

QUAKERISM IN ANGUS AND THE MEARNS<sup>1</sup>

IN 1656 Brodie entered a pious lament in his "Diary" that a certain Gordon of Lunan and one, Christian Russell had fallen into Quakerism, which he "did spread before the Lord".<sup>2</sup> This is the earliest reference we have to Quakerism in Angus. It was followed by a visit of Alexander Parker to Forfar in 1658.<sup>3</sup> Patrick Livingstone, of whom mention has been already made, was a native of the Mearns, though he spent most of his Quaker life in England and Ireland. Sometime before the Restoration, a Meeting for worship was established on Kinnaber estate, two miles from Montrose, the laird having become a convert, possibly through contact with Parker at Forfar or with Dewsbury on his first visit to Aberden in 1658. Jaffray was well known in the Mearns, and this doubtless contributed to the spread of Quakerism.

About 1669 Catherine, daughter of James Allardice, and her husband, John Fullerton of Kinnaber, became so strongly in favour of the new religion that the Presbytery of Brechin, after trying all the usual means to reclaim them, excommunicated both along with their domestic staff; and the ministers "did inhibit their parochiners to haunt or keep company with them".<sup>4</sup> It is not improbable that a bond of sympathy between the Allardices and the Barclays led to the closer connection between the families later.<sup>5</sup> At the first General Meeting at Urie, four converts were enrolled, among whom was Robert Burnett, tutor or guardian of the young heir of Leys.

These happenings did not escape the notice of Archbishop Sharpe and the Synod of Fife. In 1667 they were goading the minister of Fetteresso to take proceedings against the Quakers even to "the highest censures of the Kirk". In 1669, the Synod, alarmed at the number of Friends' conventicles in the Parish and the Quakers' attitude to ministers and public worship, urged all incumbents to be specially watchful over their flocks "till a course be taken by the magistrat with these disorderly persons".<sup>6</sup> In

October 1668, Fetteresso had already made an example of two parishioners called Craigie and Durrett who "were before the pulpitt for hearing two of the Quakers' sermons att Urie".<sup>7</sup>

By 1672 the Movement had gained a footing in Montrose, and as little further is heard about Kinnaber, it would seem that the centre of Quaker activity was almost immediately transferred to Montrose by the Aberdeen Monthly Meeting. An English Friend, Samuel Cater of the Isle of Ely, was imprisoned at Montrose early in 1672. The house of a seaman, William Napier, was the first meeting place of the Quakers "to the disturbance of the peace and quyet of the burgh", which it need scarcely be said was a malicious exaggeration. In the same month as Cater was imprisoned, the Town's officers descended on Napier's house, where they found twenty to thirty Friends assembled and arrested fifteen, including Napier himself.<sup>8</sup> Among those present were Sir John Swinton of Swinton and Robert Barclay, guests of the owner, who were visiting the meeting. When Napier was brought before the magistrates, Swinton and Barclay insisted on accompanying him. Along with Napier and three others they were thrown into the Tolbooth by the Provost as aiders and abettors of an unlawful gathering held behind closed doors.<sup>9</sup>

The imprisoned Friends determined to send a letter to the Provost, Bailies, and Councils of Montrose, protesting against their detention, charging the latter with exceeding their authority, and assuring them that they were powerless to break the prisoners' spirit. The magistrates, apparently daunted for the moment, decided to seek advice from the Privy Council about the next step to be taken. The Council, a proverbially capricious body, assured the magistrates of their cordial approbation and instructed them to detain all the Quakers in the Tolbooth during the Council's pleasure, except Napier, who was to be transferred to the Tolbooth of Edinburgh with all relevant information about him.<sup>10</sup> But Napier was successful in purchasing his freedom on £1,000 Scots security almost immediately, and the magistrates of Montrose were ordered to release him. By December 1672, Swinton and the remainder were freed on giving bond of 1,000 marks to appear before the Privy Council on a certain day. For the next four years from this date, there was a lull in the persecution of the Quakers in the Mearns.

Robert Burnett of Muchalls, fourth son of James Burnett of

Craigmyle, was the only member of the well-known family of Leys<sup>11</sup> who became a Quaker, being 'convinced' at Urie in 1669. He was brought before the Privy Council as a dangerous and seductive agent "for contraveening the lawes and acts made anent Quakers under the payne of rebellion". But he was no dangerous firebrand, and the authorities' fears were groundless. Burnett was moderate and scrupulously fair-minded. He was determined not to abuse his position as tutor of his ward and nephew, Sir Thomas Burnett, and to clear himself of any suspicion of his doing so, he arranged in 1670 for Sir Thomas to go to Glasgow to be educated under the care of his own cousin Gilbert Burnett,<sup>12</sup> at that time Professor of Divinity. Alas! for Robert's good and fair intentions! Before everything was in readiness, Sir Thomas's mother intervened and snatched him away from all his father's friends. But if Burnett was equitable, he was also resolute. He had the law on his side, for in Scots law the "tutor" was the guardian of the person and estate of a boy under fifteen and of a girl under twelve.<sup>13</sup> He carried his case before the Privy Council, who found in his favour and ordered the restoration of his ward to him, Quaker though he was. In 1682 Burnett's connection with the Society of Friends ceased. He had a difference with them over his second marriage to an 'outsider'<sup>14</sup> and after much futile controversy in an admittedly impossible situation, he was finally "disowned" or expelled from the Society.

About six years earlier, the laird of Kinnaber had also seceded. Under the influence of bereavement and the pressure of his family's desire for church worship, he was persuaded to attend the services and at last decided to sever his connection with the Friends. He appealed to David Lyall the minister to loose him from the ban of excommunication and made what was considered a rather sensational confession of the past errors of his ways in presence of the congregation.<sup>15</sup>

The clouds were now gathering for a renewal of persecution in Angus and the Mearns. In 1676, following the Privy Council's Declaration against outlaws, the magistrates had flung several Quakers without trial into the Tolbooth of Montrose. At their subsequent trial before a small Commission of the Privy Council, they and Robert Barclay, who had appeared on their behalf, were heavily fined and in default of payment were kept in gaol. In

the Autumn of the same year, a second Commission ordered the release of the Quakers still in custody and substituted the seizure of their property to the extent of the fines imposed by the first Commission, which they still refused to pay.

This duty of distraint was entrusted to Captain George Melville who arrived in the Mearns to execute the Council's warrant against David Barclay of Urie and William Spark of Dunottar. In Barclay's case Melville used his powers to the full in seizing stock and corn, but as he could obtain no market for them till the following year, their value to the Council was considerably depreciated. Spark, who had been allowed by one of the commissioners to return home on business, was re-imprisoned at Stonehaven by Keith the Sheriff-depute of the Mearns. He was now released, but only on Melville arresting his flax and whalebone to the value of £50.<sup>16</sup>

The civil authorities with the moral support of Lyall the minister of Montrose still held the Quaker meetings to constitute a crime. In addition to imprisoning several, they deprived others of their livelihood and threatened any who assisted the Quakers by charity. Any attempt to preach out of the Tolbooth windows was immediately suppressed by boarding up the windows and plugging the air passages.

In the Parish of Arbuthnott, Donaldson, the blacksmith on the Allardice estates, was dismissed by Lady Allardice at the instigation of the minister, Alexander Arbuthnot. He was one of a small group of young men in that neighbourhood who ceased to attend the Church and frequented Quaker meetings. Among his close friends was a farmer's son, David Wallace, who was converted to Quakerism at the Urie Meeting House. While neither seemed to have suffered any violence, they had much hardship and contumely to endure not only from the Church, but from their own families.

Wallace had a friend in Aberdeen, Alexander Seaton, a scion of the Seatons of Meldrum and a native of Daviot, who also suffered for his faith. During Seaton's student days at King's College, he was one of the four students won over to Quakerism in Barclay and Keith's debate with the Marischal men in 1675. He was imprisoned in Aberdeen and in Glasgow. While visiting Friends in Montrose Tolbooth in 1677, he was himself kept in captivity.

In the same year Andrew Jaffray, the laird of Kingswells, had a "concern" to bear his testimony in Montrose Church. Whether the "concern" had any connection with a special campaign against the Quakers which Lyall was conducting from his pulpit then, is immaterial. At all events, the two collided head on! The next Sunday, Jaffray waited in the Churchyard till the congregation came out, when he entered the Church and confronted the minister with plain downright dealing. The result was, that the laird was seized and beaten, and kept in solitary confinement for three days in one of the dungeons below the Church.<sup>17</sup>

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