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978-1-108-00829-7 - The Life of Alexander Duff, D. D., LL. D: In Two Volumes,  
with Portraits by Jeens, Volume 1

George Smith

Excerpt

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# LIFE

OF

## ALEXANDER DUFF, D.D., LL.D.

### CHAPTER I.

1806-1829.

#### *THE BOY AND THE STUDENT.*

Alexander Duff's spiritual Ancestry.—The Prince of the English Evangelicals and the Prince of Missionaries.—James Duff and Jean Rattray.—Achnahyle and the Cottage at Balnakeilly.—Ben-i-vrackie, Pitlochrie, and Killiecrankie Pass.—The Duff Church and the Duff Tombstone.—Portrait of a Cottage Patriarch.—Dugald Buchanan and David Hume.—Gaelic poems of "The Skull," and "The Day of Judgment."—Alexander Duff's First Dream.—The Call in his Second Vision.—Early Schoolmasters.—Lost in the Snowstorm of 1819.—A year with Moncur at Perth Grammar School.—Influence of "The Paradise Lost."—St. Andrews University as it was.—Pictures of the Student by surviving Contemporaries.—Five years of Thomas Chalmers.—The St. Andrews University Missionary Society.—Letter to Dr. Chalmers.—Alexander Duff, M.A.—Licensed to preach the Gospel.

THE spiritual ancestry of Alexander Duff it is not difficult to trace to Charles Simeon. Heredity, even on its physical side, is a mystery which modern science has as yet failed to explain. Much more difficult is it to discover all that is comprehended in the influences through which the character receives its motive power and peculiar colouring. It was the remark of

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Duff himself, when, in the fulness of his fame, he solemnly congratulated a young friend on a firstborn son, that in nothing is the sovereignty of God so clearly seen as in the birth of a child; the fact, the sex, the circumstances, the bent. To be at all, is much; to be this rather than that is, to the individual, more: but to be the subject and the channel of a divine force such as has made the men who have reformed the world, in the days from the apostles to the greatest modern missionaries, is so very much more, that we may well look in every case for the signs which lie about their infancy. In this case these signs are near the surface. It was through the prince of the Evangelicals of the Church of England that, unconsciously to both, grace flowed, at one remove, to the distant Highland boy of the Presbyterian kirk, who became the prince of Evangelical missionaries. And the grace was the same in both for it was marked by the catholicity of true Evangelicalism, which is not always found in the sectarian divisions and strifes of the Reformed Churches.

It was just after that conversation of his which proved to be the foundation of the Church Missionary Society that, in 1796, the accomplished English clergyman who filled the pulpit of Trinity Church, Cambridge, was induced to make his first tour through Scotland. At Dunkeld, Simeon tells us, his horses were at the door to take him on to the Pass of Killiecrankie, with the intention of at once turning back to that gate of the Highlands in order to hurry on to Glasgow. But "I felt myself poorly, I ordered them back and proceeded to Killiecrankie the next day. At Moulin, a village four miles from K., I called to see a Mr. Stewart." In that visit was the seed of Alexander Duff's higher life. Having seen the pass, Simeon returned to assist Mr. Stewart, who was the parish minister, at

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.Et. 1. CHARLES SIMEON AND ALEXANDER DUFF. 3

the Lord's supper. Their intercourse resulted in an immediate change in the preaching of a man of high repute for amiability and learning, but, like the young Chalmers afterwards, "very defective in his view of the gospel and in his experience of its power." From that moment Stewart "changed the strain of his preaching, determining to know nothing among his people but Jesus Christ and Him crucified."

Years afterwards, as Simeon looked back on that visit to Scotland, and saw how in Moulin, at Dingwall, and then in the Canongate of Edinburgh, Dr. Stewart was made a living power to the souls of men and women, he blessed God for the indisposition which had kept him back at Dunkeld, and so had sent him to Moulin. This, and the results of his preaching for Dr. Colquhoun in Leith, led the Evangelical whom the University then despised and his own brethren condemned for preaching in non-Anglican churches, to write, "amongst the many blessings which God vouchsafed to me in those journeys, there were two in particular for which I have reason to adore His name." After this, Simeon sent out to India the men, like David Brown and Henry Martyn, who, as chaplains and missionaries, formed the salt of the infant empire. He soon saw, also, one of the noblest of evangelizing agencies established, the Church Missionary Society; and he had helped the London Missionary Society, fruitful parent of similar organizations in Great Britain, America and Germany. But the far-reaching consequences of that day's work in Moulin he had not dared to dream of.

Among Stewart's parishioners, of whom he had told Simeon there are "few real Christians whom I can number in my parish," were two young people, who were not long in experiencing the new electric thrill which showed itself in more than one revival such as a

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few of the most aged villagers recall with fond memory at the present day. James Duff and Jean Rattray were under seventeen when Simeon preached what he at the time bewailed as his barren and dull sermon. Gaelic was the prevailing language of the district; few knew English. But what the English of Simeon began, the Gaelic of Stewart continued, and James Duff was equally master of both languages. In due time he married Jean Rattray and took her to the farm of Auchnahyle. There Alexander Duff was born to them, on the 25th April, 1806. Removing thence soon after somewhat nearer Moulin, the boy's childhood and early youth was spent in and around a picturesque cottage on the estate of Balnakeilly. No trace remains of the old house of Auchnahyle, a new one having been built on its site. All the missionary's early reminiscences were identified with the cottage at Balnakeilly, still standing and but little changed, among the woods that slope up from the old north road before it enters Moulin from Dunkeld.

And here, as he himself once wrote, "amid scenery of unsurpassed beauty and grandeur, I acquired early tastes and impulses which have animated and influenced me through life." To its natural beauty of hill, wood and water, on which the artist's eye loves to rest, there is now added the memory of him whose whole genius was coloured by the surroundings, and who, when the shadow of death was darkening over him, delighted to recall the dear father-house. It is the centre of Scotland. Rising gently some two miles to the north-east, Ben-i-vrackie reaches a height of 2,800 feet. Thence the young eye can descry Arthur's Seat which guards Edinburgh, and, in the far north of Aberdeenshire, the mightier Bens of Nevis and Macdhui. The house is beautifully placed in an open glade, with a brattling mountain stream

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## Æt. 1. DUFF'S DESCRIPTION OF HIS BIRTHPLACE. 5

on either side, and a wealth of weeping birch, ash, larch, and young oak trees, which, in the slanting autumn sun, seem to surround the cottage with a setting of gold. Twice in after years, with a loving and eloquent fondness, was he led to describe the place and the father who trained him there. When in Calcutta, in 1860, he observed in the *Witness* newspaper an advertisement soliciting subscriptions for a new Free Church for the parish, which the altered times made it desirable to erect in the neighbouring railway town of Pitlochrie, he thus wrote in a public appeal:—

“The parish of Moulin, fairly within the Grampians, embraces the central portion of the great and noble valley of Athole, watered by the Tummel and the Garry, with several glens and straths stretching considerably to the north. The great north road from Dunkeld to Inverness passes through the southerly section of the parish, along the banks of the fore-named rivers. About a mile to the north of this road, and wholly concealed from it by intervening knolls and ridges, lies the village of Moulin, in a hollow or basin, once partly the bed of a lake, but now drained and turned into fertile corn-fields, with the ruins of an old castle in the middle of them. Formerly the half, probably the greater half of the population lay to the north, north-west, and north-east of the village. But things are very much altered now. From the enlargement of farms entire hamlets have been removed, and the cottars in most villages in these directions greatly reduced in number; while one glen has been wholly, and more than one to a considerable extent depopulated, to make way for sheep-walks.”

The Pitlochrie portion of his native parish he described as “slightly elevated on rolling ridges above the Tummel, which, after its junction with the Garry

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a little above, flows on to join the Tay a few miles farther down; with the country all around richly wooded, while free from all marshy ground and cultivated like a garden; encompassed on all sides, and at no great distance, with swelling hills and craggy precipices, and the sharp pointed peaks of the lofty Ben-i-vrackie towering up almost immediately behind it; placed, also, within a mile or two of the celebrated Pass of Killiecrankie, which is bounded on the east by Fascally, with its enchanting scenery including the Falls of Tummel, and on the west by the battle-field on which Lord Dundee, 'the Bloody Clavers,' the relentless scourge of Scotland's true patriot worthies, the heroes of the Covenant, and the last hope of the Stewart dynasty, fell mortally wounded in the hour of victory; and which itself furnishes to the true lover of nature's works a variety of views altogether unsurpassed in their combination of the beautiful, the picturesque, the romantic, and the sublime."

The Duff Church now stands in Pitlochrie as the solitary memorial there of the man who has given a new and higher interest to that portion of the Grampian range than any of its sons. No; not the only memorial. There is another, a tombstone in the Moulin kirk-yard, "erected as a grateful tribute to the memory of his pious parents . . . by their affectionate son, Alexander Duff." When, early in 1848, he heard in Calcutta of his father's death, he sent to Dr. Tweedie a prose elegy on that cottage patriarch, which, undesignedly, enables us to trace the spiritual influence as it had flowed through Simeon, Stewart, and the good old Highlander to the son, who had been then for nearly twenty years the foremost missionary in India.

"If ever son had reason to thank God for the prayers, the instructions, the counsels, and the con-

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Æt. i.      DUFF'S DESCRIPTION OF HIS FATHER.

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sistent examples of a devoutly pious father, I am that son. Though sent from home for my education at the early age of eight, and though very little at home ever after, the sacred and awakening lessons of infancy were never wholly forgotten; and, in the absence of moulding influences of regenerating grace, the fear of offending a man who inspired me in earliest boyhood with sentiments of profoundest reverence and love towards himself, as a man of God, was for many a year the overmastering principle which restrained my erring footsteps and saved me from many of the overt follies and sins of youth. Originally aroused to a sense of sin and the necessity of salvation, when a young man, under the remarkable ministry of the late Dr. Stewart of Moulin, and afterwards of Dingwall, and the Canongate, my father was led to flee for refuge to the hope set before him in the gospel. And the spark of light and life then enkindled in his soul, far from becoming dim amid the still surviving corruptions of the 'old man' within, and the thick fogs of a carnal earthly atmosphere without, continued ever since to shine more and more with increasing intensity and vividness. In the days of his health and strength, and subsequently as often as health and strength permitted, he was wont to labour much for the spiritual improvement of his neighbourhood, by the keeping or superintending of Sabbath schools, and the holding of weekly meetings, at his own house or elsewhere, for prayer and scriptural exposition. In prayer he was indeed mighty—appearing at times as if in a rapture, caught up to the third heavens and in full view of the beatific vision. In the practical exposition and home-thrusting enforcement of Scripture truth he was endowed with an uncommon gift. In appealing to the conscience, and in expatiating on the bleeding, dying love of the Saviour he displayed a power before which many have

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been melted and subdued—finding immediate relief only in sobs and tears—and being equally fluent in the Gaelic and English languages, he could readily adapt himself to the requirements of such mixed audiences as the Highlands usually furnish.

“In addressing the young he was wont to manifest a winning and affectionate tenderness, which soon riveted the attention and captivated the feelings. His very heart seemed to yearn through his eyes as he implored them to beware of the enticement of sinners, and pointed to the outstretched arms of the Redeemer. Seizing on some Bible narrative or incident or miracle or parable, or proverb or emblem, he would ‘picture out’ one or other of these so as to leave a clear and definite image on the youthful mind. And when he fairly entered on the full spirit of some stirring theme, such as Abraham’s offering of his son Isaac, or Jesus weeping over infatuated Jerusalem; or when, piercing through the outer folds, he laid bare the latent significance of some rich and beautiful emblem, such as the ‘Rose of Sharon,’ the ‘Lily of the Valley,’ or the great ‘Sun of Righteousness,’ his diction would swell into somewhat of dramatic energy, and his illustrations into somewhat of the vividness and sensible reality; while his voice, respondent to the thrilling within, would rise into something like the undulations of a lofty but irregular chant, and so vibrate athwart the mental imagery of the heart, and leave an indelible impression there.

“Next to the Bible my father’s chief delight was in studying the works of our old divines, of which, in time-worn editions, he had succeeded in accumulating a goodly number. These, he was wont to say, contained more of the ‘sap and marrow of the gospel’ and had about them more of the ‘fragrance and flavour of Paradise,’ than aught more recently produced.



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Æt. 1.

A COTTAGE PATRIARCH.

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Halyburton's 'Memoirs' was a prime favourite; but of all merely human productions, no one seemed to stir and animate his whole soul like the 'Cloud of Witnesses.' And he took a special pains to saturate the minds of his children with its contents. His habit was orally to tell us of the manner in which the Papacy corrupted God's word and persecuted God's people. He would show us pictures of the enginery and processes of cruel torture. He then would give some short biographical notice of one or other of the suffering worthies; and last of all conclude with reading some of the more striking passages in their 'Last Words and Dying Testimonies.' To this early training do I mainly owe my 'heart-hatred' of popery, with any spiritual insight which I possess into its subtle and malignant genius, its unchanged and unchangeable anti-christian virulence.

"During his latter days, his answer to every personal inquiry was, 'I am waiting till my blessed Master call me to Himself.' His unsparing exposure and denunciation of the follies, levities and vanities of a giddy and sinful world subjected him, in an uncommon degree, to the sneers, the ridicule, the contempt and the calumny of the ungodly. But like his Divine Master, when reviled he strove not to suffer himself to revile again. His wonted utterance under such trials was, 'Poor creatures, they are to be pitied, for they know not what spirit they are of;' or, 'Ah! well, it is only another reason why I should remember them more earnestly in prayer. The day of judgment will set all right.' In the sharpness and clearness with which he drew the line between the merely expedient and the absolutely right and true; in his stern adhesion to principle at all hazards; in his ineffable loathing for temporizing and compromise, in any shape or form, where the interests of 'Zion's King and Zion's cause'

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were concerned; in his energy of spirit, promptness of decision, and unbending sturdiness of character; in the Abraham-like cast of his faith, which manifested itself in its directness, simplicity, and strength—in all these and other respects he always appeared to me to realize fully as much of my own beau-ideal of the ancient martyr or hero of the Covenant as any other man I ever knew. Indeed, had he lived in the early ages of persecution, or in Covenanting times, my persuasion is that he would have been among the foremost in fearlessly facing the tyrant and the torture, the scaffold and the stake. Oh that a double portion of his spirit were mine, and that the mantle of his graces would fall upon me!”

This history will show how richly the prayer was answered; this letter itself does so. But the pictures of the “Cloud of Witnesses” were not all that fired the imagination of the Highland boy. Like Carey with his maps of the heathen world, the father spoke to his children from such representations of Jugganath and the gods of India as were rarely met with at that time. On another occasion the son thus traced the specially missionary influences which surrounded him as a child: “Into a general knowledge of the objects and progress of modern missions I was initiated from my earliest youth by my revered father, whose catholic spirit rejoiced in tracing the triumph of the gospel in different lands, and in connection with the different branches of the Christian Church. Pictures of Jugganath and other heathen idols he was wont to exhibit, accompanying the exhibition with copious explanations, well fitted to create a feeling of horror towards idolatry and of compassion towards the poor blinded idolaters, and intermixing the whole with statements of the love of Jesus.”

Another of Alexander Duff’s early and constant