

TORRANCE AS A SCOTTISH THEOLOGIAN

David Fergusson, D.Phil., F.R.S.E.
Professor of Divinity and Principal of New College,
University of Edinburgh
David.Fergusson@ed.ac.uk

ABSTRACT: *While the theology of T.F. Torrance is properly recognized for its catholic and ecumenical range, less attention has been devoted to the importance of its Scottish sources. These are significant not only for understanding Torrance's development but for an appreciation of the distinctive setting of his mature theology. Attention is devoted here to his Edinburgh teachers, most notably H.R. Mackintosh, to his various ecclesiastical commitments and to several key works on the history of Scottish theology. These shaped inter alia his reading of the Reformed tradition, his reception of Barth, his account of church and sacraments, his understanding of our union with Christ as an objective and subjective reality, and his mature work on theological science. By setting these in their Scottish context, a stronger contextual reading of his work is enabled.*

Tom Torrance was a Scottish theologian. Of course, this is a truism if one considers his upbringing in Lanarkshire from the age of fourteen, his education in Arts and Divinity in Edinburgh, his distinguished ministry in the Church of Scotland, and his subsequent academic career in the Faculty of Divinity at New College, Edinburgh – where he took up a position in 1950 and, after almost thirty years of teaching, retired in 1979. It is significant that, apart from a brief spell at Auburn Seminary, he chose to remain in Scotland throughout his academic career. Apparently, he had attractive offers from Basel and Princeton but he remained in Edinburgh despite his frustration with aspects of life at New College, not least the public attack upon his work by his colleague James Barr in *Semantics of Biblical Language* (1961).



Nevertheless, in most of what has been written about Torrance too little has been made of his Scottish context. This is hardly surprising. Born in China to missionary parents, he was a pupil of Karl Barth and, with Geoffrey Bromiley, translated the *Church Dogmatics*. He was also instrumental in the translation of Calvin's *New Testament Commentaries*, participated extensively in ecumenical dialogue – especially with the Greek Orthodox Church – and wrote frequently on many of the leading thinkers in the history of the church: the Apostolic Fathers, Athanasius, Gregory Nazianzus, Cyril of Alexandria, Duns Scotus, Calvin and Barth, among many others. His theological writings are replete with references to theologians from across the classical traditions of the church. On one occasion, when asked whom among modern theologians he found to be most helpful, he replied, "Athanasius." Throughout his life, he was a committed ecumenist and deplored all narrow nationalist sentiment. Rejoicing in his birthplace, he also celebrated gladly the Anglican influence of his mother and wife. While Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, he aroused public controversy by attacking some strains within Scottish nationalism. His output obviously reflects global, catholic and ecumenical influences, and yet it also evinces a more local milieu reflecting a rootedness in and steady devotion to the traditions and writers of Scotland. Attention to these influences may enable a better positioning of his work, while also facilitating clearer interpretation and more accurate lines of criticism.¹

Studies in Scottish Theology

Torrance's work indeed contains a very substantial body of material belonging to the study of Scottish theology. In addition to other works discussed below, one might cite the following:

¹ For further details of Torrance's life and development, see the studies by Alister McGrath, *Thomas F. Torrance: An Intellectual Biography* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999) and Paul D. Molnar, *Thomas F. Torrance; Theologian of the Trinity* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).

1 *The School of Faith: The Catechisms of the Reformed Church* (London: James Clarke, 1959)

A compilation of the most influential catechisms used in the Church of Scotland since the Reformation, this volume also includes a substantial introduction from Torrance. Here he outlines both his theological method and central doctrinal emphases. While including the Genevan and Heidelberg Catechisms, *The School of Faith* also contains more indigenous works, especially John Craig's Catechism of 1581. These are compared favorably with the later Westminster theology, which Torrance attacks with typical ferocity. He assails, for example, Westminster's abstraction of the doctrine of predestination from the person of Jesus Christ and its deficient doctrine of the Holy Spirit, which leads to a deleterious re-centering of the human subject. This tendency to set the Reformed theology of the sixteenth century against its later federal developments in the seventeenth century is a recurrent theme in Torrance.

There can be little doubt that the conception of God in the Westminster theology suffers from some of the serious faults in the pre-Reformation teaching. Its 'God' appears to lack the kindness, humanity, familiarity of the 'God' of the Reformation, for tendencies towards impersonality, abstraction and even harshness are to be noted in the Westminster conception of God, although in the Catechisms there is a grand sense of the Holiness, Majesty, and Faithfulness of God coupled with that of his mercy to the elect.²

2 *The Mystery of the Lord's Supper* (London: James Clarke, 1958)

The sermons of Robert Bruce (c1554–1631) were known to Torrance through his family upbringing and then under the tutelage of H.R. Mackintosh at New College. Preached in the Kirk of St. Giles in 1589, they rank among the finest devotional literature in Scottish theology. In his 1958 volume, Torrance provided a fresh English translation from the original Scots. It is not difficult to understand the appeal of Bruce for

² *The School of Faith: The Catechism of the Reformed Church* (London: James Clarke, 1959), lxxix.

Torrance. Bruce's exposition of the sacrament is evangelical yet almost mystical. Christ gives himself to us in the sacrament, the whole Christ both flesh and blood. In the conjunction of sign and thing signified, the grace and mercy of God are sealed for us. Bruce writes, "In this union Christ Jesus, who is the thing signified, is as truly delivered to the increase of our spiritual nourishment as the signs are given and delivered to the body for our temporal nourishment."³ Torrance discerns here an account of the saving and sanctifying union with Christ, an objective and subjective reality, which is the hallmark of Calvin and the early Scottish reformers.

3 Scottish Theology from John Knox to John McLeod Campbell (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996)

The last of his productions, this book represents the late flowering of Torrance's lifelong interest in the theologians of Scotland. Sympathetic treatments of Knox, Leighton and McLeod Campbell are offered, while the polemic against Westminster theology and its Latin antecedents is sustained. This is the most substantial monograph on Scottish theology to appear for a generation, and it reveals Torrance as a scholar with intimate knowledge of some quite obscure episodes and writers in the Scottish church. It is interesting to compare his work in this volume with the output of the Church of Scotland's Special Commission on Baptism, which Torrance convened for a decade from 1953. The Commission produced a series of weighty reports largely reflecting Torrance's own distinctive doctrine of baptism. In particular, the reports of 1958–59 deliver a careful analysis of a series of key Scottish theologians in historical sequence from the late Middle Ages to the twentieth century. These reports include several thinkers and themes, which would reappear almost forty years later in Torrance's 1996 study.⁴

³ *The Mystery of the Lord's Supper* (London: James Clarke, 1958), 106.

⁴ *Reports to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh: 1958 & 1959), pp. 689–762; pp. 631–661. For a critical analysis of the work of the Special Commission, see David F. Wright, *Infant Baptism in Historical Perspective: Critical Studies* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007), 301–308.

Finally, in assessing his own output, we should not overlook Torrance's important contribution in founding and co-editing (with J.K.S. Reid) the *Scottish Journal of Theology*, which from 1948 provided an outlet for important scholarship on Scottish theology. While the journal quickly established itself as a leading international periodical, it has provided throughout its history a steady focus on local and indigenous traditions.

Scottish Influences

In examining several of the characteristic themes of Torrance's theology, we can discern more proximate influences: his teachers and colleagues, writers belonging to earlier periods of Scottish theology whom he often valorized, and the socio-political context of the mid-twentieth century Church of Scotland.

Take, for example, the dominant stress upon "union with Christ," which governs Torrance's thinking about the hypostatic union, the vicarious work of Christ, and the significance of the sacramental actions of the church. Much of this can be traced to the influence of his teacher, H.R. Mackintosh (1870–1936). Torrance never tired of extolling Mackintosh and his significance, and on revisiting his work one can see why. Mackintosh was deeply immersed both in the Calvinist traditions of the Free Church of Scotland but also in the kenotic Christology and liberalism that had taken hold of much German and British thought in his day. His theology sought to repair much of what he found lacking in these, and his proposals surrounding the union of the believer with Christ were central to this strategy. This enabled him to overcome, as he saw it, the harsh effects of exclusively forensic approaches to the work of Christ, while also escaping the moralism and historicism that he detected in liberalism. In an early essay Mackintosh defended the "*unio mystica*" against the standard charges of liberal Protestantism,⁵ while in his mature work on Christian forgiveness he writes of how "all Christianity comes down to two companion

⁵ H.R. Mackintosh, "The Unio Mystica as a Theological Concept," *Expositor*, 7, (1909), pp. 138–155. See also Robert R. Redman Jr., *Reformulating Reformed Theology: Jesus Christ in the Theology of Hugh Ross Mackintosh* (Lanham, MA: University of America Press, 1997), 183–200.

truths – God in Christ for us, and we in Christ for God. It is part of Christian experience at its highest, that what may perhaps be designated an ‘organic’ connection is felt to subsist between Christ and His people.”⁶ While Torrance expounded this idea in closer contact with the theology of the hypostatic union that he discerned in the Fathers, his theological convictions never strayed far from this dominant theme about our union with Christ, which he imbibed from Mackintosh’s lectures and writings. Theologies which threatened this were roundly criticized for dealing in abstractions, for resorting to logico-deductive terms that prescinded from this central conviction. Torrance’s relentless criticism of the Westminster Confession of Faith, the subordinate standard of the Scottish Kirk, must be seen in this light.⁷

The doctrine of union with Christ is also evident in Torrance’s strong sacramentalism, which places him at the Catholic end of the Reformed spectrum. Again, we can see this emphasis emerging from a distinctively Scottish context. Torrance was committed to the work of the Scottish Church Society, which was founded in the late Victorian period by leading figures such as William Milligan, Professor of Divinity and Biblical Criticism in Aberdeen, whose work on the significance of the ascended Christ in worship Torrance frequently commended.⁸ The goals of the Scottish Church Society included a more Catholic reading of the Reformed tradition that sought liturgical renewal, frequent celebration of the Lord’s Supper, and a Calvinist (as opposed to a Zwinglian) account of sacramental grace and the real presence of Christ in the eucharistic elements. It is this configuration of influences that enabled Torrance to move beyond Karl Barth in some important respects. In particular, his commitment to the ministry of the ascended Christ made present by the Holy Spirit led to a stronger ecclesiology, sacramentalism and eschatology than we find in Barth himself. This is apparent in works such as *Royal Priesthood*, as well

⁶ *The Christian Experience of Forgiveness* (London: Nisbet, 1927), 223–4.

⁷ For Torrance’s assessment of Mackintosh, see H.R. Mackintosh, *The Person of Jesus Christ* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 71–94.

⁸ See William Milligan, *The Ascension and Heavenly Priesthood of our Lord* (London: Macmillan, 1894).

as in those mild criticisms he ventures of Barth. In recalling their last conversation, Torrance wrote,

I then ventured to express my qualms about his account of the ascended Jesus Christ in CD IV/3, in which Christ seemed to be swallowed up in the transcendent Light and Spirit of God, so that the humanity of the risen Jesus appeared to be displaced by what he had called "the humanity of God" in his turning toward us. I had confessed to being astonished not to find at that point in Barth's exposition a careful account of the priestly ministry of the ascended Jesus in accordance with the teaching of the Epistle to the Hebrews about the heavenly intercession of the ascended Christ.⁹

An indicative text here is the revised version of Witherspoon and Kirkpatrick's *Manual of Christian Doctrine*, which Torrance produced with his ministerial colleague and friend, Ronald Selby Wright. Originally produced in 1920 as part of the Scoto-Catholic movement, this book was an attempt to develop a particular strand of the Reformed tradition that it identified as catholic, and therefore closer to Roman Catholic and Anglican doctrine than some evangelical commentators would hold. Throughout the 1950s, Torrance was involved in a series of bilateral and multilateral theological dialogues, from which many of his own contributions were later gathered into the two volumes of *Conflict and Agreement in the Church*. In 1957, he was a supporter of the so-called Bishops' Report to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. Had this been approved it would have introduced bishops into presbyteries, thus preparing the way for the union of the Church of Scotland with the Church of England. Despite the support of Torrance, John Baillie and other leading churchmen of the day, the proposals were eventually defeated after a campaign by

⁹ "My Interaction with Karl Barth," in *How Karl Barth Changed My Mind*, (ed.) Donald K. McKim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 62. Torrance's theology of the priestly ministry of the ascended Christ informs his treatment of ordination in *Royal Priesthood: A Theology of Ordained Ministry* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1955). The book is dedicated "To the Church of England, the church of my mother and my wife, and to the Church of Scotland, the church of my father, in the earnest prayer that they may soon be one." A second edition was published in 1993.

the Scottish Daily Express, which championed opposition to episcopacy as vital to Scottish identity. Not surprisingly, Torrance was deeply suspicious of Scottish nationalism thereafter.

By 1960, Torrance not only recognized the importance of a new edition of *The Manual of Church Doctrine* but was actually willing to amend and add new sections to it. A research student somewhere needs to compare the Torrance edition with the original to ascertain what he changed and added with Selby Wright, and why they chose to do so. But there is clearly an explicit commitment to a strong sacramentalism in the revision, not least in Torrance's addition of a new chapter on the sacraments of the Old Testament – circumcision and Passover – that foreshadow baptism and the Lord's Supper. "The Sacraments," we read, "result from the fact that Salvation operates by Incarnation; and they import that our relation to Christ is a living relation embracing our whole nature, bodily as well as spiritual."¹⁰ This sacramental theology with its focus on our union with Christ is supported with a range of excerpts from Calvin and other Reformation writers, including Robert Bruce.

By the mid-1960s Torrance was intensely engaged with his theological science, a project that explored the methodological relations between the natural sciences and Christian theology. In many ways, this took him beyond anything that Barth had attempted, although Torrance remained anxious to show the continuity of this work with that of his Basel teacher. In other respects, his work in theological science developed earlier convictions that owe something to the influence of Daniel Lamont, another of his teachers. For Lamont, there was important apologetic work to be done in showing the consistency of Christian faith with the best insights of other disciplines. Yet this work took place from within faith – Lamont uses the analogy of viewing the stained glass windows from inside rather than outside the cathedral walls – and it proceeded from the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. In this respect, the subjectivity and

¹⁰ H.J. Wotherspoon & J.M. Kirkpatrick, *A Manual of Church Doctrine according to the Church of Scotland*, revised and enlarged by T.F. Torrance and R. Selby Wright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960) 15.

initiative of God had to be respected. Some of this adumbrates Torrance's later work.¹¹

An important influence in Torrance's mature work on theological science was the philosophy of John Macmurray, his colleague in Edinburgh. Torrance seems an unlikely ally of Macmurray. Yet his writings from the 1960s onwards are replete with references to his older philosophical colleague. These reveal a borrowing from Macmurray's work that has seldom been properly recognized by recent studies of Torrance.¹² This is particularly evident in his 1969 publication on *Theological Science*. The constant tilting at the deleterious patterns of dualist thought is redolent of Macmurray's work, particularly the subject-object split. The claim, presented tirelessly, that the mode of knowledge must be appropriate to the nature of the object as it discloses itself to us, is drawn largely from Macmurray albeit with significant input also from Michael Polanyi. Torrance writes, "It is Professor Macmurray's contention that knowledge in action is our primary knowledge, for the knowing Self is an agent having his existence in time where he is active both in pre-scientific and in scientific knowledge."¹³

Torrance goes on to assert that a new logical form of personal activity "may be developed in which the theory of knowledge occupies a subordinate place within actual knowledge, and in which verification involves commitment in action."¹⁴ In theological terms, this means for Torrance that the knowledge of God is always and only shaped in a life of faith and obedience to the divine Word that becomes incarnate. The strongly realist cast of this theology is here reinforced by epistemological arguments that draw from Macmurray. It is also linked to an anthropology that insists upon the embodiedness and sociality of human life, themes

¹¹ See Daniel Lamont, *Christ and the World of Thought* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1934).

¹² This applies also to the teaching of his brother James B. Torrance who had studied as an undergraduate philosophy student under Macmurray in Edinburgh and later held the Chair of Systematic Theology in Aberdeen from 1976–89.

¹³ *Theological Science* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 3-4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

that are strongly Hebraic and that also find support in Macmurray's writings.¹⁵

Commentators on Torrance's theological science have often stressed the influence upon his thought of patristic writers, especially Athanasius and John Philoponos, of John Calvin and the other Reformers, and of modern scientific thinkers such as Clerk Maxwell and Einstein. But if this reading of his writings on theological science is correct, then we have again to reckon with more local influences, including that of John Macmurray. Torrance himself offered a glowing eulogy to Macmurray after his death in 1975, describing him as the "quiet giant of modern philosophy, the most original and creative of savants and social thinkers in the English-speaking world."¹⁶

Conclusion

The institutional shaping and proximate influences of his Scottish heritage upon Torrance's work will need to be taken into account by scholars seeking to place him more clearly in historical context. This is not merely a matter of the location and place of his work, nor is it an attempt to discern a partisan national identity in his work that he rightly would have deplored – the currency of theological ideas must surely be ecumenical and international. Nevertheless, a reading of his output in its Scottish context offers a significant critical opportunity for the reasons following.

Partly as a result of its sheer erudition, Torrance's work often presents a somewhat timeless reading of the Christian tradition with allusions gathered from early and modern sources. At times, it is as if Athanasius, Scotus, Calvin and Barth were all affirming and denying the same things by being transported into twentieth century conversations. And partly as a result of its comprehensive scope, Torrance's theology comes as a

¹⁵ See David Fergusson, *John Macmurray in a Nutshell* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1992).

¹⁶ Quoted by Jack Costello in David Fergusson & Nigel Dower (eds.) *John Macmurray: Critical Perspectives* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 34.

complete package that is difficult to unwrap and sift. Students often used to remark on this.

His theology is so powerful, systematic and wide-ranging that one is confronted with a stark choice: either to submit to it in its entirety or to be cast out as a radical dissident unable to subscribe to its fundamental tenets. This makes it harder to assimilate critically, to revise and adapt, to offer a sympathetic reading of its strengths and weaknesses as we are taught to do elsewhere in our academic training. The force of Torrance's personality coupled with the magisterial quality of his work make it quite hard for students to be appreciative, while also maintaining a critical distance that enables them to develop their own lines of enquiry and distinctive contributions to the problems and challenges facing the church in their own generation. But a more contextual reading of his work – the originating impulses, the influential figures, the formative movements, the particular controversies in which he was embroiled – all these might help us to see better those ways in which his work might be challenged, criticized and appropriated in our own day. None of this is in any way to diminish his significance. He now takes his place among the great theologians of the Scottish tradition, many of them among his own heroes – Scotus, Mair, Knox, Bruce, Rutherford, McLeod Campbell and Mackintosh – and he would be proud to stand alongside them. Indeed, it is hard to think of another theologian in the history of New College whose work rivals the spiritual force, intellectual erudition and theological energy of Tom Torrance.