

The Revd Professor Emeritus A. C. Cheyne: A Tribute¹

Stewart J Brown

For many of us, and especially those of us who had the privilege to be his students, he was simply ‘the Professor’. This was how I knew him thirty years ago. There were, to be sure, other professors at New College – there were professors and lecturers of great learning, ‘wise and eloquent in their instructions’, international leaders in their fields. But for his students, he was ‘the Professor’. The title aptly expressed his quiet dignity, his commitment to the life of learning, his gracious manners, and his gentle sense of humour. He seemed a natural presence in the Chair of Ecclesiastical History, as though born to the position. He was an old-style Scottish Professor, with sturdy independence of mind, who would determine, without fear or favour, how best to profess his discipline. But there was something more than this, something more to why for me he was, and will remain, ‘the Professor’. I never met with him – whether as a student, or later as a friend – that I didn’t come away feeling that I had been somehow helped to be a better person, that I had been given guidance, not only in scholarship, but in how to live a more caring and fulfilling life.

Alec Cheyne was educated at the University of Edinburgh, where he graduated MA with First Class Honours in History in 1946. Following military service, he did postgraduate work at Oriel College, Oxford, graduating BLitt with a thesis on the relations between England and Scotland during the reigns of William III and Queen Anne. After lecturing in history at the University of Glasgow for three years, he entered New College in 1953 as a regular student for the ministry of the Church of Scotland. His aim was to be a parish minister. He graduated BD with distinction in Ecclesiastical History in 1956, and became an assistant minister with every intention of entering a pastoral charge. But our lives do not always take the directions we intend. Pressure was placed on him to accept a position at New College – not least by the formidable Professor Jake Burleigh – and in 1958 he became lecturer in Ecclesiastical History. In 1964, on the

retirement of Professor Burleigh, Alec was appointed his successor to the Chair of Ecclesiastical History, a position he would hold until his retirement in 1986.

The Professor was a superb teacher. His lectures were almost legendary – learned, eloquent, polished, well-structured and often profoundly moving. He was able to draw his audiences into a past world, and breathe life into its personalities and struggles. This did not come easily. His lectures were excellent because he worked hard at them – continually polishing and revising his prose, composing and re-composing until they conveyed just the right effect. In more informal seminar and tutorial discussions, he awakened students to the challenges of reconstructing the past. In such settings, he had an ability to put students at ease and draw them out. Here his sense of humour could be particularly helpful; his irony, never unkind, and his shared humour could take the edge off his criticism of student work. He listened carefully to what was said, and I can still see his bowed head as he concentrated on every word of a student's presentation. His breadth of knowledge, while never used simply to impress, was always there, to be drawn upon by his students. He could lecture on a wide range of subjects – though he was particularly at home in Scottish history and modern British history since the late seventeenth century. He also read widely, in theology and historical theology, but also in social history, political history, intellectual history, and biography. He had a particular love for nineteenth-century literature, and offered with Ian Campbell in English Literature a memorable advanced seminar in religion and literature.

There was also his pastoral concern for his students. He took a personal interest in his students – not only in their academic work, but in their more personal worries and concerns, and in their aspirations for the future. He demonstrated a special concern for students coming from overseas, seeking to ensure that they felt welcome in Scotland. In return, those overseas students felt a great loyalty to him, and in later years he travelled widely at their invitations to present guest lectures around the world. As a teacher he changed lives. I recall once meeting a man in the southern United States, an evangelical Christian who had

come to New College to do a one-year research Masters degree with the Professor, before entering the ministry. As a result of a tutorial, in which the Professor had painted a vivid word picture of the effects of poor housing on lives in early nineteenth-century Edinburgh, the young man's eyes were opened to another direction for his Christian commitment. He returned to the American South after completing his degree, formed a small Christian organisation, and began building and renovating houses for the rural poor. The lives of many impoverished African-American families in rural Georgia were made better because the Professor stirred the imagination of this one student. And there were many others who were similarly inspired, and inspired others, and so it goes on.

One of the Professor's great achievements was to build a vibrant department by recruiting lecturers of great ability and commitment. This was the famed 'Cheyne gang' of David Wright in early Church history, Peter Matheson in Reformation history, and Andrew Ross in the history of Christian missions and American Church history. In May Hocking, they had a superb administrative secretary. This department of Ecclesiastical History was probably the best in the United Kingdom in talent and breadth of coverage. Together, they developed, along with the range of upper-level courses, a celebrated first-year survey course which combined a broad world coverage of the whole sweep of Christianity in its cultural context, and, through the innovative use of primary documents, also introduced students to the historian's craft. The course became a model for first-year survey courses in Church history around the world.

In his publications, the Professor did not rush into print, but when he did so, the results were memorable. His interest in Victorian Scotland found expression in *The Transforming of the Kirk: Victorian Scotland's Religious Revolution*, which remains the definitive study of this important theme. His long-standing fascination with Thomas Chalmers led to a volume of essays, *The Practical and the Pious*, which he gathered and edited. His introduction to that volume forms the best short study of Chalmers to be found anywhere. His *Studies in Scottish Church History* brought together a number of his seminal

essays, ranging broadly from the Reformation to the present. As an historian, he was perhaps at his best with the essay format, through which he conveyed succinctly, in beautiful prose, the essentials of an historical theme or historical personality. He was a scholar, rather than a researcher; he was a man of letters in the old sense. He loved and supported the New College Library. His historical writing was rooted in the tradition of liberal historiography, with its emphasis on the importance of individual human actors, on human potential for good, on a measured belief in progress, and on respect for human freedom. He was very much a professional historian, committed to its standards of evidence. This could lead to tension with colleagues who believed the Church historian's task should be to identify the workings of providence or to help shape a theology of history. He would not do so. One of his great achievements – and that of the talented group of historians he assembled – was to help move the study of Church history away from a theological approach, and to employ instead the same methodologies and approaches as were used by other types of historians. As a result, the influence of ecclesiastical history was greatly enhanced. He was especially committed to promoting the history of Scotland, serving as President of the Scottish Church History Society, and latterly as Honorary President of the Society.

His Churchmanship was an integral part of the Professor's role at New College. He was ordained to the ministry of the Church of Scotland and he maintained always his vocation, preaching frequently, helping prepare candidates for the ministry, and taking a leading role in the Church courts. His positions in Church policy reflected his family's roots in the United Presbyterian Church, and the great liberal evangelical traditions of that Church.

The Professor played his part in the administration of New College, and the wider University, and he served as Principal of New College in the mid 1980s. There were, of course, disagreements among colleagues over policies within the College, and with so many strong personalities, there were occasional tensions and conflicts of a personal nature. He never spoke of these tensions to me, and I'm sure that he regretted them. In any event, the more lasting impression of Alec's

New College years were that these were a great era for New College – a time of inspired academic leadership in the various disciplines, a time when New College’s international reputation soared, a time of strong student numbers and innovative new programmes. He and his colleagues helped to shape a great institution. The Professor was, and remained always, a New College man, and his contributions enhanced the discipline of ecclesiastical history, promoted our understanding of the Christian faith, and enriched countless lives, in Scotland and in the wider world.

¹ Based upon Professor Brown’s address at Professor Cheyne’s funeral on 22 April 2006.