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William Webb

Thomas Erskine of Linlathan, near Dundee (1788-1870), was not widely known in his own time. He was by profession an advocate in the Scottish legal system, but was willing to give up this work when he inherited the estate which (to distinguish him from other Thomas Erskines) is often linked to his name. On leaving his profession he devoted himself to the study of theology, with intervals of travel in Europe. He published a number of books, of which the most characteristic seems to be *The Unconditional Freeness of the Gospel*, 1828. But his surprisingly strong influence on the religious life of his time was more the result of correspondence and conversation than of what he published. His friends included famous men such as Thomas Carlyle, F. D. Maurice and George MacDonald, who were all attracted to what has been called his intensely sympathetic nature.

It was an age of controversy, in religion, and if Erskine had become a minister he would no doubt have found himself in conflict with his church authorities, as George MacDonald and the latter’s friend A. J. Scott unhappily were—among a number of others. Nicholas Needham’s substantial new book includes full accounts of the deposing of John Campbell and A. J. Scott from their ministries, in spite of the blameless characters of both, for “heretical” beliefs. Possibly MacDonald sometimes felt envious of the secure financial position of Erskine when he himself had lost his job on account of over-liberal beliefs, and had only his writings to supply the demands of a large family. There is a brief glimpse, of Erskine in MacDonald’s newly published *Letters*: “the dear, good, humble, wise old man!” This is from a letter of 1860 written in Edinburgh; MacDonald was defending his friend from an attack presumably from a legalistic Calvinist. [end of page 56]

Erskine’s attitude to Calvinism (specifically Scottish Evangelical Calvinism) in the earlier part of his long life is the main topic of Nicholas Needham’s study. He writes for an academic not a general audience, but he gives us as much help as possible with a glossary and other appendices. He outlines the five points of Calvinism for us: “total depravity; unconditional election; limited atonement; irresistible grace; perseverance.” All these need a great deal of further explanation of course. Readers of George MacDonald may perhaps
content themselves with a sample Scottish Calvinist in the grandmother of Robert Falconer in the novel of that name. The old lady destroys the hero’s dearest possession, a violin, with deliberate intent—shocking the modern reader and probably most readers of the nineteenth century also—but in her view helping to save his immortal soul. (In our own time, a well known Scottish psychiatrist, R.D. Laing, has confessed that his mother did the same thing with one of his most beloved toys, and for the same reason, so this kind of thinking may not be dead even yet.)

Erskine’s writings, even in the limited period covered by the book, reveal a certain “dogmatic flux” (Needham’s phrase), and were naturally liable to development and change. I have read that Erskine did not ultimately regret his own Calvinistic upbringing and showed some tolerance and even respect for that belief. Yet in his earlier years he attacked it fiercely as a “serpent,” and wrote:

Even the Church of Rome is not as bad as those who deny that God is love to every man and that Christ is the propitiation of the sins of the whole world.

The gentle retiring scholar could be violent in his hostility to doctrines which were so hateful to him.

Needham’s book is basically an academic thesis which does not try to provide an intimate portrait or personal close-up of its subject. He closes his chosen period with the year that Victoria became queen. But what we have—a full account of Erskine as a theologian and controversialist, plus a very detailed background showing the fate of many of the contemporary “heretics”—could hardly be more thoroughly done. [57]