

“Edwards, Maclaurin and the Transatlantic Concert”

Throughout human history, the friendship of two uniquely gifted individuals has often resulted in an extraordinary benefit for the world. Such was the friendship of Pierre-August Renoir and Claude Monet. These men of enormous creative ability often traveled together to a particular location in order to garner inspiration for their subsequent works of art. Renoir’s works reflect the influence that Monet had upon him. This influence is all the more evident when the one contrasts the works that Renoir brought forth in the company of Monet with the works he produced in the company of Paul Cézanne. The influence that Monet had upon Renoir is evident in one noteworthy example. Renoir’s admiration of his friend was captured in his portrayal of Monet painting at his garden behind his French chalet. The painting is unique in that it is reflective of what Monet valued most—capturing the beauty of a landscape. While this painting—in an extraordinary manner—captures Renoir’s admiration for Monet, its distinctiveness is discovered in what lies beneath the canvas. Beneath it lays another portrait—one painted by Monet. Having first begun to work on the canvas, Monet then gave it to his friend to paint on. In turn, Renoir produced one of the most memorable paintings of the impressionist school—a portrait of Claude Monet doing what he did best, and what he loved most.

The benefit derived from the friendship of Renoir and Monet is surely one of the greatest examples in the modern world, but it is illustrative of another friendship of a century earlier—the friendship of Jonathan Edwards and John Maclaurin of Glasgow. There is a temptation to envisage Edwards’ friendship with Maclaurin as a mere formal association—to reduce it down into a means to an end. Though this would be reductionistic, it is somewhat understandable since many of the letters written between the two did not survive. Add to this the fact that neither Edwards nor Maclaurin ever crossed the Atlantic—the two never actually met in person. While these reasons help explain why their friendship has been undervalued, the literary evidence overwhelmingly supports the conclusion that this was no mere association.

Edwards interacted with numerous Scottish ministers; of whom Maclaurin is understood to have been the “catalyst.”¹ On the surface, Edwards’ relationship with the Scottish ministers in general, and with Maclaurin specifically, may appear to have been less significant than it actually was,

but as Christopher Mitchell has so aptly noted, “Edwards’ isolation was real, and the spiritual and intellectual camaraderie offered by his Scottish correspondents was viewed by him, not as a luxury, but rather as the means of meeting a fundamental need in his life and ministry.”² While this is certainly true of Edwards’ correspondence with James Robe of Kilsyth, John Erskine of Edinburgh, and William McCulloch of Cambuslang, it is particularly so with regard to Maclaurin. Edwards personally expressed as much in a letter written to Maclaurin in November of 1745. “I am greatly obliged to you for your large, friendly, profitable and entertaining letter of February last,” Edwards wrote, “I esteem my correspondence with you, and my other correspondents in Scotland, a great honor and privilege; and hope that it may be improved for God's glory, and my profit.”³ A close examination of letters and extant works reveal that their friendship was anything but a mere formal association. To envision it in this way is to ignore an enormous amount of evidence suggesting that the two had a mutual appreciation for the fellowship and intellectual contributions of the other.

By 1742 Maclaurin had acknowledged how he had specifically benefited from two works of Edwards that has been published in Scotland. *Surprising Narrative* was first published in Edinburgh in 1737, and *Distinguishing Marks*, was published in both Edinburgh and Glasgow in 1742. So great was the influence of the Northampton minister on his Scottish counterpart that the first printing of the *Freedom of the Will* was purposefully held off until 1754. Maclaurin desired to secure subscriptions for it throughout Scotland. Of the eighty-eight copies ordered by Maclaurin and Robe, forty-five subscriptions were secured. In a gesture of friendship and mutual respect for his Scottish associates, Edwards’ willingly held the printing off until sufficient subscriptions were obtained. Edwards’ influence on his Scottish correspondents was of such magnitude that, as Mitchell notes, “Edwards became one of the chief advocates of Scottish evangelical Calvinism in the eighteenth century without ever crossing the Atlantic.”² It is surely fitting that a figure of such profundity should be the object of interest to Maclaurin; but it is correspondingly appropriate that an individual of such theological magnitude as Maclaurin should be of particular interest to Edwards.

Though largely forgotten in the church—even from within the Calvinist tradition to which he belonged—Maclaurin was nevertheless a man of extraordinary theological ability. John Brown of Edinburgh, in the preface to the 1824 edition of the *Works of John MacLaurin*, described him as “the most profound and eloquent Scottish theologian”⁴ of the eighteenth Century. Brown’s commendation was noted some 30 years later by MacLaurin’s son-in-law, John Gillies, in the preface to the 1860 W.H. Goold edition of the *Works of the Rev. John Maclaurin*. This edition differed only from the first edition, printed in Glasgow in 1755, by the addition of the brilliant exposition, “On

the Prophecies Relating to the Messiah.” This final essay supplies, on account of its eschatological nature, the theological connection between Maclaurin and Edwards in regard to the concert of prayer. Nevertheless, the question remains as to why Maclaurin’s works have not been reprinted in nearly 150 years.

Born in 1693 in Argyllshire, Maclaurin was promptly relocated from one home to another. His father—a Presbyterian minister—passed away when John was only three years old. His mother died not many years later when he was only 14 years old. Having lost both parents—as well as a younger brother—John, and his brother Collin (who subsequently went onto become a Scottish mathematician of extraordinary notoriety), went to live with their uncle, Daniel Maclaurin, a minister of the Gospel in Kilfinan. It can be safely assumed that John received exemplary nurture and theological instruction in his new home. Young John’s piety and intelligence were immediately recognized during his time of study at the University of Glasgow. After a short stint in pastoral ministry, Maclaurin was placed in the running for the chair of Divinity at the University of Glasgow. This is confirmation that John Brown’s praise of Maclaurin was far from misplaced. To fill the chair of divinity there one either had to be a man of exceptional theological ability, or—as turned out to be the case with regard to Thomas Leechman,—a man of substantial connections.⁵

Maclaurin’s Theological Contributions

The relationship between Edwards and Maclaurin cannot be fully understood apart from an investigation of the theological contributions of both men. While an abundance of scholarly works concerning Edwards’ enormous corpus of writing have been produced, it is not so with the writings of Maclaurin. This neglect surely owes to the limited printings his works have undergone. Add to this the small number of sermons and essays included in the published editions, and it becomes abundantly apparent how a man of such capacity could be almost entirely forgotten. Maclaurin’s theological depth and insight, unmatched by most of his Scottish contemporaries, is manifest from even a cursory reading of his sermons and essays. His style was perspicuous but profound. W.H. Goold expressed his sentiments concerning Maclaurin’s remarkable ability when he wrote:

The essay on ‘Prejudice Against the Gospel,’ and the Sermons on ‘The Sins of Men not Chargeable to God,’ and ‘On Glorifying in the Cross of Christ,’ are compositions, the two first for profundity and acuteness, the last for impressive eloquence, to which, in the whole range of theological literature, we will not easily find anything superior; and there is not one of the treatises in the volume, which does not contain in them many indications of a mind of extraordinary endowments, subjected to the best of all influences, and employing its best energies in the best of causes. Maclaurin’s thoughts have, in a

remarkable degree, the characteristic marks of original genius; they are singularly pregnant thoughts. They germinate in the mind. There is a living spirit in them. It is impossible to read him with attention, without being, as it were, compelled to exercise your own faculties. He is a writer who requires attention in his readers; but he richly repays it. ⁶

His adoption of Enlightenment principles was wed to an unwavering commitment to Calvinist doctrine. This was equally true of Edwards. Mitchell has further observed that Maclaurin, “like Edwards...functioned theologically on a level above most of his contemporaries, and displayed the same ability as his New England counterpart to use Enlightenment conceptions for the purpose of explicating and defending orthodox and evangelical Calvinism.”⁷ Although he showed a vast approach to learning, both of ancient and contemporary authors, he was at every point a propagator of orthodox and evangelical Calvinism. He never seemed to allow his defense of orthodoxy to supplant his eagerness to promote the central truths of the Gospel. An evangelical and Calvinistic Christocentrism permeated Maclaurin’s works. The impact of this evenhanded theological commitment was felt as he actively engaged the effort to “keep the truth before the minds of the people in the West of Scotland, during the early portions of the moderate ascendancy.”⁸ Of Edwards’ Scottish correspondents, John Erskine has typically been credited as having been “the most eminent scholar among his [i.e. Edwards’] Scottish correspondents,” the singular Scottish figure with whom “he discussed his most important theological ideas.”⁹ This claim is susceptible to reevaluation in light of Edwards’ recommendation of a number of Maclaurin’s sermons and essays.

On numerous occasions, both in his letters and writings, Edwards refers to Maclaurin. Some of the more significant allusions include a recommendation of the latter’s *Prejudices Against the Gospel*. The subjects to which Edwards appeals in this work include such controversial doctrines as *human depravity*, *eternal punishment* and the *imputation of Christ’s active obedience*. Maclaurin’s essay is a masterful defense of these doctrines, and is noteworthy, as is evident from Edwards’ citations. This particular essay reveals to a large extent the similarity between Maclaurin’s argumentation and the logical method employed by Edwards. In *Prejudices*, Maclaurin utilized the *prisca theologica*, a hermeneutical principle frequently employed by Edwards. For Edwards and Maclaurin a sure way to uphold a coherent *weltensbauung* was to root pagan worship in the perversion of Adamic and Noahic revelation. Another interesting connection is seen in a passing remark in which Edwards commends Maclaurin’s sermon, “Of God’s Chief Mercy,” an exposition of Romans 8:32 that influenced Edward’s thoughts on assurance. One final instance will suffice to demonstrate the theological similitude. Maclaurin, in his most celebrated sermon, “Glorying in the Cross of Christ,” employs a comparative process by which he contrasted the state of the humiliation of Christ, in the

incarnation, with His concurrent Divine glory. The particular section in which this comparison appears is reminiscent of portions of Edwards' renowned sermon, *The Excellency of Christ*. In that sermon Edwards exegeted the metaphors of the Lion and Lamb by explaining that they were representations of the perfections of Christ harmoniously applied to His two natures. Concerning Maclaurin's "Glorying in the Cross," the Rev. James Waddell Alexander expressed the following sentiment: "There is probably no single sermon in the English language which has acquired a higher place in the esteem of sound theologians and evangelical Christians."¹⁰

In short, it should be noted that both men adopted a Theocentric, as well as Christocentric, approach to preaching, to the doctrines of grace, and to the fundamentals of experiential Calvinism. It is no overstatement to say that the correspondence occurred as a result of their mutual interest in the advancement of these foundational principles as they were seen in light of current opposition as well as revival. And so in a rather wonderful way, these men who found themselves moved by God, joined themselves to one another for necessary intellectual stimulation and spiritual support.

The Connection

Maclaurin was the first of Edwards' Scottish correspondents. The relationship spawned out of a deep desire for the glory of Christ and mutual spiritual development. It is difficult to ascertain the precise date of the initial correspondence. It appears to have been sometime in middle of 1743. It is possible that George Whitefield, who frequently travelled between the UK and North America, became something of an intermediary. In a letter from Edwards to James Robe, written in 1743, mention is made of prior communication between he and Maclaurin. It has been suggested that the first correspondence occurred sometime in October of that same year. MacLaurin was most likely the chief propagator of the Edwards-Scotland connection on account of his admiration for Edwards and from his willingness to contact him. Maclaurin was an elder minister of many of Edwards' Scottish correspondents. It appears that many of them worked through Maclaurin to deliver books or messages to Edwards. In addition to this, Edwards' vested interests in the Scottish revivals certainly helped foster his relationship with Maclaurin.

The events that transpired during the time of the correspondence were significant. In a letter written to William Hogg, a merchant in Edinburgh "to whom [Thomas] Boston was largely indebted for assistance in getting his *Fourfold State* printed and published," Maclaurin expressed sincere desire that funds be collected to pay for a portrait of Edwards—copies of which were to be sold to provide

for the needs of Edwards' family. This fact is noteworthy because it was at that same time that things began to heat up on the domestic front for the Northampton minister. 1744 was the year of the "Bad Book" episode. This was, in some measure, instrumental in Edwards' 1750 rejection from the pulpit. Maclaurin's care and esteem for Edwards is demonstrated most clearly in the following letter:

As care has been taken to preserve to us the faces of so many other eminent authors and other persons, it seems a pity if no such respect is put on an author whose past and possibly some future composures may come to be more regarded when the world's taste mends.¹¹

Maclaurin was ready to support Edwards in the face of opposition and the opinion of the world. In short, 1744 proved to be a year of international admiration for Edwards because of Maclaurin's efforts, as well as a year of domestic frustration at home.¹² In addition to this act of kindness, Edwards made mention of an undisclosed gift his Scottish correspondents, directed by Maclaurin, wished to give to the seminary at the New Jersey College. He noted this in a letter to John Erskine in 1750: "I am very glad to hear what Mr. [John] MacLaurin informs of the encouragements likely to be given from Scotland to New Jersey College, a very hopeful society; and I believe what is done for that seminary is doing good in an eminent manner."¹³

The Concert of Prayer

Although the theological camaraderie and material endowments are not insignificant factors in the history of the friendship of Edwards and Maclaurin, there was a matter of greater weight and deeper consideration. Stephen Stein in his preface to the *Apocalyptic Writings* explains, "A group of Scottish ministers met in October 1744 and agreed to unite in prayer regularly at designated times and in quarterly meetings with the hope that God would revive his church throughout the world."¹⁴ The precise details of the concert and its continuation have not been difficult to discover. The Scottish ministers engaged in the cause wrote a memorial in which they recorded specific details. Concern for a sustained commitment to the concert lay behind the widespread circulation of the memorial to all the societies involved, as well as to American ministers—of which Edwards was the leading proponent. In October 1747, just three years after the concert began, Edwards' wrote *An Humble Attempt at Extraordinary Prayer*—(a somewhat abbreviated title). It appears to have been a direct answer to the prescriptions laid down in the memorial.

John Gillies, Maclaurin's son-in-law, also recorded in some detail the events leading to the concert together with the memorial. This was published in his 1754 edition of the *Historical Collections of Remarkable Periods of the Success of the Gospel*. In this work, Gillies recorded how the "concert was first set on foot, spread, and carried on without printing anything about it for some time, in the way of private, friendly correspondence, by letters in 1744."¹⁵ Maclaurin, the originator of the Concert, "encouraged the societies of prayer, which multiplied in Glasgow...With his approbation there was a general meeting appointed once a month, consisting of a member from each society, with a minister from their pres[byteri]es, to inquire into the state of the societies, and to send more experienced persons to assist the younger sort."¹ Maclaurin's role in the societies cannot be disregarded since he was the organizer of the societies of prayer throughout Scotland. Upwards of thirty societies with at least thirty members each existed just prior to and throughout the initial years of the concert. Nearly one thousand individuals were praying for universal revival in the church.

If October of 1743 is the correct date of the initial contact, the correspondence is tied more directly to the Cambuslang revivals. Both men had an experiential acquaintance with revival—Edwards in Massachusetts, and Maclaurin in Cambuslang. Apart from their mutual commitment to pray for continuing revival, both men shared a deep concern for the souls of professed converts. Owning their roles as spiritual apothecaries, the two carefully analyzed the marks of true Christianity. It was Edwards' 1739 Edinburgh edition of *Distinguishing Marks* that propelled Maclaurin's pastoral involvement in the Cambuslang revivals. No evidence has been presented to support the suggestion that Maclaurin was instrumental in preaching during the days of the Cambuslang revivals. To be sure there were at least 25 ministers involved, and one can reasonably speculate that Maclaurin was one of them. It was William McCulloch's record of the revivals that disclose the central place Maclaurin held in regard to Cambuslang. It is estimated that nearly 110 converts were made at one time in the revivals there. The overwhelming need for pastoral assistance served as the catalyst for Maclaurin's participation.

There was, of course, another reason for Edwards' interest in the Concert. On Edwards' part, the Northampton revivals served as affirmations of his millennial expectations. While it would be a bit anachronistic to classify him as a "postmillennialism" (since that phraseology is of modern invention) Edwards had distinct millennial expectations that awaited the fulfillment of a large portion of the Messianic prophecies of the OT in the Christianization of the world. Consequently,

¹ Maclaurin, John *The Works of the Rev. John Maclaurin* (1830) p. 37

this compelled him to turn his attention to the prophetic passages in the OT which he understood to be speaking of the Messianic later-day glory. This is most evident, among many other places, in Edwards' 1741 sermon *Importunate Prayer for Millennial Glory*. Turning to Isaiah 62:6-7, Edwards wrote, "We have prophecies left by God in the Scriptures, in the hands of his church, of what God will do in the latter days, which doubtless are to be of some use to the church."¹⁶

It is not clear whether Maclaurin shared the same millennial expectations as Edwards. It is evident that both understood that the prophecies of the Old Testament found eschatological fulfillment in the incarnation of the Son of God; but, there is little evidence to suggest that Maclaurin believed the Messianic prophecies related specifically to a millennial "later-day glory." There is one passing reference to the end time conversion of Jews and Gentiles in *Prophecies Relating to the Messiah*, but the absence of allusions to the term "millennium" or "later-day glory," is evidence of Maclaurin's focus on the "already" aspect of a Christ-centered eschatology. Maclaurin's writings indicate that if there were any modern category into which he would fit, it would be that of an "Inaugurated Millennialist." Maclaurin emphasized that Christ's first advent brought with it the full spiritual blessings promised in the OT prophets. This conclusion is reached definitively by a reflection on Maclaurin's thoughts expressed in his *Prophecies Relating to the Messiah*. The majority of the author's attention is turned to the engrafting of the Gentile nations at the first coming of Christ. This alone seems to provide the interest in the concert of prayer for Maclaurin. While God may not have promised revival at every period throughout the history of the church, He had promised to save multitudes of Gentiles. The expectation that Maclaurin had from the knowledge of the expansion of the covenant was sufficient to unite his heart to Edwards in the cause of the concert. For Edwards, the concert was driven by an expectation of a mass conversion of the world, and the end time hope of the conversion of ethnic Israel. For Maclaurin it was simply driven by the exponential nature of the Abrahamic Covenant in the inclusion of the Gentiles.

Edwards' *Humble Attempt* becomes the gateway into a deeper knowledge of the concert. This is specifically so on account of the inclusion of the memorial in the second section of the work. Among the seven suggestions listed in the memorial, the third was a call for "short and nervous scriptural persuasives and directions to the duty in view."¹⁷ Edwards' scriptural persuasive, whether "short and nervous" or not, can certainly be recognized as an attempt to root the continuation of the concert in Divine inspiration. *An Humble Attempt* seems to have given the concert momentum in Scotland, though it lacked serious continued influence in America. There was a genuine effort to renew a widespread commitment to the concert of prayer on both sides of the Atlantic. This would

continue over the subsequent decade. John Gillies explained, in his *Historical Collections*, that on July 3, 1754 members of the societies for prayer signed the following agreement:

We whose names are subscribed agree, that the concert for prayer should be continued for seven years after this date...Members of societies in other places and ministers, to whom the proposal has been mentioned, have also agreed to it...It is therefore entreated that all into whose hands this may come, would join in so blessed a mean[s] of promoting the kingdom of Christ. The Lord incline them to comply!

Ten years after the concert certain Scottish ministers sought its continuation. It is not clear as to how long this extended effort persisted. Gillies reference, almost a decade later, in the context of a renewed effort in Scotland, demonstrated the significant contribution Maclaurin and Edwards played in this Global effort to pray down the Divine blessing. A friendship that began as a simple admiration of likeminded theological minds and Christ-exalting hearts, yielded a benefit for the church that has been unsurpassed by subsequent generations.

¹ I am indebted to Christopher Mitchell for the work he has done on Edwards' Scottish correspondents. I wish to thank him for granting use of a chapter from his doctoral dissertation on Maclaurin and Edwards.

The language of Maclaurin being the “catalyst” comes from Mitchell’s essay, “Jonathan Edwards’ Scottish Connection,” in Kling and Sweeney (ed.) (2003) *Jonathan Edwards at Home and Abroad*, , South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press

² Christopher W. Mitchell (2003) ‘Jonathan Edwards’ Scottish Connection’, in Kling and Sweeney (ed.) (2003) *Jonathan Edwards at Home and Abroad*, , South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, p. 226.

³ Edwards, Jonathan (1998) *Letters and Personal Writings vol. 16*, in George S. Claghorn (ed.) New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 180.

⁴ Maclaurin, John (1830) *Works of the Rev. John Maclaurin* Glasgow: Printed for William Collins p. xxix.

⁵ Mitchell explains that Maclaurin was only defeated on account of Francis Hutchenson, the famous Scottish philosopher. The influence he had at the University of Glasgow served to ensure the election of Leechman.

⁶ Maclaurin, John (1830) *Works of the Rev. John Maclaurin* Glasgow: Printed for William Collins p. xxix.

⁷ Mitchell, “Jonathan Edwards’ Scottish Connection” p. 227

⁸ Taylor, William (1887) *The Scottish Pulpit from the Reformation to the Present Day*, New York: Harper & Brothers, p. 170.

⁹ Stephenson, Sally Anne, (1983) *The Theological and ministerial Influences of Jonathan Edwards* University of Pennsylvania, p. 187.

¹⁰ Maclaurin, John (1854) *Glorying in the Cross of Christ*, New York: Anson D.F. Rudolph p. 3

¹¹ Maclaurin, John, (1830) *Works of the Rev. John Maclaurin* Glasgow: Printed for William Collins, p. xlviii.

¹² Stephenson, Sally Anne (1983) *The Theological and Ministerial Purposes of Jonathan Edwards’ Thought* Philadelphia: Universty of Pennsylvania, p. 181

¹³ Edwards, Jonathan (1998) *Letters and Personal Writings vol. 16*, New Haven: Yale University Press, in George S. Claghorn (ed.) p. 350

¹⁴ In Stein, Stephen J. (ed.) *The Works of Jonathan Edwards vol. 5 (1977)* New Haven: Yale University Press. p. 37

¹⁵ Gillies, John (1845) *Historical Collections Relating to Remarkable Periods of the Success of the Gospel*, Kelso: John Rutherford, p. 462.

¹⁶ Edwards, Jonathan “Importunate Prayer for Millennial Glory,” in Harry Stout (ed.) *Sermons and Discourses, 1739-1742* p. 372

¹⁷ Edwards, Jonathan (1748) “An Humble Attempt,” in Stephen J. Stein (ed.) *The Works of Jonathan Edwards vol. 5 (1977)* New Haven: Yale University Press. p. 326

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