

The Making of New College
1843-46

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The Disruption of 1843

The New College was born amid religious conflict. It emerged out of the Disruption of 1843, when over a third of the ministers and perhaps half the lay membership left the established Church of Scotland in protest against what they viewed as efforts by the state to undermine the Church's spiritual independence. The outgoing clergy and laity formed the Free Church of Scotland, which was to be a national Church, free from the trammels of state patronage and acknowledging only the headship of Christ.

The new Church faced a hard struggle. Many of its congregations, especially in the Highlands, were poor and vulnerable. Many landowners viewed the Free Church as a radical movement challenging the social order, and they denied sites for Free Church buildings. Some Free Church tenant farmers lost their farms; many Free Church labourers were dismissed from employment. Opponents confidently predicted that the Free Church could not survive for long against the combined hostility of the landlords and the state. These opponents, however, failed to account for the religious and moral fervour roused by the Disruption.

The Free Church Educational Ideal

On 20 May 1843, the first Free Church General Assembly appointed an Educational Committee under the convenership of David Welsh, a Church historian who had relinquished his Edinburgh University chair at the Disruption. Reporting to the Assembly only five days later, Welsh's committee recommended the immediate establishment of a college in Edinburgh for training Free Church ministers.

Despite the many difficulties it faced in the aftermath of the Disruption, the Assembly agreed to the college project and proceeded during the summer to appoint four professors. The famed Thomas Chalmers, who had resigned his Chair of Theology at Edinburgh University at the Disruption, was named Principal and Senior Professor of Theology. David Welsh became Professor of Church History. For the Chair of Hebrew and Old Testament, the Committee selected John Duncan, a respected scholar of ancient and Semitic languages, who had been serving with the Church of Scotland mission to the Jews in Hungary. It was said of Duncan that, with his mastery of languages, he could 'talk' his way from Scotland to the Great Wall of China. Finally, William Cunningham, an Edinburgh clergyman and formidable controversial author and speaker, became Junior Professor of Theology. He was then sent for several months to the United States, in part to study at first hand 'some of the most eminent of the American Theological Institutions'.

The Education Committee purchased rooms at 80 George Street in Edinburgh's New Town, with a class room and a library containing books donated by well-wishers. The college opened for its first session in November 1843 with 168 students.

A Free Christian University?

During its first session, in 1843-44, New College was by necessity a modest operation. For many in the Free Church, this was sufficient: a small college to provide some basic theological training to aspiring ministers. Others, however, raised their sights much higher. They envisaged a great free Christian university, destined not only to train ministers, but to advance Christian scholarship across a range of disciplines and to educate professional and civic leaders for a new Scotland. ‘Build a College for yourselves’, the philosopher, John Stuart Blackie, advised the Free Church leaders in 1843, ‘You will perform an essential service to Scotland, and reap no small glory to yourselves, by erecting a Free University in this country, founded on the broad and deep principles of humanity and fraternity’.

For Thomas Chalmers, New College was an opportunity not only to advance higher education in Scotland, but also to champion the Reformed Faith in the wider world against atheism and materialist philosophy. Under Chalmers’s guidance, New College embraced and implemented ambitious programmes, intended to prepare it for this world mission.

The Core Curriculum

As Principal, Chalmers expanded the faculty to include five permanent theological chairs—Systematic Theology, Apologetics and Practical Theology, Church History, Hebrew and Old Testament, and New Testament Exegesis. Each professor taught two classes each year in his subject—a junior and a senior class. Students would progress systematically through a defined four-year programme of study, which would include two years of study in each of the core disciplines. This core curriculum included a special focus on the study of the Bible in its original languages.

In addition to this theological curriculum, New College also began providing instruction in a range of arts subjects. It appointed professors in three arts disciplines—Moral Philosophy, Logic and Natural Science. Natural Science became a required course in the core curriculum, to be taken by all students during the first year. The course emphasised natural theology, or the study of the natural world as evidence of a benevolent Creator. The professors of Moral Philosophy and Logic introduced students to Scottish common sense philosophy. There were also plans to establish chairs of Latin, Greek and Mathematics, with still more chairs to follow. It was a time of great aspirations. The brilliant young philosopher, Alexander Campbell Fraser, was convinced to accept the professorship of Logic in 1846 by the vision of New College as a ‘great free university, founded on the broad and deep principles of humanity in union with Christianity’.

In 1845, New College sought to promote the highest standards of scholarship by introducing a system of competitive bursaries. In the past, most Scottish university bursaries had been awarded to students on the basis of financial need, or according to often arbitrary criteria set by the donors. The New College bursaries, however, were to be awarded only after competitive examination, as ‘rewards of merit’. During the first year of the scheme, in 1845-46, a total of 40 scholarships were awarded. About 100 students presented themselves in Edinburgh at the end of October, and sat a series of examinations. These examinations were modelled on those at the Oxford and Cambridge colleges, and their aim was ‘to hold forth such rewards and such stimulants as might act throughout and on the whole body of our students, and thus evoke the rising energies of the Hall’.

Dreams in Stone: The Citadel on the Mound

Along with the new academic programmes came plans for a new building. In May 1844, the General Assembly approved a proposal to collect money for erecting ‘a college which would be a credit to the Church’. The College managed to purchase, at a bargain price of £10,000, a site on the Mound in Edinburgh’s Old Town. David Welsh approached a number of wealthy Free Church members—inviting donations of £1,000 from each. He died of heart disease in early 1845, but by then he had collected £21,000, a large amount at that time. The Free High Church congregation in the Old Town, moreover, agreed to share the costs of developing the site, in return for including their church among the college buildings.

The Free Church commissioned the celebrated Edinburgh architect, William Henry Playfair, to design the buildings. His plan, as presented to the General Assembly in May 1846, called for three quadrangles, each at a different level, rising from the level of the Mound to that of the Castle Hill, and providing accommodation for a full university. The first quadrangle would provide the public face for the building, so that if the Free Church should later decide to restrict itself to theological education, the first quadrangle would in itself ‘form an entire and elegant edifice’. At a time when the Free Church was still struggling against powerful opposition, its leaders felt it was important that New College should be an imposing edifice, a symbol of their Church’s permanence. Playfair designed the building so that, viewed from Hanover Street, its two towers would frame the massive tower of the historic Tolbooth Church, expressing a sense of continuity with the past.

The Social Mission

Chalmers laid the foundation stone for the new buildings at a public ceremony on 4 June 1846. In his speech on the occasion, he denied the widespread allegations that the aim of the New College was to sow political dissension or undermine the social order. Although not revolutionary in a political sense, however, New College was to be committed to social improvement, preparing ministers who would be intellectually equipped to promote the faith among the educated classes, but who would find their highest role in serving the poor and marginalised in Scottish society. ‘The youth who frequent our classes’, Chalmers insisted, ‘will with all earnestness and emphasis be told, that the Christian minister is a man of no rank, because a man of all ranks; and that although he should have an education which might qualify him for holding converse with princes and peers, it is his peculiar glory to be a frequent visitant of the poor man’s humble cottage, and to pray by the poor man’s dying bed.’ ‘Let’, he added, ‘kings retain their sceptres, and nobles their coronets,—what we want is a more elevated ground-floor for our general population’

Chalmers’s speech has been criticised for its acceptance of social inequality. He was, to be sure, a man of his time. But what was most important was Chalmers’s emphasis on social engagement. In the summer of 1844, Chalmers had begun a home mission operation in the West Port, then one of the most impoverished districts in Edinburgh. By January 1845, he was recruiting New College students as voluntary workers for the mission. After December 1847, the newly formed New College Missionary Society began work in the West Port, extending their social work to the Grassmarket and Cowgate by the early 1850s. Such work was viewed as part of the New College education.

By 1846, three years after the Disruption, New College was well established. By now eight professors had been appointed, five in theology and three in arts. A comprehensive core curriculum was in place. Further, there was a library with over

13,000 volumes and a natural history museum, while an imposing new building was rising on the Mound. Student numbers were high—178 Free Church divinity candidates in 1846-47, with additional divinity students from overseas, as well as over 200 arts students. All this had been achieved at a time when the Free Church was also building hundreds of new churches and schools, and expanding its number of clergy. By the early 1850s, the Free Church had decided to drop the aspirations for a complete university on the Mound. New College now settled into its role as a leading theological college, with a strong social commitment and a world outreach.