

JOHN LIVINGSTONE

By Rev. Donald Beaton

Free Presbyterian Magazine – October 1938

JOHN Livingstone was the son of Rev. William Livingstone, minister of Lanark. He was born on 21st June, 1603, at Monyabroch [Moine-Abroch] which was the old name of Kilsyth. Before going to Lanark his father had been minister at Kilsyth RS his father before him had been. The Livingstone's of Kilsyth belonged to the nobility and were related to the Livingstone's of Callendar. John Livingstone's mother was Agnes Livingstone, daughter of Alexander Livingstone, portioner of Falkirk; her son describes her as a "rare pattern of piety and meekness."

He received his early education at Stirling and then proceeded to Glasgow University for his Arts course and graduated as Master of Arts in 1621. While at Stirling he was under the preaching of Mr. Patrick Simson and while in Glasgow he heard Mr. John Bell, who opened the proceedings of the famous Glasgow Assembly of 1638. Livingstone describes him as "a grave, serious man."

He began to preach in 1625 and was in the habit of writing his sermons and then preached them word for word. In his autobiography he tells how he broke with this habit. He was called upon to preach on a communion occasion "and having in readiness only one preaching," he says, "which I had preached about a week before in another kirk, and perceiving sundry to be at Quodquan who had been at the other church, I resolved to choose a new text, and having but little time....I wrote only some notes of the heads I was to deliver. Yet I found at that time more assistance in the enlarging-of these points, and more motion in my own heart, than ever I had found before, and after that I never wrote all at length, but only notes."

Lord Kenmure, to whom Samuel Rutherford addressed some of his beautiful letters, was anxious to have Livingstone settled at Anwoth but certain difficulties coming the way "the Lord provided a great deal better for them [i.e. the people of Anwoth]," as he humbly says, "for they got that worthy servant of Christ, Mr. Samuel Rutherford whose praise is in all the Reformed Churches." During his short stay in Kirkcudbright he made the acquaintance of Lord Kenmure, Alexander Gordon of Earlston, Alexander Gordon of Knockgray, Christian McAdam of Waterhead and Marion McNaught in Kirkcudbright.

Among these will be recognized those who were favoured to receive letters from Samuel Rutherford.

A movement was made to have Livingstone settled as minister of Torphichen but, notwithstanding the influence of Lord Torphichen and the favour of the presbytery, Spottiswoode, "the pretended Archbishop of St. Andrews," stopped all proceedings because of Livingstone's non-conformity to the prelatic order of things. The Presbytery then forbade Livingstone to preach at Torphichen. "I found," he says, "the two or three last Sabbaths that I preached there the sweetest Sabbaths, although sorrowful, that I had seen in that place." It was at this juncture of his career that he received letters from the Countess of Wigtown who was then resident at Cumbernauld, inviting him to act as chaplain in the Earl's household. For about two years and a half he spent at Cumbernauld.

During the summer he went about from place to place preaching at Communion. It, was on one of these occasions that he preached his famous sermon at Kirk of Shotts that was so signally owned of the Lord in the conversion of sinners. The story of his invitation to preach there is well known and need not be repeated here but Livingstone's own account of that memorable day is not so well known, and, therefore, we reproduce it here. "The parish of the Shotts" he says, "bordered upon the parish of Torphichen, whether they sometimes resorted, and I was several times invited by the minister, Mr. John Holm, at Shotts to preach there. In that place I used to find more liberty on preaching than elsewhere. Yea, the one day in all my life wherein I got most of the presence of God in public was on a Monday after a Communion preaching in the churchyard of the Shotts, 21st June, 1630.

The night before I had been with some Christians, who spent the night in conference and prayer. "When I was alone in the fields about eight or nine in the morning, before we were to go to sermon, there came such a misgiving of spirit upon me, considering my unworthiness and weakness, and the multitude and expectation of the people, that I was consulting with myself to have stolen away somewhere, and decline that day's preaching, but that I durst not so far distrust God, and so went to sermon, and got good assistance. I had about one hour and a half upon the points I had meditated on Ezek. xxxvi. 25, 26; and, in end, offering to close with some words of exhortation, I was led on about an hour's time in a strain of exhortation and warning, with such liberty and melting of heart as I never had the like in public all my life. Some little of that

stamp remained on the Thursday after, when I preached at Kilmarnock. But the very Monday after, preaching in Irvine, I was so deserted, that the points I had meditated and written, and had them fully in my memory, I was not able to get them pronounced. So, it pleased the Lord to counterbalance His dealing, and hide pride from man.

This so discouraged me, that I was upon resolution for some time not to preach, at least not in Irvine; but Mr. David Dickson would not suffer me to go from thence till I preached the next Sabbath day, to get, as he called it amends [revenge] of the devil. I stayed and preached with some tolerable freedom.”

Fleming in his *Fulfilling of the Scriptures* refers to this notable outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the following sentences: “I must also mention that solemn communion at the Kirk of Shotts, June 20, 1630, at which time there was so convincing an appearance of God, and down-pouring of the Spirit, even in an extraordinary way, that did follow the ordinances, especially that sermon on the Monday, June 21, with a strange, unusual motion on the hearers, who, in a great multitude, were there convened of divers ranks, that it was known, which I can speak on sure ground, near five hundred had at that time a discernible change wrought on them of whom most proved lively Christians afterwards.

It was the sowing of a seed through Clydesdale, so as many of the most eminent Christians in that country could date either their conversion, or some remarkable confirmation of their case from that day; and truly this was the more remarkable, that one, after so much reluctances, by a special and unexpected providence, was called to preach that sermon on the Monday, which then was not usually practised; and that night before, by most of the Christians there, was spent in prayers, so that the Monday's work might be discerned as a convincing return of prayer.” The Church in Scotland from this date onwards set apart the Monday following a Communion Sabbath as a day of Thanksgiving and it is still observed in those congregations who uphold the time-honoured custom of the observance of the five days on communion occasions.

Livingstone got into touch with many of the eminent ministers and laymen in his itinerations from place to place. In speaking of the preachers from whom he received most good he says. “Those whereby I profited most were the preaching's of four men, Mr. Robert Rollock, Mr. John Welsh, Mr. Robert Bruce, and Mr. David Dickson, whom I thought of all that I had read breathed

most of the Spirit of God, least affected, most clear and plain, and most powerful Mr. Robert Bruce I several times heard, and in my opinion never man spake with greater power since the Apostles' days." These were some of the instruments which the Lord used to build the walls of Jerusalem in troublous times.

It is a commentary on the sad state of things ecclesiastically in Scotland when a minister, whose labours were so signally owned of the Lord could not get a parish in which to exercise his God given gifts. In the summer of 1630 two of the ministers in the Irish Presbyterian Church proposed to him that he should go to Ireland seeing there was no prospect that he could enter the ministry in Scotland. In August of this year Viscount Claneboy invited him to come to Ireland in reference to a call to the parish of Killinchy.

He was ordained by Andrew Knox, Bishop of Raphoe, who when Livingstone came to him with letters from Lord Claneboy and Earl of Wigtown, told him that he knew his errand. The aged Bishop further added that he thought his old age was prolonged for little other purpose but to do such offices, and that if Livingstone scrupled to call him "my Lord" he cared not much for it; all he would desire was that Livingstone would preach at Ramallen the next Sabbath, and that he would send for Mr. William Cunningham, and some two or three other neighbouring ministers, to be present, who, after sermon, should give ordination by imposition of hands, the Bishop himself being present.

The Bishop of Down (Robert Echlin), however, was not satisfied with this procedure and he had his eye on Livingstone. At length he was suspended by Bishop Echlin for non-conformity and for "stirring up the people to ecstasies and enthusiasms." In May, 1632, both Robert Blair and John Livingstone were deposed by the Bishop. For two years thereafter Livingstone spent in Scotland occasionally visiting Ireland.

In the momentous events proceeding and succeeding the signing of the National Covenant in 1638, Livingstone took a prominent part. He has left us a graphic picture of the signing of the Covenant in different places particularly at Lanark. "I was present at Lanark and several other parishes," he says, "when on a Sabbath after the forenoon sermon, the Covenant was read and sworn, and may truly say that in all my life, except one day at the Kirk of Shotts, I never saw such motions from the Spirit of God; all the people generally and most willingly concurring, where I have seen above 1000 persons all at once lifting up their hands, and the tears dropping down from their eyes; so that though

the whole land, except the professed papists, and some few, who for base ends adhered to the Prelates, the people universally entered into the Covenant of God for reformation of religion, against Prelacy and the ceremonies."

In 1638 he was approached with the view to being called to the parish of Straiton and to the town of Stranraer. As he was in doubt as to his duty the matter was submitted to Mr. Robert Blair, Mr. David Dickson, Mr. Andrew Cant, Mr. Alexander Henderson, Mr. Samuel Rutherford, and his father, Mr. William Livingston. These advised that he should accept the call to Straiton. Here he laboured until 1648 when he was transferred by the Assembly to Ancrum in Teviotdale.

The impression he had made while in Ireland is indicated by the fact that as many as 500 persons resorted to Stranraer at Communion times from Ireland. He was present as a member of the Glasgow Assembly of 1638. While at Stranraer he tells of the interest of the people in religious exercises. "When I came first to Stranraer," he says, "some of the folk in the town desired to come our house to be present at our family exercise. Therefore, I proposed that I would choose rather every morning to go to church, and so each morning at nine o'clock the bell rang. We convened, and after two or three verses of a psalm and a short prayer, some portion of Scripture was read and spoken upon, only so long as a half-hour glass ran and then closed with prayer."

He accompanied the Scottish army into England in 1640. When in England he tells of a message delivered to them by a Mrs. Fenwick at Haddon on the Wall. "Is it so," she asked, "that Jesus Christ will not come to England for reforming of abuses, but with an army of 22,000 men at his hack?" In 1648, as already mentioned, he was transferred to Ancrum and it was while minister there that he was chosen by the Commission of the General Assembly as one of the Commissioners to treat with Charles at The Hague. He was very averse to undertake the business and after events fully justified him in that aversion.

He made his mind quite clear to Mr. David Dickson, Mr. James Guthrie and Mr. Patrick Gillespie, having uttered what he terms - "one word I foolishly spoke then to them," which was: "That ere I condescend to go, and to have an hand in the consequence that I apprehend would follow, I would choose rather to condescend, if it were the Lord's will, to be drowned in the waters by the way. "The negotiations with the King were anything but satisfactory to the ministerial members of the Commission, but when Livingstone's opinion was asked he replied that though the Commissioners should agree with the King

upon terms disadvantageous to religion a minister might tell his mind, but if it went on it was not the minister's part to oppose the same but to submit himself to the government.

Afterwards he saw that he erred in thus expressing himself. "I am since re-convinced," are his words, "that I ought to have dealt more freely, and shewed them that I thought their proceedings were not according to their instructions, and that the honest party in Scotland would not be satisfied with them, and that, so far as I could discern, there was no appearance of a blessing from God upon the treaty; but partly I saw such a torrent in carrying on that business, partly, I somewhat doubted my own judgment, partly, my weakness of nature made me neglect that duty."

In Charles the Commissioners had a cunning schemer with a conscience that could stretch to any length; unfortunately, also among the Commissioners there were men whose hearts were not loyal to the covenanted cause in Scotland. When the ministerial commissioners landed in Scotland the Assembly was sitting and an account of what had taken place at the drawing up of the Treaty of Breda was presented to them, but as there were things in that account which might make the King odious in the eyes of the people, the Commissioners, at the Assembly's request, forbore to mention them. In connection with this Treaty, the story of the accident to his wife while the Commissioners were in Holland may be told. "The while I was at Holland," he says, "my wife riding" by the mill of Nether Ancrum, through the unskilfulness of the servant that rode before her, fell into the mill-dam, and was carried down the trough, till with her body she stopped the outer wheel then fast going.

Providence so ordered that the wheel wanted one of the out-sticking pieces of timber that keeps the water; and just over against the wheel where it wanted this piece her body was drawn down, and so stopped the going of the mill, and continued in that case, the water still falling on her till a gentleman that saw, and was about half a quarter of a mile distant, came running, and caused the people to go within the mill, and turn the outer wheel back, and so got her out and carried her home. She was ill bruised, and in the third day had a sore fever; yet it pleased the Lord she recovered, and wrote to me to Holland that she thought she was therein an emblem of what our treaty was like to bring on the land." In those days there were men and women in Scotland who felt that

these negotiations were like men playing with fire and they had not long to wait to see their worst fears realised.

In connection with the Public Resolutions, Livingstone took the side of UHJ Protestors, though he felt that the latter kept up too many meetings and thus widened the sad breach between the Resolutioners and themselves. After events proved that though there were good men among the Resolutioners, they had not the keenness of vision of the Protestors. In the return of Charles II. in 1660. Livingstone "clearly foresaw," as he says, "that there would be an overturning of the whole work of reformation and a trial to all that would adhere thereto." He had not long to wait for the bursting of the storm which he foresaw.

On the 20th November, 1662, he received letters from friends in Edinburgh that he with some twelve or sixteen ministers had been ordered by the Privy Council to appear before them. He appeared before the Council¹ on 11th December and sentence of banishment north of the Tay and within two months to depart out of the King's dominions, was pronounced upon him. He sailed for Rotterdam and there met with other banished ministers, Mr. Robert Traill, Mr. John Nevay, Mr. Robert McWard, Mr. John Brown, etc. The remainder of his life was spent in Holland. He died at Rotterdam in 1672.

Prof. Witheron in his *Historical and Literary Memorials of Presbyterianism in Ireland* (First Series) thus describes it; "His Autobiography, or *Brief Historical Relation*, is very like that of Blair, his teacher and friend, and is of equal value as an illustration from an independent source of the early history of Presbyterianism in Ireland. It covers the whole period of his life from his birth to his exile, and is intensely interesting, not only from the manner in which it touches upon public events of this time, but from the candid and honest way in which he describes himself. The *Brief Historical Relation* was printed in a quarto form in 1727, and has passed through several editions.

The only complete edition of the writings of Livingstone is that contained in the *Select Biographies of the Woodrow Society*" (p. 22). As a specimen of "the candid and honest way in which he describes himself," particularly as a preacher, the following paragraphs illustrate: - "As concerning my gift of preaching I never attained to any accuracy therein and through laziness, did

¹ An account of his appearance before, and the questions put to him by, the Council will be found in "Ane account of what past when Mr. John Livingstone appeared before the Council in the Lower Council-House at Edinburgh, December 11, 1662," printed in *Select Biographies* (Woodrow Society Publications), I. 213.

not much endeavour it. I used ordinarily to write some few notes, and left the enlargement to the time of delivery. I found that much studying did not so much help me in preaching, as the getting of my heart brought to a spiritual disposition; yea, sometimes I thought the hunger of the hearers helped me more than my own preparation. Many a time I found that which was suggested to me in the delivery, was more refreshful to myself and to the hearers, than what I had premeditated. I was often much deserted and cast down in preaching, and sometimes tolerably assisted. I never preached a sermon which I would be earnest to see again in write but two; the one was on a Monday after the Communion at Shotts, and the other on a Monday after the Communion at Hollywood, and both these times I had spent the whole night before in conference and prayer with some Christians, without my more than ordinary preparation; otherwise, my gift was rather suited to simple common people, than to learned and judicious auditors. I could hardly ever get my own sermon repeated, neither could I get the same sermon preached twice, although to other hearers. I thought it became tasteless both to myself and others. I have sometimes, after some years, preached on the same text, but then I behaved to make use of new notes. Had I in a right manner behaved and taken pains, it had been better for myself and others; but a lazy trusting to assistance in the meantime kept me bare-handed all my days. I had a kind of coveting, when I got leisure and opportunity, to read much, and of different subjects, and I was oft challenged that my way of reading was like some men's, after such a kind of play and recreation. I used to read much too fast, and so was somewhat pleased at the time, but retained little. My memory was somewhat waterish and weak; yet had I improved it, I might have had better use of it; for after I came from the College, I did with no great difficulty attain to some tolerable insight into the Hebrew and Chaldec, and somewhat also of the Syriac. The Arabic I did essay, but the vastness of it made me give it over. I got also so much of the French, the Italian, and after that of the Low Dutch, that I could make use of sundry of their books; and of the Spanish and High Dutch, that I could make use of their Bibles. It was once or twice laid on me by the General Assembly, to write the history of the Church of Scotland, since the late Reformation, 1638; but beside my inability for such an undertaking, and my lazy disposition, I could by no means procure the materials fit for such a work."