Thomas Boston, of Ettrick[1]

By REV. D. BEATON

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I.

OVER two hundred years ago on the first day of May, Thomas Boston entered on his Ettrick ministry. The day is memorable in the history of Scotland as that on which the Union between England and Scotland was finally consummated. In his *Memoirs*[2], Boston makes reference to the two events. The Union was regarded with anything but favour by the great majority of the Scottish people, though it proved an incalculable blessing to Scotland, and two hundred years after its consummation we are being reminded by able articles in our leading journals of the feelings with which the people of 1706 and 1707 received the proposals for union.

But the Scotland of today is more inclined to commemorate the event with rejoicings than to regard it as a calamity. Synchronising as has been noticed with this important event was the induction of the Rev. Thomas Boston to the parish of Ettrick. It, too, is an event that claims the attention not only of Scotsmen but of Presbyterians the wide world over. And already steps are being taken to commemorate the bi-centenary of the induction of Boston to the parish which was privileged to enjoy the over sight of one of the most renowned pastors that ever stood in a Scottish pulpit.

But renowned as Boston was as a pastor and preacher, his fame as a student and scholar travelled beyond the bounds of his own church and country. Dr. James Walker, who is a competent judge, has borne eloquent testimony to Boston's scholarship.[3]

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[1] This series of articles are reprinted from the Princeton Theological Review.-Editor

[2] "On the first day of May I was admitted minister of Ettrick; a day remarkable to after ages as the day in which the Union of Scotland and England commenced, according to the articles thereof agreed upon by the two parliaments. And on that very account I had frequent occasion to remember it! The spirits of the people of that place being embittered on that event against the ministers of the church; which was an occasion of much heaviness to me, though I never was for the Union; but always against it from the beginning unto this day." *Memoirs*, p. 208. The edition of the *Memoirs* quoted is that edited by Rev. G. H. Morrison and published by Oliphant, Anderson and Ferrier, Edinburgh, 1899.

[3] "At Simprin he had mastered the French language that he might have an entrance into French theological literature; but he seems to have been yet unacquainted with Hebrew. At the time he came to Ettrick, he tells us he borrowed a 'piece of the Hebrew Bible containing the books of Samuel and Kings' and with that set himself to the study of the 'Holy Tongue.' After a while he bought for himself the whole Hebrew Scriptures. 'This,' he says, 'was the happy year wherein I was first master of a Hebrew Bible.' And now he plied the

And even such a writer as the late Rev. Henry G. Graham in his *Social Life of Scotland in the Eighteenth Century* is constrained to bear testimony to Boston's remarkable influence though he refers to his theology in the flippant style common to writers of his school. “Notwithstanding much that seems extravagant to us,” he says, “and melancholy in Mr. Boston, he was a man of ability and of great influence in his day; he was a powerful preacher of the grim school, the representative of a prominent type of thought and feeling; he moved the hearts and expressed the faith of a large proportion of the people throughout the country, who thumbed his *Crook in the Lot* and his *Fourfold State* with endless edification. Peasants and farmers read them by their peat fires, and shepherds on the solitary silent hills; his smaller works were the favourite chapbooks of pedlars, and, the twelve portly tomes that contained his theological expositions were found in many a manse library and on the bookshelves of every Seceding minister long after the century was closed.” (Vol. H, p. 80.).

II.

This may be regarded as a fitting time and place to make some reference to his place among Scottish preachers and theologians and to the part he played in some of the great controversies that agitated the Church of Scotland during his day.

At the outset some reference must be made to his remarkable *Memoirs*, for, after all, it is here we find Boston as he was. Scottish religious literature is by no means barren in autobiography. The *Autobiography and Diary of James Melvill* is invaluable to the student of Scottish ecclesiastical history for the period which it covers and the *Memoirs of the Rev. James Fraser of Brea* is a rich storehouse of spiritual experience, fragrant still with the sweet incense of prayer.

But it may be said that Boston's *Memoirs* combines in a remarkable degree the distinguishing features of Melvill’s A*utobiography* and Fraser's *Memoirs*. The graphic pen pictures of persons, the happy descriptions of events in which Melvill was such a master a real characteristic of Boston's *Memoirs*, while on the other hand the deep religious experience of Fraser of Brea combined as it

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Hebrew original close and with great delight.' I need not tell at length how he Tall the course of Hebrew scholarship till he became an enthusiast on the subject of Hebrew accentuation and wanted to publish it . . . He was the best Hebrew scholar in Scotland as he was the freshest and most powerful of Scottish living theologians. .And I have been told hr the most competent scholar of our country that he regards Boston's work as 'one of sterling value arid nut yet out of date." Walker's *Scottish Theology and Theologians*, p. 321

is with rare power in spiritual analysis and sane outlook on the remarkable phenomena of the spiritual life will be met with in Boston's autobiography.

The *Memoirs* was published in 1776, forty-four years after his death. It has been said that the *Memoirs* was probably edited by his son, Thomas Boston, who succeeded his father at Ettrick and was latterly minister of the Relief Church at Jedburgh. But, as the Rev. George D. Low has pointed out, this could scarcely be the case, as Boston the younger died in 1767. In all likelihood it was the grandson of the elder Boston, Michael, who prepared the *Memoir's* for the press.[4]

In the "Address to his Children," which is prefixed to the *Memoirs*, Boston tells us that he left two autobiographic manuscripts.[5] The one was entitled, *Passages of my Life*, and the other, *General Account of my Life*. The first was begun shortly after his settlement at Ettrick, and additions were made to it from time to time during his ministry till it was completed in October in 1730. In this he incorporated passages from a diary and other incidents he had previously taken note of. The second manuscript, the *General Account*, was begun in December, 1729, and completed in October, 1730.

To both of these Boston added some passages afterwards. In the first edition of the *Memoirs* (1776), Michael Boston states in a note in preparing this work for the press, it was judged absolutely necessary, in order to prevent repetition, and references from the one volume to the other, to reduce both into one continued narrative or history, taking care all along to insert the Passage of His Life in the General Account in their proper places, according to their respective dates and years and as the nature of the subjects treated of required."

III.

The manuscripts of these two works were to remain in Boston's family - "the property thereof to be vested from time to time, in such a one of them, if any such there shall be, as shall addict himself to the holy ministry. In accordance with this wish, the manuscripts passed to his son Thomas, and from him to Michael Boston, who died in 1785. Brown of Whitburn had evidently perused

[4] See a very interesting article in British Weekly, Nov. 28, 1906, entitled "Thomas Boston: His *Memoirs* - Original Manuscripts," by Rev. Geo. D. Low, M.A., Edinburgh. A full account of the manuscripts of the *Memoirs* is given in this article, to which we are much indebted for the above. Mr, Low has decided to publish the General Account of My Life, and in all likelihood it will appear this year.

[5] Morrison ed. of *Memoirs*, p. 1.

one of the manuscripts, and from the materials gathered by him it is now known that it was the *General Account* he had seen. But from 1785 nothing was known of what had become of this manuscript.

The Rev. George Low, already referred to, having heard that the manuscript was still in existence, took steps to procure it, and was successful in his search. A number of changes, not improvements in all cases at least, were made by the editor in the first edition.[6] A number of editions of the *Memoirs* has appeared since. They constitute the twelfth volume of his collected works published in 1854. Probably the best edition is that edited by Rev. G. H. Morrison and published in 1899.[7]

The *Memoirs* is addressed to his children, and in the address, as originally written, there are a few sentences that do not appear in the printed editions. “Let not my recording the lowness of my beginning offend you,” he says; “for the lower I perceive the same to have been, it affords me the greater joy and rejoicing in that God, who hath done all things for me ... As to what you may find recorded concerning any of ourselves; that ye would not wish; they were steps of providence to me, and may be useful to you through grace. The manuscripts, you will easily perceive, are not designed for public view; and they are left in your own power. Moreover, you would consider me writing them, as leaving this world, to have no more a portion in what is done under the sun, and as going into the other world, where many things here reckoned considerable, are of no weight nor value at all”

Thomas Boston was born in the little town of Duns, which has the honour of being the birthplace of men renowned in the ecclesiastical world. Tradition says John Duns Scotus was a native of the parish; it is also the birthplace of Thomas MacCrie, the well-known biographer of Knox. It was in 1676 that Boston first saw the light. While still a boy his father was cast into prison for nonconformity, and Thomas spent a night with him; the memory of which often haunted him in after years. He was early sent to school, “and having a capacity for learning and being of a towardly disposition,” was kindly treated

[6] Boston wrote “dovering," his grandson substituted slumbering; river becomes tear; allanerly, solely; coupling over, falling down; moyen, interests; din, noise; spunk, spark; bent sail, bent; feckless mints to duty, silly essays at duty. Of the errors of the first edition perpetuated in the subsequent editions one instance may be given: “convened in the mass," Whereas Boston wrote "convened in the manse." Other interesting omissions are given in the British Weekly in the article already referred to.

[7] Memoirs of the Life, Time and Writings of the Reverend and Learned Thomas Boston, A.M. sometime minister at Simprin, afterwards at Ettrick. New Edition with Introduction and Notes by the Rev. George H. Morrison, M.A., Dundee. Edinburgh, and London: Oliphant, Anderson, and Ferrier. 1899.

by the good dame who taught him first to master the mysteries of the alphabet.

At the age of seven, he tells us, he read his Bible and had delight in reading it.[8] In 1684 or 1685 he went to the grammar school of his native town, and while at this school he was a diligent attender at public worship, and gave what attention would be expected from a boy to the ministrations of the Episcopal incumbent.

In 1687 he was taken by his father to a Presbyterian meeting in the Newton of Whitsome. The preacher was the Rev. Henry Erskine, the father of Ebenezer and Ralph, the two famous Secession preachers, and Boston heard for the first time a voice that called him to the consideration of eternal realities[9]. The sermons that most impressed him were preached from the texts, “O generation of vipers who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” and “Behold the Lamb of God who taketh away the sin of the world.”

After this, he regularly attended Henry Erskine's ministry at Revelaw, which was about four miles from Duns. “In the summer-time,” he says, “company could hardly be missed; and with them something to be heard, especially in the returning, that was for edification, to which I listened; but in the winter, sometimes it was my lot to go alone, without so much as the benefit of a horse to carry me through Blackadder water, the wading whereof in sharp frosty weather I very well remember. But such things were then easy, for the benefit of the word, which came with power.”

In the maturer experience of after years, he looks back and reviews the fervent feelings of these early days, and found that he was “raw and unexperienced, had much weakness and ignorance, and much of a legal disposition and way, then, and for a good time after, undiscerned,” but yet he could honestly say that he “was in good earnest concerned for a saving interest in Jesus Christ.”

It may be interesting at this place to quote Boston as to the progress he had made at the grammar school and the subjects that were taught in such schools in his time. “I learned Latin rudiments, Despauter's grammar, and all the

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[8] "Meanwhile I know nothing induced me to it, but the natural vanity of my mind; and curiosity as about some scripture histories. However, I am thankful, that it was at all made my choice early; and that it hath been the study of my ripest years, with which I would fain close my life if it were His will." Memoirs. p. 7.

[9] Years afterwards, in referring to this event, he says: "Little wast thou thinking, O my soul, on Christ or thyself when thou went to the Newton of Whitsome to hear a preaching. When Christ first dealt with thee; there thou got an unexpected cast." Soliloquy of Man Fishing. Works V., p. 11.

authors, in verse or prose, then usually read in schools; and profited above the rest of my own class, by means of whom my progress was more slow. And before I left the school, I, generally, saw no Roman author, but what I found myself in some capacity to turn into English: but we were not put to be careful about proper English. Towards the end of that time, I was also taught *Vossius's Elements of Rhetoric* and 15th May 1689 began the Greek, learned some parts of the New Testament, to wit, some part of John, of Luke, and of the Acts of the Apostles.[10]

Boston was at this time only between thirteen and fourteen years of age, so that it will be admitted that he had made fair progress in education. Young Boston's mind was now set on the ministry, but his father not having sufficient means to give him a university education, the door seemed shut in his face. But neither father nor son gave up hope altogether. Sometimes the way looked so dark that Boston thought of turning to a trade, but his father would not hear of it.

At length, after two years, the way was opened and Boston entered Edinburgh University in 1691. Of his life at the University we know little, except that he applied himself with diligence in the pursuit of knowledge and practised economy to such an extent that at the end of his Arts course his expenses only amounted to £11. The result of this rigid economy bore fruit in after years in the weakly constitution that made life a heavy burden to him many a day. In 1694, he graduated in arts, and in the same year he received the bursary of the Presbytery of Duns. In the following year he began his theological course, and spent one session at the university.

It was allowable in his time for a student who had attended the theological classes for one session and who desired to support himself by teaching, to complete his studies under the superintendence of the Presbytery. Boston determined on this course, and after one month's experience of teaching in Glencairn, he was appointed tutor in 1696 to the stepson of Lieutenant-Colonel Bruce of Kennet, at the salary of a hundred marks per annum. The Bruces of Kennet were the ancestors of the present Lord Balfour of Burleigh, the distinguished Scottish statesman.

While at Kennet, Boston did not hide his light under a bushel. The master and mistress being away from home, he thought it his duty to keep family worship

[10] Memoirs, p. 26.

with the members of the household, while he catechised the servants, pressed the careless to secret prayer, and reproved and warned against sinful practices. He reported the conduct of two servants to the lady, and as they were guilty of cursing and swearing after repeated admonitions, he advised her that it was her duty to reform them, and if they still refused, to dismiss them from her service. This she promised to do, but when the term day came she dismissed the only two servants who had any show of religion, retaining the other two.

Needless to say, Boston felt this to be “very grievous,” but it did not keep him from acting as a faithful monitor to the domestics at Kennet House, for he tells us that one Saturday night the servants had set a fire in the hall for drying their clothes, which they had been washing and which were to remain there until the Sabbath was over. “Grieved with this profanation of the Lord's Day,” he says, “I spoke to the gentlewoman: who insinuating, that she had not done without orders what she had done, refused to remove them: whereupon I spoke to the lady, who soon caused remove the clothes and dispose them otherwise.”

He also took good care that his pupil would not neglect attendance at church; hearing one day that he was not going to the means of grace, Boston made inquiries about the matter, with the result “both the mother and son went to church that day.” But Kennet was one of Boston's Ebenezers, where his Lord abundantly blessed him. Writing of this period of his life in his Memoirs he says: “The time I was at Kennet, continues to be unto me a remarkable time among the days of my life. Once I fainted there, being on my knees at evening secret-prayer. It was a time of much trouble to me, yet in the main a thriving time for my soul” He left Kennet in February, 1697, and in June of the same year he was licensed by the Presbytery of Duns and Chirnside. For two years Boston remained without a call; heritors who did not understand the spiritual teaching of the young preacher, and who by no means relished faithful preaching in the pulpit, did their best to keep the people from having the man of their choice.

At last, in 1699, he received a call from the parish of Simprin, and on the 21st September of that year he was ordained to the office of the ministry. A minister could scarcely have entered on a more forbidding sphere of labour. The people were grossly ignorant, and as a result there was a chilling indifference to the exercises of the sanctuary. Nothing daunted, the young

minister accepted the call, and as a keynote to his ministerial labours preached his first sermon from the text- “For they watch for your souls as they that must give account.” And from that day, there was a watching for souls that hallowed forever Simprin in his memory. He devoted his time to pastoral visitation, studying, praying with and for his people.

He instituted prayer meetings and catechisings, and gradually the blighting frosts of a long and dreary spiritual winter began to show signs of passing away. To use the Scriptural figure: “Instead of the thorn there had come up the fir tree, and instead of the briar there had come up the myrtle.” When he came to Simprin, there was no family worship held in the place, but ere he left it, worship was kept morning and evening in every home.

Those earnest pleadings in secret were not unanswered, and the memory of those days drew from him in after years the acknowledgment: “Simprin was a field which the Lord had blessed; Simprin! O blessed be He for His kindness at Simprin.” But diligent as Boston was as a pastor, he was no less diligent as a student. He read the *De Economia Faderum* of Witsius, and it is not too much to say that it left its impress on his theology.

Another book that greatly influenced him was the first part of the *Marrow of Modern Divinity*, to which reference will be made afterwards. His library was not princely in its treasures, but what he lacked in books he made up for in good, honest, original thinking. Booklovers will understand the following from his *Memoir's*: “The first parcel of books I got added to my small library was in the year 1702. The which year, in August, Mr. Simson aforesaid being in my closet, and looking at my book-press, smiled: the which from whatever principle he did it, touched me to the quick, being conscious of my want of a tolerable quantity. Among these were Zanchy's works, and Luther on Galatians, which I was much taken with: and Providence also laid to my hand, about that time, Beza's Confession of Faith. Most of the books mentioned in the 2nd, 3rd and 4th pages of my catalogue yet *in retentis* whose prices are set down with them, were purchased in that year, and the following 1703.”[11] It was while at Simprin that he set to acquire a knowledge of French from a paper of rules given by a neighbour.

He went through the book of Psalms in Hebrew and from the pulpit he delivered those remarkable sermons that were in after years to be used as the

[11] *Memoirs, p. 169.*

substance of the Fourfold State. In the quiet of his study, he faced some of the deepest questions of theology, and we have his answers in his remarkable *Miscellaneous Questions and Tracts.*[12] It was while at Simprin he took to himself a wife. "Whenever I saw her," he says, "a thought struck through my heart about her being my wife." It was a married life in which love of husband and wife burned with a beautiful flame, but it was a life which was likewise checkered with sore sorrow. Five children were born to them at Simprin, and two of these were soon laid in the churchyard. In 1706 he received a call from Ettrick, and after serious consideration accepted it.

The wrench from Simprin was painful in the extreme, and as he beheld the deep grief of his beloved and attached people, his tears mingled with theirs, "How could my eyes fail," he said, to trickle down with tears." He bade farewell to them in those impressive words of his Master so suggestive of passing opportunity, "In the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried saying, If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink. "

On May 1, 1707, Boston began his ministerial labours at Ettrick. He now set his face to a sea of troubles, and as one sees the timid student facing his difficulties one might well wonder from whence came the strong resolution that never faltered until the difficulties vanished or were completely conquered, and the only answer that suits the circumstances is that Boston had learned that "prayer moves the Hand which governs the world." There now began a ministry memorable in the annals of the Scottish pulpit.

Through years of strenuous toil, beset with trials of no ordinary kind, the faithful pastor went out and in among his people, breaking to them the bread of life, comforting the sorrowing, chiding their wanderings, but relieving their pain. Boston soon learned that Ettrick was not Simprin. He felt, to use his own words that he was now from home and that he was but beginning to be a minister of a parish. The people of his new charge, generally speaking, were "naturally smart, and of an uncommon assurance; self-conceited and censorious to a pitch, using an indecent freedom with church and state."

Opposition came to him from three sources. First, there were the followers of Rev. John MacMillan, the minister of the United Societies (now represented by the Reformed Presbyterians) - these he regarded as a dead weight on his ministry, though in its closing years the opposition was not so marked; the

[12] *Works Vol. VI.*

second source of opposition was a heritor supported by two elders, all of whom forsook attendance on the means of grace, though the heritor appears to have relented after Boston had received the call to Closeburn; the third source of trouble was the congregation, which was open to the influences brought to bear on it by the foregoing parties.

It is almost needless to add, in view of the above account, that the Sabbath sermons were coldly received, “but remarkable,” says Boston, “was the pricking up of ears when anything relative to the public fell in; which was a wounding observe to me.” But after years of strenuous toil the faithful pastor could bear testimony to the remarkable change that had come over the people: “They are by far more polished,” he says, “in their manners than at that time and much more tractable, and easy to me; and fewer scandals fall out among them.

The old dissenters continue immovable; but their increasing is ceased.” When it is remembered that Boston was “naturally timorous and diffident,” the task before him at Ettrick seems too Herculean for a man of his disposition to face, but being a man whose life was steeped in prayer and “eager in pursuit when once engaged,” he set his face to the high mountains that lay between him and the fruitful plains of his ardent hopes, and for him, like Napoleon, there were no Alps.

The parish to which Boston was called is a rural one in Selkirkshire. It is a place full of interesting traditions; to students of English literature it recalls James Hogg, “the Ettrick Shepherd.” But to the student of ecclesiastical history, it will be always linked with the name of Thomas Boston. During the time of the persecutions, many conventicles were held among the mountains of Ettrick. Peden and Renwick preached at Birkenhope, Dobb's Linn and Talla Linn, and in this way a leaven of godliness was introduced.

So that some of the families who had known the truth as it is in Jesus relished the preaching of Boston and did their best to protect him from the malice of his enemies. In the midst of all his trials, Boston did not relinquish his studies, for we find the following entry in his *Memoirs* for the year 1711: “This was the happy year wherein I was first master of a Hebrew Bible and began the study of it.” And all along it continued to be his “darling study.” In the following year, 1712, the Church of Scotland found herself face to face with a new controversy over the Abjuration Oath.

Scotland had now lost her Parliament through the Union of 1707, and the English Parliament - or perhaps more correctly the British Parliament - passed an Act in 1712 imposing the Oath of Abjuration upon all ministers. The intention of the Oath was to safeguard the Queen and secure the Protestant succession to the crown. But if this were all, none would have been more willing to take the oath than the Scottish ministers. It so happened, however, that the Oath was based upon two Acts passed by the English Parliament before the Union, in which it was expressly stipulated that the reigning sovereign should belong to the Church of England.

Apart altogether from the excusable hatred of the more orthodox Presbyterians to "black prelacy," the Oath was inconsistent with the Treaty and Articles of Union. The matter came up before the General Assembly. It was at this time under the leadership of William Carstairs, a wise statesman, but one who was more governed by the principles of worldly-wise policy than by the simplicity that is in Christ.

Boston gives an account of the discussion in the Assembly: "The lawfulness of the Abjuration Oath was debated pro and con in a committee of the whole house, betwixt the Scruplers and the Clear brethren. All I had thereby was, that the principles on which the answers to the objections were founded, seemed to me of such latitude, that by them almost any oath might pass. The parties were, at that time as I think, at the very point of splitting; till Mr. Carstairs, principal of the college of Edinburgh and clear for the oath, interposed and prevented the rupture; for the which cause I did always thereafter honour him in my heart. For all that I heard advanced to clear the difficulties about it, I still continued a Scrupler; and therefore a little before I came away home, the Act imposing the oath being printed and offered to me at the door of the assembly-house, I bought it on purpose to know exactly the penalty I was like to underlie. Being come home, I did this day spend some time in prayer for light from the Lord about that oath. And thereafter entering on to read the prints I had on it, in order to form a judgment about it, I immediately fell on the act, whereby it was first of all framed and imposed; and finding thereby the declared intent of the oath to be, to preserve the act inviolable on which the security of the Church of England depends, I was surprised and astonished; and upon that shocking discovery, my heart was turned to loathe that oath which I had before scrupled."

The penalty for refusing to take the oath was £500, more money, says Boston, than ever he had received as salary, but his mind was made up as to his course. The sorely tried pastor “being wrestled out of breath with the parish” looked forward to the impending banishment, or whatever punishment the Government would inflict, with equanimity, as a relief out of his present distresses. At last the fateful day came, December 1,[13] the last day for taking the oath, but the Government found so many Scruplers that they wisely refrained from exacting their fine. So passed away another dark cloud from the Ettrick pastor's firmament and Boston continued a Non-jurer till the day of his death.

It was in 1712 that Boston commenced the writing of the Fourfold State, and it is scarcely needful to say that it is as the author of this book that he is most widely known. Probably no theological book ever exercised such a mighty influence on the religious life of Scotland; and the sphere of its influence was not confined to Scotland alone, as Dr. Andrew Thomson in, his Thomas Boston of Ettrick: His Life and Times informs us: “In a paper,” he says, “of much ability and interest on *'Religious thought in Wales*,' which was not long since read by Principal Edwards at a great meeting of the Presbyterian Alliance in London, it was stated that if you entered the house of a rustic elder, or leader of the private societies fifty years ago, you would uniformly find that he had a small and very select library.

Among other books you would be sure to lay your hand on translations into Welsh of Boston's *Fourfold State*, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Owen's *Person of Christ* and *Mortification of Sin in Believers* and others. It is also true that in our British colonies at the present day, especially where the Scottish element abounds in the population, the Fourfold State continues to be sought after and read, and we have received testimony from natives that it is extensively sold and circulated on the misty coasts of Labrador.” The Fourfold State has passed through many editions, and it is interesting to observe that the London Religious Tract society issues the work.

It was in 1711 his friend Dr. Trotter proposed to his beloved pastor that he should print some of his sermons. Boston received the proposal at first with astonishment, but after some consideration he shewed the notes of a certain

[13] *Memoirs pp. 263, 264*

series of sermons dealing with man's fourfold state to his friend. Dr. Trotter was greatly pleased with them.

Boston now went with the matter to his great Counsellor. “I spent most of this day (January 16),” he says, “in prayer and meditation for light in this matter: and after all I found that I had rational grounds to oblige me to make an essay; but could not find such a lively sense of the call of God thereto as I desired. I observed, that the papers being kept up so long after I was made to wait for their return, was of a piece with the Lord's ordinary way with me, to bring matters first very low before they rise. One told me she observed that these sermons had more influence on the people of their neighbourhood, than any before or since. I found myself this night convinced, that they might be useful to many in regard of the room the Lord has given me in people's affections; and this went nearest to the raising in my heart such a lively sense of the command or call of God, as might help me to believe, that He would be with me in the work; which is the thing I want.”[14]

This was only one of many such appeals for guidance in this matter. Boston was earnestly seeking God's glory, and he could honestly say, “I can appeal to God that it is not a name for myself I seek. The Lord knows that I could be content to lose name or credit amongst men, so that the sermons are useful to poor souls.” The work was actually begun on January 29, 1712, when, “after prayer and getting my heart composed,” he says, “to a dependence on the Lord, I began to write out my sermons.”

The book was finished on the 9th March, 1713, but was not printed until 1720. It was well-nigh strangled in its birth, for one of the civic dignitaries of Edinburgh, who had assisted in the negotiations for procuring, a publisher, offered his services as proof-reader. But when the proofs reached the author at Ettrick, he found that not only were printer's errors corrected, but important changes were made in the body of the work. This vexatious delay, however, was at last overcome and the book went forth to the world, entitled Human Nature in its Fourfold State of *Primitive Integrity, Entire Depravity, Begun Recover, and Consummate Happiness or Misery*. The work consists of sermons preached at Simprin, which were recast in 1708 and 1709 and preached again at Ettrick. The book immediately found a public. It had the qualification of a book that was to last - it made no appeal to a passing fancy, but dealt with

[14] *Memoirs, p. 256.*

those mighty problems that must ever have an interest for men and women who realise the momentousness of life.

Its theology is the theology of the Bible as interpreted by the great Dutch divines and the Marrowmen. The ring of the federal theology and the full and free offer of Christ so much in evidence in the Marrow theology may all be traced in this religious classic. Its teaching has been beautifully described by one when he says: “Boston took the bewildered child of trespass familiarly by the hand and descending to the level of his untutored capacity gave him a clear and consecutive view of the innocence from which he had fallen, the misery in which he was involved, the economy of restoration under which he was situated, and the hope which, by submitting to that economy, he might warrantably entertain.

His eye as he wrote was upon the awkward sinner, that he might arouse him from his dangerous lethargy; upon the anxious inquirer, that he might guide his steps into the right way; and upon the young convert, that he might guard him against devious paths and perilous delays. He never failed to show the bearing of Christian doctrine upon the conscience, the affections and the life and to mingle with the light of systematic arrangement beseeching tenderness and practical appeal.”

In the spring of 1713, he borrowed a copy of Cross's *Taghmical Art* from a neighbour, and “had I known then,” he says, “what was in the womb of that step of Providence, I had surely marked the day of my borrowing that book as one of the happiest days of my life.” This book set him to the study of the Hebrew accents, and it may be safely said that no Scottish minister ever studied this intricate subject with greater zeal and with more abounding prayer. In his Memoirs he tells us the story of his struggles and how he failed to get his work on the accents published.

To him it was the great work of his life. His enthusiasm brought him into correspondence with some of the great continental scholars of the day. Among those who took a friendly interest in his work were Sir Robert Ellys and the Dutch scholars Schultens, Gronovius and Loftus. Boston translated his essay into Latin, but he died without seeing his hopes realized in its publication. In 1738 - six years after his death - it was published at Amsterdam with the title Tractatus Stigmologicus. The main contention of the essay was to prove the divine authority of the accents. “It is something to know,” says Mr. Morrison in his introduction to the *Memoirs*, “and it is worthy of remembrance that the

evangelical minister of Ettrick, whose works were treasured by the cottar and the herd, was welcomed as an equal by the finest Hebrew scholars in the world."[15]

In 1714 the famous Simson case began to agitate the peace of the church. Simson was professor of divinity at Glasgow. He was charged with teaching Arminianism, but the Assembly, after inquiring into the charges, allowed him to escape with a gentle reprimand. Boston was ill at ease with the Laodicean methods of the Assembly, and predicted further trouble from the same source. Nine years later Boston's fears were realized, for now Simson was charged with Arianism. The charges, it is true, were difficult to prove, but they were sufficiently well substantiated to move the Assembly to pass sentence of perpetual suspension. Boston felt this to be trifling with a great issue; so he rose in his place in the Assembly "with an air of great majesty," says an eye witness, "that I shall never forget," and, addressing the Moderator:

"Moderator! I cannot help thinking that the cause of Jesus Christ as to the great and essential point of His supreme Deity is at the bar of the Assembly requiring justice; and as I am shortly to answer at His bar for all that I say or do, I cannot give my assent to the decision of this act. On the contrary, I find myself obliged to offer a protest against it. And therefore, in my own name, and in the name of all that shall adhere to me, and if none here will, for myself alone, I crave leave to enter my dissent against the decision of this act."

"Sir," said the Moderator, a very grave, solemn man, "will you tear out the bowels of your mother?" "If that were the tendency of this," was Boston's reply, "rather would I take and tear it into a thousand pieces." Boston did not persist in recording his protest, so the Simson case came to an end.

In 1716 a call came to him from Closeburn, and the event is memorable for the remarkable effect it had on the people of Ettrick. All of a sudden they seemed to have realized that a prophet had been among them all these years, and to show their anxiety at the prospect of losing their pastor a fast day was appointed in which they might plead with the Head of the Church not to remove His servant from them. It was the beginning of better days. A remarkable change came over the people and the seed that was sown with tears was now beginning to bear fruit.

[15] Memoirs, p. 34.

The next great controversy in which Boston took a part was that which raged round the *Marrow of Modern Divinity*. It was during his Simprin pastorate that he came across a copy of the first part of the Marrow of Modern Divinity. It was the means of clearing up some difficulties he had in preaching the gospel. Nothing was heard of the book for years until, while the Assembly was discussing the Auchterarder Creed, as it was called - “I believe it is not orthodox and sound to teach that we forsake sin in order to our coming to Christ.” Boston communicated to a fellow member of Assembly the great help he had received through reading the Marrow.

Ultimately the book came into the hands of James Hog of Carnock, who published it. It was severely attacked by Principal Hadow of St. Andrews; so began the Marrow Controversy. Boston was condemned along with the other Marrowmen by the Assembly. In 1721 Boston's two friends, Gabriel Wilson and Henry Davidson, suggested that he should write notes in the *Marrow of Modern Divinity*. These were finished in the following spring, but, owing to his respect for church authority, they were not published until 1726. They went forth to the world under the name of *Philalethes Irenaeus*, and had in view the confutation of Hadow's *Antinomianism of the Marrow Detected*. Boston has left on record that he was much addicted to peace and averse to controversy, but once engaged therein he was “set to go through with it.” It must have cost his sensitive spirit a great deal of pain those bitter contentions in the church courts.

Boston was now turning his face towards the setting sun, and he was not without warnings his course would soon be over. In the last decade he preached to his people a series of sermons on Affliction. These were subsequently published under the title *The Crook in the Lot*, being mainly founded on Eccles. vii, 13: “Consider the work of the Lord: for who can make that straight which he hath made crooked” Many a sorrowing pilgrim has read these precious pages and felt the burden that was so heavy to bear lifted off the shoulders. Boston was a true son of consolation. The angel of death often visited his home and the tender-hearted father bowed his head in submission when the dread messenger entered in.

How tender a heart he had may be gathered from the following narrative in his Memoirs: “When the child was laid in the coffin, his mother kissed his dust. I only lifted the cloth off his face, looked on it, and covered it again, in confidence of seeing that body rise a glorious body. When the nails were

driving, I was moved, for I had not kissed that precious dust which I believe was united to Jesus Christ, as if I had despised it. I would fain have caused draw the nail again, but because of one that was present I resented and, violented myself." During the closing years of his life he had another great trial through the mental weakness of his wife. With eagerness the devoted husband watched for any returning gleam that might tell that the night was past. "Now we were," he says, "with our broken ship within sight of the shore and I was like one stretching out his hand and crying, Help forward! Help forward! But behold in a little after the storm arose anew and the ship was beaten into the main ocean out of sight of land again."

But if the latter years of her life were thus darkened Boston recalled the years when she was the joy and light of his home, and he has left on record as fine a tribute as ever a husband paid to a wife. This is how he describes her: "A woman of great worth, whom I therefore passionately loved and inwardly honoured. A stately, beautiful and comely personage, truly pious, and fearing the Lord; of an evenly temper, patient in our common tribulations and under her personal distresses. A woman of bright natural parts, an uncommon stock of prudence; of a quick and lively apprehension in things she applied herself to; great presence of mind in surprising incidents; sagacious and acute in discerning the qualities of persons, and therefore not easily imposed upon; modest and grave in her deportment but naturally cheerful; wise and affable in conversation, having a good faculty at speaking, and expressing herself with assurance; endowed with singular dexterity in dictating letters; being a pattern of frugality, and wise management of household affairs; therefore entirely committed to her; well fitted for, and careful of, the virtuous education of her children; remarkably useful to the country side, both in the Merse and in the Forest through her skill in physic and surgery which in many cases, a peculiar blessing appeared to be commanded upon from heaven; and finally a crown to me in my public station and appearances. During the time we have lived together hitherto" we have passed through a sea of trouble, as yet not seeing the shore but afar off. I have sometimes been likely to be removed from her; she having little continued health, except the first six weeks, her death had oftentimes stared us in the face and hundreds of arrows had pierced my heart on that score; and sometimes I have gone with a trembling heart to the pulpit, laying my account with being called out of it, to see her expire. And now for the third part of the time we have lived together, namely ten years complete, she has been under a particular racking distress; and for several of these years,

fixed to her bed; in the which furnace the grace of God in her hath been brightened, her parts continued to a wonder and her beauty which formerly was wont, upon her recoveries, to leave no vestige of the illness she had been under, doth as yet now and then show some vestiges of itself."[16]

Boston's labours were now nearing an end. Weakly in body and haunted often by melancholy, he persevered in the pursuit of his duties. When one looks over the record of that life, so full of noble purpose persisted in to the end, seeking the highest interests of the people committed to him, the words, "Well done, good and faithful servant," come involuntarily to the lips.

Many of Boston's works were published posthumously, and though not so popular as the *Fourfold State* and the *Crook in the Lot*, yet there is a freshness in the treatment of the subjects that make Boston's sermons readable to the present day. An edition of his collected works was published in 1854 under the editorial care of Rev. Samuel MacMillan. This edition, which consists of twelve volumes, does not contain what Boston himself regarded as his *magnum opus*, the Tractatus Stigmologicus.

Boston did not live to see the Secession of 1733, having passed away peacefully on May 20, 1732. It is difficult to estimate Boston's place as a theologian, his fame as a preacher and pastor seems to have obscured to a certain extent what belongs to him in other departments. But it is not claiming too much for him when we say that he was the Turretine of Scottish Theology. Not that his system was modelled after that of Turretine, for he was more under the influence of Witsius, but the same clear sententious treatment of doctrines characteristic of Turretine was also characteristic of Boston. In his Memoirs[17] he gives a pen picture of himself remarkable for its fidelity. In it he tells us: "I was not of quick apprehension; but had a gift of application; and things being once discovered, I was no more wavering in them ... My talent lay in doing things by a close application, with pains and labour."

Boston was only 56 years when he finished his course, and, reviewing his life two years before his death, he sums up his impressions in the concluding sentences of his Memoirs: "Upon the whole, I bless my God in Jesus Christ, that ever He made me a Christian, and took an early dealing with my soul; that ever He made me a minister of the Gospel, and gave me some insight into the doctrine of His grace; that ever He gave me the blessed Bible, and brought me

[16] Memoirs, p. 157.
[17] Memoirs, p. 474, 5.

acquainted with the originals and especially with the Hebrew text. The world hath all along been a step-dame to me; and wheresoever I would have attempted to nestle in it, there was a thorn of uneasiness laid for me. Man is born crying, lives complaining and dies disappointed from that quarter. 'All is vanity and vexation of spirit - I have waited for thy salvation, O Lord'." Such is the language of a pilgrim journeying on to a better country with the pearly gates of the New Jerusalem already in sight, and as we read the expressions of gratitude ending with the mournful plaint, our thoughts turn to that life of noble endeavour, chequered as it was with so many sorrows, and feel constrained, in the words of Carlyle,[18]to say.: "Here is a Life-battle right nobly done, Seest thou not,

> The storm is changed into a calm,
> At His command and will;
> So that the waves which raged before
> Now quiet are and still!
> Then are they glad, - because at rest
> And quiet now they be;
> So to the haven He them brings
> Which they desire to see.

We part now with one of the most intensely human and lovable Scottish pastors of the eighteenth century and pay our tribute of respect in the halting rhyme but noble appreciation of Ralph Erskine.

The great, the grave, judicious Boston's gone
Who once like Athanasius bold, stood, firm, alone.
Whose golden pen to future times will bear
His name till in the clouds his Lord appear.

[18] Oliver Cromwell V, p. 155. London, 1894.