



THOMAS
BOSTON
A Heart for Service



ANDREW THOMSON

CHRISTIAN FOCUS



First Published as
THOMAS BOSTON OF ETTRICK:
HIS LIFE AND TIMES

by

Rev. Andrew Thomson, D.D., F.R.S.E.

Thomson(1814 -1901) was minister of Broughton Place United Presbyterian Kirk, Edinburgh. His other books include *John Owen, Prince of Puritans*(ISBN1-85792-267-0) and *Richard Baxter, The Pastor's Pastor*(ISBN 1-85792-380-4).



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FOREWORD TO THE NEW EDITION

Introduction

It is good at last to have Andrew Thomson's biography of Thomas Boston back in print. There has been some considerable attention given to Boston's theology over recent years, both at an academic and a popular level, but little or nothing of a biographical nature has been written. There is room indeed for a critical, intellectual biography. Thomson's work, of course, is not of that nature but is rather a typical product of its nineteenth century origins. The language is somewhat quaint and old fashioned but it is not a barrier to understanding and is appropriate to its context, coming as it does from a day when a more formal and elaborate writing style was common.

The question which must be answered, however, is why we ought to be grateful for the republication of this biography. In other words, what is it about the life and ministry of Thomas Boston that justifies this publication? To answer this question it is useful to look at the various aspects of his life and ministry.

Boston the Man

In seeking to understand Thomas Boston, we are fortunate in having not only this biography by Andrew Thomson but also Boston's own autobiography, written for his children. The picture that emerges is of a serious man but a man with a warm and compassionate heart. He did have a somewhat introspective personality and was rather hard on himself both physically and spiritually. Physically, it showed itself in a number of ways, not least in his regular spells of prayer and fasting. Another example comes from his days as a student in Edinburgh, when he was so



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concerned at the cost of his studies to his father that he practically starved himself and made himself ill. Spiritually, the introspection led him to a sharp analysis of his own spiritual condition, an attitude which stands in marked contrast to the rather superficial spirituality of much of today's church. Occasionally he might be thought to have gone a little far, however, such as the time he rebuked himself for lying a little longer in bed on a Monday morning after a busy Lord's Day and chastised himself for 'sleeping away the blessing'!

His family life was not without great difficulties. He and his wife had several children who died in infancy and the pain of these experiences is evident in his writing. He himself suffered ill health for most of his life but this was as nothing compared to the suffering of his wife who was mentally ill for most of their married life. The care and tenderness which he showed towards her was a model to others. Even when he was dying, he was concerned to ensure that his children would take proper care of her after he had gone. Despite much suffering, however, he was blessed in many ways, not least in seeing his children follow Christ. Indeed, at the last communion service he took in Ettrick, it was his great joy to see the last of his children come to the table.

Boston the Minister

Thomas Boston (1676–1732) was a minister of the Church of Scotland who served in the Scottish border country, first in the parish of Simprin and then, for the remainder of his ministry, in the parish of Ettrick. He was a gifted and dedicated minister whose devotion to the tasks he believed God had committed to him was an example to others. This consisted primarily of the pastoral care of his flock, including the practice of catechising, and the work of preaching and teaching. It is clear that Boston could be rather stern and judgemental, especially in his earlier years but his love and compassion for his flock were also self-evident.

He was a convinced Presbyterian and played his part in the wider life of the denomination, not least by serving for a time as Clerk to the Synod. He was unswerving in his commitment to the



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Church of Scotland, the established church, even being willing to take an undeserved rebuke from the General Assembly over the *Marrow* controversy. He died before some of the other *Marrowmen* left the Kirk to form the First Secession Church but it is clear from his writings, especially on the evils of schism, that he would not have followed them.

Boston the Preacher

Boston's early preaching tended to be very legal, warning people of the demands of God's law and the consequences of breaking it, but an older, wiser minister once told him to stop 'railing' at his people and to preach grace. This he did and his ministry was transformed. Indeed, we might describe Boston as a preacher of grace in the midst of a context where legalism was present in much of Scottish preaching.

We are fortunate in having many volumes of his sermons available to us and so we can see what he gave to his people. There is a depth both of content and of spirituality which shines out from these sermons. Thomson rightly describes the seriousness with which Boston took this responsibility and describes how he would spend time before the Lord before ever he would go over to the church to preach, emphasising his complete dependence upon the work of the Holy Spirit. His congregation was given solid meat and there are many so-called educated congregations today who would struggle to follow his teaching and take in all that he said. This is a reflection on our present ignorance rather than on Boston, for his people were steeped in the Scriptures and in the Shorter Catechism and for that reason many of them were better theologians than some who occupy pulpits today. Thomson himself notes that those who had heard Boston preach the two volumes of sermons on the Shorter Catechism were well equipped to debate with any of the ministers even of that day!

His normal practice was to extract some doctrine from the text and to apply it to his hearers. His sermons were very carefully structured and hence easier for his people to remember. There was also a passion and a pathos about his preaching, which was blessed by God to the salvation of many. The story of Boston's last few sermons,



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some of them preached from an armchair specially put into the pulpit when he could no longer stand and the remainder preached from an open window in the manse, bear witness both to his faithfulness to his calling and to the desire in the hearts of his congregation to hear yet another sermon from this godly, dying man.

Boston the Controversialist

Boston was not one of those who relish argument and controversy and are always seeking some issue on which to do battle but, once he had reached a position on a matter, he was willing to stand his ground. For example, when Professor Simson of Glasgow University was charged with heresy and the General Assembly took an incredibly lenient view of the matter (in contrast with its later treatment of the *Marrowmen*), Boston was prepared to stand alone in the Assembly, in order to protest and complain against the decision. This was not easy for him because he was not one of life's natural controversialists and he was very unhappy when some others then tried to use this protest for their own ends, being afraid lest people might think that he was party to the action.

The major controversy in which Boston was involved was the *Marrow* controversy. A book, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, was published in 1645. The name of the author was withheld and he was simply identified by the initials 'EF'. It is now generally agreed that this was Edward Fisher. Although he was the 'author' of the book (in two volumes), in fact the book is mostly made up of quotations from many of the best Reformed writers, such as Calvin and Rutherford. Fisher took and used the 'marrow' or the 'core' of their writings, hence the title. Much of it consists of a dialogue between various characters, including an antinomian (one who believed that the law had no significance for Christians), a neonomian (legalist) and a minister of the gospel. It is very cleverly written and is a powerful presentation of the gospel.

Boston had discovered the book in a house in Simprin and quickly encouraged his friends to read it. He later had it republished with his own notes. The prevailing party in the Church of Scotland at that time, however, believed that the book was contrary to sound



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doctrine and a significant controversy and pamphlet war ensued between those who were advocates of the book, the so-called *Marrowmen*, and those who were opposed to it. The theological issues at stake were the free and universal offer of the gospel, the doctrine of repentance, whether assurance was of the essence of saving faith and so on. Essentially, the *Marrowmen* were protesting against the legalism of many of their colleagues in the church. This debate culminated at the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1720 when the book was 'banned', in the sense that ministers were instructed not to use it, nor to encourage anyone to read it. Even in those days it was highly unusual for a book to be treated in this way by a Protestant church.

Naturally the *Marrowmen* protested this decision and the matter rumbled on for two more years. Ultimately, however, they were rebuked by the General Assembly of 1722, although no action was taken against them in respect of their status as ministers of the Kirk nor were they removed from their congregations. Boston was at the heart of the debate over these years and the theological ability he demonstrated in presenting the arguments of the *Marrowmen* was widely respected.

Boston the Scholar

Boston was also a writer and scholar of some ability. His collected writings were published in twelve volumes in 1853.¹ The majority of his writings are sermons which he preached in Ettrick, although he also published a number of little books, including *The Crook in the Lot*. The most famous of his writings is *Human Nature in its Fourfold State* in which he developed almost a complete systematic theology by considering the various stages through which humanity has passed: man in innocence (before the Fall), man in sin (post-Fall), man saved (the Christian state) and man in glory (the future state of believers).

1. They have subsequently been republished twice: (Wheaton, IL: Richard Owen Roberts, 1980) and (Lafayette, IN: Sovereign Grace Publishers, 2001). They are also available from Tentmaker Publications, Stoke-on-Trent, England.



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When the *Marrow of Modern Divinity* was re-published with notes by Boston, this not only helped to clarify the issues at stake in the controversy but it also helped to establish his reputation as a theologian. When his *A View of the Covenant of Works* and *A View of the Covenant of Grace* were published, he was reckoned to be one of the finest exponents of covenant theology, even being compared to Witsius and other giants. His manuscript of *Miscellaneous Questions* gives a good picture of a man wrestling with some of the great theological issues and doing so without the resources available to scholars today. His library was very small indeed. It was not only in systematic theology, however, that his reputation was made. He was a Hebrew scholar of the first rank, in communication with Hebrew scholars all over Europe. His book on the Hebrew accents argued a case which proved to be wrong but even the ability to argue such a sustained position demonstrated his supreme ability and fluency in the language. He was also competent in Latin and Greek, like most scholars of his day. Unlike some, however, he was competent in French and Thomson tells us that he could translate Dutch.

Conclusion

All that has been said so far underlines the importance and significance of Thomas Boston in the early 18th century and no doubt justifies the republication of this biography by Andrew Thomson, lest we forget one of the great men of the past. Is Boston's usefulness, then, simply historical? Or does he have significance for today?

It seems to me that a recovery of interest in Thomas Boston would be of enormous benefit for the church in our day, not least for his own Church of Scotland. There are indeed many aspects of Boston's life and ministry which we would do well to recover for our own day: his love for Christ, his concern for personal holiness, his strong evangelistic zeal for the lost, his deep pastoral concern for believers and so on. This is to say nothing of the need in our day to recover his Calvinistic, covenant theology, in a day when the Reformed heritage which has been passed down from generation to generation of Scots, since the Reformation of 1560, seems set to be



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lost, even among those who claim to be evangelicals. Above all, we need to recover the example Boston set as the pastor-scholar, one who took seriously his calling to be a teaching elder, as demonstrated by the seriousness with which he set about the business of preparing to preach.

As Thomson says, Boston was a truly great man. There have been few like him in our history. May God raise up more like him to assist the church in its great need today.

Professor A. T. B. McGowan
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PREFACE

We shall not be charged with superfluous authorship in having written the following Memoir of Mr. Boston of Ettrick.¹ Nearly a century and a half has elapsed since the death of that remarkable man, and anything approaching to a complete biography of him has up to this time remained to be written.



Brief narratives regarding some of the salient points in his life, and estimates of his character, have indeed appeared at intervals, usually attached to some of his works when they were republished; but we are not aware of any book which, beginning with his early youth, and giving ample space to family incidents, has traced the story of his life through all its changeful periods – described his conflicts with surrounding errors, his influence on the condition of the church and the religious thought of his times – producing, in fact, what we mean by a biography.



No doubt we have Mr. Boston's diary, which was written by him for his family and published soon after his death, and must be invaluable to any biographer; but even it contains many gaps which need to be filled up from other sources; and besides this, it would not serve the ends of biography to be always looking at the subject of it through his eyes. We have endeavoured, in the following pages, to include in our narrative the whole range of his life and ministry; with what measure of success it will be for the intelligent and candid reader to judge.

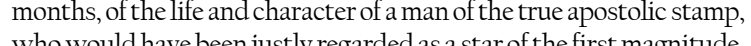
Even in so brief a preface as this, we cannot refrain from mentioning the names of friends to whom we are conscious of owing a debt of gratitude for kindly advice and cheering

1. These comments were made in 1895.



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encouragement in connection with the writing of this memoir. We owe a warm tribute of thanks to the Rev. John Lawson of Selkirk, who guided us for several days amid the classic scenes of Ettrick and Yarrow, and showed us sacred spots that were linked with the honoured name of the author of the 'Fourfold State'; and to Mrs. Dr. Smith of Biggar, who possesses, and kindly allowed us to photograph a portion of, the original manuscript of that work. We have also to thank our long-tried friend and fellow-labourer in the gospel, Dr. Blair of Dunblane, who was in full sympathy with us in our veneration for Mr. Boston, and ever ready with friendly advice and suggestion out of his well-stored mind. Nor can we omit to mention the name of W. White-Millar, Esq., S.S.C., the cherished friend of a long life, who grudged neither time nor trouble in procuring for us desired information on the subjects of our narrative, and in this way, as well as by his cheerful countenance, turned our labour into a pleasure. And not least do we place on grateful record our deep sense of the spiritual benefit we have derived from the study, for so many months, of the life and character of a man of the true apostolic stamp, who would have been justly regarded as a star of the first magnitude, an ornament to the Christian Church even in the brightest and purest periods of its history.






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It would be difficult to name a man who has a higher claim to an honourable place in the Christian biography of Scotland in the eighteenth century than Thomas Boston of Ettrick. We deem it sufficient of itself to explain and justify this statement, that he was the author of the 'Fourfold State'. It is a remarkable circumstance that, from the days of the Reformation downward, there has always been some one book in which the vitalizing element has been peculiarly strong, and which God has singled out as the instrument of almost innumerable conversions, as well as of quickening and deepening the divine life in those who had already believed. Luther's 'Commentary on Galatians', Baxter's 'Call to the Unconverted', Bunyan's 'Pilgrim's Progress', Alleine's 'Alarm', Doddridge's 'Rise and Progress', Fuller's 'Great Question Answered', Wilberforce's 'Practical Christianity'; in France, Monod's 'Lucille', and in Germany, Arndt's 'True Christianity', have been among the great life-books of their generation; and we may add with confidence to this sacred list the 'Fourfold State' of Boston.

With a quarter of a century after its publication it had found its way, and was eagerly read and pondered, over all the Scottish Lowlands. From St. Abb's Head, in all the Border counties, in the pastoral regions shadowed by the Lammermoors and the Lowthers, to the remotest point in Galloway, it was to be seen, side by side





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with the Bible and Bunyan's glorious Dream, on the shelf in every peasant's cottage. The shepherd bore it with him, folded in his plaid, up among the silent hills. The ploughman in the valleys refreshed his spirit with it, as with heavenly manna, after his long day of toil. The influence which began with the humbler classes ascended like a fragrance into the mansions of the Lowland laird and the Border chief, and carried with it a new and hallowed joy. The effect was like the reviving breath of spring upon the frost-bound earth. Many a lowly peasant with Boston's 'Fourfold State', familiar through frequent perusal to his memory and heart, became an athlete in the discussion of theological questions, and, like the Border wrestlers in an early age, was rarely worsted in a conflict. One who lived nearer to Boston's age, and was better able to judge, has declared that, over three generations, the 'Fourfold State' had been the instrument of more numerous conversions and more extensive spiritual quickening, in at least one part of our island, than any other human production it was in his power to specify.

It would, however, be a mistake to suppose that even in our own age this remarkable book had at length spent its force, and had become as an old defaced golden coin withdrawn from circulation, or as a sword that had become rusty and unwieldy, and was transferred from the armoury to the museum. In a paper of much ability and interest on 'Religious Thought in Wales', which was not long since read by Principal Edwards at a great meeting of the Presbyterian Alliance in London, it was stated that if you entered the house of a rustic elder or leader of the private societies fifty years ago, you would uniformly find that he had a small and very select library. Among other books you would be sure to lay your hand on translations into Welsh of Boston's 'Fourfold State', Bunyan's 'Pilgrim's Progress', Owen on the 'Person of Christ' and on the 'Mortification of Sin in Believers', and others. It is also true that in our British colonies at the present day, especially where the Scottish element abounds in the population, the 'Fourfold State' continues to be sought after and read; and we have received testimony from natives that it is extensively sold and circulated on the misty coasts of Labrador. It is natural that we should wish



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to know something of the outer and inner life of an author whom God has honoured for so many generations and in so many lands as the instrument of the highest form of blessing.

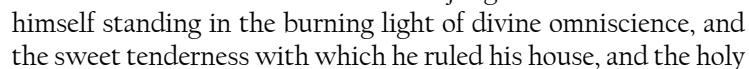
It was not only, however, as the author of the 'Fourfold State', and of other books that are afterwards to be named, but as the pastor of Ettrick, that the name of Boston long since obtained a secure and sacred place in the annals of the Church of Christ in Scotland and in the hearts of her people. The assertion is not likely to be challenged that, if Scotland had been searched during the earlier part of the eighteenth century, there was not a minister of Christ within its bounds who, alike in his personal character and in the discharge of his pastoral functions, approached nearer to the apostolic model than did this man of God. It is a fact that, even before he died, men and children had come to pronounce his name with reverence. It had become a synonym for holy living. Away up among these green hills and limpid streams of Ettrick, he rises before our imagination as a man striving daily to lead a saintly life, endeavouring by much thought and prayer to solve for himself difficult theological problems, and doing earnest battle against the profanity, impurity, worldliness, and loose notions and practices in bargain-making which he found to prevail among his parishioners, and to win them to the obedience of Christ. He was such a man as might have sat as a living model to Baxter when he wrote his 'Reformed Pastor'. We would place him as a companion spirit, like-minded and like-gifted, to that 'gentle saint of Nonconformity', as a pious English bishop has recently termed him, Philip Henry of Broad-Oak.

It must be known to many that Boston wrote a 'Memoir' of himself, or, more correctly, kept a diary, which was principally designed for the benefit of his family and 'inner friends', after he had finished his course. It is a large volume, and is invaluable to the biographer both on account of the fulness and accuracy of its information, and because it introduces us to a knowledge of the writer's inward and spiritual life, which, in its degree, would have been impossible except in an autobiography. Next to the 'Confessions of Saint Augustine', with their terrible fidelity of self-



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revelation, it would be difficult to name any autobiography, in any language, which bears so unmistakably throughout the marks of simplicity and truth. In so far as self-display and self-laudation are concerned, Boston forgets himself even when he is writing of himself. In regard to the incidents of his early life and his early ministry, and to the experiences of his last years, when begun defection in the church drew him forth reluctantly into ecclesiastical conflict, and the spirit of the martyr showed itself in the good confessor, the biographer must derive much of his information from Boston.



But it is from the records of his Ettrick life and ministry that we gather our most precious stores. To the Christian reader there is a sacred and heart-stirring interest in marking that abounding and ardent prayer which was as the air he breathed; in his practice of seeing God, not only in extraordinary providences, but in the common round of daily life; and not less in noticing the severity with which he searched his heart and judged himself as if he felt himself standing in the burning light of divine omniscience, and the sweet tenderness with which he ruled his house, and the holy passion with which his spirit yearned for the salvation of his children. While to the ministers of religion the Ettrick experiences of Boston, as he himself has described them, are full of the most wholesome impulses and suggestive lessons. Alike in his motives and in his methods, as he has enabled us to see him, in his study, in his pulpit, in his pastoral visits, in his meek endurance of opposition, in his perils amid mountain mists and flooded mountain torrents, in his watching for opportunities of doing good, and carving out those opportunities when he did not find them, young ministers when entering on the difficulties and responsibilities of their sacred office may learn the secret of ministerial success, and those who have not succeeded may find out, while it is not yet too late, the secret of their failure.

The more we study that grand Ettrick ministry, the more deep will become our impression that the ideal of a true Christian minister, as traced by Cowper in his well-known lines, and by Paul himself, was in an extraordinary measure realized by this man of



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God. In later generations Ettrick has become classic ground. In the poems of Sir Walter Scott and of James Hogg, 'the great minstrel and the shepherd poet', as Wordsworth has happily designated them, every glen and hill and stream has been made sacred to literature, and its name has been wafted to the ends of the earth. But it is to be remembered that two generations before these masters in poetry had struck the chords of their lyre, Ettrick had already become a household word in all the cottages and castles of the Scottish Lowlands, through its association with the name of Boston, who by his writings and his ministry had, in many a parish, turned the wilderness into a fruitful field, and guided many a bewildered wanderer into the kingdom of God.

