Extract from:-

A Popular History of the Free Churches.

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in Scotland, and whose "Crook in the Lot" has attained the distinction of a sacred classic. Boston was of the fibre of the Covenanters. His father had suffered much for Covenanting zeal, and Thomas Boston, as a boy, had shared his father's hardships, and embraced his spirit. He grew up in passionate attachment to the freedom and privilege of the Church. He refused to owe anything to patrons, and in consequence fulfilled his ministry in very lowly places. But his writings, together with his remarkable personality, won for him immense influence among the people. He had published the "Marrow" as expressing the evangelical interpretation of Christianity; and as such it was regarded by the moderate majority of the Assembly. In 1720 the Assembly solemnly warned the country against the book, and insisted that all ministers should preach against it. The effect of this resolution was to call to the front certain representative leaders of the evangelical party, and at the next Assembly Thomas Boston, Ebenezer and Ralph Erskine, and nine other ministers entered a plea on behalf of the book, and were "admonished and rebuked" by their brethren.

The men thus censured were by no means dismayed. They might be weak in the Assembly, but they stood for what was deepest in the life and strongest in the faith of the Scottish people, and they knew it. If the congregations had been allowed to call their own ministers there would have been less lukewarmness and semi-rationalism in the Assembly. The spirit which Boston and the Erskines manifested in the Assembly awakened response in the country. Congregations began to claim their ancient privileges, and to discover that their liberties had been stolen while they slept. The rights of the people were asserted over against the so-called rights of patrons. When ministers were

installed in parish livings contrary to the wishes of the parishioners, they had sometimes to be defended by a company of dragoons. But every such victory of the State over the Church was in reality a new argument for the advocates of freedom. It was seen to be a monstrous thing that the election of a minister in the Church of Christ should have to be supported by pikes and muskets. Sometimes the local presbytery refused to take part in the induction of a patron's nominee against the will of the people; then the less scrupulous Assembly sent down members of its own, who came to be known as a "riding committee," to carry through the distasteful proceedings.

It was high time that Scotland should find some Luther to protest against the secularisation of the Church under this system of patronage. Ebenezer Erskine was the man for the hour. By virtue alike of his ancestry and his convictions he was admirably qualified for the part he was about to play. It is a fact of great interest, as linking the Free Church movement in Scotland to the elder Nonconformity, that Ebenezer Erskine was the son of an ejected minister. His father, Henry Erskine, had been among the two thousand who gave up their livings on Bartholomew's Day, in 1662. He was at this time parish minister at Cornhill, Norham, Northumberland. After his ejection he pursued his ministry in Scotland with such secrecy as was needful, but in 1679 he was charged with preaching at conventicles, and having answered boldly, "I have my commission from Christ, and though I were within an hour of my death I durst not lay it down at the feet of any mortal man," he was sent to prison, and afterwards banished from Scotland. How he lived during the next seven or eight years is difficult to realise. He is said to have had altogether thirty-three

children, and some of the stories of his privations are at once pathetic and heroic. Perhaps Henry Erskine's most fruitful work was the conversion of Thomas Boston, whose influence in his generation was second to that of no spiritual teacher in Scotland.

The heir of such a legacy of moral constancy and spiritual power, Ebenezer Erskine proved himself abundantly worthy of the privilege. Born in 1680, and educated at Edinburgh University, he became subsequently chaplain and tutor in the family of the Earl of Rothes, and afterwards parish minister of Portmoak in Fifeshire. Early in his ministry there he passed through a spiritual crisis which deepened his religious convictions, and intensified his earnestness. As Christ became more central to his own thoughts, the authority of Christ became to him more absolute in the government of the Church. We have seen how he identified himself with Thomas Boston's protest in the "Marrow" controversy. But the occasion was at hand which would make even more severe trial of his manhood. In 1731 he had been promoted from Portmoak to Stirling; and in 1732, as moderator of the Synod of Perth and Stirling, he delivered the famous sermon which forced to an issue the great controversy concerning patronage. The text of his sermon was, "The stone which the builders rejected, the same is made the headstone of the corner." In the course of his sermon he maintained that if a man would be a true builder in the Church of Christ he must have a twofold call, the call of God and of the Church. "The call of the Church lies in the free choice and election of the Christian people." The "family" of God is "the freest society in the world." Was it likely that God would set over it patrons, heritors—those whose spiritual qualification was that they possessed a certain quantity of land? By the Act of the Assembly, confining power

EBENEZER ERSKINE.

of election to heritors and elders, "a new wound is given to the prerogative of Christ and the privilege of His subjects." Finally there is this great declaration: "Whatever Church authority may be in that Act, yet it wants the authority of the Son of God." The Assembly was rejecting the Corner-stone—" He is rejected in His poor members and the rich of this world put in His room."

The courage of this sermon was as conspicuous as its truth. By all accounts, there was a nobility and dignity about Ebenezer Erskine that lent influence and authority to his message. His portraits acquaint us with a singularly impressive and interesting face, and we know that his figure was imposing, and his demeanour fearless if somewhat austere. He must have known what reception awaited his sermon. The Synod promptly condemned it and demanded Erskine's submission. He appealed to the General Assembly, and was supported in his protest by Alexander Moncrieff, of Abernethy, William Wilson, of Perth, James Fisher, of Kinclaven, and ten other ministers. When the appeal was heard in 1733, only the above-named ministers appeared. The Assembly was overwhelmingly on the side of the Synod, and against Erskine. They refused to listen to the reading of his declaration, whereupon he laid it on the table, and with the three ministers who supported him, withdrew from the Assembly. When they had left, a member of the Assembly picked up the declaration, and, it is said, read it in a bitter and mocking tone. Great exasperation was produced ; and a motion commanding the four protesters to appear immediately and answer for their conduct was carried without dissent. A committee was appointed to confer with them, and when it had reported adversely, it was intimated to them that they would be allowed till August to repent and to retract their opinions. If they refused they would be

suspended from their ministry, and if they persisted they would render themselves liable to the severer penalty. The threat had no effect upon men whose attitude throughout had been due to deliberate conviction, and in November, 1733, the four ministers were formally cast out of the Church, and their charges declared to be vacant. On the 5th of December, 1733, they met at Gairney Bridge, near Kinross, and constituted the first Associate Presbytery.

It was soon realised by the General Assembly that their zeal had outrun their discretion. Testimonies as to the worth and excellence of the ejected ministers poured in upon them. The Presbytery and the magistrates of Stirling testified with enthusiasm to the rare qualities of Erskine. The Presbytery declared that even the authority of an Assembly condemning him could not injure his character, and that in this case the condemnation had only heightened it. The Assembly began to entertain thoughts of reconciliation. The seceders should be restored to their charges, and nothing be said about the past. But this sprinkling of rose-water over a gangrened wound was mere trifling to the protesters. They had testified on behalf of a cause. So long as the liberties and privileges of the Church of Christ were denied they could not consent to return to the State Church. From all parts of Scotland came encouraging reports, and in 1737 four other ministers, including Ralph Erskine, the younger brother of Ebenezer Erskine, joined the Associate Presbytery. Meanwhile Mr. Wilson had been set apart as a professor for training young men for the ministry. So resolutely and systematically had the organisation of the new Free Church begun.

Of all the fathers of the Secession none was more notable than Ralph Erskine. His quaint and sometimes brilliant imagination was combined with intellectual

strength and a heart of real charity and catholicity. In his declaration of the reasons for separation he recognises the "bad tendency" of division, and records his resolution "to shun divisive principles and practices." "The safest way," he proceeds, "for preserving peace being to cleave to Jesus Christ, who is the centre of all true and holy union, and to advance the truth as it is in Him, I therefore think myself obliged . . . to take the present opportunity of joining in what I reckon a faithful testimony." This is the man to whom Whitefield acknowledged his indebtedness, and of whom Andrew Fuller declared that his words had "awakened him to conviction and melted him to tears." He was known throughout Scotland by his little volume of "Gospel Sonnets," a quaint collection of sacred verse, with conceits as curious as Quarles's "Emblems," if with less of metrical merit.

Let it not for a moment be supposed that these pioneers of ecclesiastical freedom in Scotland were emancipated from all the unworthy prejudices of their time. It is possible to convict them of a lack of political sagacity on the ground of their dissent from the Act of Union of Scotland and England. Like John Wesley, and like the New England Puritans, they were careful to set on record their belief in witchcraft, and objection to the repeal of the cruel laws against it. They expressed an enthusiasm for the Covenants, which betrays the fact that they had not grasped how serious an infringement of religious liberty and discouragement of theological progress the Covenants had been. But in regard to their central protest on behalf of the prerogative of the Church of Christ they have been abundantly justified. Very solemn and very stirring were the scenes in their various parishes when the doors of the churches where they had so often ministered were closed against them.