"RABBI" DUNCAN

by ALEXANDER ROSS

"HE was at once one of the most profound and versatile of scholars, one of the humblest of believers, and one of the mst erratic and absentminded of men." So wrote Principal John Macleod ("Scottish Theology", pp. 282 f.) of John Duncan, whom the Free Church of Scotland called home from his missionary service among the Jews of Budapest to be the first Professor of Hebrew and Old Testament in New College, Edinburgh. Readers of our QUARTERLY must have been struck by the frequency with which Dr. Ross quotes the memorable sayings of "Rabbi" Duncan. We are indeed glad that he has now written this paper, which may introduce to a new generation this very remarkable Christian.

THOMAS CARLYLE says in his *Heroes and Hero Worship* that "great men, taken up in any way, are profitable company. We cannot look, however imperfectly, upon a great man, without gaining something by him." Let us look at a man who was in many ways a great man and one who ought not to be forgotten. Two pen portraits of him may inspire in us a desire to know more about him.

The first of these was drawn by one who knew him well, Dr. William A. Knight, who was Professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of St. Andrews from 1876 to 1902. Of him Dr. Norman Maclean said in his autobiography that "he had been a Free Church minister in Dundee, but had to resign his charge owing to incipient heterodoxy." Here is his most graphic pen potrait:

> During the quarter of a century which ended in 1870, there might have been seen almost daily in the streets of Edinburgh, during the winter months, an old man of singular appearance and mien; short of stature, and spare in figure, with head usually bent, and eye that either drooped or gazed wistfully abroad, as if recognising a reality behind the illusions of sense; the expression of his face one of lonely abstraction, with lines indicative of many a struggle with the darker side of things; more like an apparition from a mediæval cloister than a man of the nineteenth century. His pathetic look and generally uncouth appearance were sure to attract the notice of the passer-by. That man was not only a characteristic figure among the celebrities of Edinburgh, but really one of the most remarkable men of his time. He was the late Professor of Hebrew in the College of the Free

> Church; the learned, original, eccentric, profound, yet child-like "Rabbi" Duncan.

He must have been strange and wonderful to look upon; once seen, he would not easily be forgotten. Dr. Taylor Innes has drawn a pen portrait of Duncan in which the most striking thing is the extraordinary variety of the impressions made on him by a man who must have been far from ordinary.

> With his long beard and flowing skirts, his lifted finger and glittering eye, his archaic language and supra-mundane thinking, he looked half ancient mariner and half wandering Jew and wholly a being of another sphere.

Taylor Innes also said that

> it seemed as if Pascal had shuffled into the sandals of Socrates, and walked up and down our Edinburgh streets, with large utterance of response to the inquiring youth around.

Another has called Duncan "the Coleridge of the Free Church."

A literature of quite respectable proportions has grown up around this remarkable man. His biography by his close friend, Dr. David Brown of Aberdeen, is one of the finest and most rewarding biographies that we have. Brown, who in his early days had the interesting experience of being assistant to Edward Irving in London, is the third member of the trio responsible for the well known commentary by Jamieson, Fausset and Brown. This biography is a very scarce book in these days: when it does make a rare appearance in catalogues of second-hand books, it may be priced as high as ten shillings, though there is in existence a copy of it which was picked up many years ago—in Aberdeen—for a shilling. Brown also edited a collection of Duncan's sayings, sermons and addresses, under the title, *The Pulpit and Communion Table*. This book is even scarcer than the biography. There are two other books which are not quite so scarce; one can recollect having seen them offered for sale not so many years ago in second-hand bookshops in Edinburgh. *Recollections of Dr. Duncan* by Dr. Moody Stuart is a rich collection of Duncan's choicest sayings. *Colloquia Peripatetica; or Deep Sea Soundings* is a collection of Duncan's *obiter dicta* on a great variety of themes, amassed by Professor Knight, who lived under the same roof with Duncan during part of the summers of 1859 and 1860, in a seaside Fifeshire village, was his constant companion in his walking hours and picked up with the greatest care the pearls of wisdom that fell continually from his lips. There was published in 1925 *Rich Gleanings After the Vintage from "Rabbi" Duncan*, this volume containing sermons, lectures and addresses never before published; it was edited

by the late Rev. James S. Sinclair, minister of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland at Glasgow. Mr. W. Keith Leask reviewed the sixth edition of *Colloquia Peripatetica* in the Aberdeen students' magazine *Alma Mater* on 13th January, 1915, and this review is reproduced in Leask's deeply interesting book *Interamna Borealis* ("Memories and portraits from an old University Town between the Don and the Dee"), published at Aberdeen in 1917.

AN OUTLINE OF HIS LIFE

The facts about the life of Duncan can be learned in the books that have been written about him. We are concerned here rather with the man himself and some of the arresting things that he said in the course of his endless discussions about all manner of subjects. A few facts and dates, however, may be given. He was born in 1796 in Gilcomston, that district of the city of Aberdeen in which was born in the year 1848 Mary Slessor of Calabar. Duncan's father was a shoemaker and so was Mary Slessor's. Duncan once said about William Carey: "Carey was sneeringly called 'the sanctified cobbler,' but God has plenty of talent down in the under strata of society, which He can bring up, if He pleases."

After graduating as M.A. at Marischal College, Aberdeen, in 1814, Duncan was for a few years a divinity student in connection with the Anti-burgher branch of the Secession Church. He left that Church and joined the Church of Scotland, finishing his theological studies in the Aberdeen College of that Church and receiving license from that Church in 1825. He was for a number of years a minister in Perthshire and Glasgow, till he was appointed in 1841 to serve the Mission among the Jews in Buda-Pesth. His labours there during two short years were richly blessed of God. The most outstanding of those who were brought to Christ under his ministry were the members of the Saphir family (the most famous of whom was Adolph Saphir) and Alfred Edersheim, the author of *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*. In 1843 Duncan cast in his lot with the Free Church of Scotland and was appointed Professor of Hebrew and Oriental Languages in the New College, Edinburgh. He remained in that post until his death, having as his colleague during the last seven years of his life the distinguished Hebrew scholar who afterwards became his successor in the chair, Dr. A. B. Davidson. Duncan died in 1870 and was buried in the Grange Cemetery, Edinburgh, not far from the graves of such old Free Church comrades as Thomas Chalmers, William Cunningham and James Buchanan. On his tombstone he

is described as "an eminent scholar and metaphysician, a profound theologian, a man of tender piety and a lowly loving spirit."

ECCENTRIC

One of the adjectives applied to Duncan by Knight is the adjective "eccentric," and it is an appropriate one. There are some people who can think of Duncan only as an occasion for mirth in others because of the absurd things that he did in his frequent fits of absentmindedness. Some of his eccentricities came out during his student days at Aberdeen. One of the Professors had a young English boarder who wanted to learn French and who was sent by the Professor to Duncan for some tuition in that language. The arrangement was for a quarter's teaching from 10 to 11 in the morning in Duncan's rooms. After a very short time the young man said to the Professor: "I think, sir, it's no use going any longer to that gentleman." "Why?" "Because when I go I find him in bed, and he tells me to say my lesson at his bedside, but I have hardly begun, when I find him asleep." "In fact," Brown says, "one of his incurable peculiarities through life was the extreme difficulty of getting him to bed at any reasonable hour and the still greater difficulty of getting him to rise when once laid down and fast asleep."

The first time I ever heard of "Rabbi" Duncan was when a Free Church elder in Dingwall, Ross-shire, told me many years ago a humorous story about him as an illustration of his absentmindedness. It has been one of the disappointments of my life to discover that it is probably an apocryphal story. Dr. Moody Stuart refers to it as an almost incredible example of absentmindedness; Dr. David Brown says that he knows it to be false. The story declares that on the day of his marriage Duncan went upstairs to get ready for the occasion. As the hour of the marriage drew near, there was no sign of him, so somebody went upstairs and found him in bed, sound asleep! When he had divested himself of some articles of attire, the thought that dominated his mind was that it must be time for retiring, so he went to bed!

Brown says that he verified another story. Having to preach on a Sacramental Fast Day at Maryculter, seven miles up Deeside from Aberdeen, Duncan, walking to that place, had gone a considerable way when he took out his snuff-box to take a pinch; but the wind being in his face, he turned about to peform the operation, after which, instead of turning round again, he started walking back to Aberdeen, and was only wakened out of his reverie by a

man who was himself on his way to worship at Maryculter, who, conjecturing that he was the preacher for the day, ventured to ask him and so brought him to his senses. Brown says that he consulted an old man of ninety years of age, but in full possession of his memory, who knew a good deal of Duncan's early and later history. This man affirmed the truth of this story, and when he was asked what ground he had for believing it, replied : " Ground ? The best ground, for I knew the man that turned him on the road." The Roman Catholic Church has a legend about the appearance of the Virgin Mary to some young men in an orchard in Italy. They told their parish priest that she had accepted a bowl of milk from them and had then picked a peach from one of the trees and eaten it. The priest visited the orchard in their company and in due course picked up a peach stone. There was proof positive ! The Madonna had really been there, for there was the peach stone to prove it. The evidence for Brown's story is not quite so flimsy as that. He knew a man who knew the man who turned Duncan on that Aberdeenshire road.

Brown quotes one of Duncan's students as saying that on one occasion Duncan's prayer at the opening of his class in the New College prolonged itself for the whole hour and it was only the ringing of the bell at the end of the hour that woke him to a realization of the actual circumstances of the case and brought the reverie to an end. That may seem utterly incredible, but I was once assured by the late Principal MacCulloch of the Free Church College, Edinburgh, who had been one of Duncan's students, that he could remember an occasion, perhaps the same occasion, when the opening prayer lasted as long as that.

Duncan was an enthusiastic linguist, and it was said of him that he "could talk his way to the wall of China." In a letter written in 1857, when he was one of Duncan's students, Dr. Marcus Dods said :

> Dr. Duncan is getting fonder of us every day, and seems inclined to teach us all the languages, living, dead, buried, and a few that might be but are not yet; and keeps ominously before us a book printed in seventy-two languages; and called *The Napoleon Polyglot*, towards which he every now and then casts a loving grin, as much as to say, " How I wish I had lived at the time of Babel, or been interpreter at the court of Shem."

In a letter written two years earlier, Dods said :

> Dr. Duncan is going through Job just now, and gives some most valuable notes, a good many queer stories, and a great quantity of minor matter difficult to carry away.

Dr. James Strahan is no doubt right when he says, in his biography

of Dr. A. B. Davidson, that Duncan was unfit to be an instructor in Hebrew or any other language, and that he deserves to be remembered, not because of any light that he cast on Old Testament theology or Old Testament criticism, but because of "that spiritual genius which makes the *Colloquia Peripatetica* a living book to this day." Duncan's students may not have learned very much Hebrew, but some of them felt many a time that they were getting light on matters which, in the end of the day, they found to be of greater importance. As they listened to this strange man, who, on the slightest provocation, in prayer or lecture, would go off at a tangent and go "sounding on his dim and perilous way" into the weirdest and most obscure realms of metaphysics and theology, they felt that thoughts sufficient for a lifetime were often suggested to them.

PROFOUND

When he was quite a young boy, Duncan seems to have been occupied with deep thoughts regarding man and God and the mystery of existence.

> Here we are with the heavens above our heads. What are we? Men. How came we to be men ? What is man? How came he to be and to be as he is? We are on earth and the beasts can't ask any questions. The heavens are above us and the eagles soaring into them can't ask any questions.

He spoke these words in his later years, but he must have begun to ask such questions at an early age. Often, as he went along the street in his student days, it is said that he would wrap his red student's gown about him and mutter to himself, "What, after all, are we here for ?" Dr. Knight said that Duncan's face was one that indicated "many a struggle with the darker side of things." These struggles must have begun early. He had several years of grim battling with the "spectres of the mind." He was for a time an atheist; he actually says himself that he was an atheist when he entered the Divinity Hall.

Long afterwards he said :

> There are many minds to whom, though they are atheists, the problem of Being is interesting for evermore, and draws them into this attitude of reverent pondering. Who are we? Where are we? Whence? And whitherwards? For what end are we here? What is the hour on the clock of the universe? And so forth. Human life, death and destiny, are for ever interesting to the atheist who *thinks*.

He was an atheist who *thought*. He "fought his doubts and gathered strength, and thus he came at length to find a stronger faith his own." He emerged out of his atheism, and about that crisis in his life he said : "When I was convinced that there was a God, I danced on the Brig o' Dee with delight." But he did

not become a convinced Christian believer right away. He was for a time a Pantheist. Later on in life he said :

> There is something in Pantheism so deep that naught in bare Deism can meet it. Deism is not so deep. And Pantheism may well keep the house, till a stronger than Deism comes to take possession of it. In Jesus Christ I find the only solution of the mystery.

On another occasion he said :

> My supreme answer to Pantheism is a moral one, and is based upon the fact of sin. I ask the Pantheist, is sin real? Is it a moral antithesis and discord in man's life? And then I ask him, is that which involves a discord the outcome of the infinite *One?*

He said once that he had to fling away Pantheism in order that he might *live*. By the grace of God and under the guidance of the Spirit of Truth he came at length to a simple, profound, immovable faith in Christ as true Man and true God and he became a guiding light to many a soul that was struggling with unbelief and groping its way to clearer views of the fundamental truths of the self-revelation of God in His Word. Many of his choice sayings could become guiding lights today, if the men and women of the modern world would only condescend to listen to them. We have already quoted some of these sayings; let us now recall some more of them.

One of the best known of them was uttered in his classroom, and one of his students has given a most vivid description of the circumstances attending this utterance. He writes as follows :

> In the winter of 1864, Dr. Duncan was reading part of Isaiah with his senior class. The particular passage I cannot remember, nor does it matter, for it only served as a suggestion of the cry in verse 1 of the 22nd Psalm, " My God . . ." By the time Dr. Duncan had reached that point he had left his desk, and, bent nearly double, was pacing up and down in front of the students' benches, his snuff-box and pocket-handkerchief in one hand, a huge pinch occupying the fingers of the other, but utterly forgotten in the absorbing interest of his subject, our Lord's suffering for sinners, which he was turning over and looking at, now on this side, now on that, but all with a loving reverence, and as one who spoke in a half-sleeping vision, when suddenly a flash went through him as if heaven had opened. He straightened himself up, his face kindled into a rapture, his hand went up and the snuff scattered itself from the unconscious fingers as he turned to the class, more as it seemed for sympathy than to teach—"Ay, ay, d'ye know what it was dying on the cross, forsaken by His Father; d'ye know what it was? What? What? (as if somebody had given him a *half* answer which stimulated him, but which he had to clear out of his way, a very usual exclamation of his when wrapped in thought). What ? What ? It was damnation—and damnation taken *lovingly*." And he subsided in his chair, leaning a little to one side, his head very straight and stiff, his arms hanging down on either side beyond the arms of his chair, with the light beaming from his face and the tears trickling down his cheeks as he repeated in a low intense voice that broke into a half sob, half laugh in the middle, " It was *damnation*—and He

took it *lovingly*." No saying of his of the many I have heard from him, nothing in all his manner and expression, ever struck me like this.

The Rev. Duncan Macgregor, who was one of McCheyne's successors in St. Peter's Church, Dundee, mentions the last long conversation he had with Duncan three years before his death.

I felt as if an inspired prophet were speaking to me, and I am not ashamed to say that the glistening tears started from my eyes. Would that I could reproduce that conversation, but alas! it has gone from me. The only word that I can remember is that a saint, when overborne by indwelling sin, ought to comfort himself with the thought that *a prisoner of war is not a deserter.*

A most illuminating comment, surely, on Romans 7 : 24. We are reminded here of these other words of Duncan: "there is nobody perfect; that is the believer's bed of thorns, that is the hypocrite's couch of ease."

Duncan once said: "Some men's Trinity consists of the Father and the Son and Faith." That is subtle. Light is thrown on his meaning by an anecdote which he was fond of telling.

At a Highland Communion in a meeting for "speaking to the question" on a Friday, the subject selected was Faith. One after another of the "men" spoke in glowing terms of the power and the triumphs of Faith, and each speaker exalted it more than the one before him. At last their esteemed minister, jealous for the honour of the Lord Jesus Christ, stood up and said, "I ask, was Faith crucified for you, or were you baptised in the name of Faith?"

In *The Pulpit and Communion Table* we have this item, contributed by Principal MacCulloch:

Being asked by a lady if he would have bread and a glass of wine, he replied, "If you please, I'll have bread and a glass of *water.*" "Prison fare," remarked the lady. "No, garrison fare: Thy bread shall be given thee and thy water shall be sure; thy place of defence shall be the munition of rocks."

That is subtle, too.

Some one talking to Duncan mistook for Scripture words drawn from a very different source and asked him, "Where is that text in the Bible, 'He tempers the wind to the shorn lamb'?" He returned what Dr. Moody Stuart calls "the doubly unlooked-for answer": "That could not be in the Bible for it is not true." Dr. Moody Stuart says that "this combination of quickness and fulness of reply was not by an occasional sally of intellect, but was his daily habit of speech." Mr. G. W. E. Russell writes of people who "may not know Solomon's opinion of too-frequent visitors, or who it was that first escaped by the skin of his teeth, or what Job thought of the white of an egg; but they are persuaded that 'in the midst of life we are in death' and 'He tempers the wind to the shorn lamb' are Canonical Scripture. In my youth

there was a pathetic song about the insupportability of bereavement :

> Had we ne'er heard that Scripture word.
> Not lost but gone before.

and those who applauded the music did not ask for the reference."

The words now to be quoted open out before us vast vistas of truth.

> A lady once said to me, " The more I see of myself, I see nothing so properly mine as my sin." I said to her, " Well, you do not see deep enough. There is something far more properly yours than your sin, and your sin is improperly yours. It is a blot in your being, which, if you do not get quit of it, will never cease to be *unnatural* to you. No; the image of God is more properly yours, though you had no share in the production of it." Very many pious people do not rise high enough in their anthropology. They ascend to the Fall, and forget the higher fact that we fell, where we were fitted to dwell, and where we were intended to remain. And Jesus Christ has come so that He might raise us even higher than that height.

Alongside these words place these other words : " We must always remember that man was created before he fell. It is good to take a walk in Eden."

We have noted Duncan's acute criticism of Pantheism. His criticism of Arianism is just as acute.

> It is meagre patchwork. If we are to be saved, it must be by God, or by man, and how grandly by the God-man. But that it should be by one, neither God nor man, neither one nor other, nor part of both, nor wholly both, nor wholly one of the two, but wholly neither, and, therefore, with no real affinity with either of them; that system has no attractions for me. Let who choose go to it. I cannot, and never could.

" There is fine poetry," Duncan once said, " in some of our Scotch Paraphrases.

> So days, and years, and ages past,
> Descending down to night,
> Can henceforth never more return
> Back to the gates of light.

This is very fine poetry. But it was born in Hellas, and never existed in Judea. Now we are to sing the songs of Sion. ' Gates of light ! ' I begin to think of Aurora, fair daughter of the dawn ! On the whole, I prefer the Psalms to the Paraphrases and Hymns." Mr. W. Keith Leask asks the question : " What would Duncan have said of Heber's ' By cool Siloam's shady rill . . . lily grows . . . Sharon's dewy rose' ? . . . Siloam is not a rill, is not cool nor shady, and the lily never grew there." There are some hymns that Duncan appreciated and loved. He described the *Te Deum* as "a grand piece of writing, by far the finest fragment of post-apostolic devotion." He said : " I have a great liking for many of Wesley's

hymns; but when I read some of them, I ask, 'What's become of your Free-Will now, friend?' Some of his stanzas are specially beautiful. For example:

> All are not lost or wandered back;
> All have not left the Church and Thee;
> There are who suffer for Thy sake,
> Enjoy Thy glorious infamy."

"The last line," Duncan said, "has a *curiosa felicitas* in it."

The quotations given are perhaps sufficient to bring out the rare quality of the man, but a few of his acute estimates of eminent men may be cited. "I once heard Archbishop Whately," he said, "to my great disappointment. He was very dull and wishy-washy. He preached on good behaviour, but it was blanched morality." Thomas à Kempis he described as "a fine fellow, but hazy, and weak betimes. He and his school tend to make humility and humiliation exchange places." He said that "Matthew Henry is not deep, but broad. He had not a deep insight; but his was an 'exceeding broad' religion, because he cast himself with equal reverence upon the whole of the Bible, *and had no favourite texts.*" "Bengel's short 'Scholia'," he said, "are amongst the very best on the New Testament. But why is that book translated? It is a *loss* to our ministers to have it translated." This is what he has to say about John Owen:

> John Owen has vigorous thoughts, but the baldest style I know . . . He was a good student of texts. But, oh, he moves clumsily. He moves like a whale. Robert Hall called his works a "continent of mud". He utterly lacked the aesthetic, which Hall valued highly; but he is a good specimen of the Patristic Scholastic Puritan; and he is great in spiritual analysis. If you read him on the "mortification of Sin", you must prepare yourself for the scalpel.

CHILDLIKE

Dr. Taylor Innes declared that there were two great *thinkers* in Edinburgh last century, Sir William Hamilton and Dr. John Duncan, and Duncan was the greater of the two. The quotations given here from his talk provide some of the evidence, a very small part of the evidence that can be adduced in support of that dictum. Yet, with his subtle intellect and his vast stores of learning Duncan was one of the humblest of men. "Profound, yet child-like"—that is the suggestive antithesis in Dr. Knight's pen portrait. Once, after talking in the most profound fashion with a friend about dark and obscure problems, he said: "Ah! think now of the infinite God looking down all this time on our babblings in the dark." Mr. Robertson of Newington, visiting him in his last illness, engaged in a very brief prayer in which he said: "We seek

the *lowest* place, as that which best befits us." "At that instant," says Mr. Robertson, " he pressed my hand in both of his and exclaimed with emphasis, 'Amen to that; Amen, Amen.' " That was just a day or two before his death.
Burghead.