

Growing Up in Aberdeenshire

1851-1870

William Robertson Nicoll was born on 10 October 1851 at Kildrummy, the next parish to Auchindoir, deep in the valley of the river Don, in rural Aberdeenshire. The eldest son of the Reverend Harry Nicoll of Auchindoir and Jane Robertson, a pure Celt from a branch of the Macleod clan and descended on his mother's side from the Robertsons of Struan – a heritage of which he was always intensely proud. Harry was born in 1812 on a farm near Lumsden, and not content with the simple life to which he seemed destined, instead undertook years of intense study towards qualification as a teacher at Aberdeen University. He was ultimately appointed the schoolmaster of his native parish of Auchindoir in 1834. Harry Nicoll did not, however, intend to long remain a schoolteacher: his true ambition was to become a minister in the Church. A further period of study saw him not only gain his licence to preach, but also a fascination with books and with theological scholarship that would last a lifetime, a fascination that he would ultimately bequeath to his son. Harry Nicoll found complete fulfilment and satisfaction as the minister of the Free Church in Lumsden, and he lived happily as pastor to his congregation until his death in 1891. Harry was, in his son's words, content with

the honour he ever received... from his own people. He dwelt among them all his life, and was schoolmaster and minister in their midst for two generations. He loved them and the parish. During his ministry, he was not absent a week a year on an average from his own home. He knew every house, every tree, every flower, and every stone of the 'primitive, russet, remote country' in which he lived and died.¹

WRN shared the same love of knowledge that had led his father from field to pulpit, but harboured a grand ambition that was very much his own.

Harry Nicoll identified with the Free Church of Scotland from its formation following the 'Disruption' of 1843, that is, the exodus of 479 protesters, ministers and elders from the Church of Scotland General Assembly in Edinburgh that formed its own Assembly in the wake of the 'Ten Years' Conflict'.² The 'rebellious' churchmen had attempted to end the power of patronage, whereby landowners could appoint ministers, sometimes in spite of the wishes of a particular congregation, but they were thwarted by the minority 'Moderate' party in the Assembly, who were supported by the distant and remote Parliament in London. Their gifted leader, Thomas Chalmers, organised the resulting Free Church of Scotland, which was both vigorous and spiritual. Many of the Evangelicals were Calvinistic in their view of the Church, much inspired by their historic past, particularly the achievements of John Knox and the Covenanters, but had been reawakened by the Evangelical Revival. Indeed, as Wright and Badcock put it, "For those who had gone out, the Disruption marked a new Reformation which would both restore the Scottish Church's spiritual independence and purity of doctrine, and liberate Scottish moral and intellectual life from aristocratic patronage and state-supported privilege".³ Harry Nicoll was caught up in the excitement and his son, using his father's diary, quoted a comment from 1840 showing the strength of his father's feelings: "It appears to me doubtful whether Christianity authorises any man or any body of men to compel me to contribute to its support."⁴

Harry Nicoll's decision to stand with the Free Church of Scotland was made in spite of the weak support for its cause in the predominantly agricultural community of Aberdeenshire, where many favoured the Established Kirk.⁵ However, the national events took time to percolate through to Lumsden. Harry discusses the period in his diary:

This month has been passed in considerable anxiety regarding the state of the church and my own future prospects. I have been delighted at the firm and disinterested spirit shown by the ministers of the Free Church, and the secession has been nearly twice as large as I supposed it would be at first. I daily expected after the Disruption to be appointed to preach in Lumsden village, but the month passed away and no appointment came. I feared I would be directed to continue teaching until the law regarding schools should be determined. I would be most unwilling to agree to this. Cannot think I have any legal right to hold a school after leaving the Establishment, and have

little pleasure in remaining here in such circumstances. Comforted by the words, 'Cast your care upon Him, for He careth for you'.⁶

Harry Nicoll's decision was a matter of conscience, but also an opportunity to realise a personal dream. By standing with the Free Church from its unpopular outset, he "became ... the first Free Church minister of Auchindoir... [where] he preached to about a hundred people in a plain, barn-like building with whitewashed walls and bare deal pews".⁷ His son later reflected on his father's attitude to the events surrounding the culmination of the Disruption, for he saw that, although his father truly identified with the Free Church cause, at the same time this did not stir him to any violent or controversial position towards the Established Church. He wrote,

I have often heard the ministers who came out repudiating the word sacrifice in connection with their abandonment of State aid and privilege. In the Presbytery of Alford, to which my father belonged, no minister came out and no schoolmaster except himself. Feeling ran very high in those days, but my father continued on friendly terms with some ministers who remained in.⁸

The son, like his father, developed an inclusive and open approach to others from different backgrounds and viewpoints, though he knew where he stood and could defend that stance with knowledge and vigour, if required.

Harry Nicoll's family consisted of three sons and two daughters (in order of descending age): William, Maria, Eliza, George and Henry.⁹ His wife died when WRN was a boy of eight. Recalling his mother later in life, WRN wrote that

My mother was a bright, warm-hearted, eager girl, exceedingly well educated for her time. Though she was sixteen years younger than her husband was, the marriage was one of perfect union. It was clouded early by her falling into consumption. This seemed even to strengthen the tie between husband and wife. From the first, she was associated with my father in his studies. His wedding gift to her was an Italian edition of Ariosto, and they read together regularly till her health broke down.¹⁰

WRN also wrote of the terrible blow the death of their mother was for all the family. "In spite of all that could be done my mother grew

steadily weaker, and died eight years after her marriage, leaving four children.... I remember that on the night of her death my father announced the heavy tidings to the frightened little children huddled together in the kitchen. He told them with a smile, and we wondered why he smiled".¹¹ The "four little children were left to the care of the devoted maid Mary and the scholarly father who, with his much reading, and with gardening and carpentering besides, must have found his days assiduously filled".¹² This early loss was to prove formative, opening up in WRN an extraordinary capacity to empathise with those who suffered bereavement. At the time, however, the sad little family found that in their rural setting the comfort of human company was not abundant; diversion and solace was instead sought in their father's library. The youngsters came to regard books in the way that other children might appreciate the costliest of toys, and the value of this youthful exposure to knowledge and the written word was far from lost on them. WRN later reflected, "The loneliness of those years I look back upon with gratitude".¹³

WRN was a child of a country manse, a Scottish term given to the home of a minister, a fact which never ceased to exert influence upon his life. The family home was in Lumsden, situated in a rather remote and bleak part of the Aberdeenshire Highlands. WRN referred to the town as having the 'strange, wasted beauty' of a little hamlet on the edge of Lumsden Moor.¹⁴ The village was relatively young, having been built only in 1825 on the high road between Strathbogie and Strathdon, some thirty four miles from Aberdeen. Despite its youth, however, Lumsden's rural character was strong, the distinctive cottages which comprised the village surrounded by the smell and smoke of the peat fires. As he followed his father into the church, so he also inherited rights to the manse in Lumsden after his father's death, eventually he left it to his own family. His second wife wrote of his deep attachment to his native hills, and her husband loved George Macdonald's reflections about living in Lumsden: "Many a night I had watched the moon shining down on the hills and the valley without being able to put in words the look she wore then – a look I could not see in other places.... It is not the same anywhere else ... how true it is that we do not alter much! The externals change and the surroundings, but in our inmost souls we are what those early years and teachers made us."¹⁵ It was to Lumsden that he returned for most of his summers, particularly after he had settled in London, a habit cultivated not least to keep him in touch with his roots.

Life in the manse was ordered around the seasons, and the summers seemed brief, the purple finery of fresh heather on the surrounding hills



Harry Nicoll, WRN's father

would fade all too soon. Lumsden was no place of grand beauty, but it managed to kindle a poet's appreciation in the youthful WRN. Despite those short summers and their ephemeral charm, however, it was the long dark winters which defined life in the village. WRN later reflected upon these dreary times:

Looking back, it is the winter that strikes me as the dominant influence of the region. It was very long and very rigorous. The countryside was famous for its snowstorms,

the huge drifts they left behind them often impeding traffic for days. It was impossible to work out of doors during the dark, roaring nights and the scarcely brighter days. People were thus thrown upon their own resources, and were either made or marred by their use of the winter.¹⁶

WRN soon learnt to copy his father's example, however, and found these long winter evenings to be just the thing for serious reading.

WRN's childhood in the village of Lumsden was hard – even austere. He had many things in common with a typical hero of one of the popular Scottish novels he would do much to popularise: For there was the early death of his mother, his father's fanatical pursuit of his passion for collecting books, half-starving himself and his family so that precious volumes might be added to his library. Despite these difficult beginnings, however, WRN always maintained his loyalty to his home and had deep and highly personal reasons for his love of sentimental tales of rural Scotland. The roots of at least part of this attachment are found in the same year in which his mother died, when WRN entered the parish school of Auchindoir. In the village school, the schoolmaster had no assistant, only a pupil teacher, for as many as 130 pupils. "I was eight years old when I went to Mr Wilson's school... in order to commence Latin and prepare myself for the University... the school was largely attended, particularly in the winter."¹⁷ In recalling his teacher John Wilson, WRN noted that "Mr Wilson did us a rare service in bringing to our minds at that early and susceptible age a sense of the beauty and the glory of literature. He taught me that Homer and Virgil were poets to be read and enjoyed. Moreover he set us to think for ourselves, and he criticised what we were reading."¹⁸ Despite the quality of Wilson as instructor, however, the fact remained that the local school was terrifically overcrowded, and the incentive to ensure his son an eventual place at university meant that Harry Nicoll thought it a good idea for his son to attend the Grammar School at Aberdeen for the final part of his preparation. WRN proved a strong student, winning some school prizes for Latin composition,¹⁹ and even began to contribute poetry to the local papers such as *Free Press* and the *People's Journal*. Not only was this the beginning of his lifelong interest in poetry, but he also began his practice of using pseudonyms, in this case 'Nicholas Maitland'.

For Harry Nicoll, books were the link to the idealised academic way of life of the scholar.²⁰ In this he was not alone, for in the second half of the nineteenth century there developed a sense of distance between the minds of many ministers and their congregations, which has been attributed to

an inordinate love of books. Books were tools of the trade for ministers and brought knowledge and inspiration from the rich heritage of the past. Yet they could also sharpen a sense of sophistication and love of learning in its own right, leading some ministers to dwell in a world apart, a world more interesting and predictable than that inhabited by so many of their parishioners. Harry Nicoll was very much a part of this intellectual cadre, and through growing up in the shadow of such a man, WRN gained more than just a love of books – he also gained an appreciation of good style, which would prove invaluable to him in his career as a journalist. In discussing the breadth of his father’s collection – and thus the range of texts he had at his disposal in his youth – WRN wrote that

My father possessed a library, as distinct from a mere collection of books. That is he aimed at accumulating the standard works in English Literature in every branch of it. He had theologians, philosophers, the biographers, the historians, the novelists, the poets, and to a certain extent the scientific writers. There was, perhaps, no really standard author who was not represented among his books.²¹

Alongside this desire for knowledge, Harry Nicoll also bequeathed to his son a lively scepticism and interest in debate which could only truly be satisfied by the achievement of a high degree of scholarly credibility, which required, of course, an openness to texts of all types.

We knew that he was profoundly religious – that religion was with him first and last. We learned our Psalms and chapters, and went to church and Sunday school, but my father never spoke directly to any of us about religion. On Sundays, we sat in a room where there were none but books concerning religion. Among them, however, were sceptical books side-by-side with the others... we were quite free to read any of these, and I read particularly some books of Francis Newman and was rather impressed by them. Walking one day with my father, I said tentatively, ‘There are great difficulties about the Old Testament’. ‘Oh yes, what have you been reading?’ I told him. ‘Yes’, he answered, ‘you know Francis Newman is always unfair, but there are great difficulties about the Old Testament.’ This was all that passed.²²

Harry’s detached interest in all matters theological was undoubtedly a model for WRN, even if it was a model he didn’t follow completely.

Indeed, the two men were quite different in this respect. Harry was consciously able to keep his individual ideas and influences out of his preaching. As his son observed, "Though he spent much time and pains on his sermons, he did not cut a channel between them and his reading ... he never told anecdotes, very rarely used illustrations, made it a principle never to employ the first personal pronoun or to relate any experiences of his own. He had no poetical quotations, and he abhorred perorations. His sermons were clear, able, and deeply reverent expositions of evangelical theology."²³ WRN would cut a different path, learning to use, plunder and promote his latest reading to the full in his career as a journalist.

Within the realm of theology, however, the divide between father and son was far narrower. Harry's ability to maintain the divide between his private reading and public preaching was developed with time into a scholarly skill of sorts, dedicated to keeping conflicting viewpoints suspended in his mind and living with the tensions without seeing the need to reconcile them. He became interested in the new views emerging in Germany concerning the Old Testament, but grew alarmed when similar views were applied to the New Testament. As he developed as preacher and thinker, WRN came to hold a very similar stance, as indeed did others. There was a kind of 'intellectual schizophrenia', or 'believing criticism' in which father and son were able to follow the latest findings of biblical criticism, yet at the same time retain a warm piety for preaching, prayer and devotional living.²⁴ WRN was, like his father, able to hold ideas in suspended judgment, awaiting the 'full' truth to be revealed in due time. It was an attitude of detachment, often adopted by scholars to achieve objectivity, or for the more prosaic reason of survival within a conservative milieu under increasing pressure from developing theories. The inherent complexity of this stance, however, could lead many with non-academic minds to mistake this intentional detachment for substantial doubt.

In tracing the history of this development, some have reflected on the subtle move in Free Church seminaries in which the Reformation emphasis on the need for an 'educated ministry' became over-stressed to the degree of creating a 'scholarly ministry'. This, understandably, tended to produce a breed of book-bound ministers so thoroughly trained in scholarship that they often failed to perceive the needs and interests of the new reading public. WRN was of the second generation of the Free Church following the Disruption, a body of men who, in their taste for more radical theology, "were not of the same mind as their fathers".²⁵ This difference between the 'fathers' and their 'sons' would

grow increasingly marked during WRN's lifetime, though his own father's influence gave him a greater appreciation of past worthies than many of his contemporaries, as well as an insatiable desire to understand the latest views and 'discoveries' of the world of scholarship. The younger Nicoll greatly sympathised with many of the new views, yet he was also aware of the dilemmas and problems presented by scholastic insensitivity to the concerns of ordinary Church members, and so sought throughout his life to emulate the fine balance championed by his father.²⁶ He could also reflect a sympathy that his father shared with the revival meetings. WRN remembered and said that he owed much to some meetings at Huntly in 1860, to which his father had taken him,²⁷ where he was impressed by the experience.

WRN moved from Aberdeen Grammar School to Aberdeen University in April 1866 at the age of fourteen. His father had intended his son to have a full year at the Grammar School, but WRN won a bursary that enabled him to matriculate sooner than expected, having sat an examination normally taken by boys a full year his senior. The bursary system of which he was beneficiary was, as WRN himself would later put it, "a link ... provided in Aberdeenshire between the parish schools and the University, by which proficient scholars however humble their circumstances, could secure a college training".²⁸ On receiving the award he "returned to Lumsden in a mood of rapturous exultation, walking the eight miles that lay between the railway station and his home without ever giving thought to the distance".²⁹ Later in life, WRN reflected on the problems of entering university life so prematurely. He was too young to get the full benefit of his academic studies, as WRN wrote to his friend W. McRobbie: "I entirely agreed that we went too soon to college. We were too young to have a fair chance. The first two years I hardly understood what was going on. It was only in the third session that my mind woke. If I had been a couple of years older it would have been quite different and in every way better."³⁰ Despite the initial awkwardness brought on by his age, however, WRN soon settled in as a university student. He continued to strengthen the well-disciplined habits gained during a relatively impoverished youth, no doubt encouraged by the fact that, as he later remembered, "[t]he whole atmosphere was one of hard, steady labour. Most of the men were aware that they were having their one chance in life, and if they threw it away, they never could repair the loss. The great majority worked. Very few indulged in sports of any kind. I never remember hearing of any among my fellow students who was distinguished as an athlete".³¹ Indeed, it was only by the severest economy that many students could hope to

succeed in living on eight shillings a week, which had to cover their entire expenses for board and lodgings, the summers being spent at home.

Later WRN wrote, “[t]ruth to tell, we worked exceedingly hard, for in those days every Aberdeen student believed that the world might be conquered, but only by the sternest concentration of all energy”.³² He did well enough, taking his Master of Arts degree in March of 1870 at the age of eighteen, but achieved no particular prizes or honours in his university career.³³ He had spent much of his time in what was considered ‘desultory’ reading, passing innumerable hours in the Mechanics’ Library acquainting himself with as much English literature as he could.

WRN idolised his father and followed a strikingly similar path through his developmental years (his education having been at Aberdeen, first the school and then the University). WRN skipped only his father’s stage as schoolteacher – though he tutored privately and wrote for various local periodicals³⁴ – and proceeded directly into the Free Church College with the intention of becoming a Free Church Minister. This path was not a peculiar one amongst ‘sons of the manse’ at the time. Writing about his compatriot W.G. Elmslie, WRN noted that

[t]he sons of Free Church ministers in those days, however great their University successes might have been generally desired no higher position than that of their fathers. It was, no doubt, the wish of his parents that Elmslie should be a minister, and his inclination fell in with that.³⁵

This narrow route trod by many young men seeking to better themselves has been criticised by T.C. Smout in his historical reflections on Scottish life. He wrote that

[t]he domination of the church was responsible for a large deflection of effort and talent away from the enrichment of secular life. The middle class in particular gave many of its best brains to the ministry, which, in later times, would have been spread more widely in other callings. While there still seemed to be a chance of achieving the Godly Commonwealth on earth there was no shortage of sacrifice of human effort, and what was not poured out to this end was regarded in some sense as profitless waste.³⁶

This was a twentieth-century assessment, but the truth was that the Church had an increasingly difficult time recruiting its ministers as the

call and opportunities of the secular world of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries became more attractive. For WRN, however, there was little doubt as to the desirability of the ministerial life, even though, growing up, he had not been shielded from criticism of the Church. His father had always

kept pace with the controversies of his time. I heard much of them at the meeting of the Presbytery, where I was allowed to sit quietly in the corner. The ministers of the district were nearly all scholarly men.... These men knew what was passing in the world of thought, and their intellectual interests were of the keenest.³⁷

In some ways, throughout his life he remained the boy sitting 'quietly in the corner' and listening to the opinions, views and gossip of others, but he learned to take note and share what he gained. As a child of the second generation, WRN retained a veneration of the Free Church's history and its great heroes. However, he always bonded with his own generation and moved with the attitudes and feelings of the day, which he came to express in his own unique way, always endeavouring to grasp and reflect the emotions and the aspirations of his own contemporaries. Even though, or perhaps because, WRN spent much of his adult life as a Scottish exile in London, he remained true to his inherited love of the Free Kirk, and always remained close to all happenings in his Church and his country.

To suggest that WRN is entirely defined by his father is an overstatement, but any attempt to examine his life without considering that of Harry Nicoll would be incomplete. The love of preaching and the ministry, the deep respect for scholarship and books, the delight in acquiring knowledge, the appreciation of style as well as content, and, above all, the insatiable appetite, termed by some an 'obsession', for the printed pages of books, newspapers and magazines – each of these is a recognisable trait in WRN, but each is also readily found in Harry. Still, WRN developed, in some ways, into a profoundly different man than his father – a man who rebelled, for example, against the strictures of his childhood poverty through striving towards a fiscally successful career. For all the influence of the one upon the other, their fundamental divisions are just as telling as their similarities. Harry was the epitome of the 'eternal student', interested in knowledge for its own sake, but always wary of putting what he had gained into positive action. WRN, by contrast, sought knowledge that he might use, not only for personal gain (though, as Donald Carswell reminds us, certainly for that as

well),³⁸ but for teaching purposes. As his friend, Annie Swan, wrote in posthumous remembrance, “from his own colossal and precious store he so much enriched the lives of others. In that respect he was one of the greatest givers I have ever known.”³⁹

WRN always appreciated and respected his father, and admired the elder man’s contentedness with his life.⁴⁰ They enjoyed a good relationship, but to cast it as built upon emotion rather than something far closer to master and pupil would be misleading. WRN once commented that “I always feel that I was defrauded of my youth – there was so little sunshine in it – far too little”.⁴¹ WRN belonged to a different generation, one that believed in progress and a world of new and ever-widening horizons. Harry Nicoll, by contrast, was too easily content with ministerial life in the backwaters of Aberdeenshire, combined with the leisurely perusal of his books and magazines. The world of a son not content with a small Scottish parish must certainly have baffled him, WRN’s ambitions having far outstripped his father’s limited vision before he had even completed his university training. All that followed must have left his father looking on and wondering, but he was always interested in and proud of his eldest son’s achievements, the foundation of which WRN would always acknowledge was to be found in the Scottish manse in Lumsden.