

## Thomas Chalmers in London May 1817

‘All the world wild about Dr Chalmers,’ wrote William Wilberforce in his diary on 19 May 1817.<sup>1</sup> By *world* Wilberforce meant the intersection of the worlds of London society, Parliament and evangelical Christianity – and in that small compass the Chalmers visit was undoubtedly a sensation. To illustrate the impact of his preaching on the metropolitan élite the biographers of Chalmers invariably refer to a comment attributed to George Canning, the greatest Parliamentary orator of the day: ‘The tartan beats us all.’

Chalmers had undertaken to preach two benefit sermons in London, one for the London Missionary Society on its twentieth anniversary, and the other for the Hibernian Society. The collections at the church door for a popular preacher yielded substantial sums and formed a large part of the income of church charities. Chalmers was conscious of his value in this regard. He knew that London would make demands upon his time, patience and energy, and accordingly arranged to arrive in the capital just the evening before the LMS sermon on 14 May, and to leave on 26 May, the day after the Hibernian Society. He found he could not refuse engagements to speak at a dinner of the London branch of the Society for Propagating Christian Knowledge in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, and to preach on behalf of London’s Scottish Hospital for the relief of aged and destitute natives of Scotland. He was persuaded to follow up his sermon for the Hibernian Society with a second appearance on that same day. He also found time to meet the Fellows of the Royal Society, attend a debate in the Lords on the Catholic Question, and visit Cambridge.

Thomas Chalmers (1780-1847) was a complex and controversial figure, combining Bible-based Christianity with a rationalist enlightenment outlook and strong worldly ambitions – and also, it was said, a violent temper. He was born in the Fife port of Anstruther, the sixth of fourteen children.<sup>2</sup> His grandfather was a prosperous merchant, his father less prosperous, but still a man of some standing in the burgh. Thomas matriculated at the University of St Andrews at the age of eleven, and in 1799 was licensed as a preacher, by special dispensation, some two years before the usual minimum age. The rapidity reflected his father’s wish to see him settled rather than any urgent commitment to the ministry on his own part. His student career showed him to be a talented young man, who quickly made up for the deficiencies of his early schooling, but his interests were more in mathematics and political philosophy than in divinity. While waiting for a parish living he held posts as private tutor, attended lectures at Edinburgh University, and held an assistantship in mathematics at St Andrews. He showed himself impatient of authority and quarrelled with the mathematics professor, William Vilant.

In May 1803 he was ordained minister of Kilmany, near Cupar in Fife. He was not a zealous parish minister, and found time to give courses of unofficial lectures in mathematics and chemistry in St Andrews. The Cupar presbytery took a strong position in the controversy over pluralities, and objected on principle to his attempt to pursue a university career while holding his parish living. Chalmers was therefore, right at the start of his career, caught up in one of the fiercest controversies that exercised the church at the time. In 1805 he applied unsuccessfully for the chair of mathematics in Edinburgh. His activities in St Andrews had given him a reputation for insubordination, which told against him, and he was inexperienced in the complex interactions of national, church and university politics.

As a student he had been drawn to radical writers at a time when politics was dominated by the conflict with Revolutionary France. Events modified his radicalism. In opposition to the war-party in the 1790s he had attacked the organization of local Volunteers, but after the renewal of hostilities in 1803, persuaded like many others that national survival was at stake, he became an enthusiastic recruit. He remained antagonistic to the Tory landed interest which dominated burgh politics in his native Anstruther, and whose supporters controlled the University of St Andrews. The political conflict between Tories and Whigs was mirrored in the Church by the divide between Moderates and Evangelicals. Chalmers’s own religious position was more inclined to the Moderates, although

1 William Wilberforce (1759-1833) was a Tory MP and leading Evangelical layman and member of what later became known as the Clapham sect, supporter of many advanced causes and remembered above all for his opposition to slavery. In 1807 he secured the passing of the Act abolishing the slave trade.

2 For details of Chalmers’s early life I have followed Stuart J Brown, *Thomas Chalmers and the Godly Commonwealth*, OUP 1982, and the entry by the same author in the *DNB*.

this may well have been less from conviction than a general indifference towards his duties as a minister.

In developing his own political philosophy it is not surprising that, with his mathematical bent, he leaned towards the doctrines of Thomas Malthus. He developed his own communitarian philosophy in combination with Malthus's grim theory of population – which was given added point by the economic problems arising from the war. The results of his thinking emerged in 1807 as his first major work, *An Enquiry into the Extent and Stability of National Resources*. An attack on industrialism, and a call to limit the population to a size that could be supported by national food-production, the *Enquiry* was out of tune with the economic liberalism that was coming to dominate intellectual and political circles. What reviews his book received tended to be patronising and dismissive. He published the first edition at his own expense, in the hope that a publisher would be persuaded to bring out a second. He was bitter at the refusal of the London publishers to offer him a contract, and at the failure of government and opposition alike to take any notice of his ideas. The experience underlined his position as an outsider.

Disappointment over the Edinburgh chair and the reception of the *Enquiry*, criticism of his lax performance of parish duties in Kilmany, and a variety of family and personal problems either caused or exacerbated a breakdown in Chalmers's health. At about the same time a commission to write the entry on Christianity for Brewster's *Edinburgh Encyclopaedia* prompted him to go back to consider the historical evidence for the Gospel narratives. The crisis in his life and the renewed study of the Gospels brought about a conversion. He convicted himself of neglect of his parish duties and a lack of firm religious purpose. From now on the one sure guide, the Bible, would control his personal decisions, his intellectual quest and his social philosophy. His encyclopaedia entry was published as a pamphlet, and brought him to the attention of leaders of the Evangelical movement, such as William Wilberforce. His preaching drew large congregations to his small church at Kilmany. The powerful imagination and emotional energy which may have seemed out of place in his mathematical lectures, found their proper outlet in his sermons. He also applied his communitarian philosophy and practical intelligence to tackling the social problems of his parish.

His reputation as a preacher and parish minister spread, and in 1814 he received an invitation from the Evangelical party in Glasgow to become minister of the Tron parish. With some misgivings, he offered himself and, despite opposition from the Moderates in Glasgow, he was appointed. Here too he attracted large congregations, and concentrated on transplanting his ideal of the Christian Community from rural Fife to a populous urban parish. The experience confirmed his opposition to supporting the poor through indiscriminate charitable donations or through state sponsored relief. The way to remove the evil of poverty and dependence on relief was through education, in particular religious education, combined with close supervision of poor households. Since a single minister could not supervise a parish of 10,000, he divided it into twenty-five areas (known as *proportions*) and assigned to each a trained deacon. The deacon was responsible for 'aggressively' visiting the poor, to ensure that they were industrious and sent their children to school. His prescription of education and aggressive visiting was criticised as heartless and tyrannical, and was opposed by some with a vested interest in the existing system of poor relief in the city, but it had its supporters, on both practical and religious grounds: it promised to save money and it was avowedly based upon the Bible. The money raised by his preaching and lecturing gave him additional bargaining power, and some five years after arriving in Glasgow he persuaded the town authorities allow him to try out his ideas in the new parish of St John's. His system became known throughout the country as the St John's system.

Soon after his arrival in Glasgow he started on a series of discourses on the relationship of revealed religion to the study of astronomy. This enabled him to put his scientific training to good use, and to prove to members of Glasgow's cultured middle-class that Evangelical Christianity was not the preserve of wild and unlettered enthusiasts. *The Discourses on the Christian Revelation, Viewed in Connection with Modern Astronomy* were published in 1817 and were an immediate success. He started by expounding the basics of Newtonian physics, which he said was an attempt to describe, not to explain the natural order. So long as science restricted itself modestly to this descriptive role it would not infringe upon Revelation. Without this modesty, he says, without this subordination to the Bible, science would lead to 'mysticism', that is to subjective, individualist faith.

The *Discourses* ‘ran like wild-fire through the country,’ recalled Hazlitt, ‘were the darlings of watering-places, were laid in the windows of inns, and were to be met with in all places of public resort.’<sup>3</sup> Chalmers was already well known in Evangelical circles, as is plain from the invitations to preach that brought him to London, but the book whetted the metropolitan appetite, and assured him of a wider audience. This was not his first visit to London, but when he came before, in 1807, he had been a tourist, visiting the sights, the theatre and the House of Commons. Soon afterwards he had suffered the humiliating rejection by the London publishers of his *Enquiry*. Now he was coming by invitation and he would not be left to walk the streets as a sight-seer, but would be welcomed in to the great institutions of learning and power. Lords and cabinet ministers would line up to be introduced to him.<sup>4</sup>

His first engagement was at the Surrey Chapel in Southwark, a circular building and often referred to as Rowland Hill’s Chapel, after its founder. Hill was a Calvinist, a humane man and a witty preacher. Since its inception in 1783 Hill’s chapel had been used by both Congregationalists and Methodists; it was closely associated with numerous church charities, including the London Missionary Society.

The newspapers reported that the chapel was full by 7am, and that ‘thousands’ were turned away for want of room.<sup>5</sup> Chalmers preached on a difficult passage about speaking in tongues (1 Corinthians XIV 22-27), giving a ‘most enlightened, liberal and admirable defence of missionary societies’.<sup>6</sup> The collection was said to have raised £400.<sup>7</sup> The seventy-three year old Rowland Hill was observed standing at the foot of the pulpit throughout the sermon gazing and smiling at the preacher, and occasionally nodding his head in agreement. At the close of each well-turned sentence there was ‘a sensible rustling throughout the audience,’ reported the son of Chalmers’s Glasgow publisher. The ‘carrying forward of minds’ was plainly visible, he said, and ‘a constant assent of the head from the whole people accompanied all his paragraphs.’<sup>8</sup>

When Chalmers preached, again at the Surrey Chapel, for the benefit of the Scottish Hospital, he took his text from Acts XX 35, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’ He did not confine himself to conventional pieties on the subject, but advanced his own decided views on ‘the baleful consequences of promiscuous charity, without a due discrimination between who were, or who were not worthy of it.’ His audience contained several MPs and others concerned in the urgent contemporary controversies on how to improve the working of the poor laws. Chalmers undercut the whole debate with his ‘bold and uncompromising attack on the principle and expediency of all forms of legalised charity.’ The patients of the Hospital (said to number 2,953 in the course of the previous year) were evidently worthy beneficiaries, and the collection after the sermon raised £260.<sup>9</sup>

On his last day in the capital Chalmers preached twice, at two substantial Scots Presbyterian chapels, in the morning at London Wall, and in the afternoon in Swallow Street, Piccadilly. The chapel in Swallow Street with its three galleries and West End location attracted a large fashionable

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3 ‘Rev Mr Irving’ in *The Spirit of the Age*. Hazlitt adds in a footnote that he himself found the volume in an orchard near Boxhill, and passed ‘a whole and very delightful morning in reading it, without quitting the shade of an apple-tree.’

4 ‘The Chancellor of the Exchequer, Lord Sidmouth, Lord Melville, and others, have desired to be introduced to him,’ wrote his travelling companion. ‘At present he is off to the Chancellor, and we have just had a message from the Lord Mayor, telling us of his intention to call here to-day.’ Quoted by William Hanna, volume 2 p 100. It is interesting that Chalmers had to come to London in order to meet Melville, who was, among other things, Chancellor of the University of St Andrews, and would a few years later, despite misgivings about his eccentricity, secure the Chair of Moral Philosophy for him. See Michael Fry, *The Dundas Despotism*, 1992, p 328.

5 *Caledonian Mercury*, 22 May 1817, reprinting a report from the London *Morning Chronicle*.

6 *Leeds Mercury*, 17 May 1817.

7 *Morning Chronicle*, 19 May 1817.

8 John Smith jnr, quoted by William Hanna (volume 2 p 99). The observation of Rowland Hill was made by another eye-witness, also quoted by Hanna.

9 *Caledonian Mercury* 26 May 1817; *Morning Chronicle* 26 May 1817; Hanna, volume 2 p 101. The hospital was situated in Crane Court, Fleet Street. The charity was also known as the Royal Scottish Corporation; it was incorporated by a charter of Charles II, having been founded as a box-club in the early seventeenth century. The Corporation still exists, having been re-organized in the 1970s to provide financial and other support to Scots living within 35 miles of Charing Cross.

audience.<sup>10</sup> The crowds at the door were so pressing that Chalmers himself, and several of his distinguished supporters, including William Wilberforce and his companion Lady D (no shrimp, according to Wilberforce), were obliged to enter the church through a window. The newspapers described the afternoon sermon as an ‘animated and powerful address to the vicious,’ and Wilberforce recorded that Chalmers was ‘most awful on carnal and spiritual man’.<sup>11</sup>

It was the morning sermon at London Wall, however, that provided the most famous testimony to Chalmers’s impact upon London. The church door collection was in aid of the Hibernian Society – in full, The Hibernian Society in London for Establishing Schools and Circulating the Holy Scriptures in Ireland. It therefore attracted, among a long list of other political figures, the two Irish members of Lord Liverpool’s cabinet, Lord Castlereagh, the Foreign Secretary, and George Canning, President of the Indian Board of Control. As the newspapers noted, so many ‘honourables’ were not usually to be elbowed at public worship.<sup>12</sup>

In advocating ‘missionary’ work amongst the Catholics of Ireland Chalmers pointedly avoided the easy route of playing on the prejudice against Catholics that was never far from the surface in British society. The most controversial issue in politics at the time was the Catholic Question, whether to remove the laws that prevented Catholics from becoming members of Parliament, holding public office, and, in England and Scotland, from voting at elections. Canning and Castlereagh were both in favour of some measure of emancipation, but it was opposed by the Prime Minister, the Lord Chancellor and most of the cabinet, not to mention the King and Prince Regent. Chalmers was on the side of emancipation, and, more generally, advocated religious tolerance. He believed that however much scope was given to the Catholic church, it could be combated simply by spreading an enlightened understanding of the Bible.

His sermon was on the text from Matthew VII 3-5 ‘Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother’s eye.’ He argued for a humble, tolerant approach to missionary work. The Catholics of Ireland, he said, were in no greater need of the Bible than the Presbyterians of Scotland. He listed the faults commonly ascribed to Roman Catholicism – subservience to authority, exclusiveness, undue emphasis on outward show, reverence for the past, and the belief that repentance can be postponed until the end of life – and claimed that such faults were equally prevalent, under different names, among Protestants. The Hibernian Society should offer Catholics the Bible, and the ability to read it, in order to establish Biblical principles in their hearts – and this was no different from the work of Bible Societies among the Presbyterians of Glasgow.

As well as avoiding stirring up new antagonism against Catholicism, he also had to deal with the strong existing prejudice against the Irish population. To convince those who dismissed as hopeless any attempt to reform such a rude and sullen nation he concluded his sermon with a long passage in praise of the Irish character.

Let the rudeness of the Irish be what it may, sure I am, that there is much in their constitutional character to encourage us in this enterprize. They have many good points and engaging properties about them. I speak not of that peculiar style of genius and eloquence, which gives such fascination to the poets, the authors, the orators of Ireland. I speak of the great mass, and I do think that I perceive a something in the natural character of Ireland, which draws me more attractively to the love of its people, than any other picture of national manners ever inspired. Even amid the wildest extravagance of that humour which sits so universally on the countenance of the Irish population, I can see a heart and a social sympathy along with it ... a something by which the bosom of an Irishman can be seriously and permanently affected ...

The way to convert all this potential into actual virtue is by judicious management and ‘honest, frank, liberal and persevering kindness ... no artful policy ... but upright and firmly sustained benevolence ... an unquelled and an undissembled love for them and their children ... divested of every treacherous and suspicious symptom ...’

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10 *Survey of London: volumes 31 and 32: St James Westminster, Part 2* (1963), chapter 4, pp. 57-67. URL: <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=41454> Date accessed: 11 May 2014.

11 *Life of Wilberforce* volume 4 pp 324f; *Morning Chronicle*, 26 May 1817.

12 *The Public Ledger*, reprinted in *The Caledonian Mercury* 9 June 1817.

Why, my brethren, let all this come to be seen, and in a few years I trust our devoted missionaries will bring it before them broad and undeniable as the light of day, and those hearts that are now shut against you in sullenness and disdain will be subdued into tenderness, the strong emotions of gratitude and nature will at length find their way through all the barriers of prejudice, and a people whom no penalties could turn, whom no terror of military violence could overcome, who kept on a scowling front of hostility that was not going to be softened, while war spread its desolating cruelties over their unhappy land, – this very people will do homage to the omnipotence of charity, and when the mighty armour of Christian kindness is brought to bear upon them, it will be found to be irresistible.<sup>13</sup>

To modern ears there is something patronising about this suggestion that the Irish will respond favourably to kind treatment – there is an unspoken comparison, it seems, with animals or children – and for all the humility with which Chalmers claims to approach the task, there is an inescapable arrogance about the missionary project. Against this must be set his clear preference for reconciliation over repression. Less than twenty years after the bloody suppression of the United Irishmen's rebellion of 1798, Chalmers's references to the 'terror of military violence' on the one side and the 'scowling front of hostility' on the other were far from being empty phrases. Against such a background there is a nobility about his call to resolve the Irish problem by the 'omnipotence of charity' and the 'mighty armour of Christian kindness'.<sup>14</sup>

The nobility of this ideal may have been what moved Canning to tears. 'I was surprised to see how greatly Canning was affected,' wrote Wilberforce. 'At times he quite melted into tears. I should have thought he had been too much hardened in debate to show such feeling.'<sup>15</sup> Lady Elgin also had her eyes open to notice how Canning, who was always an object of curiosity, reacted to the sermon; she recorded that 'the beautiful passage on the Irish character affected him to tears.'<sup>16</sup> What she saw could have been his response to the humane tenor of the sermon as a whole, rather than specifically to the Irish passage, which comes right at the end, but there is no positive reason for doubting her explanation, so far as it goes. Canning was conscious of being Irish<sup>17</sup>, and might have felt a strong personal interest in the affectionate observations on the Irish character, as well as a personal and political interest in Chalmers's tolerant approach.

We might go further and discern a still more intimate explanation of his display of emotion. His mother, Mary Ann, was Irish. When left a penniless widow she had gone on the stage, and lived for almost ten years with a married man, the actor Samuel Reddish, by whom she had five children. She gave up George when he was six to his Canning uncle and aunt, who brought him up and sent him to Eton. His uncle kept him away from his mother until he was almost sixteen – old enough to have outgrown his childhood longing to be with her. As an adult, Canning recognised his duty to support his mother, but never allowed her to become part of his household, insisting that she should live well away from London. As a woman who had lived an immoral life, she was not someone he could permit his wife to mix with. Although Mary Ann doted on George and was inordinately proud of his achievements, she never accepted his harsh ruling. He had his way, of course, because he held all the power, but the situation was never comfortable and sometimes extremely painful. He tried to tell her that he was merely bowing to the unavoidable prejudices of the world, but she knew that he shared the world's judgement of her.

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13 The quotations are from 'The Doctrine of Christian Charity applied to the case of Religious differences, A Sermon preached before the Auxiliary Society, Glasgow, to the Hibernian Society for establishing schools and circulating the holy scriptures in Ireland.' The sermon delivered in London may have been different, but accounts of it confirm that it contained an impressive passage on the Irish character.

14 Chalmers, who always saw himself as a political philosopher as well as a divine, was aware of the role of Christianity in subduing the 'brawny vigour' and 'volcanic energy' of the discontented poor in British cities. Schools and the close supervision of the poor were, he claimed, a 'cheap defence' for the nation – cheaper and more effective than the English Poor Law. (The phrase 'cheap defence' occurs in both the 'Influence of Bible Societies on the Temporal Necessities of the Poor', 1814, and 'Sermon on the Death of Princess Charlotte', 19 November 1817.)

15 *Life of Wilberforce* volume 2 pp324ff.

16 Letter from Lady Elgin (1790-1860), quoted by Hanna volume 2 p 102. Hanna doesn't give any details of the letter, so we don't know how soon after the event it was written, or to whom.

17 In a letter to Walter Scott, Canning described himself as an Irishman who had accidentally been born in London. His paternal grandparents were Irish Protestants, his mother's father was Irish Catholic, and her mother half-Huguenot and half-English; he was brought up in London by his Irish uncle and aunt.

It is possible that Canning recognised something of his mother in Chalmers's portrait of the Irish character. She was passionate, wayward, strong-willed, but also affectionate and responsive to kindness. He knew that, despite everything he did for her, he failed to satisfy her. When Chalmers spoke of 'strong emotions of gratitude and nature [which] will at length find their way through all the barriers of prejudice', Canning may have recalled Mary Ann's complaint that he was affectionate only to the extent that duty required, and her longing for a spontaneous, natural outpouring of affection from him. Chalmers's words may have struck him as a rebuke for failing to break through the barrier that the prejudices of the world had erected between him and his mother. This is all mere speculation, but the incident, Canning weeping, offers a rare glimpse past the masks of propriety and irony that he habitually wears, and the temptation to make the most of it is irresistible.<sup>18</sup>

It may be, on the other hand, that Wilberforce and Lady Elgin completely misread Canning's reaction. In view of his reputation for levity on 'serious' topics and his tendency to be carried away by the spirit of mockery, perhaps his tears were due to the difficulty he had in suppressing laughter at Chalmers's Scotticisms and strong Fife accent. These features were commented on by one of the few negative notices of Chalmers's preaching in London: 'His language was rendered often unintelligible by Scotticisms and Scotch pronunciation in the broadest accent.' The writer concludes, patronisingly enough, that Chalmers 'has done more to overcome the obstacles of a provincial education, an ungrateful person, and an unharmonious voice, than could have been expected.'<sup>19</sup> It would have been quite in character for Canning to have ridiculed such a figure.

On the whole, though, it seems more likely that he was genuinely moved, whether because of his intense personal engagement with the Irish theme, or simply because of the power of Chalmers's language. Wilberforce's testimony is hard to reject; he was an experienced Canning-watcher. William Hanna, Chalmers's son and biographer, collected information on the response to the sermons from several sources, most of whom he names, but also picks up the gossip of the time, which was categorical in asserting that Canning was impressed.

[Canning] is reported to have said that although at first he felt uneasy in consequence of Dr Chalmers's manner and accent, yet that he had never been so arrested by any oratory. "The tartan," so runs the speech attributed to him, "beats us all."<sup>20</sup>

Almost every account of Chalmers's life picks up this saying of Canning's, and so it is unfortunate that we don't have firmer authority for its authenticity. Nor do we know why Canning chose to express his admiration for Chalmers in just this form. Although there is no mystery about the phrase, it seems that Canning was the first to use *tartan* in this way to refer to a Scotsman. I have found no earlier reference and the OED cites his remark as the earliest application of the word to 'one who wears tartan; a Highlander' – although of course Chalmers was not a Highlander and is unlikely to have worn tartan.<sup>21</sup> What sort of picture did Canning suppose the word would conjure up for whoever it was he was with when he made his remark? Unsurprisingly the usage was later associated with a military context, and it would have been typical of Cannings's wit to have compared the black-coated parson with a Highland soldier. In the context in which Hanna places the remark, however, it seems that what Canning had in mind was Chalmers's provincial origin and manner. The tartan, therefore, is the man from far away, the man with the unfamiliar, if not

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18 The situation with his own children may have heightened his susceptibility: he and his wife had just now, after sixteen years, been forced to accept that their eldest son, who had been lame since birth, would never be cured; and their second son, who was a naval cadet, was in trouble of a different sort, having stolen from a comrade and lied to save himself from detection. Anxieties such as these may well have served to put the world's prejudices into a different perspective.

19 *Caledonian Mercury*, 9 June 1817, reprinted from *The Public Ledger*, 5 June 1817.

20 Hanna, volume 2 p 102. Another account, in Robert Turnbull, *The Genius of Scotland*, New York, 1847/8, has Canning saying, 'The tartan beats us; we have no preaching like that in England.' This restricts Chalmers's supremacy to the pulpit, whereas Hanna's wording suggests that Chalmers is master of the whole field of oratory.

21 This was five years before the celebrated visit of George IV to Edinburgh, for which everyone, lowlander and highlander alike, was encouraged to wear tartan, but it shows that the confusion was already present in the minds of the English.

outlandish, accent, the man without metropolitan polish and Oxford learning.<sup>22</sup> With all these disadvantages, he nonetheless ‘beats us all’.

All descriptions of Chalmers’s sermons emphasise their unimpressive openings. He was doubtless aware that his Fife accent was an obstacle for his audiences, as it seems to have been for Canning. A quiet opening gave them time to adjust to it.<sup>23</sup> *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, in the first of a series on pulpit orators, gives a different explanation of the ‘air of apathy’ at the start of Chalmers’s sermons: it is a sign that he is wrestling with difficulties, it is ‘breathed from the struggling passions of his soul ... the overpowering sanctities within his spirit,’ as ‘the waves are even then rising within his soul.’<sup>24</sup>

Most accounts also dwell on Chalmers’s unimpressive physical presence in the pulpit – he was of no more than middle height, and heavily built. Hazlitt notes the contrast between Chalmers and his younger contemporary Edward Irving, a man of unusual size and ‘admirable symmetry of form’ whose ‘iron-grey complexion and firm-set features turn the raw uncouth Scotchman into the likeness of a noble Italian picture’. But, says Hazlitt, Chalmers’s deficiencies in this respect are irrelevant:

The description of Balfour of Burley in his cave, with his Bible in one hand and his sword in the other, contending with the imaginary enemy of mankind, gasping for breath, and with the cold moisture running down his face, gives a lively idea of Dr Chalmers’s prophetic fury in the pulpit. If we could have looked in to have seen Burley hard-beset ‘by the coinage of his heat-oppressed brain,’ who would have asked whether he was a handsome man or not?

It is Chalmers’s integrity and vehemence that arrest our attention, Hazlitt tells us; he is ‘the very genius or demon of theological controversy personified’. He has no airs and graces, nor anything theatrical about him. What you see is –

... a man in mortal throes and agony with doubts and difficulties, seizing stubborn knotty points with his teeth, tearing them with his hands, and straining his eyeballs till they almost start out of their sockets, in pursuit of a train of visionary reasoning, like a Highland-seer with his second sight.

This comparison, like the allusion to the character from *Old Mortality*, associates Chalmers with the romantic idea of Scotland. Was this also part of what Canning was getting at when he referred to him as the tartan? If so, it introduces at least a shade of mockery into the remark, since Canning was firmly anti-romantic by temperament. But Chalmers could captivate equally those who, like Canning, were repelled rather than attracted by the Highland seer. Hazlitt explains this appeal to the rationalist mind as follows:

Besides, he is a logician, has a theory in support of whatever he chooses to advance, and weaves the tissue of his sophistry so close and intricate, that it is difficult not to be entangled in it, or to escape from it. ‘There’s magic in the web.’ ... No one was satisfied with his arguments [in the *Astronomical Discourses*], no one could answer them; but every one wanted to try what he could make of them. ... the train of thought that was unfolded at such length and with such strenuousness, was bold, well-sustained, and consistent with itself.

Serious Christians as a rule have a bad press in nineteenth century literature, or at least in those works that are still widely read. Mr Brocklehurst and St John Rivers, Mrs Jellyby, Mrs Pardiggle and Mr Chadband, Mrs Proudie and Mr Slope – at best they are deluded and self-satisfied, at worst downright frauds. But these bitter attacks belong to the mid-century, when such humbugs as these occupied positions of power, when Evangelicalism had, as GM Young puts it, ‘grown complacent, fashionable, superior’, a far cry from the days of Chalmers’s London visit, when Evangelical energy

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22 Canning’s wife, although she was brought up in Edinburgh and London, came from a family with its roots in Fife, so it might seem surprising that he regarded it as such an outlandish place. But class trumps locality, and there was all the difference in the world between Joan’s father, Scott of Balcomie, the wealthiest commoner in Scotland, and John Chalmers, failing merchant and former Provost of Anstruther.

23 The Hibernian Society sermon opens with a dull textual note: the usual translation of his text (‘cast out the beam out of thine own eye’) suggests a ludicrous picture, so he explains at some length that the word translated as *beam* also means *thorn*.

24 *Blackwoods* volume 2 pp131ff, November 1817.

was still 'at war with habit and indifference, with vice and brutality, with slavery, duelling, and bull-baiting'.<sup>25</sup> But at any time religion offers easy cover for the charlatan, and it took an ear as fine as Hazlitt's to discriminate between the vulgar theatricality of Edward Irving and the authentic fervour of Chalmers.

For all the splash that the visit made, and the contacts he established with figures like Wilberforce, Chalmers does not seem to have left a deep impression on London.<sup>26</sup> He remained 'the Northern Orator'. It was in Scotland that he was to make his lasting contribution to history. Still, in its way the visit has its place in the story of relations between the two countries. The English 'honourables' remained confused, no doubt, about Scotland and its traditions (as witness Canning's use of 'tartan' for a Fifer) but at least they had been forced to pay attention to a broad Fife accent and acknowledge that it might be the medium for profundity and fine oratory. The enthusiastic welcome given to a great Scottish figurehead in the southern capital anticipated George IV's Edinburgh jaunt five years later.

But sermons are not to be judged only by their contribution to history. A preacher seeks to touch the condition of each individual listener, to speak directly to their particular circumstances. That Chalmers secured the nodding assent of old Rowland Hill and impressed William Wilberforce with his thoughts on spiritual and carnal man was, perhaps, no surprise at all, but to find the precise words which would elicit a response in George Canning's heart and move him to tears – that was an achievement.

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<sup>25</sup> GM Young, *Victorian England, Portrait of an Age*, 1952, pp4f. Young puts the paradox of Evangelicalism in *England* very neatly: 'On one of its sides, Victorian history is the story of the English mind employing the energy imparted by Evangelical conviction to rid itself of the restraints which Evangelicalism had laid on the senses and the intellect; on amusement, enjoyment, art; on curiosity, on criticism, on science.'

<sup>26</sup> Chalmers hoped that his views on relief of the poor would influence government thinking on Poor Law reform. His ideas had been ignored in 1807 when the *Enquiry* failed to find an audience, but he must have hoped, after the reception he received in 1817, that perhaps the time had come for his recommendations to be taken up. To those involved in the protracted debates about Poor Law reform, in England as well as Scotland, during the 1820s, the system he had introduced in Glasgow was always one of the options to be considered, but it excited more opposition than support. The new Poor Law, introduced in England in 1834, abolished the distribution of 'outdoor' relief, and the Poor Law Commission assumed that Chalmers would approve of this and endorse it publicly. But the new law isolated paupers in workhouses, which he saw as the antithesis of his Christian communitarian ideal. He also disapproved of the secularisation of the administration of the Poor Law. (See Brown, pp 152-62, 204f.)