboratory. The laboratory was later named the Cavendish Laboratory and would become internationally famous. Up to, and including, the year 2019, the Cavendish could boast of thirty Nobel Prize winners. And it was Maxwell who had the words of Psalm 111, following Miles Coverdale's sixteenth-century translation, engraved into the stonework of the Laboratory:

The works of the Lord are great.  
They are pondered by all who delight in them.

James Clerk Maxwell died on the 5th of November 1879, aged 48. It was the same age his mother had been. It was the same type of cancer his mother had had. He was buried in Parton Kirkyard, a few miles from Glenlair House.

## THE 1859 ABERDEEN REVIVAL

Though the Aberdeen Revival took place over several years, 1859 was a high-point. The same year also saw a major scientific forum taking place in the city. In September 1859, the *British Association for the Advancement*

of *Science* (BAAS) choose Aberdeen as the site for its annual meeting. The *Association* had been formed in the 1830s by individuals who felt that existing institutions, such as the Royal Society, were too stuffy, too exclusive, and too London-centric. This new *Association* had a goal of inclusivity which included a determination to take major scientific conferences to every part of the United Kingdom and Ireland. Aberdeen was by far the farthest north they had yet ventured, and by 1859 every British scientist of note was a member of the BAAS, ranging from Clerk Maxwell to Charles Darwin, from David Brewster to Thomas Huxley, and from Michael Faraday to Thomas Murchison.

Aberdeen's newly refurbished Music Hall, seating 2,000, was the scene of the *Association's* opening meeting. This was addressed by no less a personage than Albert, the Prince Consort, and husband of Queen Victoria. He was the honorary president of the *Association* that year, and he delivered a significant speech in which he stressed that advance in every area of human knowledge—but especially the sciences—depended on an open democracy, rather than elitism. In a memorable phrase, Prince Albert emphasised that advancement in the sciences came, not through a process akin to 'the action of the monarchy of a paternal Government, but the republican activity of the Roman Forum'.

At the *British Association* meetings, Maxwell was busy and active. Not only did he present several scientific papers, but he was heavily involved in the organising of the event. The whole conference was a great success.

A month or so later, and in the same Music Hall which had welcomed Prince Albert, a quite different event took place. It was connected to the wave of religious revival which had started in Ulster and was now impacting Scotland, especially Aberdeen and the north-east. The revivalist preacher Charles Finney (1792–1875) had come from the United States to take part in this spiritual movement. The Aberdeen Music Hall was one of his venues, as announced by the *Aberdeen Press & Journal*:

The Rev. C. G. Finney, a Professor in Oberlin College, Ohio, United States, a noted preacher, is at present on visit to Aberdeen. He preached in the Evangelical Union Church (Rev. F. Ferguson's), St. Paul Street, on Sabbath afternoon and evening, and again last night, and is again to preach to-day, and on Thursday and Friday evenings. Mr Finney's style is plain, familiar, and direct. He has had a large number of hearers. Mr Finney's meeting this evening ... takes place in the Music Hall.<sup>3</sup>

Finney did not initiate revivalism in Aberdeenshire. That had started at least a year earlier, as a result of the inauguration of revival-seeking

<sup>3</sup> *Aberdeen Press & Journal*, 16 Nov 1859.

prayer-meetings. Various evangelistic campaigns had already begun in the city, featuring invited preachers such as Grattan Guinness (1835–1910), Brownlow North (1810–1875), and Reginald Radcliffe (1825–1895), all of whom addressed vast gatherings.

Kenneth Jeffrey's book, *When the Lord Walked the Land*, focuses on the Aberdeen revivals.<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey points out that the movement exhibited distinctive characteristics in different areas. The city reaction was different from that of the farming interior, which in turn was different from that of the seaports. Jeffrey noted that meetings in the fishing villages could be highly emotional, whereas congregations elsewhere were extremely orderly. He suggests that this contrast may have arisen because the fishing village services were conducted apart from the established churches, whose ministers tended to try and ensure that emotionalism did not surface.

James Clerk Maxwell was interested in the revival, and we will review the evidence for that in due course. We do not know if Maxwell went to Charles Finney's event in the Music Hall, but he may well have. In our opinion, he almost certainly would have: the meeting took place within term-time; Daniel Dewar, his own father-in-law was intensely interested; and several of Maxwell's fellow academics and personal friends were deeply involved in the movement.

### 1. William Martin

One such friend was William Martin (1816–1890). Martin was Marischal's Professor of Moral Philosophy.<sup>5</sup> After Maxwell arrived in Aberdeen, he and Martin were regular companions on daily walks until Martin became unwell.<sup>6</sup> Martin was intensely evangelical. He saw his professorial position as an opportunity to influence students spiritually. Having been a parish minister before his university appointment, he was also a preacher of some renown. During university vacations, Martin made himself available for preaching engagements in far-flung districts, including Orkney and Shetland.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth Jeffrey S, *When the Lord Walked the Land: The 1858–62 Revival in the North-East of Scotland*, (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> *Aberdeen Press & Journal*, 21 Feb 1890.

<sup>6</sup> JCM, *Letter to Aunt Jane*, 27 Feb 1857, (C&G1, 264). C&G1 refers to the first edition of: Lewis Campbell & William Garnett, *The Life of James Clerk Maxwell*, (London: Macmillan, 1882).

<sup>7</sup> For more on William Martin, his interest in Bishop Butler and the revival, see Alexander Whyte's testimony, in: G.F. Barbour, *The Life of Alexander Whyte*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1923), 81f. Whyte was a student under

The year before Maxwell came to Marischal, Martin had published a book on Butler's *Analogy*, commending it to his Sabbath Class at church. Bishop Butler's *Analogy* was written primarily as a rejoinder to the Deists, who acknowledged that God made the universe, but derided the Bible's affirmations that God governs and cares for those whom He created. Butler's approach was to argue that nature confirms, at least by analogy, the teachings of the Bible on eternal life, God's discipline, and so forth. Maxwell's friendship with Martin may explain why Maxwell was reading and admiring Butler's *Analogy* soon after arriving in Aberdeen.<sup>8</sup> In connection with the revival, Martin was key in inviting Reginald Radcliffe to the city in November 1858. Martin also tried to get the use of one of Aberdeen's large parish churches for Radcliffe to speak in. When this was rebuffed, it was Martin who hired the small mission hall in Albion Street for Radcliffe's first meetings.<sup>9</sup>

## 2. William Pirrie

Another academic who was a keen supporter of revival meetings was Dr. William Pirrie (1807–1882), the Regius Professor of Surgery at Marischal. Pirrie not only attended Reginald Radcliffe's meetings but appeared at services addressed by other key speakers such as Brownlow North, James Smith of Greyfriars, and D.T.K Drummond. Drummond (1805–1877) was an evangelical episcopalian whom Maxwell had first encountered at St. John's Episcopal Church in Edinburgh when he was a school-boy.<sup>10</sup>

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Martin, and later became the renowned preacher of Free St. George's in Edinburgh.

<sup>8</sup> JCM, *Letter to Campbell*, 22 Dec 1857, (C&G1, 294).

<sup>9</sup> Jeffrey, *When the Lord Walked the Land*, 57. See also: J. Brown, 'A Godly Heritage: Revival in North-East Scotland', Part 1, in *The Believer's Magazine*, April 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *Aberdeen Press & Journal*, 18 Jul 1860: 'Revival of Religion: Open-air meetings at Huntly in the Castle Park, Huntly (kindly granted by Her Grace the Duchess of Gordon), on the 25th and 26th July, to unite in Prayer for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the district and land, and for the Preaching of the Everlasting Gospel. [The following will take part in the services] ... William Pirrie M.D, F.R.S.E, Regius Professor of Surgery, Marischal College, Aberdeen; ... Reginald Radcliffe, Esq; Rev. D. T. K. Drummond, English Episcopal Church, Edinburgh; ... Brownlow North, Esq; Rev. James Smith, Greyfriars' Established Church, Aberdeen ... etc.' See also Pirrie's Obituary in the *Dundee Courier*, 22 Nov 1882, which stated that Professor William Pirrie, an elder of the Free West Church, Aberdeen, was a supporter of evangelical and philanthropic movements in the city, frequently making large donations to the Young Men's Christian Institute and the Young Women's Christian



William Pirrie's commitment to the cause of revival is illustrated by an advertisement in the *Aberdeen Press and Journal* for the 18th of July 1860. It announced that there would be open-air meetings at Huntly in the Castle Park, use of which was granted by the Duchess of Gordon. The meetings were prayer meetings, and the focus was to be 'prayer for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the district and land, and for the Preaching of the Everlasting Gospel.' Advertised amongst those who would take part were: William Pirrie M.D, F.R.S.E, Regius Professor of Surgery, Marischal College, Aberdeen; Reginald Radcliffe; Rev. D. T. K. Drummond, English Episcopal Church, Edinburgh; Brownlow North; and the Rev. James Smith, Greyfriars' Established Church, Aberdeen.<sup>7</sup>

### 3. James Smith

As already noted, the revival meetings initially took place apart from church premises. But the landscape changed after the Rev. James Smith (1805–1871)—minister of Greyfriars — was moved by the revival, prompting him to open the doors of his church to Radcliffe. Greyfriars Kirk was the collegiate church for Marischal College, and, as one of Marischal's professors, Maxwell worshipped there frequently.

Smith's opening the doors of Greyfriars to revivalist preachers, brought the revival into the heart of college life. Yet not all were happy with what he had done. Smith was censured by his Presbytery and Synod on a technical breach of church law. He was guilty of allowing an unqualified person to preach in Greyfriars. Smith appealed against the censure, taking the matter first to the Synod and then to the General Assembly. When the matter was raised at the 1859 Church of Scotland General Assembly, the Assembly agreed with the lower church courts in terms of church law, though strong speeches supportive of Smith's intentions were made by senior Kirk figures.<sup>11</sup> Despite the Assembly's rebuke, Smith continued to allow Radcliffe to preach in Greyfriars, with William Martin presiding at several meetings and conducting the devotions.<sup>12</sup> A few years later, James Smith moved from Greyfriars Church in Aberdeen to Ellon Parish Church. There he succeeded the late Rev. Donald Dewar (1831–1862), who had been Maxwell's brother-in-law.

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Institute. We note that Professor William Pirrie should not be confused with Professor William Robinson Pirie, who was also at Marischal.

<sup>11</sup> *Scotsman*, 24 May 1859.

<sup>12</sup> The Greyfriars' elders were divided on the issue. See: Greyfriars Kirk Session Minutes: 1851–1868, 4 & 7 Jul 1859, (NRS/CH2/492/2/251–256).

## DANIEL DEWAR, PRINCIPAL OF MARISCHAL COLLEGE

The most powerful support for revivalism within Marischal College came from Maxwell's own father-in-law, Principal Daniel Dewar (c.1783-1867). Given the controversy raised in Presbytery, Synod, and General Assembly concerning the use of Greyfriars church for revivalist preaching, the fact that Daniel Dewar threw his weight behind the movement so publicly was noteworthy.

In December 1859, a year after Radcliffe arrived in Aberdeen, seven months after James Smith defended his position at the General Assembly, and a month after Charles Finney's meetings in the Music Hall, Daniel Dewar republished one of his monographs, entitled *The Work of the Holy Spirit in the Revival of Religion, and the Duty of Christians in regard to It*. The monograph sold for fourpence (postage free for three copies) and was distributed widely.<sup>13</sup>

Dewar had written the monograph twenty years earlier, following a remarkable communion season in Kilsyth which affected him deeply. That was when Kilsyth experienced revival during the ministry of the Rev. William Burns (1779-1859). There had been a famous revival in Kilsyth a century previous, but it was the one of 1839 which Daniel Dewar experienced. Remembrance of these dramatic days in Kilsyth meant much to Dewar; and in 1859 he was excited at the possibility of them being repeated in Aberdeen. He recalled the huge gatherings of between ten and twelve thousand persons; of twelve hundred taking the sacrament on the communion Sunday; of over eighty new professions of faith on one day alone; and of baptisms in the local mill pond. He recollected William C. Burns (jnr) (1815-1868) from Dundee preaching to thousands by moonlight. And he remembered the ministry of Dr. Cesar Malan (1787-1864) who had come from Geneva, and of himself preaching from a high exterior flight of stairs to thousands who were gathered in the fields before him.<sup>14</sup>

Dewar's openness to what happened at Kilsyth came from a deeply-engrained sympathy with evangelistic campaigns. This was rooted in the formative influence on his own Christian faith from the itinerant preacher John Farquharson (fl. 1800). The Kilsyth revival had also seen various ecstatic phenomena such as swooning and convulsions and shouting — not all of which Daniel Dewar was comfortable with — but, for Dewar, the dominant personal memory of the Kilsyth revival was of a mighty movement of the Spirit of God. And so, in May 1860, Dewar demonstrated that he was committed irrevocably to the revivalist cause. At

<sup>13</sup> *Aberdeen Press & Journal*, 14 Dec 1859.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *Scotsman*, 2 Oct 1839, and *Fifeshire Journal*, 3 Oct 1839.

the Church of Scotland General Assembly, he moved that the Assembly should give thanks to God for the revivals. Here we recall that, only a year earlier, the Assembly had rebuked James Smith for allowing Greyfriars to be Radcliffe's preaching base. Now Dewar was showing which side of the fence he was on. His carefully worded motion, approved by the Assembly, stated:

While by no means committing itself to an approval of all that may have accompanied recent religious movements, [this Assembly] agrees to recommend to all ministers and elders of this Church special watchfulness and prayer in regard to the progress of vital religion in their parishes—*watchfulness*, lest that which is holy may be abused, or that which is good discouraged;—and *prayer*, that God may be pleased still farther to revive his own work in the midst of the years, and to grant unto this Church and the world a yet fuller outpouring of his Holy Spirit.<sup>15</sup>

#### MAXWELL AND THE REVIVAL

That was the milieu surrounding Maxwell in Aberdeen. But what was his personal reaction? Lewis Campbell (1830-1908) was Maxwell's close friend and first biographer. In Campbell's *Life of James Clerk Maxwell*, we have the briefest of references to what was going on spiritually in Aberdeen. Campbell records:

Amongst the human phenomena surrounding him, one which genuinely interested him was the religious 'revival' which took place about that time in Scotland. His intercourse with evangelical friends in England had prepared him to sympathise with such 'experiences' and his Calvinistic reading had familiarised him with the language used.<sup>16</sup>

There are two things to note. First: though Lewis Campbell was Maxwell's life-long friend from schooldays in Edinburgh, Campbell was not himself of an evangelical persuasion. Campbell was heavily influenced at Oxford by Benjamin Jowett (1817-1893), one of the leading liberal scholars of the Church of England. What we see at various points in Campbell's biography of Maxwell is a downplaying of Maxwell's evangelical piety. Second: despite Campbell's bias, he did acknowledge Maxwell's interest in the revival movement. Here we bemoan the fact that much of Maxwell's personal correspondence was lost in a fire at Glenlair.

<sup>15</sup> *Aberdeen Press & Journal*, 30 May 1860.

<sup>16</sup> C&G1, 260.

What else can we reconstruct of the connection between Maxwell and the revival? <sup>17</sup> After James Clerk Maxwell married Katherine Dewar in 1858, they lived the first few years of their married life in rooms in her parents' house. It is certain that revivalism would be discussed in the Dewar household, which now included James and Katherine. Like his father-in-law, Maxwell welcomed the movement. At the same time, Maxwell was wary of aspects of over-excited religious fervour, with his remarks on some of the features of the 1843 Disruption testifying to his concerns on that front. What were these concerns? And why did they arise?

To understand the caution in Maxwell's interest in the revival, we need to return to the family home at Glenlair in Galloway. When the Clerk Maxwells first went there in the 1830s, the parish kirk for them was at Parton, which lay several miles away, over rough tracks which were almost unusable in the winter. Maxwell's father—John Clerk Maxwell (1790-1856)—was not only a heritor of Parton Kirk, but one of its elders, and when the kirk at Parton was being rebuilt in the 1830s John Clerk Maxwell argued that it should not be rebuilt on the same site, but should be repositioned more centrally in the parish, to make it easier for farming folk to get to it. Parton is on the extreme western edge of its parish, on the banks of Loch Ken. It is geographically remote from much of the parish: farmers, shepherds, agricultural-workers, villagers in the various hamlets found it too great a distance. However, John Clerk Maxwell failed to persuade his other heritors to rebuild at a more central location, and so Parton kirk was rebuilt on its traditional site. Nevertheless, he did not give up. And so, as well as helping to pay for Parton Kirk to be rebuilt, he and his friend and fellow-heritor, Major Charles Fletcher, built another kirk near the village of Corsock. This was completed in 1839 and was officially

<sup>17</sup> Marston, 'Maxwell, Faith and Physics', 267, [In: Flood, McCartney, Whitakers (eds.), *James Clerk Maxwell: Perspectives on his Life and Work*, (Oxford: OUP, 2014)] refers to a series of letters, penned by 'Omicron' in March 1859 to an anonymous recipient, entitled: *Five Letters on the Religious Movement in Aberdeen: with an Appendix on the Nature, Probability and Necessity of a Religious Revival*. Marston suggests the writer may have been Maxwell since the writer: (a) indicates he will meet the recipient at the British Association in Aberdeen in September; (b) has a high regard for Scripture; (c) displays familiarity with the established church, the Church of Scotland; (d) refers to theologians such as Jonathan Edwards (whom Maxwell read); and (e) discusses the Smith and Radcliffe situation. If the author were Maxwell, then the letters shed great light on his faith. However, we are hesitant about the attribution since others could equally fit the bill. The style of writing also feels non-Maxwellian. For over a century, 'Omicron' was a popular nom de plume for writers who wished to remain anonymous.

designated by the Church of Scotland as a mission station of Parton Kirk, with weekly services and other meetings. This new kirk was a huge success. The congregation grew and flourished. They had their own minister, who was under the overall authority of the Parton minister, and folk who in the past struggled to make the journey to Parton now became regular worshippers.

Then came 1843 and the Disruption. Almost overnight, this new congregation at Corsock was split in two. Half stayed. The other half left and formed a group in Kirkpatrick Durham. The split which took place, and the effect on the new young congregation, distressed John Clerk Maxwell deeply. He became suspicious of what he saw as emotional fervour, and this feeling was shared by his son, James Clerk Maxwell. In his biography of Maxwell, Lewis Campbell wrote:

Something, I forget what, led the conversation to the perilousness of strong religious excitement in early youth, on account of the spiritual exhaustion and permanent religious insensibility that are apt to follow the dying-out of the original fervour, and that derive a plausible justification from the premature and fallacious experience. He spoke with thankfulness of his own escape from a similar danger. 'The ferment,' he said, 'about the Free Church movement had one very bad effect. Quite young people were carried away by it; and when the natural reaction came, they ceased to think about religious matters at all, and became unable to receive fresh impressions. My father was so much afraid of this, that he placed me where I should be under the influence of Dean Ramsay, knowing him to be a good and sensible man.'<sup>18</sup>

When James Clerk Maxwell experienced the 1859 Revival in Aberdeen, it seems that he was pulled in two directions. On the one hand, along with his father-in-law Daniel Dewar, and along with his academic friends at the University, he welcomed the revival and the spiritual forces which were at work. On the other hand, he was suspicious about over-emotional responses. In 1843 his father had felt that some, who were initially caught up in the excitement and emotion of the event, later fell away totally from where they had been. Maxwell had similar fears. He agreed with the theology of the revival. It appears that he welcomed its impact but was hesitant about the more extreme emotions attached to it.

## AN EVANGELICAL HUNGER

By 1860, Maxwell's time in Aberdeen had come to an end. He now became Professor of Natural Philosophy at King's College in London. During

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. C&G1, 420.

James and Katherine's years in London, it is clear where their spiritual hearts lay. At several of his posts Maxwell was expected to attend the University chapel connected with the college where he studied or taught, but in London there was no such obligation. It is significant, therefore, that the Maxwells attended—by their free choice—John Offord's Baptist Chapel which was near their home. He loved the ministry of John Offord. Maxwell had an aversion to 'smart-Alec' preachers. He especially disliked University Dons who could take a verse of Scripture and then ingeniously make it mean its opposite! What Maxwell wanted was a preacher who dug into the Word of God. He wanted a preacher to *treat the Word of God*, as a scientist *treated the Works of God*. The preacher should allow scripture to reveal its own truth, just as the scientist should allow nature to make itself known. He found that in Offord.

From time to time, James Clerk Maxwell also went to listen to Baptist Wriothlesley Noel. In one of his letters, he told Katherine about Pastor 'Baptist' Noel's church in London, and how had enjoyed the simplicity of the message and the worship.<sup>19</sup> Pastor Noel's seriousness, and his evangelical preaching, appealed to him. He wrote to Katherine:

I have come from Mr. Baptist Noel. The church was full to standing, and the whole service was as plain as large print. The *exposition* was the Parable of Talents, and the *sermon* was on John 3:16. The sermon was the text writ large, nothing ingenious or amusing, and hardly any attempt at instruction, but plain and very serious exhortation from a man who evidently believes neither more nor less than what he says.

Maxwell's choice of ministry in London reveals his heart. Away from University contexts in which he was obliged to attend worship in the college chapel, he chose preachers such as John Offord and 'Baptist' Noel.

## CONCLUSION

Back in Corsock, the wounds and pain of the Disruption took time to heal, but they did. For the closing decade of James Clerk Maxwell's short life, the Church of Scotland minister in Corsock was George Sturrock, and the Free Church minister was Dr. Robert Smith (1816-1894). Together, Sturrock and Smith did much to heal the raw wounds created by past events.

<sup>19</sup> The Honourable Wriothlesley Noel (1798-1873) came from minor aristocracy and was raised in the Church of England. From 1827 until 1848 he was minister of the evangelically inclined Anglican congregation of St. John's Chapel, Bedford Row, London, before becoming a Baptist minister.

Maxwell died on the 5th of November 1879. Two days later, at the Corsock *Mutual Improvement Society*, George Sturrock spoke on the topic of 'Science and Religion'. In the chair for that meeting was Robert Smith of the Free Church. The *Galloway News and Kirkcudbrightshire Advertiser*, in reporting the meeting, noted that Dr. Smith of Corsock Free Church occupied the chair and introduced his brother of the established Church in 'very graceful terms'. That amity would have gladdened the heart of James Clerk Maxwell. He was a man, a Christian man, of whom it could truly be said that he: '*lived justly, loved kindness, and walked humbly with his God and Saviour.*' (Micah 6:8).