Nevile Davidson

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A Life to Be Lived

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WIPF & STOCK • Eugene, Oregon

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Wipf & Stock
An Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers
199 W. 8th Ave., Suite 3
Eugene, OR 97401

www.wipfandstock.com

PAPERBACK ISBN: 978-1-5326-8780-8
HARDCOVER ISBN: 978-1-5326-8781-5
EBOOK ISBN: 978-1-5326-8782-2

Manufactured in the U.S.A. SEPTEMBER 13, 2019

"Christianity is not only a creed to be believed—it is a life to be lived."
—Nevile Davidson, September 1938

Dr. A. Nevile Davidson as Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in Edinburgh in 1962, accompanied by his wife Peggy. (Photo: Falkirk Herald)

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Foreword

Visitors to Glasgow Cathedral will not always realize how much its beauty and its atmosphere owe to the vision of one man who was its minister in the central decades of the twentieth century. It is excellent news that Andrew Ralston has now given us a full account of that man's life and achievement.

Many of us are fortunate to be able to look back on one or two people who had a profound impact on our early life and helped to shape what became of us later. Nevile Davidson was one such for me. As well as being our minister he was a close friend of my parents and a frequent visitor to our home in Milngavie. From as far back as I can remember I enjoyed and looked forward to his visits, not because he played children's games or took me out to kick a ball around, but because he had an amazing faculty for enabling my sister and me to meet him on what felt like common ground. In his company it seemed natural for a grown-up and a small child to talk about things on equal terms. It was the start of a relationship that was precious to me for the rest of his life, and I gained much from his guidance and his wisdom.

With his patrician appearance, elegant manners and unfailing courtesy, Nevile may have given an initial impression of remoteness, and indeed he never quite outgrew the mould of Edwardian gentleman in which he had been cast. To those who engaged with him, though, he was not in the least remote. My father's elder's district was Townhead, where many of the poorest members of the Cathedral lived, often in severely sub-standard housing. He told us how much the minister enjoyed visiting those homes, and how much his visits were enjoyed.

The distinguished churchman who convened influential Assembly committees, served as president of several societies, was appointed moderator of the General Assembly and awarded the St. Mungo Prize for service

to the City of Glasgow, held in some respects a simple and uncomplicated faith. I recall him stating, during a discussion of common cups and individual glasses at communion services, his absolute conviction that no-one had ever, or would ever, come to harm through participation in the sacrament. Arguments based on fear or concerns about hygiene were, to him, irrelevant. Yet he had a formidable intellect, and was well able to debate deep theological and philosophical issues, especially in the ecumenical endeavor to which he was passionately committed.

Andrew Ralston has spent several years making regular visits to the National Library of Scotland to study Nevile's diaries and other papers stored there. It is wonderful that Andrew's work has now resulted in the fullest account so far published of a man who is now directly remembered by only a few, but who was for many of my generation the ideal model of a parish minister.

—David M. Beckett

Acknowledgements

I AM GRATEFUL TO many people who contributed in various ways to the production of this book:

Dr. James Macaulay, Ailene Hunter and Alison Gifford of the Society of Friends of Glasgow Cathedral for their interest in and support for the project;

Heather Beadling (Glasgow Cathedral administrator), Elizabeth I'Anson (Glasgow Cathedral librarian), Sheila Allan, Shona French and Jessie Summers for the use of archive material and photographs;

Dr. Margaret Beckett, Henty and Alan Diack, Alex and Ellen Findlay, Margaret Hamilton, Rev. Hugh Kerr, Rev. Dr. Johnston McKay, David Martin, Patricia Miller and Rev. Dr. Henry Sefton for sharing personal memories of Nevile Davidson;

Gregor Smith for original artwork depicting buildings associated with Dr. Davidson;

Jill Buchanan for permission to reproduce photographs of Nevile Davidson which originally appeared in the *Falkirk Herald;*

The Herald and Times Group for permission to reproduce photographs of Nevile Davidson which originally appeared in the *Glasgow Herald;*

David Palmer (www.photoscot.co.uk) for converting slides into digital images;

Sandra Kramer (Wild Goose Publications) for the photograph of Lord MacLeod of Fuinary;

Jack Stevenson for the photograph of the Nativity painting which hangs in the nave of Glasgow Cathedral;

Dr. Neil A. Macdonald, Norman F. Shead and Rev. Dr. Sandy Forsyth for their advice on chapters of the book in draft form. Any errors are, of course, my own responsibility;

Rev. David M. Beckett and Emeritus Professor W. Ian P. Hazlett who not only read and commented on much of the manuscript but have been unstinting in their encouragement throughout the whole process;

and, finally, my wife Hazel for sharing the task of working through the many volumes of Dr. Davidson's diaries held in the Special Collections Department of the National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh.

Introduction

"No-one can write the life of a man but himself, but in writing it he disguises it; he shows himself as he wants to be seen."

—Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 1712–1778: Confessions

One Saturday evening in March 1923, a twenty-four year old student set off from the family home in North Berwick on the east coast of Scotland to put his recently acquired motorcycle through its paces. There were few cars around in those days but when he encountered a Model T Ford on the road to Haddington he decided to race the driver for the next five miles. The young man already had quite a reputation for daring exploits on two wheels: as a schoolboy he used to impress his friends by fearlessly riding his bicycle along the top of a wall, a trick which earned him the nickname "Nevile the Devil."

Those who later knew the Very Rev. Dr. A. Nevile Davidson as the minister of Glasgow Cathedral would find it extremely difficult to imagine him taking part in such youthful escapades. During his thirty-two years at the Cathedral Davidson acquired a formidable reputation as a dignified—some even thought saintly—man of the cloth. His appearance, speech and manner were characterized by formality and he always conducted himself with the greatest of decorum. One elder who turned up at a kirk session meeting dressed in sports jacket and flannels instead of a suit was taken aside by the minister at the end and politely reminded, "country clothes for the country, town clothes for the town." No member of the congregation would have dreamed of addressing Nevile Davidson by his Christian name. After one Sunday service, people shaking hands with the minister were

taken aback to hear someone greet him as "Nevile"—only to breathe a sigh of relief when it later emerged that the visitor was in fact his cousin. Even his wife, when giving a talk to a ladies' group about the couple's world tour in 1962, referred throughout to "my husband" and never once mentioned him by name.

But there was more to Dr. Davidson than dignity and distance. One of his successors as minister of the Cathedral, the late Rev. Dr. Laurence Whitley, remarked that "Nevile Davidson always struck me as something of an enigma. He seemed on the outside to be austere and yet was very good with people and they always warmed to him." Many of those who met him came away saying, "he would listen to you in a way that made you feel you were the only person there."

Any quest to find the man behind the public image is likely to begin with the two books that came from his pen: *Reflections of a Scottish Churchman* (1965), a selection of sermons and addresses which gives some idea of Nevile Davidson's theological views, and the autobiography finished shortly before his sudden death in 1976 which appeared posthumously under the title *Beginnings but no Ending*. This provides a straightforward narrative of his career. Born in North Berwick in 1899, he studied at Edinburgh University and followed his father into the ministry of the United Free Church of Scotland in 1924.[1] His first charge was St. Mary's, Aberdeen, and during his time there the reunion of the United Free Church and the Church of Scotland took place, so that he became a minister of the latter denomination. After two years at St. Enoch's Church in Dundee (1932–4) he was called to Glasgow Cathedral, where he remained until he retired in 1967, apart from a short period as an army chaplain during the second World War. He served as moderator of the General Assembly in 1962 and traveled worldwide representing the Church of Scotland. In retirement he returned to live in the East Lothian area where he had been brought up and continued to be very active in church affairs, particularly in the field of ecumenical relations, regularly attending committee meetings in Edinburgh and doing pulpit supply.

Yet *Beginnings but no Ending* does not tell the full story. Writing in the Foreword, his friend Rev. Dr. James Bulloch notes that "a great deal is

1. Throughout this book, frequent reference is made to the various Presbyterian denominations in Scotland. Readers unfamiliar with these are referred the Appendix on page 199 for an explanation of the terminology used.

left untold in these pages."[2] Conversations and correspondence with former colleagues and parishioners reveal a very human figure, with a sense of humor, a love of nature and animals, and an almost child-like pleasure in simple things. On a visit to friends in the West End of Glasgow one November 5—bonfire night—his hostess remembers him running to the window to watch the fireworks as excitedly as any schoolboy. He delighted in telling stories about amusing experiences, such as the time on a family outing near the Davidsons' holiday home at Nethy Bridge when their entire picnic was eaten by a cow. This he found so hilarious that it did not bother him in the least that there was nothing to eat!

As well as drawing on people's reminiscences, the present volume makes use of a largely unexplored archive of written material in the form of Nevile Davidson's correspondence files and the personal diaries he kept between 1920–9 and 1942–1976 which meticulously chronicle every detail of his daily activities, from the books he read to when he had a haircut. Three years after his death, his wife Peggy deposited this extensive collection in the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh where it has lain ever since.

These documents shed light on a very different side of one of the most distinguished Scottish churchmen of the twentieth century and show him to be someone who still has much of value to say to the church today.

2. Davidson, *Beginnings, vii*

1

"Not Enough of a Scholar"

CHILDHOOD AND STUDENT DAYS, 1899–1924

Near the village of Inchture, about nine miles west of Dundee, lies the historic seat of the Kinnaird family—a fine nineteenth century country house known as Rossie Priory, surrounded by a 2000 acre estate.

Some time in the 1890s the Rev. James Davidson (1853–1930), a minister of the Free Church of Scotland, received an invitation to stay there. He was not a member of the landed gentry but what used to be described in Scotland as a "lad o' pairts"—a gifted individual from humble origins who succeeds in life through education. Brought up in the "bracing, simple surroundings" of his father's small farm at Mains of Dudwick, near Ellon, James excelled as a pupil at New Pitsligo Parish School and, in spite of financial hardship, went on to gain degrees from the Universities of Edinburgh and Aberdeen. During his visit to Rossie Priory, he met a young lady from a very different social background: Rosina Constance Agnew, daughter of Sir Andrew Agnew (1818–92), MP for Wigtownshire. Sir Andrew had five sons and eight daughters, one of whom (Mary) had married Arthur Fitzgerald, the 11th Lord Kinnaird—hence the house party at Rossie. Although Constance had been brought up as an Episcopalian at her home at Lochnaw Castle, Wigtownshire, the Agnew family had connections with the Free Church and Sir Andrew's younger brother, the Rev. David Agnew, had been ordained by the Free Presbytery of Ayr shortly after the Disruption of 1843 when nearly a third of the ministers and members of the Established Church left to form the Free Church.

Nowadays, it is very difficult to imagine the opulence of the great aristocratic houses of more than a century ago. Rossie Priory was a vast edifice in Regency Gothic style, described in the *Ordnance Survey Gazetteer of Scotland* for 1885 as "a superb, monastic-looking pile, spacious and elegant within, [containing] a valuable collection of antiquities, chiefly Roman."[1] Arthur, the 11th Lord Kinnaird (1847–1923), spent much of his time in London but returned each year for the shooting season; a typical season's "bag" comprised 5,000 rabbits, 698 partridges, 1,215 pheasants and six roe deer. Educated at Eton and Cambridge, Kinnaird is remembered above all for his skill as a footballer and for being a key figure in the Football Association. He was a keen cricketer, too, and employed a professional to teach his estate workers the game so that his friends from England would have someone to play against.[2] He also espoused the "muscular Christianity" popular in the late nineteenth century, valuing athleticism and patriotic duty over intellectualism. His sister Emily played a prominent part in the early days of the YWCA (Young Women's Christian Association) and later served as a missionary in India where she became a friend of Mahatma Gandhi.

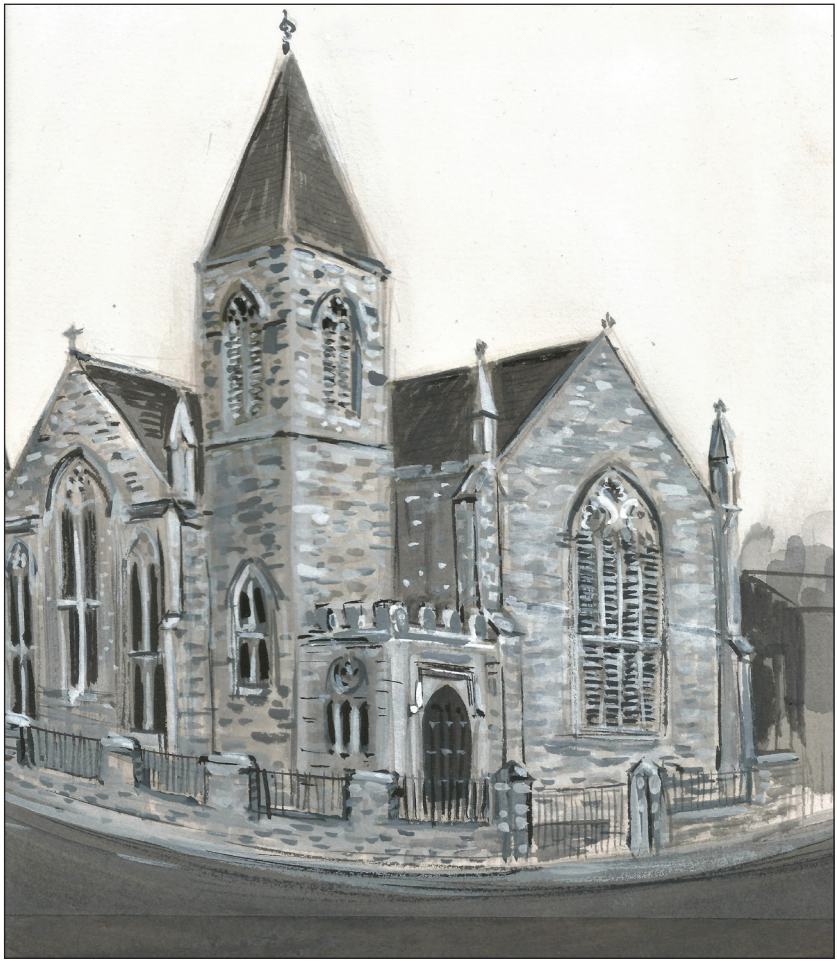
Rossie Priory in Perthshire, the seat of the Kinnaird family. Started in 1807, the building was successively enlarged during the nineteenth century but much of it has been demolished and the house today is considerably less elaborate than it would have been in Nevile Davidson's youth, when he regularly visited his aunt who had married the 11th Lord Kinnaird.

1. Groome, *Gazetteer of Scotland,* 264
2. www.scottishsporthistory.com/rossie-priory.html

Even in the 1920s an indoor staff of thirty was employed in Arthur Kinnaird's sprawling house, in addition to all the tenants of his farming land, but by the time of the second World War Rossie was hopelessly impractical to run, riddled with dry rot and much of it had to be demolished. With no surviving male heir, the Kinnaird title eventually became dormant in 1997 on the death of the 13th Lord. In his youth, Nevile made regular visits to his Kinnaird cousins at Rossie and it is tempting to speculate that the 11th Lord's manly brand of Christianity may have had some influence on him; certainly, his cousin Emily's connections with India would prove extremely useful many years later when he toured that country after it achieved independence in 1947.

Rev. James Davidson and Constance Agnew were married in April 1898 in London and their son, Andrew Nevile Davidson, was born on February 13, 1899, followed two years later by his sister, Louisa Margaret Constance, who was always known as "Cois" (pronounced to rhyme with "Joyce"). Mr. Davidson was minister of Blackadder Church in North Berwick but the privileged upbringing his two children received at the family home at 76 Westbourne Terrace was far from typical of a Scottish manse: Nevile writes in his autobiography that "as I grew up the household included a cook, a young housemaid, an elderly laundry maid, and my sister's governess,"[3] all of whom were closely supervised by his mother who was "determined and autocratic, never hesitating to rebuke or express disapproval . . . For us children, her word was law."[4] As well as enjoying a comfortable manse provided by his church, Mr. Davidson Senior was able—thanks to his advantageous marriage—to acquire some land at Nethy Bridge for the sum of £2,000 and he built Forest House there in 1910. His son wrote: "Completely secluded, the house had three sitting rooms and eight bedrooms and so allowed us to have many friends and relations to stay. For the next sixty years it was to be my second home."[5]

3. Davidson, *Beginnings,* 2
4. Davidson, *Beginnings,* 4
5. Davidson, *Beginnings,* 6



Nevile Davidson's father was minister of Blackadder Free Church which became part of the new United Free Church in 1900. The building still stands and is now North Berwick Baptist Church.

Between his aristocratic relatives in Perthshire and his father's congregation in North Berwick, young Nevile soon learnt to move easily in all social circles, a skill which stood him in good stead in later life when he felt equally at home mixing with royalty as he did with his parishioners in the crowded tenements of Glasgow's Townhead.

Other than sketching his family background, Nevile Davidson's autobiography *Beginnings but no Ending* says little else about his early years. It does not mention, for example, that in 1912, at the age of thirteen, he spent three months traveling through France with his family. This was the first occasion on which he kept a diary which chronicles a lengthy trip beginning on January 30 with a train journey to York where "we went to the Minster service. It was perfectly beautiful to hear the little boys singing." In York he bought a copy of Charles Dickens's *The Pickwick Papers*, no doubt to read on the next stage of the journey to London where the Davidsons stayed with relatives before crossing to France on February 6. In Paris the family visited the Louvre and the church of the Madeleine and attended services at the American church in the morning and the French Protestant church in the evening. Young Nevile also took French lessons and spent a long time looking round the shops where he bought himself a walking stick. Then it was on to Limoges, Orleans, Lourdes, San Sebastian, St. Jean de Luz ("a nice quiet little place") and Biarritz ("a very ugly town"). The journey continued through Angoulême, Bordeaux and Blois until, by April 16, he was back in Paris going round the department stores again. "In one of the shops," he notes, "we went up a little moving staircase and it was very amusing."[6]

The diary stops at this point, but these early reflections of a thirteen year old are interesting because they hint at certain themes which recur in his later life. His comments on York Minister reveal that, even as a child, he felt the attraction of a more elaborate and ritualistic service than he would have been used to in his father's United Free Church, while the purchase of a walking stick suggests a degree of vanity about his appearance. As a young man he spent a good deal of money on clothes.

Until the age of sixteen Nevile attended North Berwick High School; apparently, sending him to a boarding school was not something his father approved of. At school he preferred subjects that dealt with ideas rather than facts, particularly disliking mathematics, and claimed he did only the minimum of work to get by. Even so, in his fifth year Nevile was writing in depth about texts such as Thomas Carlyle's *The French Revolution: A History*, Milton's *Paradise Lost,* Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing,* and Horace's *Odes* and his surviving essays reveal a facility with words and a breadth of reading far beyond the level of the average teenager today.

6. NOTE: unless the source is specifically acknowledged in a footnote, all short quotations throughout this book in Nevile Davidson's own words come from the pages of his personal diaries.

His flair for sentence structures which build to a climax and other rhetorical devices may well have been influenced by the pulpit oratory he would hear week by week from his father and other preachers, while the content of one (untitled) effort dated May 1914 reveals a youthful awareness of a spiritual dimension to life, even if only vaguely defined in terms reminiscent of Wordsworth's "dim and undetermined sense/Of unknown modes of being":

> There are times when the soul of man seems to be roused from a temporary sleep in which it has been indulging; when, as if at the call of some great power, it leaps to a high level and, soaring 'through realms unknown'; leaves behind the things of this world, stretching, yearning towards the infinite. The call comes at divers times according to condition and circumstance, but almost every soul must feel this impulsive longing at one time or another.

The essay goes on (at considerable length) to explain how this "call" may be experienced in mountains, beside lochs or out on the moors and concludes with a poetic flourish that is not unlike the closing appeal of a sermon:

> If you be but a beggar in some great dark city, even then you have your little patch of blue sky between the roofs and your little beam of sun which finds its way into every miserable garret and hovel. Look up, then! And as you look the bird of hope will descend, borne on wings of gold and alight on *your* shoulder; yea, and carry you up beyond the roofs and chimneys and the world will seem a cheerier place thereafter and life not quite so hopeless.

Nevile Davidson left school in 1915 to matriculate at Edinburgh University—something he later regretted, realizing that he was too immature for the experience. As a future preacher and moderator of the General Assembly, he might have been expected to show early promise as a debater but he claims to have been too shy to join the Debating Society. At university he studied Latin, History and his favorite subject, English Literature but, like many young men of his generation, his course was interrupted by the first World War. While a member of the university OTC (Officers' Training Corps) he attended Barry Camp near Carnoustie—where, in September 1917, he took ill and had to be sent home for an appendix operation—and thereafter applied for a commission in the Royal Artillery, undergoing training at cadet school on the Isle of Wight. But hostilities came to an end before he saw active service and in 1919 he went back to Edinburgh

University, having now decided to study Philosophy, partly because he did not like the English course as it placed too much emphasis on Anglo-Saxon texts. Philosophy, he wrote,

> took me into a field of study concerned not with facts, but with thoughts, ideas and speculations; the place of man in the universe, the existence of God, the possibility of immortality, different kinds of reasoning and of knowledge.[7]

However, his autobiography reveals more about his opinions of his professors and the content of their lectures than about himself, saying only that, because he continued to live at home and commute to Edinburgh, "I took little part in the wider life of the university and simply attended classes."[8] He also considers himself to have been a poor scholar, lacking in academic ambition and self-discipline and suffering from the "besetting sin of idleness." He confesses that he did not read all the prescribed texts and when the final exams came round he failed to achieve first class honors as expected. This temporarily cast a cloud over his normally close relationship with his father. "When I told my father the news he made no comment, but walked out of the room and scarcely spoke to me for the next few days."[9]

A much fuller picture of how Nevile Davidson spent his time as a student can be gained from the series of diaries which he began writing in 1920. A typical day might involve attendance at lectures, lunch with friends at the Students' Union or the restaurant in Jenner's department store in Princes Street, a visit to friends or members of his extended family and perhaps a game of golf and some hours reading. This latter activity he did at least undertake in a methodical manner, recording in his diary the books he was reading for each assignment. From these entries, it is clear that he read widely and did not confine himself to his textbooks. In the spring of 1920, for example, he had various weighty historical and literary works on the go: David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Thomas Carlyle's *Frederick the Great* ("I wonder if I shall ever finish it!"), Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians*; H.G. Wells's *The Outline of History* and—for light relief—Wells's novel about anarchism, *The Man who was Thursday*. Essay assignments would be preceded by a couple of weeks' intensive reading in preparation for answering searching questions like "Why is it better

7. Davidson, *Beginnings,* 6
8. Davidson, *Beginnings,* 5
9. Davidson, *Beginnings,* 7