

---

# Alexander Dyce Davidson (1807-1872), Free Church Minister in Aberdeen

JOHN A. SMITH

Alexander Dyce Davidson was one of the foremost Disruption ministers in Aberdeen. This article briefly outlines his life and ministry.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Background

In the opening years of the nineteenth century, the city of Aberdeen had a population of some 30,000. About two thirds of that number was connected with the Established Church, although the Evangelical element was relatively weak. Many influential families remained in the Episcopal Church, which has historically been stronger in the North East than the rest of Scotland. There were also numerous small Presbyterian secession congregations.

The Parish of St Nicholas encompassed most of the city of Aberdeen and was a collegiate charge with three ministers. In addition to the East and West Parish Churches, the Established Church maintained four chapels of ease within the Parish which were under the jurisdiction of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Basic sources for the life of Davidson are: H. Scott (Ed.), *Fasti Ecclesiae Scotticae: The Succession of Ministers in the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1915), vii, 39; J. Martin, *Eminent Divines of Aberdeen and the North* (Aberdeen, 1888), 237-40; A. Whyte, "Alexander Dyce Davidson", J. A. Wylie (ed.), *Disruption Worthies: A Memorial of 1843* (Edinburgh, 1877), 211-4; J. O. Skea, *The Free West: A Record of the West Church of St Andrew 1843-1961* (Aberdeen, 1961), 9-53.

General Session of St. Nicholas. The western outskirts of the city, including Gilcomston Chapel, lay within the adjoining parish of Oldmachar. At Gilcomston, the powerful gospel preaching of Dr James Kidd attracted a congregation of two thousand. Dr James Ross, one of the ministers of St. Nicholas, was also a prominent Evangelical.

Although the Moderate party had controlled the Presbytery of Aberdeen for decades, Evangelicalism rapidly gained ground in the early nineteenth century; eight further chapels of ease were erected to serve the growing population. In 1828, the Court of Teinds disjoined the parish of St Nicholas and subdivided it into six new *quoad sacra* parishes including two former chapels of ease. It was the last major town in Scotland to be so divided.<sup>2</sup> In 1834, after the General Assembly passed the Chapels Act, the remaining chapels also became *quoad sacra* parish churches with their own Kirk Sessions.<sup>3</sup>

In 1843 every parish minister in Aberdeen adhered to the Free Church. In this it was unique among the major towns of Scotland.<sup>4</sup> The foremost among these ministers was probably Alexander Dyce Davidson.

## 2. The early years

Alexander Dyce Davidson was born on 8th May 1807 at Gordon's Court, 22 Gordon Street, a largely working class area just off Union Street in the centre of Aberdeen. He was the second son of George Davidson, a superintendent wright at the Devanha Brewery, and his wife Elizabeth Riddoch; his brothers were George and Charles. While his father was a member of the Belmont Street Chapel, his mother was a Roman Catholic who attended St Peter's Chapel in Justice Street.<sup>5</sup> It seems that

---

<sup>2</sup> The new parishes were East, West, North (for which a new church was erected), South, Greyfriars and St Clement's. See I. R. MacDonald, *Aberdeen and the Highland Church 1785-1900* (Edinburgh, 2005), 132-7.

<sup>3</sup> These were Bon Accord, Gaelic, Holburn, John Knox, Mariners, Melville, Trinity, and Union.

<sup>4</sup> In spite of being the leading Evangelical spokesman in the North East, Principal Daniel Dewar of Marischal College did not secede. Dr Forbes and Dr Smith (who was an Evangelical minister), the ministers of Oldmachar Cathedral, which was also a Collegiate Charge, remained in the Establishment; see J. McCosh, *The Wheat and the Chaff Gathered into Bundles; A Statistical Contribution Towards the History of the Recent Disruption of the Scottish Ecclesiastical Establishment* (Perth, 1843), 83.

<sup>5</sup> Davidson's father was born in 1766. His parents married on 11th November 1798 (Parish of Oldmachar Marriage Register). For St Peter's Chapel, see A. S. McWilliam, *St Peter's Church, Aberdeen 1804-1979* (Aberdeen, 1979).

the young Alexander was baptised in the Church of Rome and as a child worshipped in both congregations. In later years Davidson contributed one of a series of lectures on the errors of Romanism, given by the Established Church ministers of Aberdeen. Father Charles Gordon, the priest of St Peter's and a well known personality, responded in typically robust style:

In one of his controversial discourses, the priest was rather personal and he fired this shot, aimed at a well known minister of the city: "fa think ye was sairer on me than ony o' them but ma auld frien' \_\_\_\_\_ [Davidson] who said his questions at the altar rail there . . . his mither taught him different and he should ken better."<sup>6</sup>

The Belmont Street Chapel, though originally a congregation of the Relief Church, joined the Establishment in 1791 along with its pastor, Rev John Bryce (1754-1831). His life was noted for its "unostentatious piety and unquenchable zeal" and, significantly, "he particularly excelled in that form of expounding the Scriptures, which has been so long known and practised in the Church of Scotland, under the name of lecturing."<sup>7</sup>

The Davidson boys all attended Aberdeen Grammar School, in Alexander's case between 1817 and 1821. At that time, "it was exclusively a day school for classical education in preparation for University . . . it was exclusively a Latin school. The rudiments of Greek had been introduced as part of the business of the higher classes but with this exception and the further exception that in teaching Latin the masters might regale their classes with whatever little bits of history or general lore they could blend with their Latin lessons . . . the business of four or five years was nothing but perseverance at Latin within those dingy old walls."<sup>8</sup> In spite of such a lack of variety, Alexander developed a deep interest in languages. He subsequently undertook an Arts course at Marischal College where he was first bursar (out of 73) and in 1822 was

---

<sup>6</sup> J. Stark, *Priest Gordon of Aberdeen* (Aberdeen, 1909), 76.

<sup>7</sup> Memorial tablet formerly in the South Parish Church, Belmont Street. See *Aberdeen Journal Notes and Queries*, ii, 75; *Aberdeen Journal*, 21st December, 1831.

<sup>8</sup> H. M. Simpson (ed.), *Bon-Record: Records and Reminiscences of Aberdeen Grammar School from the Earliest Times* (Aberdeen, 1906), 207; T. Watt, *Aberdeen Grammar School Roll of Pupils 1795-1919* (Aberdeen, 1923), 14.

awarded the Silver Pen, a prize for the best student in Greek.<sup>9</sup> By this time Alexander was a member of Belmont Street Chapel. “An enthusiastic and most successful student, he worked far too hard, enfeebling, it is to be feared, his constitution, which very nearly broke down soon after his entrance on the Ministry, and probably never altogether threw off the effects of the intensity of his application.”<sup>10</sup> He graduated Master of Arts in 1825. Davidson’s pastor, Mr Bryce, gave him instruction in the Hebrew language, but such was the young man’s aptitude that teacher and pupil soon exchanged places. Bryce seems to have exercised a formative influence on Alexander and encouraged him to turn his thoughts to the Christian ministry.

During his Divinity course, Davidson, like many of his contemporaries, took up tutoring to support himself. He was employed as tutor to the family of James Blaikie of Craigiebuckler, Advocate in Aberdeen and later, between 1833 and his death in 1836, a highly respected Provost of the City. The Blaikies were relative newcomers to Aberdeen; James’s father only arrived in the city in 1780 to establish his plumbing business. Nevertheless, they were “a powerful family which dominated all aspects of the city polity and economy. The family provided a near unbroken run of Lord Provosts between 1833-46 and controlled the rights of patronage regarding appointments to city parishes.”<sup>11</sup> Craigiebuckler was a small estate, with an elegant classical mansion in wooded grounds, about two miles outside Aberdeen. James Blaikie also owned a town house and office at 247 Union Street.<sup>12</sup> One of the sons, William Garden Blaikie, entered the ministry and was subsequently a prominent Free Churchman.<sup>13</sup> He recalled of Davidson,

---

<sup>9</sup> P. J. Anderson, *Fasti Academiae Mariscallanae: Selections from the Records of the Marischal College and University*, ii (Aberdeen, 1898), 443.

<sup>10</sup> *Aberdeen Herald*, 4th May 1872.

<sup>11</sup> A. A. MacLaren, “The Liberal Professions within the Scottish Class Structure: A Comparative Study Of Aberdeen Clergymen, Doctors and Lawyers”, in T. M. Devine (ed.), *Scottish Elites* (Edinburgh, 1994), 82. For Provost Blaikie, see A. M. Munro, *Memorials of the Aldermen, Provosts and Lord Provosts of Aberdeen* (Aberdeen 1895); also *Aberdeen Herald*, 15th and 22nd October 1836.

<sup>12</sup> Craigiebuckler House, with modern additions, is now the MacAulay Land Use Research Institute.

<sup>13</sup> William Garden Blaikie was minister of Drumblade 1842-5, Pilrig Free Church, Edinburgh 1845-68 and Professor of Apologetics and Pastoral Theology at New College 1868-97. He was Moderator of the 1892 Assembly, and was author of several books, notably *The Four Gospels* and *The Life of David Brown, D.D.*

“he never lectured me: the influence came all through sympathy”; and as an eight-year-old, he lodged with Davidson’s mother during school term. He later wrote of her, “A more excellent and loveable woman I have seldom known. With her I read my chapter of the Bible at night and said my prayers. Of course she never interfered with my Protestant upbringing, and she left on my mind the impression of a singularly devout as well as sweet nature.”<sup>14</sup>

George Davidson went bankrupt in the autumn of 1829; of course, this must have caused considerable anxiety to his sons. Apparently, George was by then involved in the timber trade. He had a large quantity of logs, probably in a holding pool on the River Dee, waiting to be rafted downstream to Aberdeen. In August 1829 a terrible storm and flood, popularly known as the “Muckle Spate” caused a huge amount of damage and considerable loss of life in the North East. The timber was lost, resulting in George’s bankruptcy.<sup>15</sup> Davidson’s parents must have endured considerable hardship as a result of this.<sup>16</sup>

### 3. The young minister

As a Divinity student, Davidson was greatly influenced by Dr Duncan Mearns, a highly regarded Christian apologist. Although “Rabbi” John Duncan expressed his great admiration for him, he was also a prominent leader in the Moderate Party.<sup>17</sup> Davidson was licensed to preach the Gospel by the Presbytery of Aberdeen on 31st March, 1830. In November 1831 Davidson, along with several others, was elected to the

---

<sup>14</sup> W. G. Blaikie, *Recollections of a Busy Life* (London 1901), 39.

<sup>15</sup> D. Morgan, *The Granite Mile: The Story of Aberdeen’s Union Street* (Aberdeen, 2008), 119-20; personal communication from Diane Morgan, 2nd August 2010. In Anderson, P. J. (1897), op. cit., the occupation of George Davidson is given as *fabri lignarii* [meaning either timber merchant or craftsman] in ii, 243, but as wright, possibly following the *Fasti* in iii, 42. At the brewery, George was employed in making and repairing beer barrels. This may have led him into the timber trade. This anecdote came from a descendant of Charles Davidson. For the floods on the Dee, see T. D. Lauder, *An Account of the Great Floods in the Province of Moray in August 1829* (Edinburgh, 1830), 351-90.

<sup>16</sup> George’s former employers perhaps took pity on him, for he was employed as a warehouseman for the Devanha Bottling Company and his wife had set up a grocery business at 42 Gordon Street (*Aberdeen Directory*, 1831). He was described as a labourer in a list of male heads of households in the South Parish in January 1835 (South Church Kirk Session Minutes (CH 2/2/1). He had died before the 1841 census.

<sup>17</sup> For Dr Mearns, see Martin op. cit., 228-32; P. J. Anderson, *Officers and Graduates of King’s College* (Aberdeen 1893), 72; D. Brown, *Life of John Duncan* (Edinburgh 1872), 71-5.

eldership of the South Parish. The group included men from Trinity and Gaelic Chapels as well as the South Church itself. However the Kirk Session of Oldmachar took exception to the nomination of men who resided in the streets to the west of Union Bridge which were then in Oldmachar Parish. The issue passed to the Presbytery and dragged on until April 1833, by which time it no longer affected Davidson.<sup>18</sup>

Rev Dr William Leith, had been colleague and successor to Mr Bryce since 1825. He was a studious man who was also a medical doctor, but suffered from delicate health and died on Communion Sabbath 8th April, 1832.<sup>19</sup> The loss of a young and much loved pastor only a matter of months after the passing of his venerable colleague, was a devastating blow to the congregation. Davidson was appointed by the Kirk Session to occupy the pulpit during the vacancy. At this time, Davidson was one of three candidates for St John's Chapel, Montrose, but he declined to preach there.<sup>20</sup> The South congregation sent a call to him and the ordination and induction took place on 1st August, 1832; Dr. Robert Smith of Oldmachar presiding. The following Sabbath morning, he was introduced by Professor Alexander Black of Marischal College. In the afternoon, Davidson preached his first discourse as minister of the congregation, from 1 Cor. 9:16, "Necessity is laid upon me, yea woe be unto us if we preach not the Gospel". Davidson reminded his hearers that the same verse was expounded by his predecessor in his first sermon after his induction.<sup>21</sup>

In those days, a young clergyman usually waited a considerable time before making his maiden speech, or even voting, at Presbytery. Dr Mearns' strong influence upon Davidson caused considerable anxiety among Davidson's friends, as to which party he would support. However, their fears proved unfounded when he declared his firm adherence to Evangelicalism.

The South congregation had replaced its original plain building with a striking Perpendicular Gothic structure designed by John Smith,

---

<sup>18</sup> See I. R. MacDonald, 2005, op. cit., 138-9.

<sup>19</sup> See *Aberdeen Journal*, 16th April, 1832; Selections from the *Aberdeen Magazine* (Aberdeen, 1878), 365-9.

<sup>20</sup> *Aberdeen Chronicle*, 23rd June, 1832; William Nixon, "the Lion of Montrose", a leading Free Church Constitutionalist, was elected. He was minister until 1876 and remained Senior Minister until his death on 24th January 1900.

<sup>21</sup> *Aberdeen Journal*, 8th August 1832.



the City Architect, which was opened on 28th August, 1831.<sup>22</sup> The South parish included the middle class residential area around the church itself as well as poor slum housing, such as Mutton Brae, on the banks of the Denburn.<sup>23</sup> Davidson recorded, "In the course of pastoral visitation I have found families without a Bible. I have seen poverty in its most aggravated aspect when it begets indifference to cleanliness of person and of house." The parish was divided into districts for pastoral visitation in 1834.<sup>24</sup> In the summer months, Davidson preached in the open air in the poor areas "so that those who make the want of decent clothing an excuse for absenting themselves from church may have the Truth brought to their doors."<sup>25</sup> During his time at the South Church, Davidson was involved in the establishment of day and Sabbath schools and to raising funds to assist the poor. In later years he preached an annual sermon in aid of the coal and meal funds for the poor in the Free St Clement's congregation.<sup>26</sup> Under Davidson's preaching, it was said that the South Church became the most crowded in the city.<sup>27</sup>

When the West Church (St Nicholas) became vacant in January 1836, a section of the membership favoured Davidson. However, the young Evangelical was not favoured by the Moderate elders who dominated the Kirk Session. Two petitions were presented to the Town Council, which exercised the power of patronage in the West parish. One of them asked the council to consult the congregation while the other urged them to use their own judgment in the appointment of a minister. Eventually the council decided to hold an election. Although Davidson gained a majority it was a very narrow one and the congregation was, according to Provost Blaikie, "in a state of hopeless division". The Provost's influence was crucial in persuading the council to exercise their right of patronage and appoint Davidson forthwith.<sup>28</sup> Davidson was presented by the Town Council and translated to the West Church on 4th May, 1836. David Simpson of Trinity Chapel preached and presided,

---

<sup>22</sup> See D. G. Miller, *Tudor Johnny: The Life and Works of John Smith* (Aberdeen, 2007), 184-7.

<sup>23</sup> R. Anderson, *Aberdeen in Bygone Days* (Aberdeen, 1910), 19.

<sup>24</sup> South Church Kirk Session Minutes CH2/2/1, 9th January 1834.

<sup>25</sup> A. D. Davidson, *Address to the Elders of the South Parish* (Aberdeen, 1833), 9-10, 13.

<sup>26</sup> A. Gammie, *The Churches of Aberdeen* (Aberdeen, 1909), 186.

<sup>27</sup> *Aberdeen Herald*, 27th February, 1836.

<sup>28</sup> *Aberdeen Herald*, 13th February and 27th February 1836.

taking as his text Hebrews 13:17, “They watch for your souls as they that must give account”.

The following Sabbath Davidson was introduced by Professor R. J. Brown of Marischal College. In the afternoon, his first sermon as minister of the West Church was preached on 1 Cor. 11:2. “Paul,” he said, “must naturally have hesitated as to what manner he should adopt, in addressing a people so much superior to the comparatively unlettered and barbarous nations he had formerly written and spoken to, but his hesitation was not of long duration for he soon determined to preach Christ crucified without respect of person.” Davidson said that he was determined to follow the same course, “no matter how much the constant reference to the subject might displease some of his congregation – no matter how much such preaching might be censured for want of variety”.<sup>29</sup> The point was not lost on his new congregation, which under his predecessor, the Moderate Dr George Glennie, was “not very numerous and consisted mainly of the local crème de la crème”.<sup>30</sup> Dr. Glennie was also Professor of Moral Philosophy at Marischal College and Donald Sage wrote, “His preaching was very prosing and dull, but what was specially noticeable was his cold and bitter Moderatism”.<sup>31</sup>

The historic church of St Nicholas dates back to the Middle Ages. After the Reformation it was divided to form the East and the West churches. The West was the High Church of Aberdeen, an elegant Georgian structure having replaced the old nave in 1755. Each Sabbath the Provost and Magistrates, preceded by the Town Sergeants, processed to the West Church and sat in the impressive Town’s Loft with its canopy surmounted by the Arms of the Burgh of Aberdeen.<sup>32</sup>

As part of his duties, the minister of the West Church had to spend an inordinate amount of his time at various committee meetings for charitable and educational purposes. It may well be that this discouraged Davidson from taking on such commitments after the Disruption. Under Davidson’s preaching, accommodation in the church was soon at a premium in spite of the seat rentals (from 2/- to 10/6d) being far higher

---

<sup>29</sup> *Aberdeen Herald*, 21st May 1836.

<sup>30</sup> J. Riddell, *Aberdeen and its Folk* (Aberdeen, 1868), 81.

<sup>31</sup> D. Sage, *Memorabilia Domestica* (Wick, 1889), 304.

<sup>32</sup> For a near contemporary description of the Church of St Nicholas, see W. Kennedy, *Annals of Aberdeen* (Aberdeen, 1818) ii, 40-57. See also J. Stewart, *Guide to St Nicholas Church* (Aberdeen, n.d.).



than those of the other parish churches of Aberdeen. Inevitably, this had the effect of excluding the poor.<sup>33</sup>

While giving evidence to the 1837 Church Commission, Davidson reported a growing congregation and stated that the average attendance was 1,000 to 1,100, with 1,286 let seats. No seats were set apart for the poor; the only accommodation they had was in the passages of the church.<sup>34</sup> Davidson however was already building bridges between the West Church and its immediate surroundings. In January 1837, the Session discussed the establishment of a Parish Library and Sabbath School and in May, in response to a recommendation from the Synod, steps were also taken towards establishing a parochial day school. By October, 140 children were attending Sabbath School. In April 1839, the parish was divided into six districts for Elders' visitation.<sup>35</sup> In spite of the expense of seats, many of the working class people who attended Davidson's ministry at the South Church followed their minister to his new charge. An anecdote is recorded of an elderly lady, the owner of a country estate who frequented the West Church when at her town residence. In spite of her gentle ancestry, she was given to expressing herself in "the Doric".

"I gaed to the kirk the first Sunday afterneen after Sandie Davidson came till's," she exclaimed, "but he brocht sic a trail o' folk wi' him and I wis sae scunner't wi' the smell o' broth an' ingans that I vow'd I wadna gang back excep' to the forenoon's preachin." Not all aristocrats shared her distaste: Alexander Thomson of Banchory, advocate, scientist and antiquary, regularly attended the West Church.<sup>37</sup>

On 11th August 1840, Davidson married Provost Blaikie's eldest daughter, Elizabeth, at Craigiebuckler House. Sadly, their married life was all too brief for she died on 23rd January 1842 after contracting scarlet fever during childbirth. Their little girl, Elizabeth Ann, passed away on 25th November 1844 aged two.<sup>38</sup> Alexander Dyce Davidson never remarried.

---

<sup>33</sup> *Aberdeen Herald*, 3rd December 1836.

<sup>34</sup> *Aberdeen Constitutional*, 21st October 1837.

<sup>35</sup> West Parish Kirk Session Minutes [at the Church of St. Nicholas].

<sup>36</sup> J. Riddell, op. cit., 82.

<sup>37</sup> G. Smeaton, *Life of Alexander Thomson of Banchory* (Edinburgh, 1869), 125.

<sup>38</sup> Memorial Tablet in St Nicholas' Churchyard, Aberdeen. The *Fasti* erroneously states that Alexander and Elizabeth had no children.

Davidson's brothers both remained in Aberdeen and built up successful businesses over the years. His older brother George, after serving his apprenticeship in a bookshop, worked as a traveller for the Devanha Brewery. However, "an affectation of the lower limbs" forced him to go back into the bookselling trade. George opened his own shop in King Street and was a poet of some repute. As well as poetry, he published sermon pamphlets, including several of his brother's discourses.<sup>39</sup> Charles, the youngest of the family, had intended to study Medicine after his Arts course but his father's bankruptcy forced him to abandon this idea and instead to pursue the less expensive alternative of an apprenticeship in Pharmacy. He set up his own firm in 1834. In 1867 he joined with John P. Kay, forming the firm of Davidson and Kay, which became Pharmacists to Queen Victoria in 1884 and was still trading in the 1980s. In later life Charles bought the country estate of Foresterhill, which is now the site of Aberdeen Royal Infirmary.<sup>40</sup>

#### 4. Disruption times

By the end of the 1830s, even the Moderates acknowledged the ability of Davidson. John Bruce, a vociferous opponent of the doctrines of Grace, wrote: "No one can say that he wants abilities, though many regret that they are not, as they think, better applied. There is often a vigour and an originality in his language which show that his mind has not yet been debauched by the exciting and enfeebling effect of the popular system of preaching which he has adopted."<sup>41</sup> He was regarded by many as the best Evangelical preacher in the whole North East.

During the Ten Years' Conflict which preceded the Disruption, his ministry was the critical factor in making Evangelicalism respected in a city in which it had been distinctly unpopular, particularly among the educated classes. Alexander Dyce Davidson exercised a similar influence to Thomas Chalmers in Glasgow or Robert Gordon in Edinburgh.

---

<sup>39</sup> W. Walker, *The Bards of Bon-Accord* (Aberdeen, 1886), 661; *Aberdeen Herald* obituary, 4th May 1872.

<sup>40</sup> P. J. Anderson 1897, op. cit, ii, 457. *Aberdeen Free Press*, 27th July 1896; D. Morgan, *Lost Aberdeen: The Freedom Lands* (Aberdeen, 2009), 35. Foresterhill House still stands behind the Nurses' Home at the Royal Infirmary and is used as offices. Davidson and Kay's records, and contents of the Victorian shop, are preserved in Aberdeen City Archives.

<sup>41</sup> J. Bruce, *The Aberdeen Pulpit and Universities* (Aberdeen, 1844), 9.

However Davidson was never comfortable on the platform as opposed to the pulpit: “in debate or extemporary address, he did not shine.”<sup>42</sup> He generally refrained from speaking or even attending public meetings unless they involved spiritual issues such as Sabbath observance or Patronage. Dean William Walker, a prominent Episcopalian, was of the opinion that while the Moderates had several outstanding speakers in the Aberdeen Synod, the Evangelicals had none. A prominent layman and close friend of Davidson confided to Walker, “I can’t understand why Davidson can sit silent and leave the defence of his principles to speakers such as these”.<sup>43</sup> In spite of the fact that his position could have commanded great influence, Davidson “realised that he had not the ‘push’ required to fit him for being a bustling church leader. . . . He was oftentimes withheld by his modest diffidence, by his devotion to his pulpit preparations, and latterly by the state of his health, from taking that prominent position in the church’s counsels which he was so highly fitted to occupy.”<sup>44</sup>

Davidson’s opinions on patronage were much milder than those of some of his co-presbyters. At a meeting at Dyce, near Aberdeen, he stated that, “He did not think that there was precise Scripture for the people having the absolute election of their ministers – but he did hold that there was precise Scripture for their having a voice in the election and the power of dissenting from it. He differed from some of his friends regarding patronage – Mr Murray [of the North Parish] for instance, thought it unscriptural – but though he (Mr Davidson) did not think so, he thought that, as the laws were now administered, patronage ought to be abolished.”<sup>45</sup> Davidson’s personal position and natural reticence occasioned accusations that he was lacking in commitment to the non-intrusion cause. At a Church Defence Association meeting in January 1840, “he stated that he would not have stepped forward at all on this occasion, if it had not been that he might be thought lukewarm in this great cause”.<sup>46</sup>

In July 1840 the Council appointed a committee to submit a report about certain meetings which had been held in the Town’s churches

---

<sup>42</sup> *Aberdeen Herald* obituary, 4th May 1872.

<sup>43</sup> W. Walker, *Reminiscences Academic and Ecclesiastical* (Aberdeen, 1904), 143.

<sup>44</sup> *Aberdeen Journal* obituary, 1st May 1872.

<sup>45</sup> *Aberdeen Herald*, 25th February 1843.

<sup>46</sup> *Aberdeen Herald*, 4th January 1840. A notebook containing the minutes of the West Parish Church Defence Association is preserved in the Church of St Nicholas.

without the sanction of the Magistrates. The report stated, "Your Committee, in particular, disapprove of using the Town's Churches . . . for meetings upon any subject on which public opinion is known to be divided, or which may have a tendency to excite or increase irritation between different portions of the community. . . . The previous sanction of the magistrates should be obtained to holding in any of the Town's Churches meetings for purposes not immediately connected with divine worship or ordinances." In August, the report was adopted in spite of Councillor Ross complaining that "when this motion was first introduced by Baillie Clark, I suspected that his object was to exclude non-intrusion meetings from being held in the Churches".<sup>47</sup>

The ministers of the parish churches sent a Memorial to the Council. They argued that in banning meetings on matters "on which public opinion is known to be divided", the Council was exceeding its authority and argued that "that would prevent meetings to defend the doctrines of the Reformation, the principle of an Established Church, the sanctity of the Sabbath, the orthodox doctrines in opposition to Socinianism" and so on. "It belongs to the ministers, or, in some cases, to the kirk sessions and superior church judicatories, to say what meetings should or should not be held in the churches. If the ministers go wrong spiritually, morally or ecclesiastically, in the use of the churches, they are amenable to the Presbytery of the bounds."<sup>48</sup>

As an Evangelical minister in a congregation dominated by Moderate elders, Davidson had to be diplomatic if he was to win them over to the non-intrusion cause. Sheriff Watson, a member of the West Church and later one of Davidson's elders recalled, "Though not a very zealous yet he was a steady and consistent non-intrusionist".<sup>49</sup> James Lumsden said of Davidson, "He knew that the controversy was just the same . . . which, under various forms, had been from the beginning and will be to the end, the controversy whether Christ or man is to be supreme".<sup>50</sup> Events would prove that Davidson was highly committed to the cause. He assisted with deputation-speaking in the Moderate country parishes of Aberdeenshire in the months preceding the Disruption.

---

<sup>47</sup> *Aberdeen Herald*, 29th August 1840.

<sup>48</sup> *Aberdeen Herald*, 19th September 1840.

<sup>49</sup> W. Watson, MS *Autobiography* in Aberdeen Central Library.

<sup>50</sup> G. Smeaton and J. Lumsden, *Sermons preached in the Free West Church on Sabbath May 5th 1872* (Aberdeen, 1872).

Davidson was also one of several ministers who were cited to appear before the Court of Session and threatened with imprisonment because they supplied the vacant pulpits in the parishes of the seven ministers in Strathbogie who had been deposed by the 1841 Assembly after “intruding” Mr Edwards in the parish of Marnoch against the wishes of the church members. Davidson was indicted again later that year for “intrusion” in the parish of Culsamond. He was in fact passing through the parish without any intention of preaching there.<sup>51</sup> A few days after the Disruption he was again called to Edinburgh, along with the other members of the Assembly’s Special Commission and the Non-intrusion Presbytery of Strathbogie, to receive sentence for proceeding to induct David Henry (the people’s choice) at Marnoch.<sup>52</sup>

In 1842, after a Church Defence meeting was held in the West Church, the Town Council discussed the issue of the occupation of the town’s churches. Some members objected to what they considered to be misuse of the building and a breach of their 1840 resolution. They criticised Davidson for his vagueness and deceptiveness regarding the meeting which he had stated was “principally for devotional purposes”. One of the West Church elders, Neil Smith, jr., who was also a councillor, defended his minister. “Mr Davidson has given in more to the opinions and feelings of certain of his congregation than perhaps I think he should have done; but this was, surely, no charge against him. His endeavours as a man of peace, to give as little offence as possible seem to be poorly appreciated, and his very goodness of heart is now brought as a charge against him.”<sup>53</sup> A motion explicitly forbidding Church Defence meetings in the town churches was carried by ten votes to six. Further such meetings for the West congregation had to be held in the nearby Melville Church in Correction Wynd which, being a *quoad sacra* parish, was outwith the council’s jurisdiction.

A year later, again at a Church Defence meeting, Davidson argued that “the interdicts served on ministers, prohibiting them from preaching in certain districts, were a stretch of power which would not be tolerated in civil matters and ought not to be tolerated in ecclesiastical. It was not to obey the civil courts in matters spiritual that he had entered

---

<sup>51</sup> For the Marnoch intrusion and Culsamond case, see R. Buchanan, *The Ten Years’ Conflict* (Edinburgh, 1861), ii, 183-207 and 213-23.

<sup>52</sup> J. McCosh 1843, op. cit., 90.

<sup>53</sup> *Aberdeen Herald*, 15th January 1842.

the church.”<sup>54</sup> On the eve of the Disruption he expressed his conviction that “the next Communion in the West Church would be the last he dispensed in the Establishment, not the last he would dispense in the Church of Scotland. . . . They would not henceforth have all the solemnities of their present place of worship, for there was something of solemnity and splendour in the sanctuary where they had long worshipped; but it was not pillars that supported a church, but the presence and the grace of God’s Spirit that would be with them and would bless them as a church; and let them strive for this blessing.”<sup>55</sup> Davidson’s last sermon in the Establishment was preached from 2 Cor. 4:3, “But if our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost”. On that occasion, Sheriff Watson recalled, the minister solemnly warned his hearers, many of whom would never hear his voice again, “of the danger of listening to sermons without profiting by the truth delivered”.<sup>56</sup>

## 5. The Free West Church

It was said that many members of the West Church, though not particularly enthusiastic about the non-intrusion cause, adhered to the Free Church purely out of attachment to their minister. It seems that about half of the West Church congregation joined the Free Church. In fact one source suggests that the West was the only church in Aberdeen in which the Free Church failed to gain a majority.<sup>57</sup> Only eight out of twenty-two elders followed their minister. Nevertheless, within a short time the congregation increased in numbers far beyond what it had been within the Establishment. In September 1843, the Statistical Schedule for the Free West stated that the average attendance was about 950.<sup>58</sup>

The Free West congregation found temporary accommodation in Blackfriars Street Congregational Chapel until their new church was opened. The first Free Church service was taken by Professor Alexander Black, a rather eccentric character who took as his text Jer. 14:22, “Are

---

<sup>54</sup> *Aberdeen Herald*, 7th January 1843.

<sup>55</sup> *Aberdeen Herald*, 11th March 1843.

<sup>56</sup> W. Watson, MS.

<sup>57</sup> For a list of the West Church elders and their backgrounds see A. A. Maclaren, *Religion and Social Class: The Disruption Years in Aberdeen* (London, 1974), 224-55; W. Alexander, *Free East Church Reminiscences* (Aberdeen, 1893), 13.

<sup>58</sup> CH3/82/1/1/26.



there any among the vanities of the gentiles that can cause rain?”. In the interests of economy, the Free East, West and South congregations jointly purchased an old cotton-spinning mill which stood on a conspicuous site overlooking the Denburn valley. Francis Edmond, a leading Aberdeen lawyer and one of Davidson’s elders, was instrumental in procuring the site in advance of the Disruption.<sup>59</sup> As Edmond exited the seller’s office having finalised the bargain, he was met by another lawyer, a convinced Moderate, who was going in to purchase the factory – money no object – in order to deny the site to the Free Church. Contractors had already begun work on the new churches several weeks before the Disruption took place.

The new Triple Kirks were designed by the celebrated Aberdeen architect Archibald Simpson and formed a single edifice with an elegant red brick spire modelled on one of the twin spires of the Elizabethkirche in Marburg, Prussia. To reduce expenses, the granite rubble and bricks from the demolished mill were incorporated in the structure and the total cost was just over £6,000. The Free West Church had sittings for 1,100 and a hall accommodating 400, shared by the three congregations, was built underneath.<sup>60</sup> The new church was opened on 27th January 1844, the minister preaching three times from the single text of Psalm 87:3, “Glorious things are spoken of thee, O city of God”. The congregation continued to increase in numbers; within a few years it was one of the wealthiest in Scotland: only seven others contributed more to the Sustentation Fund. From the outset the Free West was involved in mission work in poor areas, especially the Denburn, for which Francis Edmond gifted a mission hall and College Street district. From 1852 onwards a lay missionary or catechist was appointed to this work and funds were raised by subscription to pay his salary.<sup>61</sup>

In 1865 a railway line was being built through the Denburn valley. Concern arose that the foundations of the Free West Church would be endangered by the vibration of passing trains. After discussions between the railway company and representatives of the congregation, the church was sold and the Free West people once again found themselves in temporary accommodation, meeting first in Free Gilcomston Church and

---

<sup>59</sup> See J. A. Henderson, *The Society of Advocates in Aberdeen* (Aberdeen, 1912), 171-2; *Aberdeen Journal*, 12th September 1892, has a full account of Francis Edmond’s career.

<sup>60</sup> See D. Miller, *Archibald Simpson: His Life and Times 1790-1847* (Aberdeen, 2006), 264-67.

<sup>61</sup> CH3/821/2.

then in the Music Hall. A majority, led by the minister, wished to erect a new church in a more desirable west-end site and a congregational meeting, held in November 1865, voted in favour of this step.

However, a minority of over 100 members was adamant that the old church could be repaired and that the congregation should remain there. After considerable acrimony, this group bought back the old church and the Presbytery gave them permission to call their own minister. The church was re-opened on 20th January 1867 and it was eventually agreed that it be renamed the Free High Church.<sup>62</sup> The majority continued to meet in the Music Hall until their new church was completed.

The new Free West, designed by the Aberdeen architect James Matthews in the Early Decorated style, was built on the corner of Union Place,<sup>63</sup> at that time one of Aberdeen's most desirable residential areas, and Bon Accord Street. The total cost was £12,436. The church was set back from the pavement line so that its architecture could be seen to better advantage. Like its near neighbour, Free Gilcomston, the Free West was constructed of sandstone. The church featured a 175-foot spire and coloured glass windows; it was seated for 1,150 and had a prayer meeting room and church officer's house to the rear.<sup>64</sup> At the opening service Davidson preached from Ephesians 2:20-22, "You are built upon the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief corner stone". The collection on that occasion amounted to £617.

## 6. Davidson the preacher

One visitor to the Free West described how, "a stranger is apt to misjudge Mr. Davidson as he sees him engaged in the preliminary services. His reading is correct, emphatic and pleasing but is marked by no very striking peculiarity. His prayer is exceedingly simple. The words

---

<sup>62</sup> For a history of the Free High congregation see H. W. Bell (ed.), *Free High Church Book of the Bazaar* (Aberdeen, 1892), 15-19, and A. Gammie, op. cit., 134-8. The congregation moved to a new building in the then new suburb of Hilton in 1936.

<sup>63</sup> The western section of Union Street (between Summer Street and Holburn Junction) was so designated until 1890, when the separate name was discontinued; see D. Morgan, *The Granite Mile*, 165-83.

<sup>64</sup> For a description of the new church see *Aberdeen Free Press*, 16th February 1869.

employed are very appropriate but they are uttered sometimes with hesitancy. When he gives out his text he rests on the book board and still enunciates slowly, though his thoughts are before him. He proceeds cautiously and carefully and still the matter partakes of the character of commonplace. As he proceeds his thoughts become more vigorous – his manner more animated – his enunciation more emphatic and the vast congregation hang on his lips. The attention is fixed, not on the manner of the preacher – not by the announcement of new views, or the startling, or the paradoxical, but by sober, logical, consecutive thought . . . his power, however, is in his heart. Simplicity, earnestness, energy and honesty of purpose are stamped on every word he utters.”<sup>65</sup>

Another visitor to Davidson’s church wrote: “He does not spare himself. He does not give to God that which costs him nothing. And he advances as much as would do for two sermons, or as some would spin out for several occasions. His style is simple, natural and forcible. He does not rise to the brilliant and sparkling or to the higher flights of eloquence but he is a preacher rather distinguished for that which is solid than that which is showy. It is regretted that he cannot be well heard unless you are tolerably near.”<sup>66</sup>

The distinguished Free Churchman George Smeaton said of Davidson: “He opened up to men’s gaze, as few preachers have been found to do, the whole doctrine of the Covenant of Grace, exhibiting, as in a bird’s eye view, the economy of God’s plan of Grace, from its commencement to its final consummation. My habitual impression during the four years that I and my family enjoyed his ministrations was that nowhere could you find a nobler preacher, nowhere a more ample, varied and all-sided exhibition of the Gospel of the grace of God. He preached ‘Christ crucified’ with singular power and saving efficacy.”<sup>67</sup>

Davidson always sought to express himself in language which the least educated of his hearers could understand. Smeaton recalled: “I remember him on one occasion in company declaring his full belief that a man did not know what he could not express, and that one knew only

---

<sup>65</sup> J. Smith, “Our Scottish Clergy: Dr A. D. Davidson”, *Aberdeen Free Press*, 31st August 1854. These sketches of preachers were later collected in three volumes.

<sup>66</sup> “A Stranger”, *Notes written about two years ago after hearing the late Rev Dr Davidson preach* (Aberdeen, 1873). Copy in Aberdeen Public Library.

<sup>67</sup> Smeaton and Lumsden, op. cit.

what he could clearly utter.”<sup>68</sup> Although Sheriff Watson claimed, “he never touched the feelings nor roused the mind to any high pitch of devotion or enthusiasm”,<sup>69</sup> William Carnie, the well-known local journalist remembered that, “he had that magic of tears in the voice which at tender, beseeching passages, made every eye glisten”.<sup>70</sup> “Above all,” said Davidson’s obituary in the *Aberdeen Free Press*, “he spoke with a nervous earnestness which made it impossible for the hearer not to recognise impressively the fact that the man believed and felt every word he said as the very truth.”<sup>71</sup> In 1909, Alexander Whyte remembered Davidson’s preaching as “manly, edifying, sanctifying, heart-touching”.<sup>72</sup>

William Garden Blaikie wrote: “The superiority of his preaching did not arise from the lustre of any single quality so much as from the happy combination of many. For substance, it always kept close to the great central truths of Divine revelation. It was always Biblical and practical, plain and pointed. In illustration he was often highly successful, and in the period to which the recollections of the present writer chiefly belong, he had a large command of figurative language. The fervour and free outflow of his feeling was remarkable. They were not checked by his habit of reading his discourses, for he threw his soul into them, and as he went on the glow of feeling deepened. There was a steady, cumulative power about his preaching – the momentum was always growing.”<sup>73</sup>

His preparation was meticulous, as can be seen from the hundreds of fully written-out sermons preserved today in King’s College library. After his death two volumes of selected sermons were published. James Lumsden said of Davidson, “Assigning to the preaching of the Word the place of supreme importance – not only above all worldly employments, but also amongst other parts of both pastoral and ecclesiastical duty – he devoted himself to the preparation of his Sabbath sermons and of his prayer meeting expositions with as sustained care and labour as if his aim had been that of literary ambition or permanent authorship.”<sup>74</sup>

---

<sup>68</sup> Smeaton and Lumsden op. cit.

<sup>69</sup> W. Watson, MS.

<sup>70</sup> W. Carnie, *Reporting Reminiscences* (Aberdeen, 1902) i, 9.

<sup>71</sup> *Aberdeen Free Press* obituary.

<sup>72</sup> *Reminiscences of the Revival of Fifty-Nine and the Sixties* (Aberdeen, 1909), 20.

<sup>73</sup> *Aberdeen Herald* obituary, 4th May 1872.

<sup>74</sup> Smeaton and Lumsden, op. cit.

Alexander Whyte recalled, “He wrote only after the greatest industry in preparing his matter, but when he once sat down to write his work immediately took on its peculiar neatness and accuracy . . . indeed he has been heard to say that he never drafted a discourse in his life”.<sup>75</sup> Davidson often preached through books and themes of Scripture. At the prayer meeting, he went through the Psalms, the *Confession of Faith* and the *Larger Catechism*.<sup>76</sup>

Davidson was probably the most scholarly of the Free Church ministers in Aberdeen, although there were others of considerable academic ability such as John Murray who was, like Davidson, a gifted linguist. After the Disruption, Professor Black, formerly of Marischal College, was given charge of teaching the Divinity students in Aberdeen who had adhered to the Free Church. When Black was appointed to a chair in New College, the Free Presbytery of Aberdeen appointed James Bryce of Gilcomston and Davidson to teach the Divinity classes during the winter of 1844-5. The classes met in the Free East Church Session House. Davidson refused overtures to accept the post permanently. The General Assembly appointed James MacLagan of Kinfauns (Perthshire) as Professor of Theology in Aberdeen, although a full course of study was not offered and students had to attend at least one session in Edinburgh. In later years Davidson was more than once offered a professorial chair, but always declined. In 1854, his *Alma Mater* gave recognition to his contribution to scholarship by awarding him a Doctorate of Divinity following the publication of his *Lectures Expository and Practical on the Book of Esther*.

In spite of strong opposition, from Professor William Cunningham among others, a section within the Free Church was determined to establish further colleges in Aberdeen and Glasgow.<sup>77</sup> The leading light in this campaign was Francis Edmond, a close friend of Davidson and one of his elders. Edmond’s only daughter, Jean Una, married her minister’s nephew, Alexander Dyce Davidson.<sup>78</sup>

---

<sup>75</sup> A. Whyte, “Alexander Dyce Davidson”, J. Wylie (ed.), *Disruption Worthies: A Memorial of 1843* (Edinburgh, 1877).

<sup>76</sup> CH3/821/2&3.

<sup>77</sup> See R. G. Philip, *The Church College in Aberdeen* (Aberdeen, 1936); R. A. Lendrum, “An Aberdeen Divinity Hall”, *Aberdeen University Review* xxii (1933), 223-33.

<sup>78</sup> Alexander Dyce Davidson, the son of Charles Davidson, was a partner in his father’s firm, an anaesthetist and subsequently ophthalmic surgeon at Aberdeen Royal Infirmary as well as Professor of Materia Medica at Aberdeen University. He also remained in

In 1850, a college building was opened at Holburn Junction at the west end of Union Street. Professor MacLagan attended the Free West until his death in 1853 and in later years Professors Marcus Sachs and George Smeaton were also elders there. It was said that “Free Church divinity students found their way to the Free West as naturally as to their classrooms”.<sup>79</sup> Davidson’s “influence among the students of the University and the more cultured classes was paramount”.<sup>80</sup> Distinguished High Court judges such as Lord Cockburn and Lord Moncrieff both regarded Davidson as one of the best preachers they had ever heard.<sup>81</sup> There is no doubt that the fashionable location and impressive church made the Free West the premier Free Church congregation in town: “the height of a merchant’s ambition in Aberdeen was a house in Crown Street and a seat in the Free West Church.”<sup>82</sup>

## 7. Davidson the man

Davidson’s “modesty, unobtrusiveness, cheerfulness and kindness of heart made him a most loveable man”.<sup>83</sup> The historian David Masson remembered Davidson as “a modest and conscientious man of meditative habits”.<sup>84</sup> Although Davidson could relate well to people from any walk of life, he did not visit his flock systematically as was the custom of the time.

However, he did bestow great care on the preparation of those seeking admission to the Lord’s Table. Davidson met with such persons on two evenings of the week over several months of the year and thoroughly went over the *Shorter Catechism* with them. Davidson continued this practice right up until his last illness.<sup>85</sup> His lack of visiting

---

General Practice and, as a deacon in the Free West gave free medical treatment to the poor of the congregation. He died in 1886 at the age of 41 after collapsing from a brain haemorrhage during a lecture. See P. J. Anderson, *Aurora Borealis Academica 1860-89* (Aberdeen, 1899), 302-7.

<sup>79</sup> A. Gammie, op. cit., 230.

<sup>80</sup> W. R. Nicol, “Alexander Dyce Davidson”, in *Dictionary of National Biography* xiv., 124.

<sup>81</sup> H. Cockburn, *Circuit Journeys* (Edinburgh, 1880), 27; W. Watson MS, op. cit.

<sup>82</sup> A. S. Cook, *Old Time Traders and Their Ways* (Aberdeen, 1902), 39.

<sup>83</sup> *Aberdeen Free Press*, 30th April 1872.

<sup>84</sup> D. Masson, *Memories of Two Cities: Edinburgh and Aberdeen* (Edinburgh, 1899), 299.

<sup>85</sup> Communion seasons at the Free West followed the traditional practice of the Established Church of Scotland in Aberdeen. There were two diets of worship on



was criticised by Sheriff Watson<sup>86</sup> and even before the Disruption the strongly anti-Evangelical *Aberdeen Herald* upbraided him for this. The loss of his wife and child was the main factor in Davidson developing what W. G. Blaikie described as “those habits of retirement which latterly seemed almost to have reached a morbid pitch . . . though the radiance of his nature would not have suggested to a stranger any sense of loneliness, those who knew him well could readily see that his heart never recovered its withered bloom”.<sup>87</sup>

The minister of the Free West was deeply attached to his congregation. It is recorded that on one occasion, “while giving a short concluding address after the Tables were served, he had been saying something to various classes and went on to express a fear that there might still be some of his people still unsaved, when he paused, unable to bear the thought of it. His whole nature seemed stirred and, holding out both his arms as if like the father of a family he could take the whole flock into his arms, he said ‘My friends, we cannot afford to lose any of you!’”<sup>88</sup> Alexander Whyte wrote, “Considering his power and popularity as a preacher, it was remarkable how little he was from home; and we have heard it told by ministers whom he assisted at Communion seasons, how resolute he was in getting home at the first opportunity after his work was done. He would on no account lose a day from the work he loved so well.”<sup>89</sup> Several unsuccessful calls were addressed to him, including one from Free St George’s, Edinburgh, after the translation of Robert S. Candlish to New College.

Particularly when still in the Establishment, Davidson was a prominent member of Aberdeen society, both as a result of his connection with the Blaikies and of his position as minister of the West Parish. John Bruce averred, “In private life, Mr Davidson, who is more of a man of the world, and possessed of more judgement than any of his Evangelical brethren, is said to be a most agreeable man. The ladies like the doctrines of grace, and hate cold morality, and with them all

---

Wednesday, which was the Fast Day, the usual prayer meeting on Thursday, an evening Preparatory Service on Saturday, two services on Sabbath and two Thanksgiving Services on Monday.

<sup>86</sup> W. Watson MS, op. cit.

<sup>87</sup> *Aberdeen Herald* obituary, 4th May 1872.

<sup>88</sup> *Aberdeen Journal*, 14th May 1872.

<sup>89</sup> A. Whyte, op. cit., 1877.

evangelical ministers are favourites, and Mr Davidson is, we believe, an especial favourite.”<sup>90</sup>

“Although a man of culture and refinement,” recorded the *Aberdeen Journal*, “he was not interested in what was fashionable. He was a consistent Free Churchman with all the traditions of the Disruption cleaving about him. Hence, he did not move quite as fast as some of his younger brethren have done.”<sup>91</sup> Innovations in worship were anathema to Davidson. Sheriff Watson recalled, “if not actually narrow-minded he was not at all liberal in his views. He confined his source of praise to the Psalms of David.”<sup>91</sup> In the Aberdeen of his day, his position was unusually conservative, even in Free Church congregations. On one occasion before the Disruption he was taking a service in the East Church in the absence of Dr Foote, whose congregation was in the forefront of the “improvement of psalmody” movement. After the last psalm, the precentor, as was his wont, began to sing a doxology. Davidson leaned over the pulpit and tapped him on the shoulder to stop him. After a second tap he failed to take the hint, so the preacher, “losing all patience could no longer submit to this manifestation of ritualism and ordered the congregation to cease, pronouncing there and then the Benediction”.<sup>92</sup>

In later life, Davidson very seldom spoke at meetings of Presbytery or Synod, but despite this low-key approach he took the conservative side over the controversial question of Union between the Free Church and the United Presbyterian Church. At a meeting of the Free Presbytery of Aberdeen in 1871, he supported Rev Dr Walter MacGilvray’s motion that “The Presbytery, having regard to the vague and unsatisfactory character of the basis proposed, find that there is no evidence of such agreement on the part of the negotiating parties as to warrant an incorporating union”. The motion was defeated by 29 votes to 19.<sup>93</sup> The Anti-Union periodical, *The Watchword*, recorded, “The adhesion of Dr Davidson was of immense importance”.<sup>94</sup> After Davidson’s death, the same journal stated, “No man was more eminent for lofty and unswerving consistency and maintenance of principle”.<sup>95</sup>

---

<sup>90</sup> J. Bruce, op. cit., 10.

<sup>91</sup> *Aberdeen Journal* obituary.

<sup>92</sup> W. Watson MS, op. cit.

<sup>93</sup> *Aberdeen Free Press*, 13th January 1871.

<sup>94</sup> *The Watchword*, February 1871, v, 482.

<sup>95</sup> *The Watchword*, October 1872, vii, 332.

William Garden Blaikie wrote in his autobiography: “Later in life we diverged from each other a little; he thought me somewhat broad and I thought him narrow, and we had little intercourse. He did not quite approve of the attention I gave to literary and social subjects and on the temperance question we were pretty far asunder.”<sup>96</sup> Along with John Murray of the North Church, Davidson was against the total abstinence movement which otherwise commanded strong support among the city’s Evangelical ministers.<sup>97</sup> Unusually for a clergyman in those days, Davidson also enjoyed both snuff and cigars.<sup>98</sup> When at the South Church, Davidson lived at 34 Skene Terrace and subsequently 5 Belmont Street. He moved along Belmont Street to number 15 after his translation to the West Parish. Following the Disruption, Davidson’s residence was at 126 Crown Street. His staff consisted of a housekeeper and a younger housemaid.<sup>99</sup>

Davidson’s avoidance of speaking outwith the pulpit has already been noticed. He was however greatly concerned at the prospect of a “Fusion” of his *Alma Mater* of Marischal College with King’s College in Old Aberdeen. The opponents of the Fusion supported the union of the two Universities and the ending of duplication of the professional classes of Law, Medicine and Divinity. However they were strongly against the proposal to combine the two Arts classes because they felt that this would seriously reduce the quality of teaching. At a Head Court of the Inhabitants of Aberdeen, Davidson moved the following resolution: “That the citizens of Aberdeen regard with alarm and indignation certain Resolutions of the Universities (Scotland) Commission, by which the Commission resolve to extinguish the School of Arts that has flourished at Marischal College, within this burgh, for centuries, and to apply its ample endowments to purposes inconsistent with the objects of the founders.” He objected, “I can sympathise with those who wish only one Faculty of Arts, though I differ from them in their judgement. . . . But then they have done more than that – they have not only resolved upon fusion – that there shall be only one Faculty of Arts – but they have resolved to transfer our good old college from Broad Street to Old

---

<sup>96</sup> W. G. Blaikie, op. cit., 1899.

<sup>97</sup> See, for instance, reports of Presbytery Meetings in *Aberdeen Herald*, 11th September 1841, 7th May 1842.

<sup>98</sup> D. Masson, op. cit., 299.

<sup>99</sup> *Aberdeen Directory* 1830-72 in Aberdeen Central Library. Census 1861 and 1871.

Aberdeen.” Davidson emphasised the convenient situation of Marischal College compared with King’s and complained how the Commissioners “had thrown to the winds charters, endowments and benefactions, and thus given a sad lesson to the community as to the instability of these things”.<sup>100</sup>

Examination of the Kirk Session Minutes reveals that Davidson’s closest friends among Free Church ministers included Robert S. Candlish<sup>101</sup> and William Wilson.<sup>102</sup> Both men had scholarly tastes, which would have appealed to Davidson, and both were highly influential ecclesiastics, particularly Candlish, who was the leading figure in the courts of the Church after the death of Thomas Chalmers. His theological position is best described as moderately conservative. Although Candlish was in favour of Union, he was against innovations in worship, albeit mainly on pragmatic grounds. He assisted Davidson several times in the 1840s and ’50s. Wilson was a Dundee minister who was Convenor of Home Mission and later Junior Clerk of Assembly. He was considered strictly orthodox and was an expert on Church Law. Wilson was also a good friend of Candlish and wrote his *Life*; he assisted at the Free West no less than twelve times. Very few Communion at the Free West passed without a contribution from George Moir, Free Church minister of Newmachar.<sup>103</sup> Donald Fergusson, Dunnichen,<sup>104</sup> was a

---

<sup>100</sup> *Aberdeen Free Press*, 5th March, 1859. The *Fusion* went ahead the following year. Although there were no longer separate Arts Classes at Marischal College, the building itself was retained. It was later enlarged by the addition of the magnificent frontage and the Mitchell Tower and Hall. Marischal College was the principal seat of the united University of Aberdeen until the expansion of the Old Aberdeen site in the post-war period. See W. D. Simpson, *The Fusion of 1860: A Record of the Centenary Celebration and a History of the United University of Aberdeen 1860-1960* (Edinburgh, 1963), 7-15; J. Oglivie, *Memoir of John Cruickshank, L.L.D.* (Aberdeen, 1896), 96-101; J. S. Smith, “The Marischal College Story”, *Aberdeen University Review* 50 (1984), 380-86. Marischal College is at present being converted into a new headquarters for Aberdeen City Council. I am indebted to Rev James Stewart, Senior Minister of St Nicholas, Aberdeen, for this reference.

<sup>101</sup> *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* xxx, 891-93; A. Finlayson, *Unity and Diversity: The Founders of the Free Church of Scotland* (Christian Focus, Tain, 2010), 59-81.

<sup>102</sup> Minister of Carmylie 1837; St Paul’s Free Church, Dundee, 1848-88. See *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, lix, 663; *Dundee Year Book 1888*, 59-67.

<sup>103</sup> Minister of Newmachar from 1840 until his early death in 1857; *Aberdeen Free Press*, 3rd July 1857; *Fasti*, vii, 68.

<sup>104</sup> Minister of Dunnichen 1837, Liverpool 1844, Kilmadock Free Church 1850; Leven Free Church 1865-81, W. Ewing, *Annals of the Free Church of Scotland 1843-1900* (Edinburgh, 1914), i, 152.

regular visitor on Sacramental occasions during Davidson's years in the West Parish and occasionally thereafter, as was W. G. Blaikie. John Kennedy, Dingwall, officiated once and William Nixon, Montrose, twice. Davidson was also a close friend of Henry Angus of St Nicholas Lane United Presbyterian Church. Henry Angus preached more than once in the Free West and Davidson conducted worship at his funeral in 1860.<sup>105</sup>

During his later years, Davidson suffered from repeated bouts of ill health, mainly due to severe asthma.<sup>106</sup> In 1861, the Session recommended that a licentiate of the church be appointed as missionary in the College Street district, to visit members and to relieve the burden on the minister. A succession of men served in this role. In 1864 Davidson was completely laid aside from his duties for six months and for the last two years of his life, Davidson was able to preach only once each Sabbath. Donald MacLean was appointed Davidson's last assistant in 1871; he was in his fifties when he effectively took responsibility for the congregation for several months. After Davidson's passing he was presented with a gift of twenty guineas in acknowledgement of his labours.<sup>107</sup>

## 8. The legacy

Davidson preached for the last time on 11th February 1872 and was soon afterwards confined to his home by a very severe asthma attack which, W. G. Blaikie stated, "gradually assumed a more and more aggravated form. During the last fortnight, all hope of recovery may be said to have been given up. He bore his sufferings with great patience, and exemplified on his death bed that calm peace which he had so often dwelt upon as the appropriate spirit of the dying Christian." During his last hours, a friend expressed his hope that the Lord had given him faith and peace. "He, with some effort, instantly replied, 'All my trust is in the great Salvation and the Glorious Redeemer'."<sup>108</sup>

Alexander Dyce Davidson fell asleep in Jesus at about half past eight in the morning of Saturday 27th April 1872 and these last words were later inscribed upon his memorial tablet in the Free West Church.

---

<sup>105</sup> R. Angus, *Sermons of Rev Henry Angus with a Memoir of his Life* (Aberdeen, 1861), lxvi.

<sup>106</sup> *Aberdeen Herald* obituary, 4th May, 1872.

<sup>107</sup> Minister of Carinish Free Church, North Uist 1873-92, Ewing, *Annals of the Free Church of Scotland*, i, 244. Session minutes CH3/821/3/367, 4th May 1872.

<sup>108</sup> Lumsden and Smeaton, op. cit.

No services were held in the Free West that Sabbath. The funeral took place on 1st May. "At two o'clock, when devotional exercises were engaged in, the [Free West Church] was quite filled. The pulpit and front of the gallery were draped with black cloth. In the body of the church were about six hundred gentlemen of all ranks and professions in the city, among those present being many ministers from almost every denomination. The galleries were occupied by ladies. The funeral service was conducted by Principal Lumsden, and after Rev Dr Spence had pronounced the benediction, the coffin was carried to the churchyard. . . . A large crowd lined Union Street while the procession passed; and the shops were closed and the blinds drawn down in most of the houses. The bells tolled for about an hour." Davidson was buried beside his wife and daughter in the Blaikie family lair within St Nicholas churchyard. The stone is on the west wall of the churchyard approximately half way between the West Parish Church and the Union Street entrance. On the next Sabbath, funeral sermons were preached in the Free West Church by Professor Smeaton and Principal Lumsden.

Henry Cowan of the West Parish Church also made reference to the deceased: "I know not that I have witnessed a more touching spectacle than when, a few days ago, the whole citizenship, one might say, of this town, without distinction of church or class, lined the path along which were borne the honoured remains of one who here was born, here laboured for his Master, here died."<sup>109</sup> Henry Bell of the Free High Church described Davidson's ministry as "not coming with observation and power so that men might say of it, 'Lo here!' or 'Lo there!'", a ministry nonetheless so highly influential for good to not a few yet often failing to reveal its power and success to the preacher himself".<sup>110</sup>

Principal Lumsden acted as Interim Moderator until John Laidlaw was inducted to the Free West Church on 19th September 1872. Under his ministry, changes swiftly took place in church practice and worship. Francis Edmond resigned from the eldership over the introduction of hymns to public worship and joined Free Gilcomston.<sup>111</sup> The Free West Church remained one of the most prestigious congregations in the city. Many of its office bearers were well known professional men. The congregation entered the United Free Church in 1900 and returned to

---

<sup>109</sup> *Aberdeen Journal*.

<sup>110</sup> *Aberdeen Free Press*, 7th May 1872.

<sup>111</sup> Obituary in *Aberdeen Journal*.





*Rev Alexander Dyce Davidson, by John Phillip.*

[Reproduced by permission of the Scottish National Portrait Gallery]

the Established Church in 1929. At that time it was renamed the West Church of St Andrew. One of its ministers was the noted preacher George T. H. Reid. After amalgamation with the congregation of St Nicholas (Union Grove), the West Church adopted the name of the Langstane Kirk. A serious decline in attendances and a ten-year vacancy finally led to the dissolution of the charge on Easter Sunday 1999. The

church is now a public bar and restaurant, as is the former South Church in Belmont Street. The Triple Kirks lie largely derelict, the old Free West Church razed to the ground. However, the West Church of St Nicholas remains much as it was when Davidson occupied its pulpit. It boasts one of the best preserved eighteenth century church interiors in Scotland and is open each weekday afternoon between April and September. A fine oil portrait of Alexander Dyce Davidson by the famous Aberdeen artist John "Spanish" Phillip, which used to be in the Session House of the Free West Church, is now in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery (see previous page). There is also a painting of Davidson by Sir John Watson Gordon which was bequeathed to Aberdeen Art Gallery in 1909 by Mrs Alexander Davidson, Leith.

During the ministry of Alexander Dyce Davidson, the Gospel was proclaimed from many pulpits in Aberdeen and the Reformed Faith prospered in the City as never before or since. Today, Aberdeen has the lowest *per capita* church attendance in Britain. Our prayer is that the Lord would pour out His Spirit so that multitudes would come to know the Saviour and His praises would echo through the grey granite streets which Alexander Dyce Davidson knew so well.

. . . . .

### **In Memoriam: Dr A. D. Davidson 1872**

The Cross! The Cross! 'twas all his theme  
And self was out of sight  
If Christ his Lord was magnified  
He spared not strength nor might

For lucid powers and thought sublime  
In pulpit he excelled  
A righteous God and Sovereign Lord  
He steadfastly upheld.

To youthful minds most skilfully  
The book of God unrolled  
And from that ancient treasury  
Brought forth things new and old.

Mists from their eyes like clouds sped by  
 As from his lips he taught  
 God's wondrous plan of love to man  
 With solemn lessons fraught.<sup>112</sup>

• • • • •

### **Bibliography of A. D. Davidson's published writings**

1. *Address to the Elders of the South Parish* (Aberdeen, 1834).
2. *Funeral Sermon on the Death of Provost Blaikie* (Aberdeen, 1836).
3. *The Gospel the Ministration of the Spirit*: a sermon preached before the Very Reverend the Synod of Aberdeen, on Tuesday, 8th October, 1839 (Aberdeen, 1839).
4. *Two Sermons* preached at St Cyrus on the Occasion of the Settlement of Rev Alexander Keith (Aberdeen, 1841).
5. *An Action Sermon*, 15th October 1843 (Aberdeen, 1843).
6. *A Sermon* delivered on 31st March 1844 on Rev. 5:12 (Aberdeen, 1844).
7. *The Position and Duties of Christ's Church*: a sermon preached before the Free Provincial Synod of Aberdeen on Tuesday the 9th April 1844 (Aberdeen, 1844).
8. *The Food that Perisheth*: Harvest Thanksgiving Sermon (Aberdeen, 1848).
9. *A Sermon* preached in the Free West Church, on Sabbath 7th November, on the Occasion of the death of Rev James M. Lagan (Aberdeen, 1852; 2nd edn. 1852).
10. *Lectures and Sermons*, by the late James M. Lagan, D.D., Free Church professor of divinity, Aberdeen, with a preface by A. D. Davidson (Aberdeen, 1853).
11. *Lectures Expository and Practical on the Book of Esther* (Edinburgh, 1859).
12. *Lectures and Sermons* (Edinburgh, 1872).

---

<sup>112</sup> Poem in *Bulloch Collection*, Special Collections, Aberdeen University Library.

13. "The Special Atonement and the Doctrine of an Establishment", *The Watchword*, August 1872, vii 201-2; reprinted, Free Church tracts no. 7 (Edinburgh, n.d.).
14. *The Preciousness of Christ* (Aberdeen, 1876).
15. "The Pure in Heart", *Precious Seed Discourses* (Edinburgh, 1877).

In addition, there are 23 volumes of MS sermons in the Aberdeen University Library (AUL MS 3243/1-2).