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Edward Irving, a Shooting Star in a Presbyterian Pulpit

So how did this educated Presbyterian son of an Annan tanner achieve the transitory glory of a 'shooting star' in the London of the post-Regency period?

Edward Irving himself at the start of his meteoric career would have had no doubts. On his eighteenth birthday, the 4th of August 1810, he observed in his Diary, "It is at present my intention to become a Clergyman of the Church of Scotland – and with this view I have studied at the University four successive winters."

In 1821 the congregation of the struggling Caledonian Chapel at Cross Street, Hatton Garden were in need of a new minister.

By this time Irving was a not altogether successful assistant to the pre-eminent Dr Thomas Chalmers at the Tron Church in Glasgow. Although a hardworking and sympathetic visitor of the poor, his preaching was not to the taste of the congregation and it was not unknown for people to exit the church on hearing that Edward Irving was to take the service.

Edward must have felt truly tested. There seemed no prospect of him getting a church in Glasgow, and he was aware of his unpopularity as a preacher. At this low ebb came deliverance which he described in the dedication of his book *The Last Days*: "Well do I remember the morning when, as I sat in my lonely apartment, meditating the uncertainties of a preacher's calling, and revolving in my mind the purposes of missionary work, this stranger stepped in upon my musing, and opened to me the commission with which he had been charged". The stranger was Mr Laurie, one of the elders of the Caledonian Chapel, who, while on business in Glasgow had 'talent spotted' him. The charge was to ask Edward to undertake a four-week trial as minister at the Chapel in London.

This is not to say that Irving did not have some slight doubts. After all London was a long way from home but the fact that it was the London elders who had approached him, endorsed his belief that this was his genuine call from God, because "Your invitation has come without any endeavour on my part ..."

Needless to say the trial was a success, and he was offered the job. Indeed, so keen were they to have him that the obligatory need for the pastor to preach in Gaelic was obviated by the Elders getting a Bill passed to annul this requirement.

If he had had any doubts they surely must have been assuaged by the increasing congregation, with the approval of his preaching, and a doubled stipend, which he was only too eager to share with his life-long friend, Thomas Carlyle. "I have received the call most respectably signed, and what with subscriptions and the first of the Seat-rents, the security of £500 a year, so that I trust being able to entertain you yet in London as every honest hearted

fellow should be entertained.” And so on the 16th October, 1822 he was inducted into the Caledonian Chapel.

To paraphrase Jane Austen, “It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single minister in possession of a good living must be in want of a wife.”

This did not prove as simple as it appeared. Unbeknown to his great friend Thomas, he had fallen in love with Jane Welsh who he had tutored in Haddington as an intelligent child of ten, and who he had met again in Edinburgh when she was eighteen, and by this time extremely pretty. He had, however, introduced Jane to Thomas Carlyle who had also succumbed to her charms. As if this was not complication enough, Edward had much earlier become engaged to Isabella Martin, the daughter of the Manse at Kirkcaldy, and engagements at that period were legally binding. A fact Jane Welsh and Thomas Carlyle would have known.

He proposed to Jane, but although she too loved him, the scandal that would have ensued could have ruined his budding career. So she refused him and eventually married Thomas Carlyle. We know this because of a letter she sent to Thomas shortly before their marriage:

“I told you that I did not care for Edward Irving, took pains to make you believe this. – It was false. I loved him – must I say it – once passionately loved him ... I showed weakness in loving one whom I knew to be engaged to another, I made amends in persuading him to marry that other and preserve his honour from reproach.”

Carlyle’s blunt declaration in a letter to his brother John that Isabella was “dead ugly” was not kind but he mitigated this by adding that although “without any notable gifts of mind or manners or appearance, contrives to be in general extremely agreeable.” She also proved to be a loving, loyal and supportive wife.

But if this was not quite the marriage Irving intended, he was married and things were about to look up.

In 1823, shortly after his marriage, one Sunday, George Canning, then Foreign Secretary and Leader of the House, was brought by Sir James Mackintosh to hear Irving preach. Later in the House of Commons, discussing the connection between high talent and high pay for ministers, Canning said that the most eloquent sermon he had ever listened to was by a Scotch Minister trained in one of the most poorly endowed churches and now preaching in one of her outlying dependencies.”

We now live in an age when we are fed with a plethora of entertainment twenty four hours a day but in those amusement hungry times, a stirring sermon was not to be despised to enliven a boring Sunday.

The bon-ton flocked to Hatton Garden to the extent that it was admission by ticket only and others waited outside in hope of obtaining a seat. And Irving’s sermons were good value for as one William Jones observed in a biographical sketch of him, “accordingly he began to deal out his fulminations against both

princes and people, with an unsparing hand.” Great fun providing you were not the target of his castigations.

In addition to this new found fame, a new church was being built in Regent Square, and in July, 1824 Edward, the first of Irving’s eight children, was born. Thomas Carlyle in a letter to Jane Welsh bore witness to Irving’s devotion as a father. “Visit him at any time, you find him dry-nursing his off-spring; speak to him, he direct your attention to the form of its nose, the manner of its waking and sleeping and feeding and digesting; he dandles it fondly and gracefully as a she-bear does her cub; he asks you twice a minute (if he dare ask) whether it is not a pretty boy; sometimes he attempts a hideous chaunt to it by way of lullaby.” A besotted father indeed, and if only the story could have ended here.

However, the canker, which was to be Edward’s ultimate downfall, had already been planted. Between 1823 and 1826 he met the three men who were to encourage and confirm his change to a millennial and Christological theology; Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Henry Drummond the banker and Hatley Frere.

Indeed, in October, 1825 when in Kirkcaldy, awaiting the birth of his second child, he wrote a letter to his church members in London:

“I have been occupied all the day with finishing of a work upon those prophecies which have respect to the papacy and to infidelity, which I trust the Lord will bless of the stirring up of the church to expect speedily the Coming of the Lord.”

Then in 1826 Irving translated and published a book written by a Chilean Jesuit, Manuel Lacunza: “The Coming of Christ in Glory and Majesty.

Lucunza’s work lay in its futurism with reference to the interpretation of the book of Revelation. Irving’s contribution was his discussion of the charismatic outpouring he expected to occur just prior to the Lord’s return.

Further in November 1826, Drummond held the first of the conferences at his house at Albury in Surrey and among other declarations it was recorded, “That Mr Irving has come forward as a mark for the Infidel to shoot at, and as a standard for the Believer to rally to.” An invitation, which the “Infidels” were not to ignore.

Meanwhile, the tragedy occurred which, I believe, was decisive to Edward Irving’s embrace of his millennial and Christological beliefs; his beloved little Edward had died, aged fifteen months on the 11th October 1825.

In 1827 the new National Scottish Church in Regent Square was consecrated attended by the nobility and gentry, and an inaugural sermon by Dr Chalmers; about which the good doctor complained that his patience had been thoroughly tried by Irving who had preceded the doctor’s address with one of his own lasting a mere hour and a half! Short by Irving’s standards!

The creation of the church had been attended by a certain amount of dissention. In 1824 a piece of freehold ground had been found and purchased for £1,500 in Regent Square, and a suitable architect was to be selected by competition advertised in *The Times*. However, the design finally selected was not the winning entry, which was a submission by Robert Wallace.

The Highland Society did not consider the nominated design worthy of the Church of Scotland and the Scottish Nation and it was discarded in favour of the entry which had come third; a gothic construction by William Tite, reminiscent of York Minster with its twin towers and costing £21,000 against the £12,000 quoted by Wallace.

Wallace was so incensed by his treatment that he published a pamphlet describing how after some weeks he was summoned before the Building Committee, assured that they still held a high opinion of his drawings but 'unforeseen circumstances' had prevented their use. He was offered 50 guineas for his trouble and the return of his plans, an offer he promptly refused complaining that the 5 weeks deliberation by the Committee had cost him time and would damage his reputation. It should be added that the church's choice in the pursuit of grandeur with its extra financial burden was later to give them much anxiety. Nor did this new church accommodate the larger congregation it was built for as the first enthusiastic attendances began to diminish and the bon-ton moved on to other amusements.

1827: On 10 July, less than two months after his church had relocated in Regent square, Irving preached the keynote sermon in London for the anniversary meeting of the Gospel Tract Society. In the course of his address, he made reference to the Incarnation, stating that when the Word became man, He "took upon himself a body like ours". He also mentioned the coming of the Son "under accursed conditions." It appears that certain attendees were offended by these references to Christ's humanity, and afterwards reported to the Rev. Henry Cole, a former Anglican clergyman, some of the substance of what they had heard.

The Rev Cole became one of the first 'Infidels' to attack Irving. Even though Irving had entreated him to meet and discuss their differences, Cole published a tract addressed to Irving "in refutation of the awful doctrines of the sinfulness, mortality and corruptibility of the body of Jesus Christ,"

In May 1828 Irving undertook a successful tour of 12 days in Scotland prior to the General Assembly in Edinburgh lecturing on the book of Revelation at gatherings at 6 o'clock in the morning.

During his tour he preached for John McLeod Campbell of Row and also to the congregation of Robert Story of Rosneath. One a new friend, the other an old one. He also was introduced to A.J.Scott who became Irving's assistant in London. And it was there that he converted McLeod Campbell and Scott to his belief in Christ's universal redemption, which was a denial of Calvin's teaching.

Some blamed Irving when the large crowd he gathered at Kirkcaldy parish church to hear him, caused an overcrowded balcony to collapse on the audience below, killing 35 people, which was seen as God's punishment for his wrong theology.

In 1830 he published *The Orthodox and Christian Doctrine of Our Lord's Human Nature*, which caused further great controversy and expanded the opposition against him.

At this point the London Presbytery tried to proceed against him, but as Irving had been ordained in Scotland they held no authority over him and on October 19th he simply voluntarily withdrew his membership of it. Although the Presbytery determined to try him in absentia, and condemned him for holding heretical views, at this point he still had the support of his own congregation and the Kirk Session of Regent Square countered the condemnation by issuing a public statement acknowledging their agreement with their pastor's position

Then in March of 1830 in Scotland the charisma of 'speaking in tongues' by the Holy Ghost were manifested.

Edward Irving attended a meeting of the group of London men who had journeyed to the West of Scotland to investigate and they confirmed their belief that the people experiencing the visitation of the Holy Spirit were genuine. Indeed one of their number went so far as to marry one of them.

One of these group of believers, a John Cardale, began home prayer meetings on the expectation of the Spirit's outpourings, and in April 1831, it was his wife who first gave utterance.

Irving, too, was invoking the visitation of tongues at Regent Square, with 6.30 am prayer meetings. Then on the 30th October, 1831 during a regular Sunday morning service a Miss Hall burst forth with utterances. The next day it was unfavourably reported in *The Times* but the church was inundated with the believers, the sensation hunters and other undesirables.

Irving managed to restore order and the outpourings were to be confined to the 6.30 pm service only.

The majority of the Kirk Session, some of who were also trustees of the National Scotch Church, disapproved. They did not believe this was the voice of God, and nor did others including, Irving's father and brother-in-law, Coleridge, his assistant Scott and his friend Thomas Carlyle. This did not, however, deter Irving. When the Session summoned him to a meeting, he simply refused to meet them. Whereupon they turned the case over to the Presbytery, complaining that lay people were allowed to take over the church, that women were permitted to interrupt the services and that time was given over to these outrages.

The Presbytery called Irving before them on 26th April 1832, and the night before the hearing one Robert Baxter who had himself prophesied in the spirit, called on Irving and told him that he had come to believe his messages were false and from the devil and begged him to ban the tongues. It was useless.

On May 2nd Edward Irving was considered unfit to remain a minister of the National Scottish Church, Regent Square and when arriving to take the 6.30 am service, he found himself and the congregation locked out. He was star of his pulpit no more.

Alternative premises were found in the painter Benjamin West's old exhibition hall in Gray's Inn Road and after some five months they moved away from Bloomsbury to a more permanent home in Newman Street, where the Catholic Apostolic Church was born. But that is another story.