

CHAPTER IV

GATESIDE RELIEF CHURCH AND THE FREE CHURCH

THE old relief church in Wamphray was a big, barn-like building. The congregation was large. It was drawn from a wide area comprising the parishes of Wamphray, Moffat, Kirkpatrick-Juxta, Johnstone, Kirkmichael, Lochmaben, Dryfesdale, Tundergarth, Hutton and Corrie, Applegarth, Eskdalemuir, and even in Ettrick there were adherents. In all the parishes mentioned there was one and sometimes two elders appointed to watch over its church affairs. The session clerk resided in Moffat, seven miles away. The communions were very large gatherings, and the celebration not unlike that described by Burns in his "Holy Fair." Of course the preliminary Fast Day and the Saturday and Monday following the communion, were all observed as preaching days. The "tables" were numerous, and the celebration took the greater part of a long summer day. Gateside Sacrament or Lockerbie Lamb Fair were the alternative holidays bargained for by the country servants in Annandale when accepting a new situation. One does not wonder at that, seeing those two institutions were the most favourable for meeting former fellow servants and renewing old acquaintanceships.

From 1777 till 1847 was the period during which the old relief church had regularly ordained ministers.

At the latter date the once great congregation had dwindled down to very small proportions. The ostensible reason for the formation of the church was the objection of the people to the law of patronage, but the real grievance seems to have been the remissness of the parochial clergymen in the performance of their spiritual duties, in Wamphray particularly,¹ and possibly in all the neighbouring parishes; for as soon as a change of minister occurred in Wamphray, and the clergymen of the neighbouring parishes became fully alive to their spiritual duties among their parishioners, the people gradually returned to the parish church, so, before fifty years elapsed from its formation, Gateside relief church had lost its great influence and widespread importance and popularity, but it did good work both in its former and latter day. From its session records it seems to have been built about the year 1777.

The first stated minister was the Rev. Thomas Marshall. He was ordained in May, 1778, and remained in the charge for nearly four years. Mr. Marshall seems to have possessed high attainments as a preacher. There is still a story told that when his successor was making his first visitation he came across a great admirer of the former minister: "Oh!" quoth she, "he was a gran' an' soon' preacher, Mr. Marshall." Her visitor ventured on a little cross-questioning as to what this grandness and soundness consisted of, but it only drew from her the refrain, "O, it was gran' an' soon', and sae lang too, the vera introduction took a roon' soun' 'oor to deliver, and sae deep, I wad defy mortal man to fathom it." Seemingly what this mortal dame could not comprehend she had appre-

¹ During Mr. Donaldson's ministry.

hended, and set all down and laid it off as a compliment to her late minister's powers as a deep-thinker and his great abilities as a speaker. All the female members of his congregation, however, were not so loquacious over Mr. Marshall's great ability, and even over the soundness. Of their own best behaviour they seem to have had grave doubts, for on entering another house he saluted the occupier with the words, "You are just at your lesson, I see." "Aye," quoth the modest, flustered body, "I'm just reading a chapter of the Bible—Gude forgie me." Mr. Marshall's successor was the Rev. George Halyburton Nicholson. He was ordained in April, 1782, and died in 1792. He is said to have been zealous in the discharge of his ministerial duties, and was very decided against innovations of any description in the service of the relief kirk. He proposed at a presbytery meeting that Mr. Lawson, one of his brethren in Dumfries, should not be allowed to wear the gown that some of the ladies of his congregation had presented to him. His motion was not carried. Mr. Lawson put on the gown, and according to McDowall's *History of Dumfries*, a hundred members of his congregation left and built a church to themselves, the pulpit of which, in after years, was long occupied by the famous Walter Dunlop.

It was many years after Mr. Lawson put on the gown before seceders as a body became reconciled to look at their minister "gang sailing up the 'arra' and mount the pulpit steps wi' a lang tail like a peacock ahint him." Such toggery seemed to them to savour too much of the "Kirk of Rome." Those were the days of essentials only. Mr. Nicholson died in 1792. Five years elapsed before his successor, the Rev.

Decision Laing,¹ was ordained. Mr. Laing received a call from Balfroon (Stirlingshire) congregation, accepted it, and demitted the charge at Gateside in June, 1804. More than a year after, in August, 1805, the Rev. Henry Paterson was ordained pastor of the congregation, and administered to their spiritual wants faithfully and well for two and forty years. He died in Gateside manse, 14th June, 1847. The last member of his family, a Mrs. Marshall, died in Edinburgh a few years ago.

There was a short break in Mr. Paterson's connection with this congregation. In the year 1818 a considerable number of individuals in Halifax, Nova Scotia, wishing to form themselves into a congregation with the Relief Synod, Mr. Paterson was selected and appointed to proceed to Halifax in order to form the congregation, the synod agreeing to supply his pulpit during his absence. Mr. Paterson faithfully carried out his commission by forming a large and respectable congregation. After labouring among them for nine months he returned to Wamphray after an absence of fifteen months. For many years before his death he held the office of clerk to the Relief Presbytery of Dumfries. There was, after Mr. Paterson's death, a vacancy in the pastorate of four years. During the vacancy the congregation built themselves a new church on a different site not far from the old one.

On the 13th February, 1851, the Rev. John Brash

¹ A perusal of the "call" from Balfroon, kindly obtained by the late Rev. Mr. Thomas, Lockerbie, from a granddaughter of Mr. D. Laing, confirms the ancient tradition in Wamphray regarding the high ability as a preacher, and popularity as a minister, of the Rev. Decision Laing, during his seven years stay in Gateside church.

was ordained in the new church, then called the Wamphray United Presbyterian Church. After a ministry of three years and four months he demitted his charge on 27th June, 1854, having accepted a call to the pastorate of the Associate Reformed Church, Jane street, New York, U.S.A.

In December, 1855, the Rev. David Mann was ordained. He left his charge in the autumn of 1870, and removed to Canada, taking up a charge in the county of Huron. He was the last of the regularly ordained ministers. During the vacancy which lasted from 1870 to 1901, the presbytery supplied the pulpit by ministers and students in charge for longer and shorter periods. In 1901 the congregation amalgamated with the Johnstone and Wamphray Free Church.

The last of the ministers in charge, the Rev. Peter Wilson, improved and beautified the church, the manse, and the grounds; and by his pulpit services, his lectures and courses of lectures, did much to raise the spiritual and intellectual life of the district. Indeed the whole walk and conversation of Mr. and Mrs. Wilson, among all denominations in Wamphray and the district around, made their residence there a welcome one and their departure sincerely regretted.

The relief kirk observed the same strict discipline that other churches of that period did anent drinking, profane swearing, fighting, and servile work on Sundays and Fast days. All who indulged in these were subject to one or more days' public rebuke before the congregation, but it went one more, to use a slang phrase, "For a lad and lass walking on the public road doing the preliminaries to marriage, one day's public rebuke was awarded." P's and q's, it would seem,

had to be strictly attended to a century ago. An unluckly chiel once fainted under the vigorous overhauling he was being subjected to, which drew from the administrator the remark, "I'll proceed no farther to-day; no use in pouring water on a drowned mouse."

Among the Wamphray elders of the relief church in its earliest days was Alexander Glencorse, householder in the Hass. His great-grandson, Mr. Rae, is the present master of Wamphray parish school. Robert Sanders, shoemaker in Newton, was an elder of a later date. He was ordained in 1811 and remained in office till his death in 1869, at the great age of ninety-seven years. He had seen the old church in all its glory, saw its once large congregation dwindle down, saw the lease of seventy years run out, saw the first building deserted, and assisted in the erection of the new one and at the election of the two ministers to it.

The choice of a minister is a great event in a presbyterian kirk in either town or country. All the members of the church have a vote, and the adherents volunteer their opinion on the merits of the different candidates also. In country places the "says" and "saws" and sparks and flashes and figures of speech emitted on these occasions, being generally of an agricultural flavour, get a wider circulation than in town, and if at all pat are long remembered and quoted. Every one attends to hear the candidates. The congregation is all attention. The criticism takes a wide range. The first has perhaps the "root o' the maitter" in him, but "we'll hear what the others have to say." The second may have a "flow of eloquence, but nae great body o' maitter." A third may be set aside because of the "lean-

ness" of his prayers. A fourth may have "naething wrang wi' him, but a weakness." Some members want (rieveer like) something to carry away with them when they go to church, and it has happened that a spinster who could not be suspected of "plotting a dainty bit plan to entrap her spiritual teacher" has declared her intention of voting for the "bonniest" man, and so on till all the candidates are heard. Then it is generally found that the majority fix on one who, if he has not a "fling in his gallop," might do. Enquiries into pedigree and other points are set afloat, and if found satisfactory, he gets the charge. Amidst all the frothy talk floating on the surface at the election of ministers, there is a deep undercurrent of anxiety on the part of all to get a good man, and cases of disappointment have raised two other questions: that of "fixity of tenure" and a power in the church to move clergymen round after the methodist fashion.

A precentor in Gateside church, who, perhaps, breaks the record as a leader of psalmody, retired at the age of eighty-two, giving as his reason that the "voice will fail." He sang or rather chanted the tunes to the Psalms of David in the modern, cheerful way, to the satisfaction of the congregation, but, as he had grown "hard of hearing," the minister had to tap him on the head when to stop. That, the old man saw, amused the young people, so he "gied it up."

JOHNSTONE AND WAMPHRAY FREE CHURCH.

This congregation was formed shortly after the Disruption in May, 1843, and was composed chiefly of persons residing in the above named parishes. During the summer, and on towards the autumn, they

had no fixed place of worship, being interdicted from entering lands belonging to any of the proprietors of the district. Mr. Little, Roughlake, allowed the congregation to assemble on the piece of land behind his house, on which was erected, for a short time, a tent. This was finally interdicted, and an arrangement was come to with the minister and congregation of the Relief church at Gateside enabling them to worship there. This arrangement continued for about a year, during which period every effort was made to procure a site, but without avail. At this time, through some disagreement about the hour of worship, it was found necessary to leave Gateside church. This was in the autumn of 1844. Having procured an empty barn at Woodend, Johnstone, this was fitted up as a place of worship, and on the 18th October, 1844, the Rev. Peter Hope was ordained minister of the congregation. The ceremony took place in Woodendholm, close to the river Annan, a little to the south of the farmhouse. Mr. Hope was a very able and prudent man, and successfully steered the young congregation through its early difficulties and dangers. After leaving Woodend barn worship was held in a canvas tent erected close by Jocksthorncottage. In little more than a year a site for a church and manse was granted by Mr. Hope Johnstone, and there, at Jocksthorncottage, the congregation of the Free church of Johnstone and Wamphray found a resting-place from its wanderings. Mr. Hope laboured successfully for twenty-six years, working diligently in pulpit, Sunday school, Bible class for adults, and always most attentive to the sick and the poor among his people. The Bible and Confession of Faith were

the text-books for his adult Bible class. There was a library for the Sunday-school children, and also one suited to the members of the Bible class.

The sort of mediæval custom of treating and tripping as aids to Christianity had not then come into fashion. Religion, like everything else, was run on more Spartan lines sixty years ago. Parents inculcated into their children then that Bible knowledge was such a valuable thing in itself that no opportunity of acquiring it should be lost, and also deeply impressed upon them their indebtedness to those who imparted it to them. It were useless to speak against a system that is so popular and so universal; yet there are old-fashioned folks who fear that under it Sunday-school scholars may look upon treats and trips as the essential, and the real reason for attending Sunday school as quite a secondary matter.

There have been five clergymen in the Johnstone and Wamphray Free Church since Mr. Hope's time. His immediate successor, Mr. McQueen, was translated first to Kilmarnock, thence to a church in Campbeltown, where he still is. Mr. Murdoch, who followed Mr. McQueen, died in the charge, to the grief of his people and all acquainted with him. Mr. Barr, his successor, accepted a call from a church in Glasgow and is still there. Mr. Young followed Mr. Barr in Wamphray, and this year accepted a call from a congregation in Renfrew. The departure of Mr. Young to his new charge, and the ordination of Mr. Alexander to Johnstone and Wamphray United Free Church, were events of the summer of 1906.

As in other parishes, and indeed more than in many, church questions were agitating Wamphray

folk long before '43. Lay lecturers were sent round to show the superiority of a state church to voluntaryism. Indeed dissenters were not reckoned a church at all; they were called "meeting-house folk" in those days. From '40-'43 was a time of much hot speech, in pulpit, on platform, by the fireside, and on the road. "By Babel's streams" was often sung at Sunday service. The woes of the church were all the topic. Even children at school prolonged the cry, and for want of argument called one another "Nons" and "Mos" (moderates), and sometimes came to blows. Nothing else got its innings — church, church, was all the cry. Some there were who, able to separate church from Christianity proper, thought the great talk about church a "deavance," but as the multitude looked upon both as one and the same thing, such folk were set down as stupids or careless "Gallios," fit only for the "house of Rimmon" or elsewhere. By '43 everyone that would listen could not misunderstand the state of affairs in the church. Every seventh day its woes were explained, not to speak of week-day lectures and showers of leaflets ever falling. Non-intrusion, being a practical question, was easily and thoroughly understood by all. Spiritual independence was much talked of too, but, being a more subtle question, was not so fully grasped by the many. The heat and the bitterness that once prevailed, the stand-offishness of one dissenting body towards another and towards the mother church they left, and the attitude of the church towards those who left her, have by time been greatly modified; and to the laity at least, the late interchange of pulpits among presbyterians of every name has given great satisfaction, and is looked

on as an evidence that the narrow and intolerant views of sect are yielding to the broader and better principles of Christianity.

Among the early elders in this church occur the names of John Carruthers, Mains, Johnstone; Crichton Lochhart, Cleughhead, Johnstone; and from Wamphray, John Pagan and James Porteous, were among the first.