

CHAPTER 1



The Life and Times of Robert Murray M'Cheyne

THE year 1813 was a 'golden age' in Scottish history. The Industrial Revolution had expanded commerce and industry. Academics, arts, and sciences flourished in universities and cities. The nation's spiritual climate was undergoing a change as well for the better. Evangelical religion was replacing the old and cold Moderatism that marked the Scottish Church in the late 1700s. Andrew Bonar wrote of the times: 'Eminent men of God appeared to plead the cause of Christ. The cross was being lifted up boldly in the midst of the church courts which had long been ashamed of the gospel of Christ. More spirituality and deeper seriousness began ... to prevail among the youth of our divinity halls. In the midst of such events ... [M'Cheyne] was born.'¹

1813–1831: From Birth to New Birth

Robert Murray M'Cheyne was born in Edinburgh on 21 May 1813, to Adam and Lockhart M'Cheyne.² Adam was a lawyer, and the following year he joined the Society of Writers to His Majesty's Signet. This ancient society conducted cases before the Court of Session, the supreme civil court in Scotland. The society Writers also had the exclusive right to prepare crown writs, charters, and precepts. Adam's new position brought increased income and a chance to scale the social ladder,

1. Bonar, *MAR*, p. 1.

2. Adam lived from 1781 to 1854 and Lockhart from 1772 to 1854.

moving up from the working class of his family. It was not long before he was noted as a man of social importance, and his home distinguished with goods, furnishings, and ample space.

Adam's personality was direct, and his work ethic disciplined. He was the home's clear authority and he later admitted, 'It was no part of my character to spare the rod.'³ He trained his children to cherish hard work and learning. While Adam cut a strong – and at times stern – figure, the home was full of life and warmth. This was mostly due to Lockhart's influence on the family.

Like her husband, Lockhart was the youngest child in her family. However, unlike Adam, she entered marriage having known the privilege of belonging to society's upper echelon. Her father 'was the proprietor of the Nether Locharwood estate, the most prosperous in Ruthwell parish.'⁴ She was thus accustomed to the comfortable lifestyle that Adam's position as Writer afforded. Her personality complemented his in noticeable ways. She tenderized his demanding nature, creating an environment in which the children were not only accountable, but also cherished. Taken together, Adam and Lockhart trained their children to be self-controlled, studious, and adventurous. The children knew the pleasant routine of schoolwork and play.

Robert was close with both parents. As so often happens, his time with his father sharpened his resolve and courage, while his interactions with his mother fertilized tenderness. His later letters to his family reveal a deeply devoted relationship with his mother. Their kindred spirit could be called 'affectionate,' even 'sentimental,' and solidified a life-long bond.

Adam and Lockhart wed in 1802. They had five children together, with Robert as the youngest. David Thomas (1804–1831) was the firstborn. He followed his father into the legal profession and was counted as 'the pride of his home.'⁵ Next came Mary Elizabeth (1806–1888), Robert's constant companion and helper during his time in Dundee. Because she lived with Robert in adulthood and oversaw his domestic affairs, Robert called her 'my own Deaconess and helpmeet.'⁶

3. Quoted in Yeaworth, p. 27.

4. Yeaworth, p. 7.

5. Smellie, p. 35.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

William Oswald (1809–1892) was the third child; he studied medicine and eventually went to India with the Bengal Medical Service in 1831. He retired as a surgeon in the Honourable East India Company. Isabella was born in 1811 and died of sickness four months later. Interestingly, none of the M'Cheyne children ever married.

A Popular Student

By all accounts, a calm ambiance permeated the home of Robert's youth. The siblings were closely knit, and the older children regularly assisted the younger ones in their schoolwork. Adam's occupation provided relaxed living quarters and his esteem for education meant intellectual growth was the children's primary labor. From the start, Robert displayed singular aptitude for learning. Adam recalled how, at the age of four, Robert memorized the Greek alphabet 'as an amusement' while recovering from illness.⁷

In virtually every class during his schooling, Robert was one of the most popular students. He was teachable and capable, attractive and inventive. His form was even distinguished – tall and slender for his age. His favorite childhood pastimes were friends, athletics (particularly gymnastics), poetry, sketching, and achievement. Childhood acquaintances remembered his disposition as equally ambitious and winsome. The Spirit later sanctified these characteristics, which so often war against each other, so that they were driving aspects in his subsequent ministry.

One oft-repeated family legend underscores Robert's competitive streak. After completing the English School with only the second prize, he came home dejected. His older siblings had taken the first prize, after all.

In many ways, Robert's early character manifested a maturity in contrasting traits. He was competitive, yet kind. He was firm, yet patient. He was an artist who happened also to be organized. He loved to sketch rural scenes and portraits of friends. His poetic pen frequently spilled ink onto various pages. His creative streak did not mean he possessed a mind given to flights of fancy. Instead, his

7. Van Valen, p. 16.

life exuded discipline and neatness. At the age of sixteen, he wrote an essay titled, ‘On Early Rising.’ His essential argument was that although ‘sleep was necessary for babies and children, there came a time when it was more profitable to curtail the hours in which a man wastes “the best and most useful part of his life in drowsiness and lying in bed.”’⁸

M’Cheyne attended the English School from 1818–1821, earning highest marks in recitation and singing. In 1821, he advanced to the High School, where he quickly developed a delight in studying classics and history – ‘Virgil, Horace, Ovid, and Tibullus enthralled him; and he did more than the required translations.’⁹ In November of 1827, he entered the University of Edinburgh, ‘when it was basking in the glory of many outstanding professors, and when science and letters were at their zenith.’¹⁰ His facility in Latin and Greek provided much deeper study in the classics. He left every class with honors, further demonstrating his unique abilities and intellect.

From Crisis to Christ

The M’Cheynes were devout churchgoers. Yet, most of their religious commitment seemed to be little more than external and formal. In Robert’s early years, the family attended the Tron Church in Edinburgh, where Alexander Brunton and William Simpson ministered. Brunton was a force in the Church of Scotland, serving as moderator of the 1832 General Assembly and eventually as Professor of Hebrew and Oriental Languages at the University of Edinburgh. Part of the Church’s teaching tradition of the time was that churches typically hosted a children’s catechism class between the morning and afternoon services. M’Cheyne devoted himself to the class at the Tron Church and his friends recalled ‘his correct and sweet recitation’ of Scripture passages and answers to the Shorter Catechism.¹¹

In 1829, the M’Cheynes moved to the newly erected St. Stephen’s Church. It was a significant move. While the family appears to have

8. Yeaworth, p. 15.

9. Ibid., p. 25.

10. Ibid., p. 27.

11. Bonar, *MAR*, p. 2.

exchanged congregations only because St. Stephen's was closer to home, it saw them also exchange a Moderate ministry for one with decidedly Evangelical sympathies under William Muir. Robert served the church wherever he could and engaged in relevant ministry. He also became something of a disciple of Muir's. During the winters of 1829–1830 and 1830–1831, he attended special meetings that Muir hosted in the vestry on Thursday evenings. When Robert began to pursue the gospel ministry, Muir was his endorser.

Such a pursuit, however, was far from Robert's mind in his later teenage years. His external piety was a mask that fooled many ministers and church members. Although Muir spoke glowingly of Robert's 'sound' principles and 'exemplary' conduct,¹² he himself later considered his devotion a 'lifeless morality.'¹³ Andrew Bonar remembers how Robert 'regarded these as days of ungodliness – days wherein he cherished a pure morality, but lived in heart a Pharisee.'¹⁴ M'Cheyne's analysis came years after his conversion. Therefore, it would be wrong to think of him as conflicted spiritually. He was, during these years, full of happiness and hope. In time, he explained the joy of his childhood with a verse: 'When the tears that we shed were tears of joy, and the pleasures of home were unmixed with alloy.'¹⁵

Yet, as he finished his university studies, storm clouds of crisis broke over his peace and leisure. First, in April 1831, his brother William departed for India to join the Bengal Medical Service. The M'Cheynes had so far known relational and geographical closeness during Robert's life. William's venture disrupted the family's harmony and caused much anxiety, especially because the conditions in India were unstable and often life-threatening.

The second crisis was the death of Robert's eldest brother. When William left for India, David lay in the grip of a serious fever. The sickness never abated and eventually it claimed David's life on 8 July 1831. His death smacked Robert with an emotional – and spiritual – blow from which he never recovered. Robert 'had long looked up to

12. Quoted in Yeaworth, p. 22.

13. Quoted in Robertson, *Awakening*, p. 34.

14. Bonar, *MAR*, p. 2.

15. M'Cheyne, 'Birthday Ode,' quoted in Yeaworth, p. 41.