

Thomas Boston: the Man and His Ministry

WHEN THOMAS BOSTON was born in 1676 the Stuart policy of violent repression against the popular religion of Scotland was approaching the height of its ferocity; and so, too, was the passion of popular resistance. Ministers who refused to subscribe to prelacy were still being outed from their congregations; those of them who then dared to preach at field-conventicles faced the death penalty (Donald Cargill was executed in 1681, James Renwick in 1688); people who attended such conventicles risked eviction, transportation or imprisonment; peasants who hesitated to swear their wholehearted belief in the royal supremacy when challenged by the dragoons faced summary execution (the Wigtown Martyrs, Margaret Wilson and Margaret Lauchlison were drowned in the waters of the Solway in April 1685; John Brown of Priesthill was shot by Claverhouse's dragoons in the presence of his wife and children that same year).

But the reaction was not confined to defiant field-preaching. The right to bear arms against tyrants had long been an established principle in Scottish theology, and it was reasserted unambiguously by such later Covenanters as John Brown of Wamphray and Alexander Shields.¹ Archbishop Sharp, the arch-advocate of repression, was assassinated in 1679; Richard Cameron's *Sanquhar Declaration* of June 1680 disowned the authority of Charles II and protested against the succession to the throne of his brother, James, Duke of York; after Cameron was killed when he and his small band were

1. John Brown, *An Apologetical Relation of the Particular Sufferings of the Faithful Ministers and Professors of the Church of Scotland since August 1660* (Rotterdam, 1665. Reprinted in *The Presbyterian's Armoury*, Edinburgh: Ogle and Oliver and Boyd, 1846, Vol. 3); Alexander Shields, *A Hind Let Loose: an Historical Representation of the Testimonies of the Church of Scotland* (Utrecht: 1687).

overtaken by a detachment of dragoons in July 1680, his mantle fell on James Renwick, whose *Apologetical Declaration* (1684) was a declaration of war against any who actively obstructed them in their pursuit of ‘the ends of their covenants’.² Renwick himself was executed on 17 February 1688, the last martyr of the Covenant.

These events all took place in Boston’s childhood, but by the time he was ordained to his first charge, Simprin in Berwickshire, in 1699, the situation in Scotland had changed dramatically. The last of the Stuarts, James II/VII, had been forced into exile in December 1688, the Glorious Revolution had led to William of Orange being installed as King of the United Kingdom in 1689, and as part of the Revolution settlement prelacy had been abolished, Presbyterianism established, and the Westminster Confession confirmed as ‘the public and avowed confession’ of the Kirk. From that point onwards, Scotland’s religious wars, such as they were, would be fought on paper and in the courts of the church, leaving men like Boston free to shepherd their flocks in comparative peace. In the course of a ministry which lasted from 1699 to 1732 he would publish one of the enduring classics of Scottish theology, *Human Nature in its Fourfold State*; play a key role in the major doctrinal debate of the eighteenth century, the *Marrow* controversy; and earn himself, almost incidentally, a reputation as one of the most influential figures of our theological history.

But he would do so despite having to work in the most unfavourable circumstances. For one thing, he was not a man of outstanding intellectual gifts. This is not to say that he was not able, but he was not in the first rank, compared to, for example, a Thomas Chalmers or a Jonathan Edwards. ‘Rabbi’ Duncan called him ‘a commonplace genius’ and Hugh Miller declared that he was by no means superior to such later Moderates as William Robertson and Hugh Blair, and far inferior to them as a writer.³ Such judgements need not be taken as canonical, though it has to be said that if Scottish theologians were to be judged solely on the quality of their writing few would figure in any Hall of Fame. But as Miller himself points out, however inferior Boston

2. For extracts from the *Apologetical Relation*, see William Croft Dickinson and Gordon Donaldson (eds.), *A Source Book of Scottish History*, Vol. III (2nd. Edition, Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson, 1961), p. 181. Renwick makes plain that their ‘war’ was not against those who merely differ from them in ‘judgement and persuasion’, but against the ‘cruel and bloodthirsty’, particularly the justiciary and the military, and their informers.

3. Hugh Miller, *The Headship of Christ*, p. 229.

might be as a stylist (and that's debatable), he stood in far higher repute among the common people of Scotland than any of the *literati* who ever occupied Scottish pulpits; and the reason for this is clear. It was the common people he addressed, and it was to their piety he gave voice; and this, rather than any inferiority on Boston's part, is the real reason why modern heirs of the Scottish Enlightenment dismiss him with contempt. It is not his style, but his message, that prompted such scholars as David Daiches (clearly writing at second-hand) to portray him as a man obsessed with the fate of the damned.⁴ They wanted a 'kindlier' tale, beautifully told, but not the truth.

Another remarkable feature in the background to Boston's ministry was that he never in his lifetime occupied a central or national position. He served two parishes in the Borders, Simprin and Ettrick, both small, both rural, and both peripheral. Simprin was, in his own words, 'remote and inconsiderable': indeed, so inconsiderable that at one point he suggests that no one in the town had to walk more than a few paces to get to church. Some of his colleagues, he wrote, 'thought me happy because I had so few people. Some thought me wretched because I had such a poor stipend.'⁵ Even so, he had to wait a long time before even this door opened to him. We are inclined to assume that patronage came into the Kirk only after the Union, when a perfidious United Kingdom parliament passed the infamous Patronage Act of 1712. In reality, it had been established practice before the Reformation, and although condemned by both the First and the Second Books of Discipline it had never been eradicated and would persist in the Established Church until 1874. Boston was one of its victims. Licensed on 15 June 1697 he was clearly not to the taste of heritors, and had to wait more than two years before he was ordained. He was not the sort of man to compromise in order to secure preferment, and he made no attempt to ingratiate himself with those who were in a position to advance his career. Although naturally diffident to an extreme, his diffidence left him when he entered the pulpit, and he himself admitted that he did his cause no good by not bowing to the heritors when he entered the pulpit, preaching on

4. David Daiches, *God and the Poets: the Gifford Lectures, 1983* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), pp. 136-37.

5. *Memoirs of the Life, Times, and Writings of Thomas Boston of Ettrick. Written by Himself* (1776. New edition, Glasgow: John McNeilage, 1899, p. 125). The *Memoirs* also occupy the whole of Volume XII of *The Complete Works of the Late Rev Thomas Boston* (12 vols., 1853. Reprinted Stoke-on-Trent: Tentmaker Publications, 2002).

themes others avoided, speaking out on the sins of the land, and refusing to socialise after the Sabbath's work was done. He felt no bitterness, however: indeed, he thought the patrons were often right. He was not their man, recording on one occasion, 'I do believe that they and I both agreed that, in respect of my temper and way, I was not for the parish of Clackmannan.'⁶ In the end, he was grateful for Simprin, having concluded that, 'if I was at all to be admitted to the holy ministry, it should be at Simprin, as unfit for a more considerable post.'⁷ Ettrick, to which he was called in 1707, was little better, but he contented himself with the thought that, 'though it was a small charge, yet it was *my* charge,' and it was his duty to minister to those to whom God had called him, whether many or few.⁸

It is notable, too, that in his own day Boston was never a star preacher who drew great crowds. Even in his own parish few saw his worth. 'In the visiting of the parish,' he records in 1712, 'I was much discouraged. The ministry of this church [Ettrick] is like to die unlamented. I have no sympathy from any of my people, or next to none.'⁹ Nor was he at all lionised by his clerical colleagues. He was on the losing side in the *Marrow* controversy, and generally found himself swimming against the tide, and forced to dissent from decisions of the General Assembly. He was not alone in feeling alone, of course. Others, too, felt disillusioned and marginalised, and although Boston had died the year before the Secession of 1733 it was his friends that led it; and his own son, Thomas Boston the younger, left the Church of Scotland in 1757, and in 1761 became co-founder (with Thomas Gillespie) of the Relief Church.

But what troubled him the most, especially in the early years, was that he had so few books. He comforted himself with the assurance that though he lacked commentaries, 'a heavenly frame of spirit, and soul-exercise ... were two excellent commentators,'¹⁰ but nevertheless he never forgot the day a neighbouring minister looked at his little bookcase and sneered at its contents. Nor did he forget the day when, on his way to preach, he noticed a student of Divinity among those entering the church.

6. *Memoirs*, p. 40.

7. *ibid.*, p. 80.

8. *ibid.*, p. 203, italics added.

9. *ibid.*, p. 254.

10. *ibid.*, p. 118.

His heart sank, because he hadn't been able to give his text the detailed attention a commentary would have afforded. The student would not be impressed. However, the library began to build up, albeit slowly. Within a year he possessed a copy of *De oeconomia foederum*, the *magnum opus* of 'the evangelical Witsius'.¹¹ By 1706 he possessed a four-volume edition of the *Works* of Turretine, and in 1707 he purchased Poole's *Annotations* (a commentary covering the whole Bible), but only ten years after his induction to Simprin did he become the happy possessor of a Hebrew Bible. He notes, too, the purchase of a book of sermons by Thomas Manton: he had bought it because it contained some sermons on Philippians 3:3, on which he was preaching at the time. By the time he came to write his *Notes on the Marrow of Modern Divinity* (1721–22) he had clearly read widely. This would make an interesting study in its own right, but it certainly included Luther, Calvin, Zanchius, Polanus, Peter Martyr, Mastricht, William Ames, John Ball, Ursinus, Downham, Grotius, Reynolds, John Preston, Burroughs, Thomas Goodwin, as well as such Scottish writers as Patrick Hamilton, John Davidson, Robert Rollock, Thomas Halyburton and Knox's *History of the Reformation*.

His pursuit of books had its ups-and-downs, however. On one occasion, he was awaiting a parcel as eagerly as a man expecting to receive a fortune, only to be told that the parcel had been lost. He took it as God's chastisement, and submitted. Eventually, however, the lost treasure was found, and delivered.

Why, then, considering all the disadvantages under which he laboured, is Thomas Boston's one of the best-known names in Scottish theology? The simple answer is that he left behind him a considerable body of literature, little of which was published in his own lifetime, but which, when eventually collected, filled twelve large volumes; and this legacy was of such a quality that it has had both an enduring and an extensive influence.¹²

This corpus, well-nigh the largest in the history of Scottish theology, reflected Boston's untiring diligence. Having the care of only small parishes, it would have been tempting to skimp on his sermon-preparation, to talk down to his rural congregations, and to avoid the profounder themes of the Christian faith. Boston didn't fall into any of these traps. Instead, he regarded

11. *ibid.*, p. 115.

12. *The Complete Works of the Late Rev. Thomas Boston, Ettrick*, 12 vols., ed. Samuel M'Millan (Aberdeen: 1848–52. Reprinted Stoke-on-Trent: Tentmaker Publications, 2002).

the smallness of his parishes as a God-given opportunity to engage in earnest study,¹³ and in this resolve he never wavered, whatever the inconveniences. One summer, when a new manse was being built (and the old had, presumably, been demolished), he studied in either the stable or the barn. He also decided at an early point in his ministry to write out all his sermons in full; and not only his sermons, but his conclusions on every other subject which captured his attention. He had an active and restless intellect which left him incapable of giving up on any question till he had thought it through to a resolution; and once resolved it was committed to writing. It is to this habit that we owe, for example, his series of studies, *Miscellaneous Questions*, including the influential, ‘Who have a right to baptism, and are to be baptised?’¹⁴

Boston was also given to setting himself goals. In his early days at Simprin he set himself to learn French. Later he turned to Hebrew and, in the opinion of John Macleod, became the most thorough student of the Hebrew Bible that Scotland produced in his day.¹⁵ He certainly achieved such proficiency that the Hebrew Bible became his delight. Later still, some time around 1716, he became fascinated with the Hebrew accents. We now know that these accents are not original but were added by the Masoretes, successive generations of Jewish scholars who, in the years between A.D. 600 and A.D. 1000, sought to establish the definitive text of the Hebrew Bible. In its original form that text consisted only of consonants, but the Masoretes added two additional features: vowel-points, to define pronunciation, and accents to indicate where the stress should be placed in chanting. Boston, however, had assumed that the accents went back close to the original, and he was profoundly disturbed when he discovered that Louis Cappell (1585–1658), Professor of Hebrew at the Protestant Seminary in France, had argued (and in the opinion of many,

13. Smallness is relative, of course. Boston’s congregations would not have been small by today’s standards.

14. See Boston, *Works*, Vol. 6, pp. 11-220. Jonathan Edwards was given to the same habit (see his ‘Miscellaneous Observations on Important Theological Subjects’ in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 2 vols. 1834. Reprinted Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974, Vol. 2, pp. 459-51). Cf. George Gillespie, *A Treatise of Miscellany Questions* (1639. Reprinted in *The Presbyterian’s Armoury*; 3 Vols., Edinburgh, 1846; Vol. II [The Treatise runs to 122 pages, but with separate pagination within the volume]).

15. John Macleod, *Scottish Theology in relation to Church History since the Reformation* (1943. Second edition 1946, reprinted Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2015), p. 157. James Walker describes Boston as ‘one of the great figures in our theological history’ (James Walker, *The Theology and Theologians of Scotland 1560–1750*; Second Edition revised, 1888. Reprinted Edinburgh: Knox Press [Edinburgh], 1982, p. 30).

demonstrated) that the accents were of much more recent origin, having been inserted by the Masoretes only in the fifth century.¹⁶ As always, Boston addressed the question vigorously, and came to the conclusion that, *contra* Cappell, ‘the accents are the true key to the genuine version and sense of the Hebrew text, and that they are divine.’¹⁷ As ever, Boston committed his conclusions to writing, and the result was a Latin treatise, *Tractatus Stigmologicus Hebraicus*, published posthumously (1738) in Amsterdam. The *Tractatus* has long been forgotten, but Boston was not entirely wrong. As Bruce Waltke points out, the accents not only help to beautify the chant; by denoting the stress of a word they can also clarify the meaning (Waltke cites the difference between the English ‘pre-sént’ and present). He also points out that the accents can signalise the connection between words, quoting as an example Isaiah 40:3, which, depending on the position of the stress can read either: *The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ...* or, *A voice of one calling: ‘In the desert prepare ...’* (NIV).

The man himself

So then, out of Boston’s study, in his small and marginal rural parish, came books which would one day be found in countless ordinary homes all over Scotland. But before we look at his writings, what of the man himself?

Boston was a Borderer, born in Duns in 1676. His father, a native of Ayr, had suffered for refusing to take the Abjuration Oath,¹⁸ and Boston recalled going as a child to visit him in prison to keep him company. His father’s piety influenced him profoundly, but he was also influenced by the preaching of Henry Erskine (the father of Ralph and Ebenezer), whom he heard preaching in the area of Duns when he was only twelve years old. Years later, he recalled some of Erskine’s texts, and it is probably to this time we should date Boston’s conversion. He became a student at Edinburgh University when only thirteen years old, and graduated in both Arts and Divinity, but seems to have owed little to the instruction offered by either department.

Those who seek a psychological profile of Boston will find abundant materials in his *Memoirs*, written in the first instance for his children, and completed in 1730, but first published only in 1776. He describes himself as

16. The oldest Masoretic manuscript goes back only to the ninth century.

17. Boston, *Memoirs*, p. 291.

18. Passed in 1664, the Oath required people to disown the policies of the Cameronians, who had renounced the authority of James VII.

diffident and ‘little serviceable’ in public affairs, and no less backward in conversation, being naturally silent. This bashfulness, he laments, had done him much harm, yet while always timid before he preached, he found that he was fearless once the door of the pulpit closed behind him.

But not only was he diffident and bashful, he was also a depressive, given to fits of melancholy. To some extent this was circumstantial. Boston had a difficult life, beginning with his father’s imprisonment, followed by his long wait for a call, and then the challenges he faced in both his parishes. While the Revolution Settlement had put an end to Stuart persecution, not everyone was happy. In the south of Scotland in particular, there were many who were profoundly dissatisfied with the constitution of the church as settled in 1688. One reason for this was that there had been no formal vindication of the faithful Presbyterians who had contended so valiantly during the years of repression; another was that many of the curates who had been parties to the persecutions continued to occupy their pulpits without any profession of repentance. But what caused the deepest resentment was that the Revolution Settlement refused to acknowledge the continuing obligation of the national covenants (the National Covenant of 1638 and the Solemn League and Covenant of 1643). This was no merely academic matter. It meant, in the view of the disaffected, that the principles which had been enshrined in these documents were vulnerable to change; and these included the divine right of Presbytery and the spiritual independence of the church. Later developments, and particularly the passing of the Act of Patronage by the UK Parliament in 1712, would show that these concerns were not without foundation. Nor were the misgivings confined to the church settlement. Some also denied the lawfulness of the constitutional settlement on the two related grounds that the existing civil rulers lacked the qualifications laid down in the Word of God, and that they were not committed to the covenants the nation had sworn in 1638 and 1643.¹⁹

These dissident views had their roots in the field-preaching of Donald Cargill, Richard Cameron and James Renwick, whose followers, alienated from the church, formed themselves into ‘societies’ for prayer, fellowship and testimony. These societies later came together in a loose association known as ‘the United Societies’, and those who adhered to them as the ‘Society people’ (or, after the Revolution, as ‘Cameronians’).

19. *The Correspondence of the Rev. Robert Wodrow*, Vol. 1, ed. Thomas M’Crie (Edinburgh: Wodrow Society, 1842) p. 51 fn. Hereafter *Wodrow’s Correspondence*, Vol. 1.

When Boston came to Ettrick in 1707, he found that several families in the parish were among those who dissented from the Revolution Settlement, dissociated themselves from the Kirk, and adhered instead to the ministry of the Reverend John MacMillan (1669–1753). From his student days, MacMillan had shown a clear sympathy with the ‘Society people’, but despite these sympathies, he trained for the ministry of the Church of Scotland and was inducted to the parish of Balmaghie in Kirkcudbrightshire in 1701. He remained, however, a persistent and vociferous critic of the Revolution Settlement, highlighting what he regarded as the defections of the church, and was deposed in 1703 for refusing to retract a paper of ‘grievances’ he had presented to the Presbytery of Kirkcudbright. In 1706 he accepted a call to be the Minister of the Covenanting Societies, and he served as their only minister till he was joined by Thomas Nairn in 1743. Together, they then formed the Reformed Presbytery.²⁰

MacMillan had a wide following, scattered throughout the south of Scotland, and he had no conscience about extending that following by alienating people from their parish ministers. It is often the case with such self-appointed prophets, however, that they choose as their special targets, not the openly heretical and ungodly, but those whose soundness and piety present the greatest obstacle to the progress of their own party. This was to be Boston’s fate. MacMillan made a point of preaching frequently in his neighbourhood, and sometimes within the bounds of his parish; MacMillan publicly confuted points Boston had made in his sermons; he visited the homes of Boston’s people, portraying him as an enemy, and even as a liar. The result was that Boston had to suffer the presence among his hearers of those who were openly disaffected; and then, in 1708, many left him for good after he had observed a Fast appointed, not by the Church, but by the Government. Worst of all, perhaps, it became a distraction. When attendances were low, he concluded it was because people had forsaken him to go and hear MacMillan; when there was a ‘throng’, ‘I really thought some had the [*sic*] rather come out that day that I might see they were not gone to his meeting.’²¹

On top of all this Boston had domestic sorrows which were severe even by the standards of the eighteenth century. His wife, née Catherine Brown,

20. See DSCHT, ‘MacMillan, John’. Wodrow 1.51, 67. *Early Letters*, p. 281.

21. *Memoirs*, p. 247.

became ill six weeks into their marriage and never recovered. For the last ten years of his life she was confined to bed, and he lived in constant anxiety that she might be taken from him at any time. They married on 7 July 1700, and he has left a remarkable pen-portrait of her: a portrait of romance tinged with comedy. ‘A woman of great worth,’ he wrote,

whom I therefore passionately loved, and inwardly honoured: A stately, beautiful and comely personage, truly pious and fearing the Lord; of an evenly temper, patient in our common tribulations, and under her personal distresses: A woman of bright natural parts, an uncommon stock of prudence; of a quick and lively apprehension, great presence of mind in surprising incidents; sagacious and acute in discerning the qualities of persons.²²

There is more in the same romantic vein,²³ but the attraction wasn’t entirely romantic. To an earlier eulogy he had added, ‘and that I reckoned her very fit to see to my health’²⁴ (her father being a physician and she herself being skilled ‘in physic and surgery’)²⁵. This reflects Boston’s life-long concerns with his health, and his tendency towards hypochondria. At one point he even took the step (amusing or drastic, depending on one’s point of view) of cutting-off his hair and wearing a wig; but whatever this did for his health, he eventually found it troublesome ‘when going abroad’ and so, he writes, ‘I betook me to my own hair.’²⁶ In the event, however, it was his wife’s health, not his, that filled their married life with anxiety: so much so that when he left home on a preaching engagement he worried that he might find on his return that she had passed away. Latterly, he even feared that he might find her dead when he returned to the manse after taking a service in the church.²⁷ Despite his fears, however (and, indeed all the signs), she outlived him by five years.

Yet his wife’s chronic and often painful illness was not the only sadness Boston had to bear. Of his ten children, he buried all but four of them.

22. *ibid.* p. 149.

23. ‘My difficulty,’ he wrote early in their relationship, ‘was not to get to love her, but rather to bound it’ (*ibid.*, p. 39).

24. *ibid.*, p. 42.

25. *ibid.*, p. 162.

26. *ibid.*, p. 52. Despite his fragile health Boston notes in 1731 that he was never prevented from preaching through indisposition.

27. ‘Sometimes I have gone with a trembling heart to the pulpit, laying my account with being called out of it to see her expire,’ *ibid.*, p. 149.