

THE LIFE AND MINISTRY OF DAVID HOUSTON

By Rev. Prof. A. LOUGHRIDGE B.A.

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The pages of our history are adorned by men of distinguished character and outstanding godliness. There come to mind the names of great saints like Cargill and Rutherford who radiated the Spirit of Christ ; great soldiers like Richard Cameron, the Lion of the Covenant ; prophetic preachers like Alexander Peden and James Renwick, and pioneering stalwarts like John MacMillan. But while the church in general, and the Covenanting church in particular owes much to these spiritual giants, her debt to her lesser sons and servants is in no way diminished.

It is a reasonable assessment of the value of the life and ministry of David Houston to say that but for his fiery and turbulent career there would probably *have* been no Reformed Presbyterian Church in Ireland as we know it to-day. If not its founder, he was certainly its first and for many years its only minister, and his zeal and devotion in trying days, laid a foundation for a continuing witness for Covenanting principles in Northern Ireland. Let us examine his distinguished and boisterous career, his honest and forthright character, and the challenge that his life brings to us to-day.

David Houston was born near Paisley in the year 1633. Nothing is known of his parentage or indeed of his early life. He entered Glasgow University as a matriculated student in 1648, and completed his training there by obtaining his Master's Degree in 1654. These were strange days for young men, and especially for young men with a view to the work of the Christian ministry. Charles I. has forfeited his life and the great Protector Cromwell ruled Britain with a rod of iron and with less than average sympathy for Presbyterian law and order. The General Assembly in Scotland had accepted the new Westminster Standards. The Church had some quiet years, for the bitter years of testing were yet to come. David Houston set his heart on the gospel ministry. By whom or where he was licensed, we do not know, but when he came to Ulster shortly after the Restoration in 1660 he came as a licentiate and undertook the supply of some congregations under the care of the Route Meeting or as we are more accustomed to call it, the Route Presbytery in North Antrim.

The relationship between David Houston and the Route Presbytery was never cordial or satisfactory. He came to Ulster a Covenanter of the strictest school, and he maintained and preached the continuing obligation of the Scottish Covenants. He found in the Route men who had a more moderate view of Covenant obligations and who were unwilling to risk livelihood or security by taking an unpopular course, so they heartily disapproved of the young man's preaching. They were the more concerned about it because *they* realised that by his zealous and earnest preaching he was winning the strong sympathies of many in the Route. Time and again the Presbytery remonstrated with him and appealed to him to avoid what they called "an irregular carriage in preaching in way of opposition." At first he accepted reproof readily enough and the scope of his witness embraced congregations in Mid-Antrim under the supervision of the Antrim meeting. When that meeting admonished him for "scandal and disorderliness, especially .at Glenarm," he was

advised to "withdraw awhile out of the country." He agreed to do so, and his removal from Ulster was a great relief to the ministers of Antrim and the Route.

He soon returned however, this time to Ballymoney, where his sincere preaching of Covenanting principles is reported to have caused a rent in the parish. The Route meeting advised him to leave its bounds, but the intrepid Covenanter refused to heed the warning of the brethren, and he continued to preach at Ballymoney and Derrykeighan, and several times in the parish of Macosquin. On February 27th, 1672, the Route Presbytery formally suspended him, although there was no formal charge preferred or proved against him. It was just that he differed from his brethren in his zeal for the Covenanting cause. The Antrim meeting investigated the problem too. In their finding there is no reference to any blot on his personal character. They content themselves by agreeing that "he should be restrained from preaching in those places where there had been a division about him." In 1673, the Route meeting relented in their attitude to him and withdrew their suspension. It may well be that they were encouraged to do so in the hope that he might be persuaded to return to Scotland. This is what he did. in the autumn of that year. And Classon .Porter, whose brief biographical sketch gives as much detail about him as can be reasonably discovered, makes this succinct comment, " Then had the churches rest throughout the regions of Antrim and the Route."

In 1675, David Houston returned to Ulster for a short time. The Presbyterian congregation of Glenavy spoke of issuing a call to him, but it is to be feared that they were not so anxious for his services as they were to embarrass the Presbytery in order to secure the return of their own minister, whom Presbytery had removed from his charge.

Records of the Antrim and Route meetings are silent about the activities of Mr. Houston for the next four years, so it is reasonable to assume that he was in Scotland from 1675-1679. It is generally accepted that he took an active part in the Battle of Bothwell Brig on 22nd June, 1679. He returned to Ulster immediately after the battle in company with many 'fugitives from the battlefield. But his most notable travelling companion on his arrival was the great Alexander Peden himself.

Covenanting principles in the stormy days that followed Bothwell were less acceptable than ever to many in Ulster, especially to the ministers who had accepted indulgences at the hands of a Stuart king. They were anxious to disprove any connection or sympathy with the Scottish Presbyterians, and a paper was prepared and sent to the Lord-Lieutenant in Dublin giving assurances of loyalty to the iniquitous tyranny of the Stuart regime. In these circumstances Mr. Houston's presence in Ulster was both unwelcome and embarrassing and Classon Porter says of him that "he was to be discountenanced as an inconvenient brother, and if necessary, disowned." This state of affairs, on the other hand, was not displeasing to Mr. Houston, for he on his part was unwilling to associate with men who were obviously unfriendly to the Covenanting struggle in Scotland. He was also less concerned for the fellowship and recognition of the Presbyterian ministers, because he had the great privilege and opportunity of associating with Alexander Peden. It appears that it was Peden who formally and regularly introduced him to the scattered Covenanting

societies in County Antrim. Doubtless, many of them knew him, but -they had refrained from accepting him openly in those dangerous times, since he had been on terms of fellowship with the indulged party. From this time on, he has an official standing with the Societies.

His formal recognition by the Irish Societies soon led to renewed contacts with the brethren in Scotland. In 1686, the Scottish brethren sent a Commissioner to Ireland to enquire into his character and conduct. The report was favourable, and on the 22nd December, 1686, he was accepted by them as an accredited minister. We note with interest the word minister, for we read that he was able to produce for the satisfaction of the Scottish Societies certificates both of licence and of ordination, the latter showing that "he had been settled in the meeting-house which he had kept in Ireland by the ministers on the call of the people." When, where or by whom he was ordained has never been accurately established. It is likely to have taken place between 1680 and 1685. Since the Route Presbytery deposed him on the 7th February, 1687, he must have been a minister under their direction and may have been ordained at Derrykeighan or Armoy. It is possible that this deposition was a last judgment upon a troublesome brother, but it must have concerned him very little, as he had virtually renounced his attachment to Irish Presbyterianism on his recognition six weeks earlier by the Scottish societies.

At this point it is of interest to note James Renwick's view of him, expressed in one of his letters. "As for Mr. David Houston, he carries very straight. I think him both learned and zealous. He seems to have much of the spirit of our early professors ; for he much opposes the passing from any part of our testimony, and sticks close to every form and order whereunto we have attained. He hath authority with him which some way dashes those who oppose themselves."

In 1687, David Houston made several journeys between Scotland and Ireland. He was in Scotland when James Renwick was arrested and executed, and though he fled to Ireland, he was arrested and sent a prisoner to Dublin. Later in June, 1688, he was ordered to appear for trial at Edinburgh. He would undoubtedly have gained the distinction accorded to Renwick as the last of the martyrs, but for a gallant and audacious rescue from the hands of his military escort. A day of prayer and fasting had been ordered in the societies, but before it took place, when he was on his way to Edinburgh, a band of Covenanters surprised the guard at Cumnock, in Ayrshire. In the ensuing skirmish several of the guard were killed. David Houston, who had been bound to his horse, suffered severe injury, when the horse became panic-stricken. But his life was spared. Though there was considerable excitement over this daring act, and courts of enquiry were established to investigate the incident, there were no developments affecting him or his Covenanting friends for the glorious Revolution was now on its way, and the bitterness of many years was soon to be replaced by happier days.

While this bright day in British History was loudly acclaimed by many, it was a day of bitter disappointment for the adherents of Cameron and Renwick. They had greater hopes than many others on account of their attachment to the Protestant and Reformed Faith. But their hopes of a Covenanted nation were blighted by the political expediency that

held sway, and David Houston found himself once again a central figure in bitter controversy. He and his followers stood aloof, and so great was his disapproval of the Settlement that he refused to pray for the new king. Even the Covenanters themselves were divided into the praying and the non-praying parties. The less strict were critical of him and his style of preaching. He on his part was suspicious of any whose admiration for the new king and new settlement was too openly acknowledged.

Early in 1689, Mr. Houston seems to have lived in or near Newtownards. A document is available entitled "A Bond of Compliance," in which he promises Lord Mountalexander of the Ardes that he will use his influence in the peaceful settlement of the country, and if need be, that he will persuade his followers to provide a force for the defence of the country, on condition that they have liberty to appoint their own officers. From this bond it would appear that his influence in Ulster was quite considerable since the authorities showed much concern to secure his support. That his influence was also feared by the Presbyterian Synod of Ulster is evident from the interest they continued to take in his career. Though he was no longer under their jurisdiction, having been deposed by the Route Presbytery three years earlier when he cast in his lot fully with the United Societies, the Synod now resumes a consideration of his supposed irregularities. Hugh Wilson of Castlereagh, Peter Orr of Clough, and Patrick Adair of Cairncastle, were appointed a Committee to make the investigation, but while words such as "irregular" and even "immoral" are used in their report, there is nothing whatever proved against his character, and it would seem that his chief fault as far as the Synod was concerned was his ability to draw and hold the affection and support of members of the Presbyterian church.

David Houston returned to Ireland in 1692, and spent the last four years of his life at Armoy, Co. Antrim. A meeting house was built, but I have been unable to discover any trace of its site as the ruins were removed about eighty years ago. The only reference we find to his work at Armoy comes from the complaint of a Northern Bishop to the Lord-Lieutenant of Ireland in 1694. This speaks of him as "A clergyman that preaches up the Solemn League and Covenant, accusing the people of Scotland of perjury in not sticking to their League, and having a congregation of five hundred resolute fellows that adhere to him." Many sought marriage and the baptism of children at his hands, and calls on his services took him to all parts of Ulster to preach the word. To quote Classon Porter, "He went forth, as his failing strength permitted him, on frequent excursions through the Counties of Down, Antrim and Derry, confirming the churches which he had built in those localities, and with undiminished boldness and unshrinking fidelity, testifying to his devoted followers what he believed to be the Gospel of the Grace of God. For this work he had lived. In the discharge of this work he died. He had often preached at Kellswater, and it was while he ministered in the district that the end came—a peaceful end to a stormy career. His mortal remains were laid to rest at Connor, but even his last resting place was not free from disturbance. A headstone had been erected and on it the following inscription placed—" Here lies the body of Mr. David Houston, a faithful minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, who departed this present life, the 8th December, in the year 1696, and of his age the 63rd year." Of this inscription, a copy was fortunately

taken, for in later years his grave was desecrated and allocated to another, and the record of his name and life obliterated from the tombstone.

HIS CHARACTER.

There is little need to write specially of his character, for the record of his life has revealed his distinguished character. A few comments may suffice. The story of his life may have suggested a rash, irregular, turbulent troublemaker, and this is how his enemies and even the ministers of the time are inclined to regard him. But surely we must take note of the fact that while many charges were preferred against him, nothing whatever was proved regarding his personal character and conduct. If he was troublesome to his fellow-ministers, is not that fact an indictment of their easygoing acceptance of conditions that were far from satisfactory, and his own resolute fidelity to principle? He did the right as he saw the right, and like all reformers and pioneers, he suffered opposition and misunderstanding at the hands of many. He was a man of undoubted courage. Only in this spirit could he have stood alone so long and so often as the flag bearer of the Covenant. It was his courage that enabled him to challenge and question the claims of the majority at the Revolution Settlement, and to stand alone in trial. One who has written critically and not always sympathetically of his life and work sums up his character as follows—"As a probationer, as a minister and as a man, he was brave, outspoken, honest and sincere." With less courage and more compromise he might have had an easy and comfortable ministry in regular circumstances. But he was cast in a different mould. He dared to be a Daniel, and he dared to make known, come what may, the royal prerogatives of his Lord and Master, Jesus Christ."

We honour his memory to-day. The story of his life brings a challenge to us. Our church has entered on quieter happier days than those of which we have spoken. But we must never forget the debt we owe to a man like David Houston. He being dead, yet speaketh. But for his courage and constancy in face of greatest trial, there might well have been no Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland to-day. The study of his life reminds us that the Covenanting Church in every generation requires men and women who hold principle dearly, who are not afraid to take a stand for truth, and who are more concerned for the honour of Christ than for the advancement of their own interests. David Houston calls us to give thanks for a good heritage of an honourable history and attachment to truth ; he calls us to continue our witness for the noble yet oft despised principles that our fathers held so dearly ; he appeals to us to approach our task in this day of great opportunity with renewed zeal and loyalty to Christ, the Church's glorious Head. He would echo Renwick's rousing words— "As to the remnant I leave, I have committed them to God, tell them from me not to be weary, not to be discouraged in maintaining the testimony. Let them not quit nor forego one of these despised truths. Keep your ground, and the Lord will provide you teachers and ministers, and when He comes, He will make these despised truths glorious upon the earth."

Let the faithful life of a faithful servant of God warn us against sloth, and inspire us to greater deeds for the Church of the Covenants and for the honour of the Master.