

Article for New College Anniversary Bulletin April 2006

Teaching theology in Edinburgh: beginnings

The teaching of theology and divinity has a very long history in Edinburgh, of which the New College phase only forms the latest chapter.

In the sense of formal theological instruction, it was the Dominicans who began the tradition when their Edinburgh friary was founded in 1230, the first to be opened in Scotland. The Blackfriars buildings were in the Cowgate and by the sixteenth century they included a particularly fine hall, spacious enough to be the meeting place for the Councils of the Scottish Church called in 1549, 1552 and 1559 that produced reforming statutes and Archbishop Hamilton's Catechism. The hall was probably used on a daily basis to accommodate part of the comprehensive educational training undertaken by the friars, but they generously made way each year for the Scottish Exchequer and its accounting sessions. As the most commodious roofed space in Edinburgh, apart from the Castle and Holyrood, the Blackfriars hall was in considerable demand and it was at the heart of the famous 'Cleanse the Causeway' fight in 1520.

During the 1550s there were attempts to make more provision for higher education in the capital. One initiative came from the Queen Regent, Mary of Guise, mother of Mary, Queen of Scots, who founded two public lectureships, one in Greek and another in civil and canon law, both regarded at the time as ecclesiastical subjects. The second initiative flowed from the noted humanist Robert Reid, bishop of Orkney, who left provision in his will in 1558 for a college with a distinctly non-clerical emphasis to be erected in Edinburgh to teach the 'new learning'. That bequest eventually formed part of the

relatively meagre endowment of the 'Tounis College' established in 1583, the foundation of the University of Edinburgh.

By the 1580s a great deal had changed. The first wave of the Reformation with its scramble to create the new Kirk was over and rifts were opening concerning control over the Kirk. The political scene was unstable as the teenage king, James VI, was growing out of his minority and taking power into his own hands; but it was a bumpy ride. The establishment of the university hit one especially big bump and the new foundation became part of the faction fighting infecting the royal court and the Edinburgh burgh council. In 1579 James Lawson, John Knox's successor as minister at St Giles' had revived plans for a college in the capital. The Edinburgh ministers, all living 'collegially' near St Giles', already formed a block of theological expertise and were probably running a mini-seminary helping train future clergy. They were the original recipients of the considerable library amassed by Clement Litill, a Protestant lawyer, who had died in 1580. Four years later the 276 volumes, mostly theological, were handed over to the Tounis College, where they founded the University Library and have remained in Special Collections to this day, as Litill wished. Each book is stamped, 'I am gevin to Edinburgh & Kirk of God be Maister Clement Litol Thair to Reman, 1580'. [Illustration 1] Thanks to Litill's own theological interests and his European contacts, the collection is a fine representation of the theological debates of the 1550s-70s. Unfortunately, in the following decades money was tight and the library was able to purchase little. By comparison with Sir Thomas Bodley's library donated to Oxford or that gained in 1592 by Trinity College, Dublin, Edinburgh was not well supplied.

Although there was a library in 1580, as yet there was no university. Led by Lawson, the Edinburgh's vociferous presbytery were pushing the town council to accept their plans for a theological seminary. Others wanted a college that had greater emphasis upon the liberal arts and would cater more closely for the civic needs of the burgh, especially its expanding legal and mercantile elite. In August 1582 the situation changed dramatically with the 'Ruthven Raid', when the earl of Ruthven and his pro-Presbyterian allies seized power by imprisoning James VI. The Edinburgh Presbyterians had a field day, staging a triumphalist welcome home for John Durie, their previously-banished minister. A procession started at the Netherbow and marched around the burgh singing Psalm 124, 'Now Israel may say', in four-part harmony. This harmonised setting of the metrical psalm came from Thomas Wode's beautifully-illustrated, manuscript part-books, now held in EUL [Illustration 2]. Plans for the college were immediately pushed ahead by the victorious faction and with Masters of Works were appointed in December. In June 1583 the burgh was taxed to pay for alterations to the buildings of the former Trinity College to create a home for the Tounis College. In September of that year the first appointment of a regent, or teacher, was made and on 10 October the College opened its doors to the first students.

By that autumn the Ruthven regime had fallen and a new town council had been put in place dominated by the opposite faction. This drove a number of Presbyterian clergy into exile in England and James Lawson died in London the following year. Consequently, from its inception the new College was under close scrutiny by the burgh council and the court and its curriculum probably reflected a compromise, providing both a liberal arts

education and theological training for the ministry. Robert Rollock, the first member of staff, was careful not to antagonise the virulently anti-Presbyterian regime of the earl of Arran. His bending like a willow with that political wind later produced the snippy comment from David Calderwood, the hard-line Presbyterian historian, that he was 'a Godly man, but simple on the matters of Church Government, credulous [and] easily led by counsel'.

In 1586, Rollock was made Principal with a salary of 400 merks [£266 Scots] p.a. in addition to the student fees whilst the second regent, Duncan Nairn, had to survive on the pittance of 40 merks and fees. The Principal had plenty of time to write his books since he only had to teach the final or B.D. year that followed the M.A., which was all taught by Nairn. During the 1590s Rollock produced a series of biblical commentaries on the Pauline epistles that employed the Ramist method of logical analysis to the interpretation of Scripture, earning the praise of his Genevan counterpart and leading Reformer, Theodore Beza. [Illustration 3] Rollock is regarded as Scotland's first proper covenant theologian, and he was crucial to the development of the federal theology which played such an important role in the Scottish Kirk.

In a far cry from the football field or the golf course, Rollock's students spent their Saturday afternoons listening to him reading from Beza's *Questiones* and after the sermon on Sunday they were trained in the Heidelberg Catechism. This was in addition to the lectures during the week starting at the bracing time of 5 a.m. Not surprisingly, the intensity of the courses produced a high drop-out rate. In 1587 the first batch of forty-

seven men graduated and a further thirty followed the next year, having survived the plague that had hit Edinburgh and closed the College in 1584-5. After this initial bulge, in the 1590s graduate numbers averaged 25 a year. In the first decade of the university's existence 103 of the 259 graduates went into the ministry. That cohort helped fill the remaining vacancies in Scotland's parishes and by the end of the sixteenth century most parishes had a minister. Subsequently, the number of Edinburgh graduates entering the ministry dropped to one in five, reflecting the decrease in vacancies. In those early years the liberal arts components of the curriculum were important in their own right and not viewed solely as the preparation for theological training. This encouraged a wider range of students to study at the Tounis College, ensuring its survival and enabling it to grow. In the first century of Edinburgh University 's existence, theology was a high-profile and frequently contentious strand within the curriculum and entering the ministry one option for its graduates, but it was always part of a broad community of scholarship.

### Illustrations

1. One of Clement Litill's books in EUL Special Collections

[www.lib.ed.ac.uk/about/bgalleries/Gallery/records/fifteen/litill.html](http://www.lib.ed.ac.uk/about/bgalleries/Gallery/records/fifteen/litill.html)

2. Thomas Wode's Psalter, EUL Special Collections [Several pictures available]

Musical setting of Psalm 137 'When as we sate in Babilon' with musical instruments in margin; or Opening of Tenor Part-book; or Opening of Treble Part-book

3. Painting of Theodore Beza from portraits of the Reformers hanging in EUL

see colour picture in *The University of Edinburgh: An Illustrated History*

EUL probably have digital image