



Torn between two identities: Edward Irving's Scottish Presbyterianism and British nationalism

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Edward Irving and Thomas Carlyle often walked around the brooks near their home in Dumfriesshire. Suddenly Irving spoke to Carlyle, "One day we will both shake hands across the brook, you as a first in Literature, I as first in Divinity – and people will say, 'Both these fellows are from Annandale. Where is Annandale?'"¹



Introduction

Edward Irving (1792–1834), the great orator of the National Scotch Church in Regent Square, London, is still a controversial figure known for his unconventional ideas concerning the person of Christ, the manifestation of supernatural gifts, and millennialism. His life represents a dramatic theological journey, inspired by a burning and passionate love for God. Almost all of Irving's theological ideas had their focus on humanity's desperate desire to approach God through the person of Christ. Along with his theology, his life has also attracted much scholarly attention on account of its panoramic journey: from being Scottish and uncelebrated to achieving unprecedented popularity in London; and from prominence as a Presbyterian minister to being deposed from the National Kirk. Irving's legacy is that of a radical evangelical figure who played a significant role in changing the direction of Evangelicalism in the 1830s.

Extensive research on him, viewing his work and theology in synthetic perspective, has begun to reveal a portrait of his life in its integrity. As a starting point, I will offer an account of the sphere in

which his thoughts and, indeed, his identity, were developed. When we view him in the perspective of his dual identity, we can then understand him more clearly. In this article I will explore his identity as both a Scottish Presbyterian and a British nationalist, and I will provide a brief account of his premillennialism as related to these dual identities.



Born as a Scot

Edward Irving was born in Annan, Dumfriesshire, in the southwest of Scotland. According to Mrs Oliphant's description, it was 'a peaceful little Scotch town'. He was the second son of Mary and Gavin Irving, a tanner of the village. Irving's paternal ancestors were said to be the descendants of French Protestant refugees, and one of his forefathers had been a parish minister in Annan.² If Edward's decision to enter the ministry of the established church was inspired by family tradition, his sensitive character was definitely inherited from his mother, who also was reputed to be a descendant of Martin Luther. For Irving, his mother was a model of an excellent house-mother who 'had much of fluent speech [...] thrifty, assiduous, wise, [...] full of affection and tender anxiety for her children and husband'.³ Irving used to say, 'There are no such women, now, as my mother'.⁴

This ideal image of woman as mother remained in his mind throughout his lifetime and probably led him to give up his passionate love for the brilliant Jane Welsh. Instead he married a more domestic character, Isabella Martin, a daughter of the Kirkcaldy Manse who, we know, reminded him of his mother. Isabella was devoted to Irving throughout their marriage, and during Irving's later years she showed a profound maternal affection and tender care for him, present at his bedside right up to his final moments.

Although Irving's birthplace, near the Solway Firth, was separated from England by only a few miles, it had a definite Scottish social and religious tradition. Margaret Oliphant gives us a vivid picture of the religious life of Annan during Irving's youth: 'Household psalms still echoed of nights through the closed windows, and children, brought up among few other signs of piety, were yet trained in the habit of family prayers'.⁵ In this district, agriculture was booming and corn-

laden sloops sailed peacefully from Waterfoot of Annan to the Solway Firth and on toward England, though ‘a naked peel-house and austere towers of defence on both sides of the border’ were reminders of the former border warfare between the two nations.



Covenanting and Seceder traditions

In his youth, Irving was attracted by two subjects which were related to both religion and nation: the Covenanting tradition and Seceder ministry.

This Lowland town of Annan was full of the heritage of the Covenanting tradition, with many Covenanters’ graves scattered throughout the area. The legendary stories of their desperate struggles on battlefields and the heroic tales of individual martyrdom were told around the ‘ingleside, kitchen fire, or in the farm-house chimney corner’. Irving had an ardent ear for these legendary tales,⁶ and he visited almost every one of the Covenanters’ graves on the moors, the last resting place of those who had fallen for the sake of the doctrine of Christ’s sole supremacy over His house.⁷

While the Covenanting movement arose from a religious motivation, it also contained a strong element of national sentiment. Scotland was regarded as a nation covenanted with God, and the Covenanters had, for a time, united much of the nation behind their vision.⁸ This Scottish religious and national identity found expression when, on 23 July 1637, Edinburgh rioted against the reading of ‘Laud’s Liturgy’, which was based largely on the Anglican Book of Common Prayer. Through the National Covenant of 1638 and the Solemn League and Covenant of 1643, this Scottish religious and national identity was embraced by much of the Scottish people. The covenants became symbols of the nation’s independence, as well as having theological significance.⁹ Irving’s later opposition to private church patronage, which had enabled members of the landed classes to select ministers for parish churches within the Church of Scotland, was influenced by his veneration for the Covenanting tradition. According to Finlay, those who left the Church of Scotland and formed secession churches in protest against patronage can be seen as part of the Covenanting tradition: ‘there is strong evidence to show that the memories and the

traditions of the Covenanters were a principle source of motivation for the secessionist churches of the early eighteenth century'.¹⁰

The Covenanting tradition impressed Irving with its theocratic model of Scotland as a Christian commonwealth whose sole head was Christ.¹¹ His later writing would carry the influence of his early veneration of the Covenanters:

The blood of martyrs mingled with our running brooks; and their hallowed bones do now moulder in peace within their silent tombs, which are dressed by the reverential hands of the pious and patriotic people [...] the church arose in her purity like a bride decked for the bridegroom. Religious principles chose to reside within the troubled land [...]¹²

Irving was taught literature and languages by Adam Hope in Annan Academy. According to Thomas Carlyle, who was also Hope's pupil, religiously Hope was 'a Calvinist at all points, and Burgher Scotch Seceder to the backbone'.¹³ Following the example of his teacher, Irving had attended Sunday services at a Secession church in Ecclefechan, six miles away from his home. Although it required a long walk, Irving rather enjoyed the journey across the moors, passing the pasturing sheep, having the sense of God's presence with him (Ps. 23). For Adam Hope and his attendant pupils, the Seceder minister in Ecclefechan, Revd John Johnston, was their 'only Minister'. Irving's other family members duly attended their local parish church, and tolerated their 'drunken Clergyman', believing that it was 'ungenteel' for Irving to join the Sunday 'pilgrimage to Ecclefechan'. Thomas Carlyle described the religious mood in Annan as one where 'A man who awoke to the belief that he actually had a soul to be saved or lost was apt to be found among the Dissenting people, and to have given up attendance on the Kirk'.¹⁴

The Revd John Johnston of Ecclefechan was regarded as a man 'of stern theology, of simple life, of unbending moral standard and practice'.¹⁵ Later, Irving recognised the invaluable experience of his attendance at the Secession church and his indebtedness to Johnston as 'a most holy father of the Burgher Communion'. This testimony goes

along with that of Thomas Carlyle who attended this congregation regularly with his parents.¹⁶ Although it was said that Johnston preached mainly on such themes as the divine law,¹⁷ there remains no record of his teachings. We know that Scottish Seceders were usually very conservative theologically and opposed to any laxity in matters of doctrine and church discipline. Their claim to be returning to the primitive principles of the church can be matched with Irving's later efforts to revive the church's primitive doctrine.

As a young boy, with a sensitive and receptive mind, Irving's experience of these pilgrimages to the Secession meeting-house was deeply formative. He would have learned much from his long walks to Ecclefechan with his more mature companions and would have developed personal discipline. In his *St. Giles Lectures*, Robert H. Story portrayed Irving's walks to the Secession church as being the most remarkable character-forming boyhood experience: 'The solemnity, the moral intensity, the national fervour, of this covenanting company left, too, their impress on Irving's character.'¹⁸

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many in Scotland boasted that their educational system was superior to that of their neighbour England, and noted that it had produced such intellectual giants as David Hume, Adam Smith, William Robertson, and Walter Scott. Schools in every burgh and virtually every parish – Knox's long unfulfilled dream – provided the mass of the population with a basic education surpassing that available in most European countries. Irving was both a product of this Scottish educational system and also of the Scottish Enlightenment, the unique flowering of intellectual culture, when Scotland was 'briefly the cultural leader of Europe'.¹⁹ Irving was proud of his Scottish education and this pride lasted throughout his lifetime. He also placed great emphasis on the role of the Church in Scotland's educational system. Because the schools and the universities were 'maintained by the learning and oversight of the Clergy,' Irving maintained, 'so that the intellect of our land grew and flourished by the preaching of the word.'²⁰ Although most of his ministerial career was spent in England, his mind was filled with an abundant love of Scotland, while he felt that England was like a 'foreign part'.



Irving's Scotland in London

Irving's Scottish mind-set was apparent when he started his London ministry as a minister of the Church of Scotland in the Caledonian Chapel in Hatton Garden in 1822. When he came to London, Irving felt that he had 'a divine mission to re-establish practical Christianity' in the capital of the United Kingdom.²¹

For Irving, who had once dreamed of being a missionary to Persia, London was now regarded as his missionary territory.²² Rooted in Scottish Presbyterianism, Irving left his native land, and came to 'foreign parts'.²³ Brought up in the Covenanting tradition, Irving retained a passionate loyalty to Scotland, and he devoted a large part of his ministerial labours to providing care for the Scots residing in London.

Arriving in London, he noticed that most Scots staying in or around the city did not regularly attend their mother church – the Church of Scotland – which meant, for Irving, that the Kirk was losing not only the one straying sheep of the biblical parable, but the other ninety-nine as well.²⁴ He further observed that many London-based members of the Scottish upper social orders developed the habit of attending the Church of England in London, and when they returned to Scotland they went to the Episcopal Church. Irving honoured the Church of England as 'a true sister' church of the Church of Scotland. However, for Irving, the desertion of their national church by many Scots was a 'very great evil to our nation' and this would split the Scottish nation 'more and more asunder'.²⁵ For Irving, it would have been an act of betrayal or ingratitude for Scotsmen living in London²⁶ to lose their Presbyterian and Reformed identity.

Like many expatriates who miss their home, Irving regarded his native land as a model of Christianity. From his point of view, the Scottish Presbyterian tradition, which had its historic roots in the Culdees, had retained more of its apostolic spirituality and primitive Christian purity than its sister establishment, the Church of England.

Irving's veneration of Scottish Protestantism can be seen in his historical account of the Church of Scotland. Irving traced what he defined as the spirit of the Scottish Reformation in the Celtic church and the Culdees, who had, according to Irving, 'maintained a noble

resistance' against Roman episcopal authority. It was a noble distinction, for Irving, that in 'Scotland [...] amongst the nations of the earth [...] honest and humble Christian ministers have been ever received with open arms'.²⁷ Irving conveyed his historic understanding of these pre-Reformation Celtic and Culdee churches, with their 'primitive simplicity', 'orthodox faith' and resistance to Papal oppression, 'continuing to survive almost till the dawn of the Reformation' in Scotland'.²⁸ The medieval Roman church, according to Irving, had sought to suppress the truth and light of Celtic Christianity. By keeping a simple and primitive faith, the Celtic church had characterized for Irving the 'true' Scottish Christianity, rejecting 'Papal inventions' or 'Roman superstition', and preserving 'the love of religious liberty, and preference of a primitive church, without pomp or ceremonies, which have distinguished us amongst the nations of Christendom'.²⁹ Opposition to the sacramental system and much of the doctrine of the Roman church was, for Irving, a salient characteristic of the Celtic church, distinguishing that church from 'the synagogue of Satan'.³⁰ This was the ideal church for Irving: 'they were the nearest to the lives of the Lord and his apostles which I have either read or heard of in any language or in any country'.³¹

After Irving had attracted a huge congregation in the Caledonian Chapel, the congregation decided to build an enlarged church for their now overflowing numbers. For Irving, this new church was to be a symbol of 'the gathering together of the scattered people of our nation; and, therefore, we have given it the name of "National"'.³² The congregation 'resolved that means be immediately taken for building a new National Scotch Church; that it be in connection with the Church of Scotland; that the doctrines, forms of worship, and mode of discipline of that Church shall be taught; and the same shall in all time coming be filled by a minister duly licensed to preach the Gospel by the Church of Scotland and ordained according to the rules of that Church'.³³ Irving hoped this construction would be an example for other Church of Scotland congregations, and he trusted 'that this may be the beginning of an era in the history of our church in this metropolis, when she shall take a character as an established church, and profit all by the service'.³⁴



Irving's adoption of British nationalism

Shortly after his settlement in London, Irving's sermons attracted large numbers from a variety of social classes; almost all the seats were occupied an hour before the service, and admission was by ticket. In his unprecedented popularity, Irving found London a place of opportunity, and urged his friend Thomas Carlyle to join him, saying, 'Remember London is your destination [...] Scotland breeds men, but England rears them'.³⁵ As Irving perceived England now as a place of hope, he adopted a British identity. As he did so, he took on one of the characteristics of British identity: anti-Catholicism.

According to Linda Colley, 'British identity was built on the common strands of Protestantism, shared economic priorities, the monarchy and a fear of the Catholic, continental "other"'.³⁶ Irving's anti-Catholicism arose after his adoption of this British identity, as the political mood was ripening for the enacting of Catholic Emancipation.

As Irving began to embrace this British identity, he felt called to rebuke 'errors' in Britain, especially in the Church of England. Irving began to denounce what he perceived as the social depravity, liberalism, and materialism of the whole of Britain. He denounced the widespread materialism of London, which he believed arose from the new industrialism: 'Byronic poetry, Malthusian economics, Benthamite utilitarianism and all the "Babylonish" gods worshipped by his contemporaries. No idol or sin escaped the prophetic lash of his burning denunciations.'³⁷ In pointing out national errors, Irving also portrayed Britain as an 'elected nation' with a divine calling in the world, not only in politics but also in religion. In *The Spirit of the Age* William Hazlitt noted that these attitudes reflected Irving's Scottish Presbyterianism: 'He makes war upon all arts and sciences, upon the faculties and nature of man, on his vices and his virtues, on all existing institutions, and all possible improvements, that nothing may be left but the Kirk of Scotland, and that he may be the head of it'.³⁸

In his first publication, *For the Oracles of God; Judgement to Come*, Irving reproached the people who gave no attention to God's word. From the beginning of his second year in London, Irving had preached on the nature of the Christian life, urging his hearers to adhere to the Word of God in all aspects of their lives. He was concerned

about the prevalent bibliolatry of the times, which emphasised the letter rather than the spirit of Scripture, and he insisted that the Bible must be considered as the voice of the Spirit, through which believers could know the will of God. Against the ‘dull Catechism’, Irving called men back to the spirit of Scripture.³⁹ He lamented the ‘apostasy’ of his age, which degraded the Word of God into mere fiction, and he called for religion of the heart. ‘Irving’s sense of a revived faith in scriptural truth had been expressed through his lifelong commitment to what he regarded as the principles of the Scottish Reformers and Covenanters, principles that he believed were the basis of the Scottish national Church and national identity’.⁴⁰

Irving, then, was driven by a dual vision of Scottish Presbyterianism and British Protestantism, though never abandoning the thought of the mother church’s priority over the sister church. He also stated that Scotland manifested her people’s rights and liberties with patience and perseverance beyond all the nations in the world, without which the Roman Catholics or England would have annihilated the Scottish church and state. Now the Scottish people had been rewarded with an unrivalled place amongst the nations of the earth.⁴¹

Throughout his life, Irving favoured the sixteenth-century Scots Confession of Faith over the seventeenth-century Westminster Confession of Faith. He also relied more on the Scots Confession in vindicating his distinctive Christology. He thought that the Scots Confession was ‘the pillar of the Reformation Church of Scotland’, while the Westminster Confession had exerted little or no influence upon the Church of Scotland.⁴² For Irving, the Scots Confession was ‘the banner of the Church in all her wrestlings and conflicts,’ while the Westminster Confession was but ‘the camp-colours which she hath used during her days of peace’. Irving’s Scottish identity was noted by F. D. Maurice, in his *Doctrine of Sacrifice*:

What he [Irving] taught me was to reverence the education he had received in the John Knox School, and the fathers who had imparted it to him. [...] He showed me, that the old patriarchs of Scotland had a belief in GOD, as a Living Being, as the Ruler of the earth, as the Standard of Righteousness, as the Orderer of men’s acts in all the common relations of life [...] I perceived,

clearly, that Mr. Irving had not acquired *these* convictions in England. [...] That he brought with him; it was part of his covenanting, Calvinistic culture.⁴³



Millennialism and British nationalism

Like ancient apocalyptic prophecy, nationalism has often been associated with a revolutionary eschatology.⁴⁴ The conflict of Scottish Presbyterianism and British Protestant chauvinism in Irving, alongside the historic events of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars, eventually led him to premillennial ideas. He regarded Britain as ‘a nation united for God, against nations confederate for idolatry and man-worship’.⁴⁵ Since Britain was one of the rare countries in Europe that had not been invaded by French military forces during the Napoleonic wars, the country had been preserved from Continental turmoil with her Protestant religion intact, and had been preserved from ‘Papal errors’.

In this context Irving regarded the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars as ‘the day of great judgement of the Lamb’, and the preservation of his country from this led him to see it as the nation ‘sealed before the day of wrath began’.⁴⁶ The victory of Trafalgar (1805) was great enough to ensure the British identity as a ‘sealed and elected nation’.

Premillennialists expected the establishment of the millennium by divine, cataclysmic action, while postmillennialists thought that the kingdom of God would come gradually as the result of the endeavour of Christian and human institutions.⁴⁷ As the godly commonwealth of the established church grew, nurtured by rising Protestant world missions, postmillennialists believed that vital Christianity would soon spread over the whole earth and usher in a millennial age of spiritual blessing. The future was expected as a time of peace and glory for the church that would pursue mission persistently, following the work of the London Missionary Society and the Clapham Sect.⁴⁸ The comparative political stability in Britain, and on the Continent as well, until the mid-eighteenth century, ‘did not encourage the sense of an imminent collapse of the existing order’.⁴⁹

But the subsequent catastrophic events which swept the whole of

Europe, leading to the violent uprooting of their political and social institutions forced many thinkers to regard the end of the world as being near.⁵⁰ This corrupt world, according to premillennarians, could have its problems settled only by the personal return of Christ to establish the millennial kingdom. This premillennial hope became their belief that the imminent return of Christ for the ‘final judgement of the Lamb’ was at hand.

Irving’s social friends in London also drove him to embrace these chiliastic visions. Through Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s romantic and mysterious world, Irving developed a pessimistic Romanticism. According to David Bebbington, Irving was a prime example of the ‘adaptation of Evangelicalism into the Romantic idiom of the day’.⁵¹ The Romantic sensibilities of the age encouraged belief in a divine supernatural ingress into the natural world and fostered the idea of Christ’s personal return among contemporary Evangelicals.⁵² As far as the direct sources of Irving’s millennialism are concerned, these are likely to have arisen from his contact with three contemporary millennialists: Lewis Way (1772–1840) of the Anglican “Jews’ Society”; Henry Drummond (1786–1860), a wealthy London banker (with Scottish roots) and also at one time High Sheriff of Surrey; and James Hatley Frere (1779–1866), a prominent writer on prophecy. Way’s notion of the biblical connection between Christ’s second coming and the conversion of the Jews strongly influenced both Drummond and Irving. Drummond’s Continental Society inspired Irving’s proclamation of the Second Advent, which he published in a lengthy work, entitled *Babylon and Infidelity* and dedicated to Frere.

In 1826 Drummond opened his country home in Albury, near London, for advanced prophetic investigation, and this became known as the ‘Albury Conference’. People from a variety of groups attended, including Church of England clergy, Moravians, nonconformist ministers, Church of Scotland ministers, English laymen, and others. But arguably the two most influential Evangelicals in Britain, Thomas Chalmers and William Wilberforce, both declined the invitation, and this suggests that there were concerns that the conference might be dominated by extreme views.⁵³ The reports of the annual meetings of the Albury Circle and a considerable number of prophetic articles were published in the *Journal Morning Watch* from 1829 to 1833,

through Drummond's financial support and John Tudor's editorial efforts. Irving was a leading author in the journal.

Irving's British nationalism fired his prophetic study. For Irving, Britain's triumph over the Napoleonic Antichrist was one of the signs that Britain was the 'sealed' or elect nation, a covenanted people, the only one of the 'ten horns', that had cast off the papal supremacy and restored the true Christian faith.⁵⁴ But this sealed or covenanted status also had, according to Irving, heavy responsibilities.

The passing of the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829 roused Irving and the other participants at the Albury conferences to denounce the Act as raising the question of 'whether we shall remain as an Anti-catholic and Protestant kingdom, or whether we shall take the seed of the serpent [...] again into our councils and administration'.⁵⁵ For Irving, the Act was 'a great evil in the sight of God', which would speedily bring the nation to ruin.⁵⁶

Irving's hostility to Roman Catholicism was now violent, and he denounced it as 'the great whore of Babylon', and the Roman hierarchy, with the Pope at its head, was 'the very synagogue of Satan'.⁵⁷ Irving insisted that Britain must play its role as a 'sealed nation' and oppose Catholicism, or else risk the wrath of God.⁵⁸ For Irving and the Albury Circle, Britain should remain as a 'sealed and elected nation', preserved by God, not only from revolution, Catholic idolatry, and poverty like that in Ireland, but also in the *parousia*. With their nationalistic chauvinism, the Albury Circle anticipated God's special activity in Britain, in manifesting the coming of His kingdom in the wider world.⁵⁹

They wanted Britain to listen to their prophetic voice and repent in preparation for the coming kingdom, but Britain did not respond quite as they wished. Irving's friend and mentor, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, now denounced Irving for his apocalyptic extremism. Amid mounting criticism of his premillennialism, Irving's eccentric Christology also drew national theological attention, starting with Henry Cole's claim in 1827 that Irving's idea of Christ's 'sinful flesh' was heretical. In 1830, claims of the return of the Pentecostal spiritual gift of speaking in tongues, first in the neighbourhood of Rhu in Scotland and then at Irving's church at Regent Square, caused a national sensation and aroused intense opposition. A number of Irving's friends were

condemned at the 1831 General Assembly of the Church of Scotland: John McLeod Campbell and Hugh Baillie McLean were both deposed from the ministry of the Church of Scotland, while ‘Sandy’ Scott (Irving’s assistant minister at Regent Square) was deprived of his license to preach in the Church of Scotland. Amid these official condemnations, Irving’s former mentor, Thomas Chalmers, ‘preserved unbroken silence’.⁶⁰ Thomas Carlyle and Mrs Carlyle (Irving’s former sweetheart, Jane Welsh) could not do anything but look sympathetically upon Irving’s crumbling reputation. In 1832, Irving was evicted from the National Scotch Church, his own congregation, because he had permitted ‘gifted persons’ to speak in tongues in public services. This had brought chaos in the congregation.

For Irving, the world of Babylon was expanding. His former conception of the Roman Catholic Church as Babylon, and the Pope or Napoleon as Antichrist, was widened to include not only the Church of Scotland but also all of Christendom. Irving declared that ‘[b]y Babylon I mean the whole system of doctrine and discipline and customs, actually existing and practically governing Christians in this and every land upon the earth.’⁶¹ All churches of this and other lands were, like the defiling women in Revelation 14, harlot churches. Irving maintained that ‘[t]he churches will cast out the children of God, with their gold and silver, and their precious stones, as Egypt thrust Israel out’,⁶² and ‘I know not one pastor, or one church, of a truly faithful uncompromising character, which hath not either been cast out, or against which proceedings are not already begun.’⁶³

Like John the Baptist in the wilderness, Irving proclaimed that anyone who had an ear should ‘come out of Babylon, and fight against her [...]. For “the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent taken it by force”’.⁶⁴ Irving and the Albury members believed that they were living in the time between the pouring out of the sixth and seventh vial, described in the sixteenth chapter of the Revelation.⁶⁵ For them, the days of unprecedented crisis were regarded as a brief respite between the bowls of God’s wrath being poured on the earth. National repentance would save their nation and church from apostasy, judgement, and tribulation.⁶⁶ Irving’s premillennialism had become, in fact, an ‘onslaught upon society as a whole’.⁶⁷

However, for Irving and the Albury Circle, Britain devoted little

attention to such prophetic voices. The once highly-favoured Britain had become an ‘apostate nation’. Through their explorations of premillennialism, Irving and the Albury Circle engaged in denouncing all those outside their circle as ‘Babylon’. The Albury Circle, including Irving, deteriorated into an extreme sectarianism, and its fruit was the Catholic Apostolic Church. In this new sect, Irving was no longer a leading figure – those appointed as ‘angels’ or ‘apostles’ occupied the former role of Irving.



Lost identities

Irving strongly denounced the depravity of the whole of society and claimed the imminence of the Second Advent. However, at the same time, he insisted that the earth must be restored to its original goodness in purity.⁶⁸ From this aspect Irving’s premillennialism consists not only of a pessimistic side but also an optimistic but objective belief. Irving’s millennialism was ‘to open and clear up the object of a Christian’s hope, which is, that the Lord cometh [...]. For all this breaking down of Babylon the harlot’s power, is to prepare the way of the New Jerusalem, the bride of the Lamb.’⁶⁹ The world could not be purified but Irving held on to the hope of mankind’s eternal blessing by the sovereign God within an apocalyptic framework.

In early 1833, the Church of Scotland Presbytery of Annan, which had ordained Irving, summoned him home to be tried on charges of heresy. Irving duly returned and received the ‘foregone verdict’ of deposition in a darkened church lit by a solitary candle. Everything had gone: his pride in his Scottish Presbyterianism and his zeal for Britain as a ‘sealed nation’. The one thing that still remained in his heart was his passionate love for God. Throughout his life, Irving showed his passion to follow the spirit of Christ, which alone remained within him for his final voyage.

By now his health was failing and he was suffering from consumption. Weary and sick, Irving returned to Scotland with his wife, arriving in Glasgow via Greenock in October 1834. Mrs Irving remained with him during his final illness. He died when he had lost each of his identities, holding only to a passionate love for God, dreaming of participation in an otherworldly kingdom.



Conclusion

Throughout his life Irving had a strong pride in his Presbyterianism coupled with a patriotic Scottishness. His settlement in London confirmed his British Protestant nationalism, which had then contributed to premillennialist visions of Britain a ‘sealed nation’ called to prepare the way for the return of Christ in glory. His impassioned denunciations of the widespread materialism, liberalism, and religious apostasy in the whole community, however, had not been welcomed; rather, they had rebounded to his own destruction. With his ‘otherworldly religion’ Irving’s vocation was to wait for Christ in ‘power from on high’. He claimed that this wicked world would be resolved by Christ’s personal return in his eschatological scheme. Being brought up in the Presbyterian system and struggling against evangelical liberalism, Irving lost his identities and faced difficulties in adapting himself to a new Catholic Apostolic Church, following his deposition from the ministry of the Church of Scotland. With his Scottish and his British identities now denied him, his early death from consumption was perhaps a mercy. Holding only a sincere love for God, which earthly institutions could no longer deprive him of, Irving stepped out into his final journey to the Lord.

This study of some of the intrinsic inter-relations of Irving’s sometimes eccentric ideas – e.g. his Christology, his millennialism, his belief in the manifestation of miraculous gifts – leads, it is to be hoped, to a deeper understanding of the distinctiveness of Edward Irving.

Notes

- ¹ Quotation taken from Andrew L. Drummond, *Edward Irving and His Circle* (London: James Clarke, 1937), 24.
- ² Margaret Oliphant, *The Life of Edward Irving, Minister of the National Scotch Church, London*, 2 vols. (2nd ed.; London: Hurst and Blackett, 1862), I:1; William W. Andrews, *Edward Irving: A Review* (2nd ed.; Glasgow: Hobbs, 1900), footnote p. 15; Thomas

- Carlyle, “Death of the Rev. Edward Irving”, *Fraser’s Magazine* (January, 1835): 99.
- ³ Thomas Carlyle, *Reminiscences* (ed. Charles Eliot Norton; London: J. M. Dent, 1932), 172.
- ⁴ We can observe several cases of historical religious figures being affected by their mothers either in their conversion or their spiritual life, such as St Augustine and his mother Monica, John and Charles Wesley and their mother Susanna, etc.
- ⁵ Oliphant, *Life of Edward Irving*, I:7.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, I:8 f., 19.
- ⁷ Edward Irving, *The Coming of Messiah in Glory and Majesty* (London: L. B. Seeley, 1827), cxci.
- ⁸ Richard J. Finlay, “Keeping the Covenant: Scottish National Identity”, in *Eighteenth Century Scotland: New Perspectives* (ed. T. M. Devine and I. R. Young; East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 1999), 124.
- ⁹ James B. Torrance, “The Covenant Concept in Scottish Theology and Politics and its Legacy”, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 34 (1981): 226.
- ¹⁰ Finlay, “Keeping the Covenant”, 127.
- ¹¹ Oliphant, *Life of Edward Irving*, I:197.
- ¹² Edward Irving, *For the Oracles of God, Four Orations; For Judgement to Come, an Argument* (London: T. Hamilton, 1824), 238.
- ¹³ Carlyle, *Reminiscences*, 174 f.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 176.
- ¹⁵ Robert H. Story, “Edward Irving”, in *St. Giles Lectures, Third Series, Scottish Divines, 1505–1872* (Edinburgh: MacNiven and Wallace, 1883), 226.
- ¹⁶ Carlyle, *Reminiscences*, 177.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸ Story, “Edward Irving”, 226.
- ¹⁹ Eric J. Evans, “Who Gained Most When Scotland and England Joined in 1707?”, *BBC History* (May, 2007): 26–30, 28; Andrew L. Drummond and James Bulloch, *The Scottish Church, 1688–1843: The Age of the Moderates* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1973), 45; David Daiches, Peter Jones and Jean Jones, eds., *A Hotbed*

- of Genius: The Scottish Enlightenment 1730–1790* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1986).
- ²⁰ Edward Irving, *A Pastoral Letter From the Scotch Presbytery in London Addressed to the Baptized of the Scottish Church Residing in London and its Vicinity and in the Southern Parts of the Island* (London: James Nisbet, 1828), 18.
- ²¹ James A. Froude, *Thomas Carlyle, A History of the First Forty Years of His Life, 1795–1835*, 2 vols. (London: Longmans, 1882), I:156.
- ²² According to Esther Breitenbach of the University of Edinburgh, generally Scottish missionaries of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries revealed their identity as either ‘Scottish’ or ‘British’, and these two identities had worked in complementary manner, rather than on competitive terms. But, it is also true that a Scottish Presbyterian identity was favoured by Scots missionaries. See Esther Breitenbach, “Empire, Religion and National Identity: Scottish Christian Imperialism in the 19th and early 20th centuries” (Ph.D. diss., University of Edinburgh, 2005).
- ²³ Edward Irving, “To the Rev. Thomas Chalmers, D.D. Minister of St. John’s Church, Glasgow” in *For the Oracles of God*, xxi.
- ²⁴ Irving, *A Pastoral Letter*, 7.
- ²⁵ *Ibid*, 9.
- ²⁶ Liam Upton, “‘Our Mother and Our Country’: The Integration of Religious and National Identity in the Thought of Edward Irving (1792–1834)”, in *Religion and National Identity: Wales and Scotland c. 1700–2000* (ed. Robert Pope; Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001), 255.
- ²⁷ Edward Irving, *The Confession of Faith and the Books of Discipline of the Church of Scotland, Of Date Anterior to the Westminster Confession* (London: Baldwin and Craddock, 1831), xvi.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, xvii. Irving’s view on this part of ecclesiastical history was based on his reading of the writings of Bede (c.672–735) and George Buchanan (1506–82).
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, lxxxii.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, xxxvi–xxxvii.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, xxxviii.
- ³² Edward Irving, “The Spiritual and National Benefits Resulting

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- ³⁸ William Hazlitt, *The Spirit of the Age* (London: Colburn, 1825), 91.
- ³⁹ Drummond, *Edward Irving and His Circle*, 59.
- ⁴⁰ Ralph Brown, “Victorian Anglican Evangelicalism: The Radical Legacy of Edward Irving”, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 58 (Oct. 2007): 682.
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- ⁴² Edward Irving, “Notes on the Standards on the Church of Scotland”, in *The Collected Writings of Edward Irving in Five Volumes* (ed. Gavin Carlyle; London: Alexander Strahan, 1864–5), I:602.
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- ⁴⁵ Edward Irving, *A Letter to the King on the Repeal of the Test and Corporation Laws, as it Affects Our Christian Monarchy* (London: James Nisbet, 1828), 13.
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- ⁵⁶ Edward Irving, *The Church and State Responsible to Christ, and to One Another: A Series of Discourses on Daniel’s Vision of the Four Beasts* (London: James Nisbet, 1829), 300 f.
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- ⁵⁹ Mark Patterson, “Designing the Last Days: Edward Irving, the Albury Circle, and the Theology of the Morning Watch” (Ph.D. diss., King’s College, London, 2001), 217.
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