

# **Minister of the Gospel at Haddington**

**The Life and Work of the Reverend John Brown**

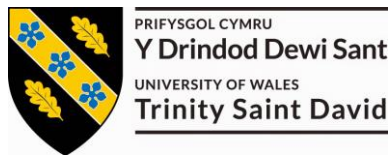
**(1722-1787)**

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School of Theology, Religious Studies and Islamic Studies  
Faculty of Humanities and Performing Arts







## **Master's Degrees by Examination and Dissertation**

### **Declaration Form**

1. This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

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15 January 2018

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3. This dissertation is the result of my own independent work/investigation, except where otherwise stated.

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## Abstract

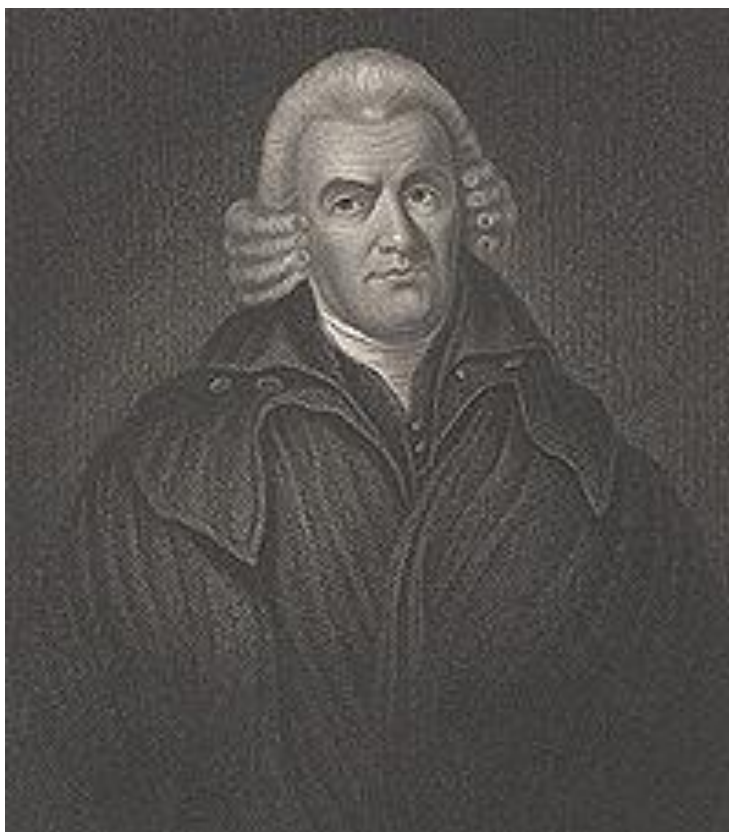
This dissertation takes a fresh look at the life and work of the Reverend John Brown (1722-1787), minister of the First Secession Church in Haddington and Professor of Divinity in the Associate (Burgher) Synod, who is best known as the author of *The Self-Interpreting Bible* (1778). Brown was born in humble circumstances in Perthshire; ‘attached’ himself to the 1733 Secession, and aspired to become one of its ministers. However, his lack of formal education, the death of his parents, and accusations that to learn Greek and Hebrew he had entered a Faustian pact, meant he struggled to achieve his goal. However, after serving as a shepherd, pedlar, soldier and teacher and studying part-time for the ministry, he was ordained in July 1751. Brown soon established himself as an effective pastor and respected presbyter and, in 1753, was elected moderator of the Associate (Burgher) Synod. After publishing four works, including a history of the Secession, in 1767 Brown was appointed to the non-stipendiary post of Professor of Divinity and each summer students came to Haddington to study under him. In 1771 Brown began to correspond with Selina, Countess of Huntingdon, one of the leaders of the Evangelical Revival in England and Wales, who requested a copy of his *Systematic Theology* for use in her college in Trefecca in mid-Wales. Brown was a prolific religious writer and published sixty books, pamphlets and tracts, including *A Dictionary of the Bible* (1769), which attracted interest outside Scotland; *The Self-Interpreting Bible* (1778), upon which his reputation largely rests; and a *History of the British Churches* (1784), which is perhaps his ablest work. The main sources for Brown’s life are accounts written by himself and members of his family; profiles in his *Dictionary and Bible* and Robert MacKenzie’s biography, *John Brown of Haddington* (1918).



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John Brown (1722–1787) by William Home Lizars

To the Memory of  
MR. JOHN BROWN  
THIRTY SIX YEARS MINISTER OF THE GOSPEL  
AT HADDINGTON  
And Twenty Years Professor of Divinity under the Associate  
Synod  
After maintaining an eminent Character for  
PIETY, CHARITY, LEARNING AND DILIGENCE  
HE DIED  
Rejoicing in the hope and glory of GOD  
And Acclaiming the Riches of Divine Grace to him as a Seceder  
The 19<sup>th</sup> of June A.D. 1787



## Introduction

‘That the subjects of the following Papers are serious and interesting, we suppose, will be readily admitted.’<sup>1</sup>

It is now a hundred years since Robert Mackenzie (1855-1919) published his biography of *John Brown of Haddington* (1918)<sup>2</sup> and, apart from the occasional article and brief references in general histories, little has been written about him since. Nevertheless, copies of his *Self-Interpreting Bible* (1778)<sup>3</sup> continue to be cherished as family heirlooms and sell for large sums, especially in the United States.<sup>4</sup>

The aim of this dissertation is to demonstrate that John Brown (1722-1787) is worthy of further consideration, not only as the author of *The Self-Interpreting Bible*, through which he left his mark on popular piety in the English speaking world, but as an individual, churchman, teacher, and religious writer. Brown rose from humble origins in rural Perthshire to found an ecclesiastical and medical dynasty; overcame a variety of obstacles to become a leading figure in the Burgher branch of the Secession Church, was a staunch but not uncritical defender of the new denomination, a teacher, who earned the respect and affection of his students, and the author of numerous books, tracts and pamphlets on religious topics.

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<sup>1</sup> J. and E. Brown (eds.), *Select Remains of the Rev. John Brown, Late Minister of the Gospel at Haddington, who died June 19, 1787* (Pittsburgh, Cramer, Spear and Eichbaum, 1810), iii.

Available at <https://babel.hathitrust.org>.

<sup>2</sup> R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington*, (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1918 reprinted by Forgotten Books 2015)

<sup>3</sup> J. Brown, *The Self-interpreting Bible, containing the Old and New Testaments; to which are annexed an extensive introduction, marginal references and illustrations*, (Edinburgh, Gavin Alston, 1778)

<sup>4</sup> In December 2017 AbeBook.Com had 46 copies of *The Self-Interpreting Bible* on sale at prices ranging from \$18.56 to \$2,500.



While MacKenzie's biography displays his diligent research into 'all the original material available'<sup>5</sup> and while it provides a wealth of information on almost every aspect of Brown's life, it also reflects assumptions about the Church of Scotland in the eighteenth century and the response of the Secession to its shortcomings, which can appear outmoded to the modern reader.<sup>6</sup> The publication of Gordon Donaldson's (1913-1993) *The Scottish Reformation*, in 1960, was a watershed in ecclesiastical historiography in Scotland. Donaldson and those who followed him rejected the partisan approach of the previous four hundred years<sup>7</sup> and developed a more measured approach. As a result, today most church historians in Scotland no longer see it as their task to be apologists for a particular faith tradition. It is, therefore, necessary to separate the useful facts, which MacKenzie provides in abundance, from some of the accompanying judgements, and attempt a fresh assessment of Brown's legacy.

However, this more tolerant approach did not extend to those who broke away from the Church of Scotland in the eighteenth century. Callum Brown, who is more sympathetic than other historians, says 'Church historians, writing mostly from a twentieth-century Church of Scotland and ecumenical standpoint, have been largely unfavourable to the various groups of dissenters [in the eighteenth century]'<sup>8</sup> and he cites, as examples

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<sup>5</sup> R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington*, p viii

<sup>6</sup> Robert MacKenzie was a United Free Church minister in Alloa and his writing reflects assumptions that would have been current in the denomination at the time.

<sup>7</sup> Jenny Wormald says Donaldson's 'classic study' and *Essays of the Scottish Reformation* edited by David McRoberts, 'destroyed the excesses of the old view'. J Wormald, *Court, Kirk and Community: Scotland 1470-1625* (London, Edward Arnold, 1981), 75

<sup>8</sup> C. G. Brown, *The People in the Pew, Religion and Society in Scotland since 1780*, (Glasgow, The Economic and Social History Society of Scotland, 1993), 12



of this antipathy, comments by A L Drummond and James Bulloch<sup>9</sup> that the Seceders were ‘provincials’ and ‘malcontents’, who did not respect parish boundaries.<sup>10</sup> Criticism of the Seceders has continued into the twenty-first century. David Bebbington describes them as traditionalists who ‘demanded punctilious conformity to church order and inherited doctrine’.<sup>11</sup>

Calum Brown attributes the attitude of church historians ‘to groups like the Relief Church<sup>12</sup> and especially the Secession Church’ to the fact that ‘little of the eighteenth-century dissenting presbyterian tradition survives today’.<sup>13</sup> This tradition was eclipsed by the Disruption of 1843, which saw the formation of the Free Church of Scotland,<sup>14</sup> and has since been diluted by a series of church unions.<sup>15</sup>

To compensate for the absence of this dissenting tradition, chapter three will examine John Brown’s own defence of the Secession. In 1766 he published *An Historical Account of the Rise and Progress of the Secession*. While it is not as definitive as McKerrow’s *History of the*

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<sup>9</sup> On his death in 1966 Andrew Drummond left a manuscript, which was revised by James Bulloch. The resultant study is the most comprehensive account of this period of Scottish church history

A L Drummond and James Bulloch, *The Scottish Church; 1688 – 1843; The Age of the Moderates* (Edinburgh, Saint Andrew Press, 1973)

<sup>10</sup> C. G. Brown, *The People in the Pew*, 12

<sup>11</sup> D Bebbington, *Evangelicalism* Oxford Companion to Scottish History, edited by M. Lynch, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001) p 515

<sup>12</sup> There was a second secession in 1761 led by Thomas Gillespie (1708-1774) which led to the formation of the Presbytery of Relief otherwise known as the Relief Church.

<sup>13</sup> C. G. Brown, *The People in the Pew*, 12

<sup>14</sup> Around a third of the ministers of the established church seceded over the issue of patronage and what they saw as the state’s refusal to acknowledge the spiritual freedom of the Church.

<sup>15</sup> In 1847 the United Session Church, itself a fourfold union, joined with the Relief Church to form the United Presbyterian Church. In 1900 it joined with the majority of the Free Church to form the United Free Church and in 1929 it united with the Church of Scotland.



*Secession Church* (1839),<sup>16</sup> it has the merit of having been written by someone who had lived through the events he describes and provides an insight into how Brown viewed the denomination he served for thirty-six years.<sup>17</sup>

While twentieth and twenty-first writers have shown little interest in John Brown, his family and admirers were determined to preserve his memory. The earliest account of his life is *A Short Memoir*, which he wrote towards the end of his life and which was published by his sons, John and Ebenezer, in 1779, in a collection entitled *Select Remains of the Rev. John Brown, Late Minister of the Gospel at Haddington, who died June 19, 1787*. While it is as much a spiritual last will and testament as an autobiography, it records many of the key incidents in Brown's life, which reappear in later memoirs. In the preface, the brothers say, 'it was his care to mark the singular dispensations of Providence towards him; then prudently declare them to his children'<sup>18</sup> and they add that they may be censured 'as too partial to the memory of their deceased father'.<sup>19</sup>

The charge of partiality can be levelled at *A Memoir of the Rev. John Brown of Haddington*, which was inserted into the fifth and subsequent editions of his *Dictionary of the Bible* (1769), and *The Life of the Reverend John Brown*, which was inserted into the fourth and subsequent editions of his *Self Interpreting Bible* (1778), though the latter makes the occasional critical observation. (For convenience they will be referred to as *The Memoir* and *The Life* respectively.) In 1823, Brown's third son,

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<sup>16</sup> J. McKerrow, *History of the Secession Church*, (Edinburgh, Oliphant, 1839) Available at <https://archive.org/details/historyofsecessi01mcke>

<sup>17</sup> It is interesting, if not entirely surprising, that *An Historical Account of the Rise and Progress of the Secession* does not appear in Drummond and Bullock's extensive bibliography.

<sup>18</sup> J. and E. Brown (eds.), *Select Remains of the Rev. John Brown*, iii

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, v



Thomas, included an account of his father's life, entitled *A Sketch of the Life of the Author*, in the 1823 edition of Brown's *Compendious History of the British Churches in England, Scotland and America* (1784).<sup>20</sup> And to mark the hundredth anniversary of Brown's death, his grandson, John Croumbie Brown, edited a *Centenary Memorial of Rev. John Brown*, (1887),<sup>21</sup> which includes the recollections of Brown's youngest son, William. As one would expect, all of these accounts are deferential.

Brown's life falls naturally into three phases: from his birth in rural Perthshire in 1722 to his licensing by the Associate Presbytery of Edinburgh in 1750; from his call to the First Secession Church in Haddington in 1751 to the publication of *An Historical Account of the Rise and Progress of the Secession* in 1766; and from his election as Professor of Divinity in the Associate Synod in 1767 to his death in 1787.

Chapter one will examine John's childhood in the farmtoun of Carpow, his aspirations to become a minister, the loss of his parents, and his time as a shepherd, pedlar, soldier and divinity student. Chapter two will examine Brown's call to the First Secession Church in Haddington, his rise within the Associate Synod, his first marriage, and his early attempts at authorship. And chapter four will examine his role as Clerk to the Associate Synod and its Professor of Divinity, his second marriage, the publication of his most important works, and the establishment of his reputation in England, Wales and North America.

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<sup>20</sup> J. Brown, *A Compendious History of the British Churches in England, Scotland, Ireland and America* edited by T Brown (Edinburgh, Maclachlin and Stewart, 1823)

<sup>21</sup> J. Croumbie Brown (ed.), *A Centenary Memorial of Rev. John Brown, A Family Record*, (Edinburgh, Andrew Elliot, 1887.)

Available at <https://archive.org/details/centenarymemori00unkngoog>



Brown's life spanned a significant period in the history of the Church in Scotland. Between c.1750 and c.1780 the Scottish Enlightenment<sup>22</sup> reached its peak;<sup>23</sup> Moderatism developed into a well-organized and influential force in the Church of Scotland;<sup>24</sup> and Evangelicalism began to have an impact in the central belt.<sup>25</sup> Although the Seceders tried to detach themselves from what was happening in the established church, they could not ignore it. In his writings, Brown is critical of some aspects of the Enlightenment, bitterly opposed to Moderatism and suspicious of Evangelicalism.

David Wright describes John Brown as a 'prolific writer' who displayed 'his exhaustive knowledge of the Bible and the riches of his well-stocked mind'.<sup>26</sup> In all Brown published sixty works including books, tracts and pamphlets. In relating his life, this dissertation will consider a number of works, including *A Help for the Ignorant* (1758),<sup>27</sup> which was Brown's first venture into authorship, *A Dictionary of the Bible* (1769),<sup>28</sup> which

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<sup>22</sup> The term 'Scottish Enlightenment', which describes the flowering of intellectual activity in Scotland during the eighteenth century, was not coined until the nineteenth century. It is generally said to have begun with the publication of James Dalrymple, 1<sup>st</sup> Viscount Stair's *Institution of the Law* in 1681 and ended with the writings of Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832).

<sup>23</sup> D. Allen, *Enlightenment (1660-1843): Oxford Companion to Scottish History*, 133-136

<sup>24</sup> C. C. Kidd, *Moderatism: Oxford Companion to Scottish History*, 513-515

<sup>25</sup> D. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism: Oxford Companion to Scottish History*, p 515-516

<sup>26</sup> D. F. Wright, *Brown, John (1722-1787): Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford University Press, 2004)

Available at <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/3622>

<sup>27</sup> J. Brown, *Help for the Ignorant; or an easy, plain, practical, and extensive Explication of the Assembly's Shorter Catechism* Second Edition, (Edinburgh, John Gray and G Alston, 1761)

Available at <https://books.google.co.uk>.

<sup>28</sup> J. Brown, *A dictionary of the Holy Bible*. (Edinburgh, John Gray and Gavin Alston, 1769)



attracted interest outside Scotland, his *Self-Interpreting Bible* (1778),<sup>29</sup> upon which his reputation largely rests, and *A Compendious History of the British Churches in England, Scotland, Ireland and America* (1784),<sup>30</sup> which Wright says is probably his most able work.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> J. Brown, *The Self-interpreting Bible, containing the Old and New Testaments; to which are annexed an extensive introduction, marginal references and illustrations* Second Edition (Edinburgh, Gavin Alston, 1778)

<sup>30</sup> J. Brown, *A Compendious History of the British Churches in England, Scotland, Ireland and America* (Glasgow, John Bryce, 1784)

<sup>31</sup> D. F. Wright, *Brown, John (1722–1787)*



## 1

**Lad o' pairts**

'I was left a poor orphan, and had nothing to depend on but the providence of God'<sup>32</sup>

David Wright describes John Brown as 'a lad o' pairts';<sup>33</sup> that is a youth who, thanks to the democratic nature of Scottish education, rises from humble origins to achieve academic and/or professional distinction.<sup>34</sup> However, Brown did so in an unconventional way by 'attaching' himself to the Secession of 1733 and working tirelessly to become one of its ministers. While there were things in Brown's background that assisted him fulfil his ambition, he had to overcome personal tragedy and false accusations and, had he not been driven by a strong sense of call and been supported at crucial moments, it is unlikely that he would have succeeded.

John was born in 1722 in the hamlet of Carpow, on the banks of the River Tay, in the parish of Abernethy, in Perthshire.<sup>35</sup> Carpow was home to a number of cottar families, whose main occupation was growing and processing flax.<sup>36</sup> Although climatic conditions in Scotland had improved since the 'seven ill years' of the 1690s, subsistence farming remained a precarious occupation.<sup>37</sup> By Brown's death, in 1787, the traditional Lowland way of life had started to disappear as lairds 'improved' their estates<sup>38</sup> and removed farmtouns, like Carpow.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> J. and E. Brown (eds.), *Select Remains of the Rev. John Brown*, 10

<sup>33</sup> D. F. Wright, *Brown, John (1722–1787)*

<sup>34</sup> Editors, *Dictionary of the Scots language*

Available at <http://www.dsl.ac.uk>

<sup>35</sup> J. and E. Brown (eds.), *Select Remains of the Rev. John Brown*, 9

<sup>36</sup> R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington*, 4

<sup>37</sup> G. Sprott, *Rural Society: 1770s onward: Oxford Companion to Scottish History*, 551

<sup>38</sup> *ibid*, 552

<sup>39</sup> R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington*, 3



John was one of four children born to John Brown (d. c.1733) and Catherine Millie (d. c.1735).<sup>40</sup> His father divided his year between salmon fishing on the Tay in the summer and weaving flax in the winter.<sup>41</sup> Despite limited formal education,<sup>42</sup> Brown senior had learnt to read and write and ‘filled his home with the current literature of the period.’<sup>43</sup> As a result John grew up in a household where literacy was valued and where books were part of everyday life.

We do not know very much about Catherine Millie, however, she seems to have been devout and to have encouraged her children to fulfil their ambitions. John’s elder brother, James, became a burgess in Cupar in Fife. His sister, Janet, married a John Heggie and went to live in nearby Newburgh-on-Tay, and his younger brother, William, worked as a forester on the Inverary estate of the Duke of Argyll.<sup>44</sup>

John’s family shared in the eighteenth century revival of family worship in Scotland.<sup>45</sup> Recalling his childhood, Brown says, ‘It was a mercy that I was born into a family which took care of my Christian instruction, and in which I had the example of God’s worship, both evening and morning’ and he adds, ‘This was the case in few families in that corner.’<sup>46</sup> In playing tribute to his parents’ piety, Brown is doing more than displaying filial affection. His strong sense of call was rooted in his childhood within

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<sup>40</sup> D. F. Wright, *Brown, John (1722–1787)*

<sup>41</sup> R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington*, 4

<sup>42</sup> J. and E. Brown (eds.), *Select Remains of the Rev. John Brown*, 9

<sup>43</sup> R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington*, 4

<sup>44</sup> *ibid*, 9

<sup>45</sup> K. B. E. Roxburgh, *Female Piety in Eighteenth Century Scotland* (The Evangelical Quarterly 2002), 168.

Available at <https://biblicalstudies.org.uk>

<sup>46</sup> J. and E. Brown (eds.), *Select Remains of the Rev. John Brown*, 9



his ‘small religious family’<sup>47</sup> and, even then, he experienced what it meant to stand out from his neighbours.

Brown says, ‘My parents’ circumstances were such that they were not able to afford me any great length of time at school for reading, writing, and arithmetick (sic)’.<sup>48</sup> Schooling had been one of the main priorities of the Scottish Reformers, and, in *The First Book of Discipline* (1560), John Knox (c. 1513-1587) had argued that there should be a school in every parish.<sup>49</sup> MacKenzie attributes John’s limited formal education to the damage done to Scottish education during the upheavals of the previous century and to the lack of interest shown by Episcopalians in carrying through the Knoxian reforms.<sup>50</sup> However, David Witherington says, ‘Despite the political and religious tumults of the 17<sup>th</sup> century there was steady progress in implementing the programme [of the Reformers]’.<sup>51</sup> As a result, by 1730, when John probably went to school, most children, girls as well as boys, were receiving a basic education which, though neither free nor compulsory, was producing high levels of literacy.<sup>52</sup>

The fact that John’s parents were unable to keep him at school ‘any great length of time’<sup>53</sup> or afford the extra cost of Latin lessons,<sup>54</sup> may not have been as significant as it appears. It is possible that he did not have to rely solely on the local dominie<sup>55</sup> for his education and that his mother assisted

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<sup>47</sup> J. and E. Brown (eds.), *Select Remains of the Rev. John Brown*, p 11

<sup>48</sup> *ibid*, 10

<sup>49</sup> On Schooling, *The First Book of Discipline*, in *Works of John Knox* ed. David Laing (Edinburgh, James Thin, 1895), Vol. 2, 183-260

<sup>50</sup> R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington* p 6

<sup>51</sup> D. Witherington, *Schools and Schooling: 1694-1872: Oxford Companion to Scottish History*, 563

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, 563

<sup>53</sup> It is likely that John attended school for the two years which was the norm for a child from his background.

<sup>54</sup> J. and E. Brown (eds.), *Select Remains of the Rev. John Brown*, 10

<sup>55</sup> The Scots term for a school master



him to learn to read. Certainly by the age of nine, John could read ‘the catechisms by Vincent, Favel, and the Westminster assembly’<sup>56</sup> and from the age of twelve, he was tackling theological works, such as Guthrie’s *Trials of a saving interest in Christ* (1663).<sup>57</sup>

Brown says that, when he was eight, he managed to slip into the gallery of Abernethy church during a communion service and, before being removed, observed the minister distributing the elements.<sup>58</sup> The experience had a profound effect on him and, in later life, he decided that ‘children should not be kept out of church on such occasions’.<sup>59</sup>

John’s interest in divinity led his mother to hope that one day he would become a minister and she is reputed to have said, ‘Oh when will I see the craws fleein’ ower my bairnie’s kirk!’<sup>60</sup> However, such hopes looked to have been dashed when, at the age of eleven, John’s father died and two years later he lost his mother and he himself suffered four bouts of fever.<sup>61</sup> Although John had been ‘left a poor orphan’,<sup>62</sup> he had inherited his mother’s strong religious faith and his father’s belief in the importance of self-education and together they would carry him forward.

In his teens, John read works by William Gouge (1575-1653), Samuel Rutherford (1600-1661) and William Guthrie (1620-1665).<sup>63</sup> MacKenzie describes these works as ‘the religious books of the period’,<sup>64</sup> however, their authors were long since dead and there is no evidence that John was

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<sup>56</sup> J. and E. Brown (eds.), *Select Remains of the Rev. John Brown*, 10

<sup>57</sup> *ibid*, 10

<sup>58</sup> *ibid*, 9-10

<sup>59</sup> *ibid*, 9-10

<sup>60</sup> R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington*, p 9

<sup>61</sup> *ibid*, 11

<sup>62</sup> J. and E. Brown (eds.), *Select Remains of the Rev. John Brown*, p 10

<sup>63</sup> *ibid*, 10

<sup>64</sup> R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington*, p 4



exposed to the less conventional literature that was emerging from the Scottish Enlightenment, such as *An Enquiry into the Original of Moral Virtue* (1733) by Archibald Campbell (1691-1756), Professor of Church History at St. Andrew's.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, around this time, evangelicals were trying to have Campbell deposed for teaching that self-love is 'the sole principle and motive of all virtuous and religious actions'.<sup>66</sup>

John's piety and ability to read, led a local sheep-farmer, John Ogilvie, to employ him as a shepherd and personal companion.<sup>67</sup> Brown's son, John, describes Ogilvie as 'venerable for age, and eminent for piety' but 'not able to read English'.<sup>68</sup> MacKenzie says the pair 'built a little shelter on the Colzie hill', which became known 'the tabernacle'.<sup>69</sup> There John read the Bible to his employer and the pair said their prayers and sang psalms. Ogilvie's intervention was the first of several that enabled Brown to overcome adversity and become a religious leader.

In this supportive environment John began to follow the spiritual directions set out by Joseph Alleine (1634-1676) in his guide to conversion, *An Alarm to Unconverted Sinners* (1671).<sup>70</sup> He committed himself to praying six times a day whilst out on the hill and three times during the remainder of the day.<sup>71</sup> MacKenzie compares John's approach

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<sup>65</sup> M. Batty, Campbell, Archibald (1691–1756): *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford University Press, 2004)

Available at <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/4476>

<sup>66</sup> 'Acts: 1736', in *Acts of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland 1638-1842*, ed. Church Law Society (Edinburgh, 1843), pp. 633-642.

Available at *British History Online* <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/church-scotland-records/acts/1638-1842/pp633-642>

<sup>67</sup> Unknown Author, *Life of the Reverend John Brown*, 1

<sup>68</sup> Letter from Dr John Brown to Dr John Cairns cited by R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington*, 14

<sup>69</sup> R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington*, 13

<sup>70</sup> *ibid*, 15

<sup>71</sup> *ibid*, 15



with the ‘method’, which John and Charles Wesley had adopted in Oxford,<sup>72</sup> and, though Brown would later become a severe critic of the Wesleys,<sup>73</sup> at this point, he was following a similar spiritual course.

Following Ogilvie’s retirement, John found less congenial employment with another local farmer.<sup>74</sup> However, it is not entirely clear what effect this had on him. In later life, he claimed that the change led to ‘much practical apostasy from God’<sup>75</sup> but that seems to be an overstatement of the kind Brown was prone to make. It is probably more accurate to say that, without the encouragement of Ogilvie, John struggled to achieve the spiritual goals he had set himself.<sup>76</sup> There is certainly no suggestion that, as a teenager, John rejected the values that had been instilled into him as a child. *The Life* says that ‘during the season of backsliding ... his external character was remarkably distinguished by many virtues’.<sup>77</sup>

At the age of nineteen John suffered a further bout of fever which, he says, ‘awakened [his] concern about eternal salvation’.<sup>78</sup> After recovering, he heard a sermon on the text ‘surely he hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows’ (Isaiah 53.3),<sup>79</sup> which led him to see his life as being guided by the Holy Spirit.

While John was making his spiritual journey, dramatic events were unfolding in the parish of Abernethy. In 1733 Alexander Moncrieff (1695–1761), minister at Abernethy, joined Ebenezer Erskine (1680–

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<sup>72</sup> R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington* p 11

<sup>73</sup> J. Brown, *An Historical Account of the Rise and Progress of the Secession*, Sixth Edition, (Edinburgh, Hugh Inglis, 1791, reproduced by ECCO) 47-50

<sup>74</sup> Unknown Author, *Life of the Reverend John Brown*, 2

<sup>75</sup> *ibid*, 2

<sup>76</sup> J. and E. Brown (eds.), *Select Remains of the Rev. John Brown*, 11

<sup>77</sup> Unknown Author, *Life of the Reverend John Brown*, 2

<sup>78</sup> J. and E. Brown (eds.), *Select Remains of the Rev. John Brown*, 11

<sup>79</sup> *ibid*, 12



1764), minister at Stirling, James Fisher (1697-1775), minister at Kinclaven, and William Wilson (1690-1741), minister at Perth, in declaring a secession from the Church of Scotland ‘in disgust at patronage, and the decay in doctrine and discipline in the church’.<sup>80</sup> They then formed the Associate Presbytery and elected Erskine as moderator. Although, from 1737, the Associate Presbytery allowed members of Praying Societies, who were disillusioned with the established church, to form Secession congregations,<sup>81</sup> the procedures of the General Assembly took their time and Erskine and his associates were not deposed until 1740.<sup>82</sup> As a result, during John’s teenage years, the Secession was a major topic of conversation in the parish of Abernethy: not least because the minister, Moncrieff of Culfargie, to give him his full title, was also the local laird.<sup>83</sup>

*The Life* says, ‘To this body our young shepherd early attached himself; and ventured to conceive the idea of one day becoming a shepherd of souls in that connection.’<sup>84</sup> In pursuit of his aim of becoming a minister, John used his free time to improve his education. He received assistance in learning Latin from the Reverend John Johnston of Arngask (1700-1746) and, until they fell out, from Alexander Moncrieff.<sup>85</sup> However, David Wright says he ‘acquired the elements of Greek unaided, by working back

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<sup>80</sup> D. Bebbington, *Protestant sects and disestablishment: The Oxford Companion to Scottish History*, 494

<sup>81</sup> A. L. Drummond and James Bulloch, *The Scottish Church; 1688 – 1843*, p 50

<sup>82</sup> ‘Acts: 1740’, in *Acts of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland 1638-1842*, ed. Church Law Society (Edinburgh, 1843), 653-661.

Available at *British History Online* <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/church-scotland-records/acts/1638-1842/pp 653-66>

<sup>83</sup> T. B. Johnstone, *Moncrieff, Alexander, of Culfargie (1695–1761)* revised by N. R. Needham; *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford University Press, 2004) Available at <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/18949>

<sup>84</sup> Unknown Author, *Life of the Reverend John Brown*, 2

<sup>85</sup> *ibid*, 2



from ... the English New Testament'<sup>86</sup> and it is possible he used a similar technique to teach himself Hebrew.

Wright says John 'made a rapid 50 mile round hike to St Andrews to buy a Greek Testament with hard won savings, but made such an impression on a professor in the bookshop that he was given it free'.<sup>87</sup> MacKenzie, who has a longer version of this story, speculates that John's benefactor may have been Francis Pringle (1707-1782), the Professor of Greek.<sup>88</sup>

The people of Abernethy were unable to comprehend how a shepherd boy could read ancient languages and claimed John 'received a secret aid from the enemy of man, upon the pledge of his own soul'.<sup>89</sup> The charge that John had entered into a Faustian pact is not as surprising as it might seem. Perthshire had been one of the most assiduous Scottish counties in persecuting witches; in Dornoch an elderly women had been executed for witchcraft as recently as 1727; and Seceders had protested against the repeal of the statutes against witchcraft in 1736.<sup>90</sup> MacKenzie says some members of the Abernethy session, to which a complaint, known as a *fama*,<sup>91</sup> was brought, 'still lingered in the dark superstitions of the past'.<sup>92</sup>

What appears more surprising is that John failed to receive support from Alexander Moncrieff, despite writing a long and deferential letter of explanation.<sup>93</sup> Even when the elders eventually issued John with a clean

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<sup>86</sup> D. F. Wright, *Brown, John (1722–1787)*

<sup>87</sup> *ibid*

<sup>88</sup> R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington*, 31

<sup>89</sup> Unknown Author, *Life of the Reverend John Brown*, 3

<sup>90</sup> T. C. Smout, *A History of the Scottish People; 1560-1830*, (London, Collins, 1969), 207

<sup>91</sup> A *fama* is 'a scandalous report'.

J. L. Weatherhead, *The Constitutions and Laws of the Church of Scotland*, (Edinburgh, The Board of Practice and Procedure, 1997), 195

<sup>92</sup> R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington*, 32

<sup>93</sup> *ibid*, 34-44



membership certificate, Moncrieff refused to sign the document.<sup>94</sup> While MacKenzie is probably right to attribute Moncrieff's attitude, in part, to snobbery, the incident shows that he was out of sympathy with the Enlightenment and wanted to cling to the attitudes of the past.

Moncrieff's antipathy led John to leave Perthshire and became a pedlar.<sup>95</sup> From the age of twenty-one, he plied his trade in Fife and Kinross.<sup>96</sup> John appears to have been fastidious about the houses he was prepared to enter, and was rebuked by his supervisors for spending more time reading his customers' books than selling them his wares.<sup>97</sup> *The Life* says, 'his monitors at last gave up the case in despair, and wisely shaking their heads, pronounced him "good for nothing but to be a scholar."' <sup>98</sup>

After encountering Jacobite troops on a foraging mission in Fife during the '45 rebellion, John, who was a loyal subject of George II (1683-1760),<sup>99</sup> enlisted in the local militia and served in Blackness Castle, near Bo'ness, and Edinburgh Castle,<sup>100</sup> where it is possible he rubbed shoulders with William Robertson (1719-1793), the future leader of the Moderate Party in the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington*, 32

<sup>95</sup> Unknown Author, *Life of the Reverend John Brown*, 3

<sup>96</sup> *ibid*, 3

<sup>97</sup> *ibid*, 3

<sup>98</sup> *ibid*, 3

<sup>99</sup> J. Brown, *A Compendious History of the British Churches in England, Scotland, Ireland and America* by T Brown (ed.) (Edinburgh, Maclachlin and Stewart, 1823), x

<sup>100</sup> R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington*, 32

<sup>101</sup> J. R. Smitten, Robertson, William (1721–1793): *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford University Press, 2004; online edition, Jan 2008)

Available at <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/23817>



At this time Scottish education was becoming more diverse with bodies other than the established church providing schools<sup>102</sup> and, after returning to civilian life, in 1747, John ‘laid the foundation of a school’<sup>103</sup> at Gairney Bridge, near Kinross, where the Secession had been declared, before moving to another school ‘at Spittal, in the congregation of Linton’,<sup>104</sup> near Penicuik, where he taught for a further eighteen months.

While living in Kinross, John walked the ten miles to Dunfermline to attend worship in Ralph Erskine’s (1685-1752) church<sup>105</sup> and this may have influenced his decision to remain in the recently reconstituted Associate Synod following the ‘breach’ of 1747, when Seceders split into Burghers and Antiburghers over the propriety of taking the ‘burgher oath’, which required the holder of a public office to affirm ‘the true religion presently professed in this kingdom’.<sup>106</sup> *The Life* says John considered ‘a difference of opinion on this point was by no means of sufficient importance to break the sacred bond of Christian fellowship’<sup>107</sup> and MacKenzie adds that he ‘considered Moncrieff and his party as too strict in their interpretation of the oath’.<sup>108</sup> Given Moncrieff’s treatment of John, it is not surprising that he ended up in the opposite camp.

While teaching, John pursued his ambition of becoming a minister.<sup>109</sup> However, when he applied to the Associate Presbytery of Falkirk to be recognised as a candidate for the ministry, a member resurrected the

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<sup>102</sup> D. Withrington, *Schools and Schooling: 1694-1872: Oxford Companion to Scottish History*, 563

<sup>103</sup> Unknown Author, *Life of the Reverend John Brown*, 4

<sup>104</sup> *ibid*, 4

<sup>105</sup> *ibid*, 60

<sup>106</sup> *ibid*, 60-66

<sup>107</sup> Unknown Author, *Life of the Reverend John Brown*, 6

<sup>108</sup> R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington*, 66

<sup>109</sup> J. Brown, *A Compendious History of the British Churches in England, Scotland, Ireland and America* by T Brown (ed.) (Edinburgh, Maclachlin and Stewart, 1823), x



claims of satanic influence, and it took the intervention of Ralph Erskine to ensure his acceptance.<sup>110</sup> Recalling the affair, nearly forty years later, Brown wrote, ‘The members of the Praying Society, to which I belonged, continued my steadfast friends, and were more kind to me now than before.’<sup>111</sup> Once again, faced with adversity, John had received support that enabled him to surmount his difficulties.

Following the ‘breach’ of 1747 and the defection of Alexander Moncrieff, Ebenezer Erskine, now aged sixty-seven, was prevailed upon to take his place as the Professor of Divinity in the Associate Synod and a new ‘Divinity Hall’ was established in Stirling, where students spent two months during the summer of 1747.<sup>112</sup> Although John did not have the usual entry requirement of a university degree, the Associate Synod was eager to recruit ministers and his maturity and grasp of the classics were deemed sufficient to enable him to be accepted.<sup>113</sup>

MacKenzie says that, while ‘there was not much of the professional method’ in Erskine’s style of teaching, John benefitted from his ‘mature wisdom’ and ‘ripe experience’.<sup>114</sup> In 1749 Erskine got his wish and the role of Professor of Divinity passed to his son-in-law, James Fisher,<sup>115</sup> who was minister of Greyfriars Secession Church in Glasgow.<sup>116</sup> Fisher

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<sup>110</sup> R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington*, 68

<sup>111</sup> J. and E. Brown (eds.), *Select Remains of the Rev. John Brown*, 13

<sup>112</sup> R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington*, 67

<sup>113</sup> W. McKelvie, *Annals and Statistics of the United Presbyterian Church* (Edinburgh, 1873), 216-217

Available at <https://archive.org/details/annalsstatistics00mack>

<sup>114</sup> R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington*, 69

<sup>115</sup> While there is no record of the 1749 ‘session’, it is reason to assume that it was taken by Erskine as Fisher is listed from 1750 onwards.

W. McKelvie, *Annals and Statistics of the United Presbyterian Church*, 216-217

<sup>116</sup> R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington*, 293-294



seems to have been better suited to teaching students and MacKenzie says they ‘received a new and wholesome stimulus under him.’<sup>117</sup>

During the period when John was combining teaching with studying for the ministry, *The Life* says he ‘would commit to memory fifteen chapters of the Bible as an evening exercise after the labours of the day.’<sup>118</sup> As a result of these efforts, Brown acquired an extensive knowledge of the Bible, which he deployed throughout his career.

*The Life* says that after John had ‘approved himself on trial before the Associate Presbytery of Edinburgh, he was licensed by that reverend body, at Dalkeith, to preach the gospel in their society.’<sup>119</sup> John’s licensing, on 14 November, 1750, brought to an end a long, eventful and, at times, painful journey, during which John had shown remarkable persistence. The death of his parents, the hostility of the people of Abernethy, the antipathy of Moncrieff and the attitude of some Seceders, could easily have derailed his endeavours. However, he had received support from John Ogilvie, Ralph Erskine and his friends in the Praying Society and was set to become, not only a minister in the Associate Synod, but one of its leading lights.

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<sup>117</sup> R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington*, 70

<sup>118</sup> Unknown Author, *Life of the Reverend John Brown*, 4

<sup>119</sup> *ibid*, 4



## 2

**Pastor and Author**

‘I have essayed to preach scriptural truth in scriptural language.’<sup>120</sup>

In the years between 1751 and 1766 John Brown established himself as a pastor and presbyter, married and became a father, and published the first of his books and pamphlets. Although, during this phase of his life, Brown was hardly known outside the Associate Synod, he was laying the foundations upon which his reputation would be built.

By the spring of 1751, Brown had received calls from the First Secession Church in Haddington, 19 miles east of Edinburgh,<sup>121</sup> and the Secession Church in Stow,<sup>122</sup> 25 miles south of the city. As both were within the bounds of the Associate Presbytery of Edinburgh, it had ‘the right of deciding between their competing claims.’<sup>123</sup> However, it found it expedient to leave the choice to Brown.

Of the two congregations, Stow was the more straightforward option. It had been formed, in 1738, by members of the local Praying Society and, in 1740, had called William Hutton to be its first minister.<sup>124</sup> During his ministry the congregation had grown steadily and remained in the Associate (Burgher) Synod following the ‘breach’ of 1747. As Hutton had only recently been translated to Dalkeith,<sup>125</sup> the congregation had not yet experienced a long vacancy.

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<sup>120</sup> J. and E. Brown (eds.), *Select Remains of the Rev. John Brown*, 16

<sup>121</sup> W. McKelvie, *Annals and Statistics of the United Presbyterian Church*, 217

<sup>122</sup> *ibid*, 507

<sup>123</sup> Unknown Author, *Life of the Reverend John Brown*, 5

<sup>124</sup> W. McKelvie, *Annals and Statistics of the United Presbyterian Church*, 507

<sup>125</sup> *ibid*, 509



The history of the Secession in Haddington was more problematic. In 1737 a number of Praying Societies had united to form the ‘Correspondence of East Lothian’ and been recognised as a congregation in connection with the Associate Presbytery.<sup>126</sup> In 1741, a further three elders and forty members from the established church had joined the congregation and, the following year, it had erected a meeting house at the east end of Haddington.<sup>127</sup> Despite these efforts, the congregation had struggled to call a minister and it had taken until 1744 to secure the services of Robert Archibald (1705-1762).<sup>128</sup> Even then, its troubles were not over. Following the ‘breach’ of 1747, Archibald and a minority of his members had formed a new congregation and joined the General (Antiburgher) Associate Synod and, in 1752, had converted a barn at the west end of the town into a meeting house.<sup>129</sup> Meanwhile the ‘remaining members [had] petitioned for a fresh “supply”’.<sup>130</sup>

Despite the troubled history of the congregation and the presence of a rival Secession Church in the town, Brown chose Haddington. It is said that when an elderly lady was asked whom the congregation should call, she replied, ‘Oh, the lad wi’ the tattit head;<sup>131</sup> there’s a sweet savour of Christ about him.’<sup>132</sup> *The Life* says that Brown chose Haddington partly because he felt sympathy for the members of the congregation, who had been without a minister for four years, and partly because he considered himself

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<sup>126</sup> W. McKelvie, *Annals and Statistics of the United Presbyterian Church*, 216

<sup>127</sup> *ibid*, 216

<sup>128</sup> J. Miller, *The Lamp of Lothian: or The History of Haddington*, (Edinburgh, James Allen, 1844), 461

<sup>129</sup> *ibid*, 461

<sup>130</sup> R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington*, 75

<sup>131</sup> MacKenzie says that Brown had ‘matted hair, in dark ringlets’.

R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington*, 76

<sup>132</sup> *ibid*, 75



better qualified to serve ‘the smaller of the two charges’.<sup>133</sup> However, in gratitude for the faith which the Seceders in Stow had placed in him, Brown continued ‘to visit and examine the congregation ... until it was supplied with a regular minister.’<sup>134</sup> As Stow is more than 25 miles from Haddington, and the vacancy lasted until 1756,<sup>135</sup> this was a substantial commitment for a newly inducted minister.

As John prepared for his ordination, he wrote a memorandum to himself entitled, *Reflections of a Candidate for the Ministerial Office*.<sup>136</sup> In it he asks a series of searching questions designed to test whether he has a genuine call. Though the document is idealistic and at times rhetorical, it shows that John regarded the Christian ministry as the highest of callings.

Brown was inducted into the First Secession Church in Haddington on 4 July 1751,<sup>137</sup> where he remained until his death. Wright says he ‘disapproved of ministers flitting from charge to charge’.<sup>138</sup> Brown demonstrated his commitment to his charge by styling himself ‘Minister of the Gospel at Haddington’.<sup>139</sup>

While ministers in the established church enjoyed right of tenure<sup>140</sup> and were not at the beck and call of their sessions, as Secession congregations were financed by their members, mainly through the payment of pew

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<sup>133</sup> Unknown Author, *Life of the Reverend John Brown*, 5

<sup>134</sup> *ibid*, 5

<sup>135</sup> W McKelvie, *Annals and Statistics of the United Presbyterian Church*, 308

<sup>136</sup> J. Brown *Reflections of a Candidate for the Ministerial Office* reproduced in J and E Brown (eds.), *Select Remains of the Rev. John Brown*, 57-62

<sup>137</sup> D. F. Wright, *Brown, John (1722–1787)*

<sup>138</sup> *ibid*

<sup>139</sup> The term ‘Minister of the Gospel at Haddington’ appears on the title pages of Brown’s book, on the obelisk marking his grave and in the long title of *Select Remains of the Rev. John Brown* edited by John and Ebenezer Brown.

<sup>140</sup> Ministers were inducted *ad vitam aut culpam* and could only be deposed by the presbytery of the bounds after due process had been followed and fault found. J. L. Weatherhead, *The Constitutions and Laws of the Church of Scotland*, 194



rent,<sup>141</sup> there was often an element of ‘he who pays the piper calls the tune’ in the relationship of a congregation to their minister. Brown’s grandson, John Croumbie Brown, says that there was a memorandum in ‘the records of the Session from the date of his ordination’<sup>142</sup> setting out what the elders expected of their new minister. It included three main duties.

The first was to preach to the congregation. Brown was required to give a lecture, a sermon, and an evening exercise each Sunday during the four winter months and to preach a second sermon during the remaining eight months of the year.<sup>143</sup> While reformed ministers had always been expected to preach several times a week,<sup>144</sup> Brown had to rise early<sup>145</sup> to do the necessary preparation.

Brown’s youngest son, William, says ‘As a *preacher* Mr. Brown was distinguished by great plainness, faithfulness, seriousness and earnestness’<sup>146</sup> and that ‘He was much of the mind of Archbishop Ussher, as expressed in that golden saying – “It will take all our learning to make things plain”’.<sup>147</sup> However, William concedes that his father’s ‘delivery was strongly characterised by that *sing-song*<sup>148</sup> which prevailed much in the Secession’<sup>149</sup> and *The Life* is even more candid. It says ‘Except for his overawing seriousness, and occasionally a melting sweetness in his voice,

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<sup>141</sup> S. Bruce, *A House Divided: Protestant Schisms and the Rise of Religious Tolerance*, (*Sociological Analysis*, Spring, 1986), pp. 21-28

<sup>142</sup> J. Croumbie Brown (ed.), *A Centenary Memorial of Rev. John Brown, A Family Record*, (Edinburgh, Andrew Elliot, 1887.) 126

<sup>143</sup> J. Croumbie Brown, *A Centenary Memorial of Rev. John Brown*, 126

<sup>144</sup> O. Chadwick, *The Reformation*, (London, Penguin, 1964) 419

<sup>145</sup> R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington*, 103

<sup>146</sup> J. Croumbie Brown, *A Centenary Memorial of Rev. John Brown* 137

<sup>147</sup> *ibid*, 137

<sup>148</sup> In a footnote Croumbie Brown cites Mrs Stowe, the authoress of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, as comparing this form of delivery to the intoning used in services in cathedrals.

<sup>149</sup> J. Croumbie Brown, *A Centenary Memorial of Rev. John Brown*, 138



it does not appear that his delivery was by any means attractive'.<sup>150</sup> Nevertheless, *The Life* cites an English divine, Robert Simpson, as saying, 'Like his Lord and Master, [Brown] spoke with authority and hallowed pathos, having tasted the sweetness and felt the power of what he believed'.<sup>151</sup> It also records how, after hearing Brown preach at North Berwick, the philosopher and historian, David Hume (1711-1760), remarked that he spoke 'as if Christ were at his elbow'.<sup>152</sup>

The second of Brown's duties was, once a year, to visit members of the congregation, who were not only in Haddington but also in parishes scattered throughout East Lothian.<sup>153</sup> Having announced from the pulpit, the previous Sunday, which district he intended to visit that week, Brown, accompanied by an elder, went from house to house questioning each member of the family, and any servants present, 'on matters relating to the doctrines and duties of religion'.<sup>154</sup>

In addition to catechising members in their homes, twice a year, Brown 'examined' them publicly on their knowledge of the Westminster Assembly's *Shorter Catechism*. These examinations took place at gatherings held on Sunday evenings in suitable locations in different parts of the county.<sup>155</sup>

*The Life* says that Brown was also 'very assiduous in his visits to the sick and the afflicted, and that not merely to those of his own congregation, but to all, of every denomination, who desired his services.'<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Unknown Author, *Life of the Reverend John Brown*, 5

<sup>151</sup> *ibid*, 5

<sup>152</sup> *ibid*, 5

<sup>153</sup> J. Croumbie Brown, *A Centenary Memorial of Rev. John Brown*, 126

<sup>154</sup> *ibid*, 127

<sup>155</sup> *ibid*, 127

<sup>156</sup> Unknown Author, *Life of the Reverend John Brown*, 5



The third of Brown's duties was to moderate the session, which consisted of twelve elders and six deacons.<sup>157</sup> (The latter looked after the temporal affairs of the congregation.) The main business of these monthly meetings seems to have been prayer, the singing of psalms and what the memorandum calls 'spiritual conference with prayer',<sup>158</sup> through which elders were nurtured in their faith.

Despite the strict discipline, which was a hallmark of the Secession, Thomas Brown says his father 'met with few trials from the irregular behaviour from members of his congregation'.<sup>159</sup> In part this was because Brown did not go looking for trouble and, in part, because he preferred to deal with matters privately.<sup>160</sup>

Brown was also responsible, with the elders, for distributing the tokens, which entitled members to receive communion<sup>161</sup> and admitting 'young communicants' into the congregation.<sup>162</sup> Throughout his ministry, Brown was concerned to ensure that young people received the kind of Christian education he had received as a child and he published several works on the subject including *A Short Catechism for Children* (1764),<sup>163</sup> which remained in print into the twentieth century, *The Duty of Raising up*

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<sup>157</sup> R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington*, 85

<sup>158</sup> J. Croumbie Brown, *A Centenary Memorial of Rev. John Brown*, 126

<sup>159</sup> T. Brown *A Sketch of the Author* in J Brown *A Compendious History of the British Churches in England, Scotland, Ireland and America* (Edinburgh and London, Macauchlan and Stewart, 1823), xv  
Available at <https://books.google.co.uk>

<sup>160</sup> *ibid*, xv

<sup>161</sup> J. Croumbie Brown, *A Centenary Memorial of Rev. John Brown*, 126

<sup>162</sup> R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington*, 80

<sup>163</sup> J. Brown, *A Short Catechism for Children* (Toronto, James Campbell, 1865)



*Spiritual Children to Christ* (1780)<sup>164</sup> and *The Young Christian; or the Pleasantness of Early Piety* (1782).<sup>165</sup>

In September 1753, John married Janet Thomson (c. 1732-1771), the only daughter of John Thomson, a successful Musselburgh merchant.<sup>166</sup> Although only twenty-one, MacKenzie says Janet ‘brought to the home in Haddington the fidelity and the piety that had shone so brightly in [her father’s house]’.<sup>167</sup> In July 1754 the couple’s first child was born and named after his father and grandfathers. They went on to have another seven children, of whom, only Ebenezer, survived into adulthood.<sup>168</sup> In a letter to a parent whose offspring had died, Brown wrote, ‘Experience hath made me to know how hard it is to part with a pleasant child’.<sup>169</sup>

*The Life* says that Brown had an income of forty pounds a year on which to bring up his ‘numerous family’ and that he gave, at least, a tenth to charity.<sup>170</sup> (Even after Brown became Professor of Divinity, his finances did not improve as the post was non-stipendiary.) Although Brown’s income was only just over half the ‘modest’ stipend of £75 per annum, which William Robertson was receiving as the parish minister of nearby Gladsmuir,<sup>171</sup> he says that, throughout his ministry, his congregation provided him with ‘sufficient subsistence’.<sup>172</sup> While Brown’s writing earned him a measure of fame, he lost money on his *Self-Interpreting*

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<sup>164</sup> J. Brown, *The Duty of Raising up Spiritual Children to Christ* (Glasgow, John Bryce, 1780)

<sup>165</sup> J. Brown, *The Young Christian; or the Pleasantness of Early Piety* (Gale ECCO, Print Editions, 2010)

<sup>166</sup> T. Brown *A Sketch of the Author*, xvi

<sup>167</sup> R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington*, 83

<sup>168</sup> T. Brown *A Sketch of the Author*, xvi

<sup>169</sup> J. and E. Brown (eds.), *Select Remains of the Rev. John Brown*, 22

<sup>170</sup> Unknown Author, *Life of the Reverend John Brown*, 7

<sup>171</sup> J. R. Smitten, *Robertson, William (1721–1793)*

<sup>172</sup> J. and E. Brown (eds.), *Select Remains of the Rev. John Brown*, 17



*Bible*.<sup>173</sup> (Robertson was more fortunate. He received £600 for his *History of Scotland*.<sup>174</sup>)

In November 1753, Brown was elected Moderator of the Associate Synod,<sup>175</sup> which was a remarkable honour for someone who was still only thirty-one and who had only been in the ministry for two years. The Synod's main business in 1753 was a debate on 'the Rise, Progress and Grounds of the Secession',<sup>176</sup> which was marking its twentieth anniversary. The Synod also instructed Brown and James Fisher to reply to a letter from a group in North America asking it 'to have regard to "their deplorable circumstances for want of faithful ministers"'<sup>177</sup> and dealt with a matter of keen interest to Brown concerning a licentiate, called Forrest, who had refused to accept a call to Stow.<sup>178</sup>

During his moderatorial year, Brown crossed the border to visit Alnwick<sup>179</sup> and Newcastle-upon-Tyne, where the Church of Scotland congregation was in the process of joining the Associate Synod.<sup>180</sup> He was also given the further honour of being elected Moderator of the Associate Presbytery of Edinburgh: a post he held for three years.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington*, 183

<sup>174</sup> J. R. Smitten, *Robertson, William (1721–1793)*

<sup>175</sup> *ibid*, 88

<sup>176</sup> *Minutes of the Associate Synod*, cited by R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington*, 88

<sup>177</sup> *ibid*, 88

<sup>178</sup> *ibid*, 88

<sup>179</sup> In 1753 a group of Anglicans, who were dissatisfied with the Church of England, petitioned the Associate Presbytery of Edinburgh to 'be supplied with sermon'. Brown's visit appears to have been a response to this request.

W. McKelvie, *Annals and Statistics of the United Presbyterian Church*, 99

<sup>180</sup> *ibid*, 89

<sup>181</sup> *ibid*, 89



MacKenzie says, ‘In 1756, Brown introduced what was regarded as a daring innovation at that time’.<sup>182</sup> This involved doubling the number of celebrations of the Lord’s Supper from one to two a year. Until then Secession congregations had followed the general practice in Scotland of holding an annual communion season, during which there were several services, shared by visiting ministers, and attended by members from nearby congregations.<sup>183</sup> However, Brown did not accept the conventional wisdom that an annual celebration made the Sacrament more ‘solemn’. In a letter to the Reverend William McEwen of Dundee, he asks rhetorically, ‘Why not pray seldom, preach seldom, read God’s Word seldom, that they may become more solemn too?’<sup>184</sup> Brown’s wish for a more frequent administration of the Lord’s Supper was driven by his high doctrine of the Sacrament, in which he believed the Holy Spirit was at work.<sup>185</sup>

It is a measure of Brown’s maturity and the trust in which he was held by his congregation that he was able to achieve this change relatively early in his ministry. Although he wrote an *Apology for the more Frequent Administration of the Lord’s Supper* (1804),<sup>186</sup> he did not feel the need to publish it and it only appeared after his death.<sup>187</sup> However, it took Brown longer and required more patience to get the session to allow children to be present during communion.<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> *ibid*, 89

<sup>183</sup> John Croumbie Brown describes a communion season in James Fisher’s church in Glasgow very similar to those in the established church at that time.

J. Croumbie Brown, *A Centenary Memorial of Rev. John Brown*, 104

<sup>184</sup> Letter to Rev. William McEwen, Dundee cited by R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington*, 93

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid*, 93

<sup>186</sup> J. Brown, *Apology for the more frequent Administration of the Lord's Supper* (Edinburgh, J Ritchie, 1804)

<sup>187</sup> J. Croumbie Brown, *A Centenary Memorial of Rev. John Brown*, 126-127

<sup>188</sup> R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington*, 97



*The Memoir* says that Brown chose Haddington over Stow, in part, to ‘afford him leisure to pursue his studies.’<sup>189</sup> It was not unusual for an eighteenth century minister to pursue his own intellectual interests. While Brown was working on his first publication, *A Help for the Ignorant; or an easy, plain, practical, and extensive explication of the Assembly’s Shorter Catechism* (1758),<sup>190</sup> two other East Lothian ministers, were, in their different ways, contributing to the Scottish Enlightenment.

The first was John Home (1722-1808), minister at Athelstaneford, four miles north east of Haddington, whose blank verse tragedy, *Douglas*, became ‘a key text in the Scottish literature of sensibility’.<sup>191</sup> The second was William Robertson, who, while minister at Gladsmuir, four miles west of Haddington, wrote most of his first major work,<sup>192</sup> *The History of Scotland*.<sup>193</sup>

While Home and Robertson were out to make their reputations, Brown’s aim was more modest. He examined members of his congregation on their knowledge of the *Shorter Catechism*, which, as a boy, he had learnt off by heart, and wished to improve their understanding of it. However, in 1753, Ebenezer Erskine and James Fisher<sup>194</sup> had published *The Westminster*

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<sup>189</sup> Unknown Author, *A Memoir of the Rev. John Brown of Haddington*, 4

<sup>190</sup> J. Brown, *Help for the Ignorant; or an easy, plain, practical, and extensive Explication of the Assembly’s Shorter Catechism* Second Edition, (Edinburgh, John Gray and Gavin Alston, 1761)

Available at <https://books.google.co.uk>.

<sup>191</sup> K. Simpson, *Home, John (1722–1808): Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford University Press, 2004)

Available at [www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/13646](http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/13646).

<sup>192</sup> J. R. Smitten, ‘Robertson, William (1721–1793)’

<sup>193</sup> W. Robertson, *The History of Scotland during the Reigns of Queen Mary and James VI*. (New York, the Bradley Company).

Available at <https://archive.org/details/historyofscotland00robe>

<sup>194</sup> On the title page it is described as being by ‘Several Ministers’ and, in the preface, Ebenezer Erskine and James Fisher say that Ralph Erskine had contributed prior to his death.



*Assembly's shorter catechism explained: by question and answer*<sup>195</sup> and it is not clear why Brown felt the need to produce his own, longer explanation.

Brown not only covers the same ground as his former teachers, he uses the same format and augments each of the 103 answers in the *Shorter Catechism* with a long series of further questions and answers. For example, after reminding his readers that the *Catechism* answers the question '*What is God?*' with 'God is a spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth', Brown comes up with over two hundred questions and answers to elucidate these eighteen words. They include asking, '*What things teach us there is a God?*' to which he gives the answer, 'both scripture and reason'.<sup>196</sup> In most instances, Brown provides a scriptural reference to support his answer. However, they vary in their degree of relevance.

While *A Help for the Ignorant* was sufficiently popular to go into five editions,<sup>197</sup> Brown's treatment of the relationship between the righteousness of Christ and the righteousness of Christian believers attracted criticism from Antiburghers. In a pamphlet entitled *The Imputation of Christ's Righteousness*,<sup>198</sup> the Reverend John Dalziel of Earlston challenged Brown's claim that the believer only receives Christ's righteousness in proportion to their need, to which Brown replied with a pamphlet entitled, *A Brief Dissertation concerning the Righteousness of*

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<sup>195</sup> 'Several Ministers of the Gospel', *The Westminster Assembly's shorter catechism explained: by question and answer*, Third Edition (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publications, 1765).

Available at <https://archive.org/details/westminsterassem00fish>

<sup>196</sup> J. Brown, *Help for the Ignorant*, 18

<sup>197</sup> R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington* 347

<sup>198</sup> J. Dalziel, *The Doctrine of the Unity and Uniformity of Christ's Surety-righteousness, in the Imputation Thereof to Believers in Its Infinite Value* (Earlston, Thomas Familton and Thomas Wilson, 1760)



*Christ* (1759).<sup>199</sup> Although in the last decade of his life Brown wrote on controversial issues,<sup>200</sup> Wright says that during the remainder of his ministry he managed to avoid further theological controversy.<sup>201</sup>

In 1766 Brown published *An Historical Account of the Rise and Progress of the Secession*. As it will be examined in the next chapter, it is sufficient to note, at this point, that it seems to have confirmed his reputation within the Associate Synod.

By 1766 Brown had demonstrated that he was an effective pastor, who enjoyed the confidence of his congregation and was able to carry through significant reforms and maintain discipline without having recourse to formal censures; had earned the respect of his fellow presbyters in the Associate Synod and the Associate Presbytery of Edinburgh; had married and become a father and, like many of his contemporaries, had suffered the loss of several children; and was a published author, with four works to his name. Brown was now set to succeed the Reverend John Swanson of Kinross (1712-1767), as the Associate Synod's Professor of Divinity,<sup>202</sup> and see his reputation spread to England and Wales and across the Atlantic to North America.

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<sup>199</sup> J. Brown, *A Brief Dissertation concerning the Righteousness of Christ* (Edinburgh, E and J Robertson, 1759)

<sup>200</sup> In 1780 the issue of Catholic Emancipation prompted Brown to publish 'The Absurdity and Perfidy of all Authoritative Toleration of Gross Heresy, Blasphemy and Popery in Britain' and in 1785 concern over Sabbath Observance prompted him to publish a pamphlet entitled '*Thoughts on the Travelling on the Mail on the Lord's Day*'

<sup>201</sup> D. F. Wright, *Brown, John (1722–1787)*

<sup>202</sup> Unknown Author, *Life of the Reverend John Brown*, 9



## 3

**Historian of the Secession**

‘I thought Providence called me, to give you hints of the truth presently injured, and the support of which is the declared end of the Secession.’<sup>203</sup>

*An Historical Account of the Rise and Progress of the Secession* (1766) was the first of Brown’s three histories. Robert Mackenzie describes it as ‘a small work, as befitted a history that might be supposed to cover only twenty-six years’.<sup>204</sup> (It is only 76 pages.) However, he is over generous in claiming that Brown ‘proceeds in a fair and impartial spirit’.<sup>205</sup> One of the features of Brown’s *Account* is his tendency to launch into diatribes against individuals and institutions of whom he disapproves. While these tirades disrupt the flow of his narrative, they reveal many of the attitudes that prevailed in the Secession and the fervour with which they were expressed. Though it is clear that Brown had access to both the records of the Secession and the *Acts of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland*, he rarely acknowledges his sources.

Brown told his students, ‘I look upon the Secession as indeed the cause of God, but sorely mismanaged and dishonoured by myself and others.’<sup>206</sup> While Brown had less cause to reproach himself than those who had adopted an uncompromising approach to the denomination’s relationship to the state, he combines a staunch defence of the Secession with expressions of regret that it was often mired in controversy.

Brown opens his *Account* by declaring, ‘The connection of the *Secession* with former events, renders necessary a rehearsal of a variety of facts, prior

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<sup>203</sup> J. and E. Brown (eds.), *Select Remains of the Rev. John Brown*, 162

<sup>204</sup> R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington*, 116

<sup>205</sup> *ibid*, 116

<sup>206</sup> *ibid*, 136



to the date of it'.<sup>207</sup> The purpose of this review is to establish the Seceders' claim to be heirs to the Covenanters of the previous century. Brown pursues his aim by saying that James VI and I attempted to exchange 'the simple and scriptural form of worship, introduced by the reformers ... for the superstitious one of the English';<sup>208</sup> that Charles I 'bestirred himself, to render [the Kirk] altogether *English* or rather a little *more Romish*';<sup>209</sup> that Charles II 'fined, imprisoned, tortured, banished or murdered'<sup>210</sup> those who opposed his claim to be head of the church; and with a final flourish, Brown declares, 'In 1688, when James and his agents were just going to wreath the yoke of Popery and slavery about our necks, God ejected him from his throne, and crushed his designs.'<sup>211</sup>

Brown then devotes several pages to explaining and justifying the National Covenant of 1638, through which Presbyterians in Scotland registered their opposition to the ecclesiastical reforms of Charles I, and the Solemn League and Covenant of 1643, in which the Convention of Estates,<sup>212</sup> with the concurrence of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, formed a military alliance with the English Parliament<sup>213</sup> and pledged to work for a civil and religious union with England and Ireland.<sup>214</sup> Brown says that 'Nothing so much distinguished our ancestors, as their public

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<sup>207</sup> J. Brown, *An Historical Account of the Rise and Progress of the Secession*, 3

<sup>208</sup> *ibid*, 3

<sup>209</sup> *ibid*, 4

<sup>210</sup> *ibid*, 12

<sup>211</sup> *ibid*, 13

<sup>212</sup> The Convention was Scotland's Parliament and consisted of the nobility and burgesses; the clergy having been ejected in 1689.

<sup>213</sup> G. Donaldson, *Scotland: Church and Nation through Sixteen Centuries* (London, SCM, 1960) 84

<sup>214</sup> Jamie McDougall has shown that 'The most significant result of the widespread subscription to the Solemn League was the creation of an association between the two covenants in the popular consciousness.'

J. McDougall, *The Reception of the 1643 Solemn League and Covenant*, (Edinburgh, Records of the Scottish Church History Society, 2016), 59



covenanting with God'<sup>215</sup> and insists that both covenants are 'binding upon the whole church and nation, and their posterity after them'<sup>216</sup> He even accuses William III (1650-1702) and his managers of being 'far from hearty friends to a covenanted reformation'<sup>217</sup> because they were willing to tolerate Episcopalians.

Brown traces the origins of the Secession to the case of John Simson (1667-1740), Professor of Moral Philosophy at Glasgow University, whose views included 'an insistence on the likelihood of more souls being elect than reprobate ... and a belief that in hell sinning would cease.'<sup>218</sup> The 'Simson Case' became a *cause celebre* during the 1720s. However, his opponents were unable to persuade the General Assembly to depose him. Simson lectured in Latin and because 'his Latin was weak and that of his students was weaker'<sup>219</sup> it was difficult to establish precisely what he had taught. After a second enquiry into his views, the 1729 Assembly suspended Simson *sine die* while allowing him to retain his emoluments. Brown complains that 'Many were offended, that his blasphemy and error were so lightly censured.'<sup>220</sup>

Brown compares the treatment of Simson with the decision of the 1720 General Assembly to condemn *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* (1646),<sup>221</sup> as being 'contrary to The Holy Scriptures, our Confession of Faith, and Catechisms'.<sup>222</sup> *The Marrow* was the work of an English Puritan, Edward

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<sup>215</sup> J. Brown, *An Historical Account of the Rise and Progress of the Secession*, 4

<sup>216</sup> *ibid*, 11

<sup>217</sup> *ibid*, 14

<sup>218</sup> A. Skoczylas, 'Simson, John (1667–1740)': *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford University Press, 2004; online edition, Oct 2009)  
Available at <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/25586>

<sup>219</sup> A. L. Drummond and J. Bulloch, *The Scottish Church: 1688-1830*, 33

<sup>220</sup> J. Brown, *An Historical Account of the Rise and Progress of the Secession*, 21

<sup>221</sup> E. Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* (London, 1647)

<sup>222</sup> 'Acts: 1720', in *Acts of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland 1638-1842*, ed. Church Law Society (Edinburgh, 1843), 533-541.



Fisher (d. 1655),<sup>223</sup> and, after being reprinted in Scotland, in 1718, became popular with evangelicals.<sup>224</sup> Brown questions whether most commissioners had read the work and says, 'In this hasty attack, they too plainly condemned the offering of Christ as Saviour to *all men* and to men *as sinners*.'<sup>225</sup> Twelve ministers, including Ebenezer and Ralph Erskine, remonstrated against the condemnation and, after being rebuked by the 1722 General Assembly, were dubbed the 'Marrow Men'.<sup>226</sup>

During the 1720s those who controlled the General Assembly<sup>227</sup> came to see patronage, which it had opposed since its reintroduction in 1712,<sup>228</sup> as placing 'the choice of ministers in the hands of those most likely to select educated men of their own outlook'.<sup>229</sup> As a result, the Assembly routinely refused appeals from congregations against the intrusion of a patron's nominee.<sup>230</sup> In 1732 the Assembly used a dubious provision in an *Act and Overture anent the Method of Planting Vacant Churches*,<sup>231</sup> to approve the measure, even though a majority of presbyteries had not supported the

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Available at British History Online <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/church-scotland-records/acts/1638-1842/pp533-541>

<sup>223</sup> Edward Fisher used the pseudonym 'E F'

<sup>224</sup> J. Brown, *An Historical Account of the Rise and Progress of the Secession*, 19- 20

<sup>225</sup> *ibid*, 20

<sup>226</sup> A. Fawcett, *The Cambuslang Revival*, (London, Banner of Truth, 1971), 23

<sup>227</sup> It is a moot point whether, in the 1720s, the controlling group in the Assembly should be called Moderates. Drummond and Bulloch use the term but Colin Kidd says it was not used during the eighteenth century.

C Kidd *Moderatism: The Oxford Companion to Scottish History*, 514

<sup>228</sup> A. L. Drummond and J. Bulloch, *The Scottish Church: 1688-1830*, 39

<sup>229</sup> *ibid*, 19

<sup>230</sup> *ibid*, 59

<sup>231</sup> 'Acts: 1731', in *Acts of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland 1638-1842*, ed. Church Law Society (Edinburgh, 1843), pp. 613-616. *British History Online*. Available at <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/church-scotland-records/acts/1638-1842/pp613-616>



measure,<sup>232</sup> and a significant minority had opposed it.<sup>233</sup> The Assembly's managers achieved their desired result by counting the eighteen presbyteries, which had not sent in returns, as being in favour of the Overture<sup>234</sup>

The Act gave powers to elders and heritors in country parishes and elders and magistrates in burghs to nominate a minister in a vacancy should the patron fail to do so within six months.<sup>235</sup> Ebenezer Erskine was outraged that the Act placed the choice of a minister in the hands of local elites rather than to the people of the parish as laid down by the *First Book of Discipline* (1561).<sup>236</sup> However, as the 1730 Assembly had amended its standing orders to prevent those who opposed patronage having their dissent recorded,<sup>237</sup> Erskine was left angry and frustrated.

In one of his more vivid passages, Brown conveys the Seceders' abhorrence of patronage. He says a patron can be 'a notorious Infidel, a blasphemer, a profaner of the Sabbath, an athiestical neglecter of the worship of God in his closet and family, an unclean whoremonger, an habitual drunkard' and still, by virtue of owning property, possess the right to choose 'ambassadors for Christ, and pastors to the souls of his

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<sup>232</sup> The 1697 Barrier Act states that changes to the doctrine, worship, discipline or government of the Church of Scotland must be approved by a majority of Presbyteries.

J. L. Weatherhead, *The Constitutions and Laws of the Church of Scotland*, 153

<sup>233</sup> A. L. Drummond and J. Bulloch, *The Scottish Church: 1688-1830*, 40

<sup>234</sup> *ibid*, 40

<sup>235</sup> *ibid*, 40

<sup>236</sup> The Fourth Head of the *First Book of Discipline*, concerning Ministers and their Lawful Election, states, 'It appertains to the people, and to every several congregation, to elect their minister.'

<sup>237</sup> 'Acts: 1730', in *Acts of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland 1638-1842*, ed. Church Law Society (Edinburgh, 1843), pp. 610-613. *British History Online*. Available at <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/church-scotland-records/acts/1638-1842/pp610-613>



people’.<sup>238</sup> He also accuses some presentees of being willing to perjure themselves in order to obtain a living by taking ordination vows they have no intention of keeping.<sup>239</sup>

In October 1732, Erskine was elected moderator of the Synod of Perth and Stirling and used his moderatorial sermon, later published as *The Stone Rejected by the Builders, Exalted as the Head-Stone of the Corner* (1732),<sup>240</sup> to condemn patronage and the defects of the Church of Scotland in matters of doctrine, discipline and church government.<sup>241</sup> The sermon caused uproar and Brown says that after three days of ‘warm disputation’, the synod ordered Erskine to be rebuked for ‘the *matter* and *manner* of his sermon’.<sup>242</sup> He refused to accept the rebuke and appealed to the General Assembly, where he was supported by James Fisher, Alexander Moncrieff and William Wilson. However, when called to the bar, Erskine refused to keep silent<sup>243</sup> and the case was referred to the Commission of Assembly, which was surprisingly sympathetic to the four men: so much so that it took the casting vote of the moderator to carry out the instructions of the General Assembly and suspend them from exercising their ministerial duties.<sup>244</sup>

Having backed themselves into a corner, the suspended ministers met at Gairneybridge, outside Kinross on 5 December 1733 and declared a secession from the established church and formed the Associate

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<sup>238</sup> J. Brown, *An Historical Account of the Rise and Progress of the Secession* 35

<sup>239</sup> *ibid*, 35

<sup>240</sup> E. Erskine, *A sermon: The stone rejected by the builders, exalted as the head-stone of the corner: preached at the opening of the Synod of Perth and Sterling, at Perth, October 10, 1732* (Henry Hoskins, 1800)

<sup>241</sup> D. C. Lachman, ‘Erskine, Ebenezer (1680–1754)’: *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford University Press, 2004)

Available at <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/8853>,

<sup>242</sup> J. Brown, *An Historical Account of the Rise and Progress of the Secession*, 23

<sup>243</sup> A. L. Drummond and J. Bulloch, *The Scottish Church: 1688-1830*, 41

<sup>244</sup> *ibid*, 41



Presbytery, with Erskine as its moderator.<sup>245</sup> Brown stresses that the secession was not ‘from the constitution of the church of Scotland, but from the prevailing party in her judicatures’.<sup>246</sup> This distinction between the Church of Scotland, as a church and an establishment, and those who happen to be in control of its affairs, was central to Brown’s understanding of the Secession.<sup>247</sup>

Brown says that the 1734 General Assembly was ‘very different from some of the preceding’.<sup>248</sup> This was largely due to the exertions of John Willison (1680-1750), minister at Dundee, who had ‘preached a conciliatory sermon, published as *The Church's Danger* (1733),<sup>249</sup> in an effort to keep the church unified’.<sup>250</sup> Willison helped to persuade the Assembly to rescind ‘the acts which had given offence to the seceders’ and restore ‘them to their previous places in the Church of Scotland’.<sup>251</sup>

However, the Seceders rejected Willison’s attempts at reconciliation. Brown says that because the Assembly had not ‘condemned the preceding assembly or the conduct of the commission’, the Seceders regarded its decisions ‘as an act of favour, rather than of justice, and so deemed the truths, which suffered along with them, not duly vindicated’ and that, accordingly, they refused to return ‘to the established judicatures, upon such foundations.’<sup>252</sup> Despite rejecting the Assembly’s olive branch,

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<sup>245</sup> *ibid*, 42

<sup>246</sup> J. Brown, *An Historical Account of the Rise and Progress of the Secession*, 23

<sup>247</sup> Unknown Author, *Life of the Reverend John Brow*, 6

<sup>248</sup> J. Brown, *An Historical Account of the Rise and Progress of the Secession*, 23

<sup>249</sup> J. Willison, J, *The church's danger, and the minister's duty declared, in a sermon preached at the opening of the Synod of Angus and Mearns, at Montrose, the 16th day of October 1733*. (Edinburgh, T. Lumisden and J. Robertson, 1733)

<sup>250</sup> M. Jinkins, *Willison, John (1680–1750): Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford University Press, 2004; online edition, May 2011)  
Available at [www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/29592](http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/29592).

<sup>251</sup> M. Jinkins, *Willison, John (1680–1750)*

<sup>252</sup> J. Brown, *An Historical Account of the Rise and Progress of the Secession*, 25



Brown says the Seceders ‘kept their meetings of presbytery, for almost nothing but prayer and conference; waiting and wishing, for an opportunity for an untainted return.’<sup>253</sup>

However, in 1736, the General Assembly decided not to censure Archibald Campbell, Professor of Church History at St. Andrews, who had been accused of teaching that self-love is ‘the sole principle and motive of all virtuous and religious actions’.<sup>254</sup> For the Seceders this was the final straw and Brown says the Associate Presbytery began ‘to supply with sermon such oppressed Christians as petitioned it’.<sup>255</sup>

These petitions came mainly from members of Praying Societies, who were ‘discontented with their own ministers’ and ‘ready to form the nuclei of new [Secession] congregations’.<sup>256</sup> In 1714 Ebenezer Erskine had founded a society in Portmoak in Fife.<sup>257</sup> The main activities of these groups were Bible reading, prayer, discussion of doctrine and advice to members on their spiritual state.<sup>258</sup> The Associate Presbytery’s defiance forced the authority’s hand and Brown records that the 1740 General Assembly deposed eight ministers ‘without finding them erroneous in doctrine or scandalous in practice’.<sup>259</sup>

In 1734, the Seceders had published what became known as the *First Testimony*,<sup>260</sup> in which they set out their four reasons for leaving the

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<sup>253</sup> *ibid*, 25

<sup>254</sup> ‘Acts: 1736’, in *Acts of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland 1638-1842*, ed. Church Law Society (Edinburgh, 1843), 633-642.

Available at *British History Online* <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/church-scotland-records/acts/1638-1842/pp633-642>

<sup>255</sup> J. Brown, *An Historical Account of the Rise and Progress of the Secession*, p 25

<sup>256</sup> A. L. Drummond and J Bulloch, *The Scottish Church: 1688-1830*, p 50

<sup>257</sup> A. Fawcett, *The Cambuslang Revival*, 69

<sup>258</sup> *ibid*, 69-74

<sup>259</sup> J. Brown, *An Historical Account of the Rise and Progress of the Secession*, 45

<sup>260</sup> *ibid*, 23-25



established church. These were that the General Assembly, under ‘the prevailing party’, was abusing its power by ignoring the procedures of the church; that it had failed to deal properly with those who were preaching morality rather than the gospel; that it was forcing ministers to breach their ordination vows by preventing them opposing apostasy and that the ‘prevailing party’ was refusing to be reclaimed.

What is striking about the *First Testimony* is that it is essentially a protest. It says what the Seceders were against but not what they were for. While Drummond and Bullock are characteristically harsh in claiming that all that united those who joined the Secession was ‘hostility to the National Church and a determination to have their own way’,<sup>261</sup> the Seceders were far from united in their understanding of what it meant to adhere to the National Covenant.

In 1737 the Associate Presbytery issued a *Second Testimony*, drafted by William Wilson, setting out its doctrinal position.<sup>262</sup> It is a conservative document, which Brown says was intended to show the Seceders’ adherence to the confessional position ‘long acknowledged by the nation’.<sup>263</sup> The *Second Testimony* rehearses the main tenets of federal Calvinism, which emphasises the covenant between God and his people, and asserts that Presbyterianism is the only form of church government authorised by the New Testament. While Brown stresses that the *Second Testimony* was not intended to replace the *Westminster Confession* as the Associate Presbytery’s subordinate standard, he says that that those

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<sup>261</sup> A. L. Drummond and J. Bulloch, *The Scottish Church: 1688-1830*, 51

<sup>262</sup> J. Brown, *An Historical Account of the Rise and Progress of the Secession*, 26-30

<sup>263</sup> *ibid*, 29



joining the Secession ‘commonly professed their approbation thereof, *so far as they understood it*.’<sup>264</sup>

In 1741 the first of the controversies, which were to plague the Secession, arose. Two years earlier, at the start of the war with Spain<sup>265</sup> the established church had allowed the government to organise fasts and thanksgivings in Scotland. Brown says that Alexander Moncrieff and Thomas Mair saw this as the state intruding into the church’s domain and persuaded the Associate Presbytery to ban Seceders observing such occasions.<sup>266</sup> However, Brown claims that the ruling was opposed by a majority of ministers<sup>267</sup> and ‘excepting a few of the forward and less judicious, as little open offence was ever given to the government ... by the Seceders, as by those who professed to be the most zealous observers of the royal fasts.’<sup>268</sup> Nevertheless the controversy revealed a rift between those who demanded strict adherence to the National Covenant and those who took a pragmatic view of church/state relations.

Brown says that ‘From a number of favourable reports concerning the English Methodists, not a few of the Seceders had judged them laborious reformers, and prayed for their success’.<sup>269</sup> However, when Ralph Erskine corresponded with John Wesley (1703-1791),<sup>270</sup> he was unable to satisfy himself that his opinions were orthodox and was told by George Whitefield (1714-1770) that he and his brother, Charles, ‘blasphemed the doctrine of election’.<sup>271</sup> In a long tirade, Brown accuses Wesley of

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<sup>264</sup> *ibid*, 29

<sup>265</sup> Known as the War of Jenkins Ear.

<sup>266</sup> J. Brown, *An Historical Account of the Rise and Progress of the Secession*, 46-47

<sup>267</sup> The decision was of doubtful validity, as it had been taken at a poorly attended *pro re nata* meeting, which had not been authorised to discuss Moncrieff’s motion.

<sup>268</sup> J. Brown, *An Historical Account of the Rise and Progress of the Secession*, 47

<sup>269</sup> *ibid*, 47

<sup>270</sup> *ibid*, 47

<sup>271</sup> *ibid*, 47



teaching ‘that if God from eternity chose some for everlasting life, and proposed to leave others to perish in their sin, he is *an almighty tyrant, and more false, cruel and unjust than the DEVIL*’<sup>272</sup> and, with uncharacteristic understatement, he adds, ‘the Seceders have not a favourable opinion of Mr. Wesley, nor the preachers he superintends, as it is feared, they too much resemble their leader.’<sup>273</sup>

In 1741 Ralph Erskine commended the Secession to George Whitefield, who had a reputation as a powerful itinerate preacher, and encouraged him to come to Scotland.<sup>274</sup> However, although he was a Calvinist, from the start of the visit there was tension between Whitefield, who insisted that he had come as an ‘occasional preacher, to preach the simple gospel, to all who are willing to hear me, of whatever denomination’,<sup>275</sup> and members of the Associate Presbytery, who wanted him to have nothing to do with the established church, which they considered to be corrupt.<sup>276</sup>

Although Whitefield attracted large crowds, Mark Noll says his preaching ‘did not match the hurricane of grace that [he] had brought to New England or even the local tempests that attended his preaching in London, Bristol and other English cities.’<sup>277</sup> This is not surprising. Brown says Whitefield’s insistence on ‘joining Christians of all denominations ... without minding their differences; provoked the Seceders to turn their regard into dislike, and warm opposition.’<sup>278</sup>

Brown struggles to justify the way Seceders refused to have anything to do with what he calls ‘worthy ministers’, who remained in the established

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<sup>272</sup> *ibid*, 48

<sup>273</sup> *ibid*, 50

<sup>274</sup> A. L. Drummond and J. Bulloch, *The Scottish Church: 1688-1830*, 51-52

<sup>275</sup> M. A. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism*, (London, Inter-Varsity Press, 2004), 103

<sup>276</sup> A. L. Drummond and J. Bulloch, *The Scottish Church: 1688-1830*, 51-52

<sup>277</sup> M. A. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism*, 101

<sup>278</sup> J. Brown, *An Historical Account of the Rise and Progress of the Secession*, 51



church. After conceding that the Seceders were sometimes too hasty in breaking fellowship with these men, he adds, 'It cannot, however, be denied, that some of these worthy ministers, by connecting themselves at sacramental, or other occasions, with intruders, or their abettors, gave too much provocation.'<sup>279</sup>

In 1743 the Associate Presbytery made a further attempt to define its position by reviving the practice of public covenanting. However, Brown, who at the beginning of his *Account* praises the public covenanting of earlier generations, is sceptical about the enterprise. He says that the bond, to which ministers and members were required to subscribe, contained 'a long confession of sins, of which, it is probable, few of the people could *fully* know the import'<sup>280</sup> and he questions whether even 'the most zealous for covenanting'<sup>281</sup> always insisted on people signing the bond before being admitted to communion. Even so, the controversy demonstrated that the rift between hardliners and pragmatists was widening.

Resentment at the imposition of ministers on congregations assisted the Associate Presbytery to grow to forty-five congregations and, in 1745, it was reconstituted as the Associate Synod, with three local presbyteries.<sup>282</sup> However, Brown says, 'To punish the Seceders' pride of their success; ... the Lord gave them up to a most unchristian contention and breach among themselves.'<sup>283</sup> The cause of this 'breach' was the decision of burghs, such as Edinburgh, to exclude Jacobite sympathisers from civic life by requiring the holder of a public office to affirm 'the true religion presently professed in this kingdom'.<sup>284</sup> As Seceders were loyal subjects of George

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<sup>279</sup> *ibid*, 45

<sup>280</sup> *ibid*, 52

<sup>281</sup> *ibid*, 53

<sup>282</sup> A. L. Drummond and J. Bulloch, *The Scottish Church: 1688-1830*, 51

<sup>283</sup> J. Brown, *An Historical Account of the Rise and Progress of the Secession*, 53

<sup>284</sup> *ibid*, 55



II, (1683-1760)<sup>285</sup> the problem did not lie with excluding Jacobites from civil life but with what was deemed to be implied by the term ‘true religion’ and the fact that the oath was being administered by magistrates, who belonged to the established church. Two years earlier, the Associate Presbytery had expelled Thomas Nairn (1680-1764),<sup>286</sup> for asserting ‘that none but a covenanted Presbyterian could be the lawful sovereign of this realm’<sup>287</sup>

The Erskines and James Fisher argued that as the Seceders ‘had never pretended to set up a new religion’,<sup>288</sup> there was no reason why adherents should not sign the oath. However Alexander Moncrieff, Thomas Mair and Adam Gib persuaded the Synod that signing the oath was ‘inconsistent with its testimony and covenant bond’.<sup>289</sup> But this was not the end of the matter. In April 1747, Burghers, as those who did not oppose the signing of the oath were now being called, were able to reopen the question, and persuaded a majority in the Associate Synod that no action should be taken ‘*until the issue had been maturely considered in presbyteries and sessions ... and further means of unanimity, by prayer and conference essayed*’.<sup>290</sup> Brown says this prompted Thomas Mair to claim ‘the Burghers had forfeited all their synodical powers and authority, and the whole power of the synod devolved upon himself and his party.’<sup>291</sup> The following day Mair and twenty-two Antiburghers met in Adam Gib’s

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<sup>285</sup> Ebenezer Erskine raised a troop of Seceder volunteers in Stirling  
A. Muirhead, *A Secession Congregation in its community; The Stirling congregation of the Re. Ebenezer Erskine 1731-1754* (Records of the Church History Society, 1986) 228

<sup>286</sup> Nairn had joined the Secession in 1737 or 1738 and was one of the eight ministers deposed in 1740.

<sup>287</sup> J. Brown, *An Historical Account of the Rise and Progress of the Secession*, p 52

<sup>288</sup> *ibid*, 54

<sup>289</sup> *ibid*, 55

<sup>290</sup> *ibid*, 56

<sup>291</sup> *ibid*, 56



house and formed the General (Antiburgher) Associate Synod. Although thirty-two members of the Associate (Burgher) Synod remained, including the moderator and clerk,<sup>292</sup> the ‘breach’ had split the Secession in two.

Brown accuses the Antiburghers of fermenting schism by excluding ‘from the sacrament, such of their people, as opposed the division, and were determined to hear both sides’;<sup>293</sup> of not responding to the Associate Synod’s attempt at a reconciliation; and of ‘persecuting their Burgher brethren with deposition and excommunication’.<sup>294</sup> While his criticisms may be justified, Brown is a mite defensive in asserting that ‘the Messrs. Erskines, and others, lived as holy, preached as edifyingly and died as comfortably as their excommunicators’.<sup>295</sup>

Nevertheless, Brown ends his *Account* by saying ‘the congregations belonging to both [branches], are about two hundred, or more: in some of these are thousands of member; but the greater number fall much below that account’<sup>296</sup> and by insisting that the two branches have a great deal in common doctrinally, in their form of worship and in their strict discipline. The only significant difference Brown identifies concerns public covenanting. He says the Antiburghers consider it ‘a very distinguishing point of religion, and with great zeal instigate their people thereto, and represent the Burghers as very wicked for not doing the same.’<sup>297</sup>

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<sup>292</sup> *ibid*, 56

<sup>293</sup> *ibid*, 58

<sup>294</sup> *ibid*, 58

<sup>295</sup> *ibid*, 59

<sup>296</sup> *ibid*, 59

<sup>297</sup> *ibid*, 62



However, it seems that not everyone was staying the course. Brown says, ‘sundry of the less conscientious Seceders, falling into scandal, return to the established church, that they may altogether avoid, or only receive a very slight censure’.<sup>298</sup>

In writing his *Historical Account of the Rise and Progress of the Secession*, Brown was following in the footsteps of John Knox (c.1513-1572),<sup>299</sup> who wrote his monumental *History of the Reformation in Scotland* (1566) in order to justify the decision of Protestants in Scotland to leave the Church of Rome. Brown seems to have recognised that, if the Secession was to be taken seriously, there needed to be a coherent account of its origins and that he was better qualified than most to write its history. However, his task was complicated by the controversies that had plagued the early years of the Secession and especially by the ‘breach’ of 1747. Although in one of his more reflective passage, Brown pleads with both branches of the Secession to ‘lay aside their pride and prejudice ... [and] join together, in the fear and service of God,’<sup>300</sup> he had been obliged to record that, almost from the beginning, Seceders had engaged in petty disputes over matters that had very little to do with doctrine or discipline and a great deal to do with the hubris of individuals.

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<sup>298</sup> *ibid*, 60

<sup>299</sup> Knox had been born in Giffordgate, which was less than a mile from Brown’s manse.

<sup>300</sup> J. Brown, *An Historical Account of the Rise and Progress of the Secession*, 61



## 4

**Professor of Divinity**

‘I commit all my students unto thee, that thou, O Lord, may train them up for the ministry.’<sup>301</sup>

In the last two decades of his life John Brown fulfilled the potential he had shown as a boy growing up in rural Perthshire and at the start of his ministry in Haddington. He achieved prominence within the Associate Synod as its Clerk and Professor of Divinity; published his three most important works; corresponded with Selina, Countess of Huntingdon (1707-1791), one of the leaders of the Evangelical Revival in England and Wales, and was invited to teach in the newly established Dutch Reformed Church college in New York.

In May 1767 John Swanson, minister of the First Secession Church in Kinross,<sup>302</sup> who had succeeded James Fisher as the Associate Synod’s Professor of Divinity in 1764, died suddenly<sup>303</sup> and, as there was insufficient time to name a successor before the next teaching ‘session’ in August, Brown was asked to stand in. Although other names were canvassed, when the Synod met, in October 1767, Brown was unanimously elected to the post.<sup>304</sup>

The following May, the clerk of the Synod, Andrew Cock, ‘asked to be relieved of his duties’,<sup>305</sup> as it was to hear a case to which he was a party, and Brown was chosen to replace him.<sup>306</sup> As a result, in the course of a

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<sup>301</sup> J. and E. Brown (eds.), *Select Remains of the Rev. John Brown*, 19

<sup>302</sup> In 1748 John Brown went as a commissioner to the Associate Synod to support a call from Kinross Secession Church to John Swanson.

<sup>303</sup> R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington*, 128

<sup>304</sup> *ibid*, 131

<sup>305</sup> *ibid*, 130

<sup>306</sup> *ibid*, p 131



few months, Brown came to occupy two of the key posts in the Associate Synod. However, as both posts were non-stipendiary, Brown's income did not increase.

*The Life* says Brown 'made a point of regularly attending and acting in the church courts, though he avoided taking any leading part in the management of ecclesiastical business.'<sup>307</sup> (This may be an allusion to William Robertson who, in the 1760s, began to manage the business of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.<sup>308</sup>) In the twenty years in which he was clerk, Brown missed only two meetings of the Synod: one held in Glasgow, in May 1786, to accommodate 'the growing section of the Church located in Ireland'<sup>309</sup> and the one a month before he died.

*The Life* says that Brown had two aims on becoming Professor of Divinity: 'instructing his pupils in the science of Christianity, and ... impressing their hearts with its power.'<sup>310</sup> It would be wrong to read too much into the use of the term 'the science of Christianity'. Brown's *Systematic Theology*, later published as *A Compendious View of Natural and Revealed Religion* (1782),<sup>311</sup> is traditional both in its format and its contents. However, it shows that, while Brown was hostile to some of the ideas emerging from the Enlightenment, he was not averse to using its terminology.

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<sup>307</sup> Unknown Author, *Life of the Reverend John Brown*, 9

<sup>308</sup> J. R. McIntosh, *Principal William Robertson, the Popular Part and the General Assembly*, (Edinburgh, Records of the Scottish Church History Society, 2014) 49

<sup>309</sup> R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington*, 250

<sup>310</sup> Unknown Author, *Life of the Reverend John Brown*, 9

<sup>311</sup> J. Brown, *A Compendious View of Natural and Revealed Religion* (Glasgow, John Bryce, 1782)



To mark his appointment, Brown preached a sermon, later published as *Religious Steadfastness recommended* (1769),<sup>312</sup> in which ‘he dwells at considerable length on the religious state of the nation, and expresses violent apprehensions at the visible diffusion and advance of what he called latitudinarianism’.<sup>313</sup> Latitudinarianism had been a feature of the Church of England since the seventeenth century<sup>314</sup> and was characterised by a lack of emphasis on ‘dogmatic truth, ecclesiastical organisation, and liturgical practice’.<sup>315</sup> Brown borrows the term to attack those who, in his view, were preaching morality rather than the Gospel, and thereby weakening the Calvinist orthodoxy of the Church of Scotland.<sup>316</sup>

Like his predecessors, Brown established what was rather grandly called a ‘Divinity Hall’ in Haddington and each August and September around thirty students came to the town, where they lodged with members of Brown’s congregation.<sup>317</sup> Candidates for the ministry were required to attend four of these ‘sessions’<sup>318</sup> and were supervised during the remaining ten months by their local presbytery.<sup>319</sup> As student numbers were relatively small, Brown was able to get to know each of his charges personally and follow their development over four or five years. He was in the habit of visiting them in their lodgings early in the morning to see

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<sup>312</sup> J Brown, *Religious Steadfastness recommended* (Edinburgh, John Gray and Gavin Alston, 1769)

<sup>313</sup> Unknown Author, *Life of the Reverend John Brown*, 10

<sup>314</sup> J. Spurr, ‘Latitudinarianism’ and the Restoration Church, (*The Historical Journal*, March, 1988) 61-82

<sup>315</sup> F L Cross (editor) *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1959), 789

<sup>316</sup> William Robertson, told his congregation in Edinburgh, ‘that if Virtue in all its beauty were seen on the earth all men would fall down and worship it.’

J R McIntosh, *Principal William Robertson, the Popular Part and the General Assembly*, 31

<sup>317</sup> R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington*, 139

<sup>318</sup> Later increased to five.

<sup>319</sup> R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington*, 127



if they were at their studies.<sup>320</sup> Brown's concern for his students was not confined to their academic progress. He also took an interest in their financial welfare and provided funds from his own limited resources to enable poor students to continue their studies.<sup>321</sup>

In all Brown taught around 180 students<sup>322</sup> and at the close of each 'session' gave a valedictory address to final year students, who were about to go to their first charge.<sup>323</sup> Most went on to minister in Scotland but some went as missionaries to North America.<sup>324</sup> MacKenzie quotes a Dr MacFarlane as saying, 'The piety, learning and soundness in the faith, for which the Haddington students were justly esteemed, greatly contributed to the influence and usefulness of the young Secession.'<sup>325</sup>

While Ebenezer Erskine, James Fisher and John Swanston had based their lectures on Francis Turretin's *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (1679-1665),<sup>326</sup> Brown based his on his extensive knowledge of the Bible.<sup>327</sup> As his output shows, he was always more of a biblical scholar than a theologian. Though Brown always began his lectures promptly at ten o'clock, they could last for up to three hours.<sup>328</sup> Sermon classes, which were an important part of the curriculum, were held on four afternoons. Though 'students were at liberty to criticise each other's production',<sup>329</sup>

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<sup>320</sup> *ibid* 139

<sup>321</sup> R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington*, 138

<sup>322</sup> W. McKelvie, *Annals and Statistics of the United Presbyterian Church*, 666-668

<sup>323</sup> R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington*, 134

<sup>324</sup> *ibid*, 142

<sup>325</sup> *ibid*, 142

<sup>326</sup> F. Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, (Geneva, 1679-1685)

<sup>327</sup> A. L. Drummond and J. Bulloch, *The Scottish Church: 1688-1830*, 111

<sup>328</sup> R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington*, 133

<sup>329</sup> *ibid*, 133



Brown maintained order and always had the last word. The teaching week ended with a lecture on Church History on Saturday evening.<sup>330</sup>

While collecting material for his *Dictionary of the Bible* (1769), Brown published a short work entitled *Sacred Typology; or, a Brief View of the Figures and Explications of the Metaphors contained in Scripture* (1768).<sup>331</sup> The use of typology had a long history in the Church going back to Saint Paul, who describes Adam as ‘a type of the one who was to come’ (Rom. 5.14). However, there was a variety of opinion as to which ‘salvation events’ in the Old Testament had anticipated ‘salvation events’ in the New Testament<sup>332</sup> and MacKenzie says that many of Brown’s judgements are ‘arbitrary’.<sup>333</sup> Brown used typology to demonstrate how the Scriptures predict future events, both in biblical times and beyond, and later published *The Harmony of Scriptural Prophecies, and History of their Fulfilment* (1784).<sup>334</sup>

In the 1760s there were only two Dictionaries of the Bible available in English: Thomas Wilson’s (1562–1622) *Christian Dictionarie* (1612)<sup>335</sup> and Augustin Calmet’s (1672–1757) *An historical, critical, geographical, chronological and etymological dictionary of the Holy Bible* (1732).<sup>336</sup> In contrast to these works, which were intended to be used by scholars, Brown set out to produce a dictionary that could be used by lay people as well as ministers. Alongside entries on the people, history and geography

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<sup>330</sup> *ibid*, 133

<sup>331</sup> J Brown, *Sacred Tropology; or, A Brief View of the Figures and Explication of the Metaphors contained in Scripture* (Berwick, W Phorson, 1791)

<sup>332</sup> Unknown Author, *types/typology: Oxford Biblical Studies on Line*. Available at <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/article/opr/t94/e1969>

<sup>333</sup> R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington*, 118

<sup>334</sup> J Brown, *The Harmony of Scriptural Prophecies, and History of their Fulfilment* (Glasgow, John Bryce, 1784)

<sup>335</sup> T Wilson and J Bagwell, *A Complete Christian Dictionary*, Sixth Edition, (London, E Cotes, 1661)

<sup>336</sup> It had been translated into English by Samuel D’Oyly and John Colson.



of the Bible, there are homely touches. For example, Brown says a frog, has ‘four legs for leaping with’ and is ‘much given to croaking’.<sup>337</sup> Sadly, such eccentricities were expunged from the 1866 edition edited by Brown’s son, William.<sup>338</sup>

William Brown says that his father’s work was ‘too much of a Dictionary’,<sup>339</sup> by which he means there are a large number of entries defining everyday English words. However, as Samuel Johnston (1709–1784) had only recently published his *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755),<sup>340</sup> few of Brown’s readers would have had access to an English dictionary. He was also writing for readers whose ‘first language’ was one of the many dialects of Scots in everyday use<sup>341</sup> and who would not have been as familiar with English idioms as later generations.

The *Dictionary* was the first of Brown’s works to appeal to readers outside his own denomination. There were eight further editions, the last, in 1868, edited by one of Brown’s successors, John Eadie (1813–1876).<sup>342</sup> In 1869 James Rhys Jones (1813–1889) translated the *Dictionary* into Welsh as *Geiriadur beiblaidd*.<sup>343</sup>

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<sup>337</sup> D. F. Wright, *Brown, John (1722–1787)*

<sup>338</sup> J Brown, *A Dictionary of the Bible*, edited by W Brown (Edinburgh. Oliphant, 1866).

Available at <https://archive.org/details/ahistoricaldict00browgoog>

<sup>339</sup> J Brown, *A Dictionary of the Bible*, edited by W Brown, v.

<sup>340</sup> S Johnston, *Dictionary of the English Language*, (London, W Strahan, 1755)

<sup>341</sup> M Robertson, *Scots language: Oxford Companion to Scottish History*, 574

<sup>342</sup> J. Hawke, ‘Eadie, John (1813/14–1876)’: *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford University Press, 2004)

Available at <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/8382>

<sup>343</sup> D. L. Thomas, ‘Jones, James Rhys Kilsby (1813–1889)’, rev. Robert V. Smith: *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford University Press, 2004).

Available at <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/15019>.



On 10 May 1771 Janet Brown died, at the age of thirty-eight.<sup>344</sup> We do not know the cause of her death but it is possible that, after bearing eight children and being responsible for running a busy household, she was simply worn out.<sup>345</sup> The previous February, Janet had displayed a mixture of maternal concern and piety in a letter written to her son, John, who was at Edinburgh University. After chiding him for not writing every week, she says ‘youth is a precious time, let it not slip without being concerned that Christ be yours and you be His.’<sup>346</sup> After Janet’s death, Brown wrote, ‘I confidently trust she went to her first and best husband!’<sup>347</sup>

In July 1771 Brown began to correspond with Selina, Countess of Huntingdon (1707-1791), one of the leaders of the Evangelical Revival in England and Wales, who had asked for his views on justification prior to a ‘conference ... with Mr Wesley and his preachers.’<sup>348</sup> Selina’s forceful character and strong opinions had led to a breach with John Wesley<sup>349</sup> and she wanted the opinion of someone who shared her Calvinist theology. Later Selina requested a copy of Brown’s *Systematic Theology*, for use in her theological college in Trefecca in mid-Wales,<sup>350</sup> where she trained

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<sup>344</sup> R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington*, 152

<sup>345</sup> In a letter to her son, John, written in February in February 1771, Janet refers to the death of a Janey Hunter from smallpox; so it may have been prevalent in Haddington at the time.

R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington*, 152

<sup>346</sup> *ibid*, 152

<sup>347</sup> *Ibid*, 152

<sup>348</sup> Unknown Author, *Life of the Reverend John Brown*, 10

<sup>349</sup> B. S. Schlenther, ‘Hastings, Selina, countess of Huntingdon (1707–1791)’: *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford University Press, 2004; online edition, Jan 2008)

Available at <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/12582>

<sup>350</sup> Unknown Author, *Life of the Reverend John Brown*, 8



‘chaplains’ to work in ‘major watering places of the nobility and wealthy’<sup>351</sup> such as Bath and Tunbridge Wells.

*The Life* says ‘in consequence of our author’s modesty, [the correspondence] remained a secret till after his death.’<sup>352</sup> However, Brown was probably reluctant to reveal his dealings with an Anglican. While he could tell Selina that there are few differences ‘between a professedly staunch Presbyterian and a truly conscientious Episcopalian if they both cordially believe the doctrine of God’s free reigning to men’s eternal life, through the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ our Lord’,<sup>353</sup> most Seceders, like most Presbyterians in Scotland, equated Episcopalianism with Jacobitism.<sup>354</sup>

In an address to his students, which prefaces his *Systematic Theology*, Brown writes, ‘While I have been occupied in instructing you ... my principal concern was to impress your minds with the great things of God.’<sup>355</sup> In other words, Brown not only deals with the technical aspects of theology, he attempts to show their relevance to his students’ spirituality. While the influence of John Calvin (1509-1564) and Francis Turretin (1623-1687) can be seen in Brown’s insistence that the Scriptures reveal that some are predestined to salvation and others to damnation,<sup>356</sup> he has much more to say about the ‘covenant of works’ in the Old Testament and the ‘covenant of grace’ in the New Testament. Brown uses

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<sup>351</sup> B. S. Schlenther, ‘*Hastings, Selina, countess of Huntingdon (1707–1791)*’: *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford University Press, 2004; online edition, Jan 2008) Available at <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/12582>

<sup>352</sup> Unknown Author, *Life of the Reverend John Brown*, p 10

<sup>353</sup> *Ibid*, 6

<sup>354</sup> G Donaldson, *Scotland: Church and Nation through Sixteen Centuries*, 104

<sup>355</sup> J Brown, *The Systematic Theology of John Brown*, 3

Available at <http://reformedaudio.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/The-Systematic-Theology-of-John-Brown-of-Haddington.pdf>

<sup>356</sup> *ibid*, 96



covenant or federal theology to explain how God offers a ‘full and free salvation through Christ to sinful men’.<sup>357</sup> Brown’s *Systematic Theology* can be seen as an exposition of the *Second Testimony* (1737), which had been drafted by one of his predecessors, William Wilson, and which had become the main statement of the Secession’s theological position.

One of the features of Brown’s *Systematic Theology* is the vast number of biblical references, which leads Drummond and Bullock to speak of his ‘incessant searching of the text of Scripture’.<sup>358</sup> Although there was a second edition of *A Compendious View of Natural and Revealed Religion* in 1796, it is not one of the works on which Brown’s reputation was built.

In 1771 Brown published the second of his histories, *A General History of the Christian Church, from the Birth of our Saviour to the Present Time*. *The Life* dismissed it as ‘little more than an abridgment of Mosheim’.<sup>359</sup> As Archibald Maclaine (1722–1804)<sup>360</sup> had published an English translation of Mosheim’s *Institutes of Ecclesiastical History, Ancient and Modern*,<sup>361</sup> in 1764, it is not clear why Brown felt the need to replicate it. However, *The Life* says the work was written in a ‘fervid spirit’;<sup>362</sup> so it is possible that he felt he could bring a measure of enthusiasm to the subject.

On 19 January 1773 John married Violet Croumbie, the daughter of William Croumbie, a merchant in the village of Stenton, eight miles east of Haddington.<sup>363</sup> MacKenzie describes the Croumbies as ‘a noteworthy

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<sup>357</sup> *ibid*, 296

<sup>358</sup> A. L. Drummond and J. Bulloch, *The Scottish Church: 1688-1830*, 111

<sup>359</sup> Unknown Author, *Life of the Reverend John Brown*, 11

<sup>360</sup> J. K. Cameron, ‘Maclaine, Archibald (1722–1804)’: *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford University Press, 2004)

Available at <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/17636>

<sup>361</sup> J. L. von Mosheim, *Institutes of Ecclesiastical History, Ancient and Modern*, translated by A. Maclaine (London, Longman and others, 1863)

<sup>362</sup> Unknown Author, *Life of the Reverend John Brown*, 11

<sup>363</sup> R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington*, 163



family' who 'had for generations supplied the travelling dealers of the district with their miscellaneous wares'.<sup>364</sup> It is indicative of Violet's social position that her grandson called himself John Croumbie Brown. The couple had nine children,<sup>365</sup> of whom five, four boys and a girl, survived childhood. Thomas (1776-1828) became a minister in Dalkeith.<sup>366</sup> Janet (1779-1843) became the second wife of Robert Paterson of Alnwick.<sup>367</sup> Samuel (1779-1839) became a pioneer of itinerating libraries.<sup>368</sup> David became a bookseller in Edinburgh<sup>369</sup> and William (1783-1863) became secretary of the Scottish Missionary Society.<sup>370</sup> Violet survived John by more than thirty years.<sup>371</sup>

Brown's great-grandson, one of many namesakes, said of him, 'He was our King, the founder of our dynasty'.<sup>372</sup> The 'dynasty', which included 'numerous ministers, eminent scientists, literary figures, and activists in public life',<sup>373</sup> ensured his memory was kept alive.

In 1778 John Brown published the work for which he is best known, *The Self-Interpreting Bible*. Despite his extensive knowledge of ancient languages, it is not an original translation but uses the text of the *King James Bible* (1611), which led the King's printer, who held the copyright and was unhappy about Brown's use of marginal notes, to delay its publication for eighteen months.<sup>374</sup>

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<sup>364</sup> *ibid*, 163

<sup>365</sup> D. F. Wright, *Brown, John (1722-1787)*

<sup>366</sup> R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington*, p 315

<sup>367</sup> *ibid*, 315

<sup>368</sup> *ibid*, 316

<sup>369</sup> *ibid*, 321

<sup>370</sup> *Ibid*, 321

<sup>371</sup> Unknown Author, *Life of the Reverend John Brown*, 8

<sup>372</sup> D. F. Wright, *Brown, John (1722-1787)*

<sup>373</sup> *ibid*,

<sup>374</sup> Unknown Author, *Life of the Reverend John Brown*, xi



Brown's title reflects two ideas that were close to his heart. He believed that by furnishing his readers with cross-references, marginal notes, chapter headings, footnotes, and 'reflections' on each chapter, he was enabling them to interpret the Bible for themselves.<sup>375</sup> The notion that the Scriptures should be accessible had been central to the Scottish Reformation. English and Scottish exiles,<sup>376</sup> working in Geneva, under Knox's friend and colleague, William Whittingham (1524-1579),<sup>377</sup> had produced *The Geneva Bible* (1560) whose 'revolutionary format created the first English study Bible with all the necessary apparatus and commentary lodged within one set of covers'.<sup>378</sup> (It was the translation of choice for English Puritans.<sup>379</sup>)

Brown also believed that, by providing this apparatus, he was allowing the Bible to interpret itself. In the Introduction, Brown says 'every Protestant must allow the Scripture itself to be its own best interpreter'<sup>380</sup> and he goes on to refer to the *analogy of faith*,<sup>381</sup> which stated that because the Bible is the Word of God it has an innate unity, which enables one passage of scripture to be used to interpret another.<sup>382</sup> Brown was justified in appealing to a Reformed understanding of how to interpret the Scriptures. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* says, 'the infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when

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<sup>375</sup> D. F. Wright, *Brown, John (1722–1787)*

<sup>376</sup> Most had fled persecution under Mary Tudor

<sup>377</sup> J Dawson *John Knox*, (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2015) 91

<sup>378</sup> *ibid*, 153

<sup>379</sup> A Nicholson, *Power and Glory*, (London, Harper Collins, 2003) 58

<sup>380</sup> J Brown *Self-Interpreting Bible* (William MacKenzie Glasgow [no date given])  
Available at <http://www.electricscotland.com/bible/brown/bible%20002.jpg>

<sup>381</sup> J Brown *Self-Interpreting Bible* 21

<sup>382</sup> H Wayne Johnston, *The "Analogy of Faith" and Exegetical Methodology* (Journal of the Evangelical Theology Society, March 1988), 61- 80.

Available at [http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/31/31-1/31-1-pp069-080\\_JETS.pdf](http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/31/31-1/31-1-pp069-080_JETS.pdf)



there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture ... it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly'.<sup>383</sup> However, Brown, with his extensive knowledge of the Bible, is unable to resist providing parallels to almost every verse in the Old and New Testaments, even when it is not obvious that they 'speak more clearly' than the one being read.

In his lengthy Introduction, Brown 'deals with the Bible's authority and inspiration, its interpretation, and biblical history from creation.'<sup>384</sup> He argues that human reason is incapable of directing us to 'true holiness, or lasting happiness'<sup>385</sup> and that real understanding can only come from diligently studying the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Because Brown sees the historicity of the Bible as given, he has no difficulty in drawing up a precise chronology of biblical events, using, as his timeline, the work of Archbishop James Ussher (1581-1656), who had calculated the date of Creation as 24 October 4004 B.C.<sup>386</sup> In the same way, because Brown sees prophecy as both the declaring of God's judgement on the present state of the world and the foretelling of what is to come, he is able to extract precise predictions from the pages of the Bible.<sup>387</sup> One of the more interesting is Brown's claim that in 1866 or about 150 years later (i.e. c.2016) God 'will by terrible wars, or some other means, continuing perhaps for thirty years, pull down the Antichristian

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<sup>383</sup> *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 1, paragraph IX.

Available at

[http://www.reformed.org/documents/index.html?mainframe=http://www.reformed.org/documents/westminster\\_conf\\_of\\_faith.html](http://www.reformed.org/documents/index.html?mainframe=http://www.reformed.org/documents/westminster_conf_of_faith.html)

<sup>384</sup> D. F. Wright, *Brown, John (1722–1787)*

<sup>385</sup> J. Brown *Self-Interpreting Bible* (Edinburgh, Tomas Ireland, 1831), 17

Available at <https://books.google.co.uk>

<sup>386</sup> R. Buick Knox, *James Ussher – Bishop of Armagh* (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 1967), 206

<sup>387</sup> J. Brown *Self-Interpreting Bible*, 61-76



and Mahometan powers and introduce the glorious THOUSAND YEAR REIGN of the saints.’<sup>388</sup>

However, changes were afoot and, two years after the publication of the *Self-interpreting Bible*, the German protestant theologian, Johann Eichhorn (1752-1827), published the first volume of his *Historical and Critical Introduction to the Old Testament (1780-83)*,<sup>389</sup> which challenged many of the traditional assumptions about the nature of the Old Testament.<sup>390</sup> Although Brown read German, he was untouched by the advent of what came to be known as ‘higher criticism’.

MacKenzie says the *Self-interpreting Bible* was ‘planned to be available for devotional use’<sup>391</sup> and at the foot of each chapter Brown provides a ‘reflection’ on its meaning.<sup>392</sup> However, rather than being expositions of the text, they are homilies on the Christian life. For example, reflecting on the first chapter of the *Book of Ruth*, which describes how Naomi was forced to return to Bethlehem after the death, in Moab, of her husband, Elimelech and her two sons Mahlon and Chilion, Brown says, ‘marriages and deaths are near neighbours; one death in a family is but the forerunner and warning of another.’<sup>393</sup> Brown’s tangential approach to the texts on which he reflects, may explain why later editors of the *Self-Interpreting Bible* introduced verse by verse commentaries.<sup>394</sup>

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<sup>388</sup> R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington*, 79

<sup>389</sup> J. Eichhorn, *Historical and Critical Introduction to the Old Testament*, (London, Spottiswood and Co. 1888)

<sup>390</sup> D. R. Lee, *The Historical-Critical Method: A Guide for the Perplexed*. (London and New York, T & T Clark International, 2012)  
Available at <https://books.google.co.uk/>

<sup>391</sup> R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington*, 177

<sup>392</sup> They are the equivalent of the ‘arguments’ in the *Geneva Bible*.

<sup>393</sup> J. Brown *Self-Interpreting Bible*, 286

<sup>394</sup> There are verse by verse commentaries in the 1897 version edited by J Lee.



Despite being sold for the considerable sum of £1 2s,<sup>395</sup> the first edition of the *Self-Interpreting Bible* sold rapidly.<sup>396</sup> Its success was made possible by changes in Scottish society during the middle decades of the eighteenth century. By 1778 there was a significant ‘middle class’ in the Lowlands, comprising merchants, tenant farmers and craftsman and it was from this group that the Secession drew most of its members.<sup>397</sup> As prosperity increased during the nineteenth century, the cost of printing came down and the number of evangelicals in the Church of Scotland increased, more and more Scottish families were able to purchase a copy of *Brown’s Bible*.<sup>398</sup> However, as Brown’s publisher, Gavin Alston, had gone bankrupt, he lost the money he had put into the venture.<sup>399</sup> Undeterred, Brown set to work on a second edition.<sup>400</sup> However, he died before it was published in 1791.

One of Brown’s admirers was Charles Simeon (1739-1836), who, in 1782, had begun his long ministry as vicar of Holy Trinity in Cambridge. Despite early opposition, he established Holy Trinity as the leading evangelical church in the city.<sup>401</sup> Simeon was part of an influential group

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J Brown *The Self-Interpreting Bible: With Commentaries, References, Harmony of the Gospels and Many Other Helps Needed to Understand and Teach the Text* (1914) edited by J Lee

Available at <http://www.puritandownloads.com>

<sup>395</sup> £1 2s was the equivalent of £170 in 2017

<sup>396</sup> R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington* p 183

<sup>397</sup> Drummond and Bulloch observe that the Seceders did not need to ‘appeal to the landed and titled’ as they were able ‘to draw their support from a class that was growing in number and wealth, the small tradesmen, the farmers, and the craftsman.’

A. L. Drummond and J. Bulloch, *The Scottish Church: 1688-1830*, 43

<sup>398</sup> R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington* 190

<sup>399</sup> *ibid*, 183

<sup>400</sup> *ibid*, 183

<sup>401</sup> L. W. Cowie, ‘Simeon, Charles (1759–1836)’: Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, (Oxford University Press, 2004; online edition, Oct 2005). Available at <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/25559>.



of evangelicals in and around Cambridge, who, at a time when evangelicals were in the minority in the Church of England, offered mutual support to one another.<sup>402</sup>

In a letter to Brown, written in January 1787, Simeon says,

‘Your *Self-interpreting Bible* seems to stand in lieu of all other comments; and I am daily receiving so much edification and instruction from it, that I would wish it in the hands of all serious ministers.’<sup>403</sup>

Simeon was well enough off to request forty copies of *The Self-Interpreting Bible*.<sup>404</sup> However, Brown was by then suffering his final illness, and it was left to his son, Ebenezer, to reply after his death. Ebenezer told Simeon that there were no copies available in Scotland and asked him to wait for the second edition, which he expected to be published in London.<sup>405</sup>

It is a measure of the growing popularity of the *Self-Interpreting Bible* that a London printer was willing to take on its publication after Gavin Alston had gone bankrupt. By then it had become widely known in the United States, and, in 1792, a third edition was published in instalments in New York, with the President, George Washington, heading the list of subscribers.<sup>406</sup> Its sales were probably helped by the fact that the publisher gave it an American gloss. ‘The frontispiece ... shows America (with

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<sup>402</sup> *ibid*

<sup>403</sup> R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington*, 188

<sup>404</sup> The £44, which 40 copies would have cost, was more than Brown’s annual income.

<sup>405</sup> R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington*, 189

<sup>406</sup> Houston Baptist University, *John Brown Self Interpreting Bible*.

Available at <https://www.hbu.edu/museums/dunham-bible-museum/tour-of-the-museum/bible-in-america/bibles-for-a-young-republic/browns-self-interpreting-bible/>



Indian style headdress of feathers) sitting holding the Constitution'<sup>407</sup> receiving a copy of the Bible from a kneeling figure, probably representing 'peace'.

*Brown's Bible*, as it came to known, went into twenty-six editions, the last of which was published in the United States in 1909. MacKenzie says that it 'is undoubtedly the best'.<sup>408</sup> It is certainly the most altered. First published in 1897, it was edited by James W Lee, a Methodist minister in St. Louis, and contained a number of photographs of Palestine. Illustrations were not new. The 1870 edition was 'magnificently illustrated throughout with numerous full-page engravings depicting Bible scenes, views, maps and plans (including 24 stunning chromolithographic plates)'.<sup>409</sup>

Wright refers to Robert Burns' (1759-1795) poem *An Epistle to James Tennant of Glenconner*,<sup>410</sup> in which the poet writes, 'My shins, my lane, I there sit roastin'/Perusing Bunyan, Brown an' Boston.' Although this may not be as a great an accolade as Wright implies,<sup>411</sup> it does show that by 1786, *Brown's Bible* was sufficiently well known for Burns to be able to refer to its author without any further explanation.

In 1784 Brown published the third of his histories, *A Compendious History of the British Churches in England, Scotland, Ireland and*

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<sup>407</sup> Houston Baptist University, *John Brown Self Interpreting Bible*.

<sup>408</sup> R. MacKenzie, *John Brown of Haddington*, 184

<sup>409</sup> E C Kline, *The Self-Interpreting Bible*,  
Available at <https://www.klinebooks.com/>.

<sup>410</sup> D. F. Wright, *Brown, John (1722–1787)*

<sup>411</sup> Burns was a critic of what he saw as the hypocrisy of many in the Kirk and, in 1788, was rebuked by Mauchline Session for his irregular marriage to Jean Armour. A. L. Drummond and J. Bulloch, *The Scottish Church: 1688-1830*, 109



*America*,<sup>412</sup> which Wright describes as ‘perhaps Brown’s ablest work’<sup>413</sup> and *The Life* says was ‘a work of original research ... much superior to the more general compilation.’<sup>414</sup> However, it is not as compendious as Brown intended. After writing *An Introductory Sketch of the History of the Waldenses*,<sup>415</sup> he abandoned the idea of writing histories of the other European reformed churches and confined his treatment of the Church of Ireland<sup>416</sup> and the protestant church in America<sup>417</sup> to brief sketches.

In the preface, Brown says, ‘I have aimed at impartiality in my narrative, but dare not pretend that I have attained this rare historical excellency.’<sup>418</sup> While he had come a long way from his *Account of the Rise and Progress of the Secession* (1766), with its diatribes against individuals and institutions, and while his histories of the Church of England and the Church of Scotland are detailed and comprehensive, Brown’s concept of impartiality does not prevent him denouncing Roman Catholicism, criticising Anglicanism and lamenting the state of the Church in Scotland.

*The Life* describes how, probably around 1772, Brown met the poet, Robert Fergusson (1750-1775), while walking in the grave-yard of St. Mary’s Collegiate Church in Haddington and says, ‘being struck with [Fergusson’s] pensive appearance, he modestly addressed him, and offered him certain serious advices, which deeply affected him at the time.’<sup>419</sup> This was one of two encounters Brown had with leading figures

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<sup>412</sup> J Brown, J, *A Compendious History of the British Churches in England, Scotland, Ireland and America* (Glasgow, John Bryce, 1784)

<sup>413</sup> D. F. Wright, *Brown, John (1722–1787)*

<sup>414</sup> Unknown Author, *Life of the Reverend John Brown*, p xi

<sup>415</sup> J Brown, *A Compendious History of the British Churches in England, Scotland, Ireland and America* vol. 1, 1-26

<sup>416</sup> *ibid*, 358-392

<sup>417</sup> *ibid*, 396-417

<sup>418</sup> *Ibid*, iii-iv

<sup>419</sup> Unknown Author, *Life of the Reverend John Brown*, 7



in the Scottish Enlightenment. *The Life* records that David Hume heard him preach in North Berwick and remarked, ‘That old man preaches as if Christ were at his elbow.’<sup>420</sup>

In 1779 Brown entered the controversy surrounding Catholic Emancipation by publishing a pamphlet entitled *The Oracles of Christ and the Abomination of the Antichrist compared; or a Brief View of the Errors, Impieties, and Inhumanities of Popery* (1779)<sup>421</sup> which he followed up with *The Absurdity and Perfidy of All Authoritative Toleration of Gross Heresy, Blasphemy and Popery in Britain* (1780).<sup>422</sup> *The Life* says, ‘These publications originated in the universal sentiment of alarm entertained by the evangelical Presbyterians of Scotland ... in consequence of the proposed abolition of the penal code against the Roman Catholics.’<sup>423</sup> In 1785, Brown entered the controversy surrounding Sabbath Observance by publishing a pamphlet entitled, *Thoughts on the Travelling of the Mail on the Lord’s Day* (1785).<sup>424</sup> While these works deal with matters of profound concern to Seceders, their publication suggests that in his later years Brown felt comfortable in commenting on matters of national interest.

In 1784 Brown was offered a chair in the Dutch Reformed church's new college in New York.<sup>425</sup> As he had always had a deep interest in the churches of North America, earlier in life he may have responded to the

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<sup>420</sup> Unknown Author, *Life of the Reverend John Brown*, 5

<sup>421</sup> Brown, J, *The Oracles of Christ and the Abominations of Antichrist Compared; or, A Brief View of the Errors, Impieties and Inhumanities of Popery* (Glasgow, John Bryce, 1779)

<sup>422</sup> J Brown, *The absurdity and perfidy of all authoritative toleration of gross heresy, blasphemy, idolatry, popery, in Britain. In two letters to a friend* (Glasgow, John Bryce, 1780)

<sup>423</sup> Unknown Author, *Life of the Reverend John Brown*, 11

<sup>424</sup> Brown, J, *Thoughts on the Travelling of the Mail on the Lord's Day* (Edinburgh, D Paterson, 1787)

<sup>425</sup> Unknown Author, *Life of the Reverend John Brown*, 11



challenge of crossing the Atlantic, but at sixty-two and with his health beginning to fail he declined the invitation.

After suffering for some years from ‘a weakness in his stomach,’<sup>426</sup> on 25 February 1787 John Brown preached, what he knew would be his final sermon, on the text, ‘It had been revealed unto him by the Holy Ghost that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ’ (Luke 2.26).<sup>427</sup> During the following months his sons, John and Ebenezer, recorded his observations on a variety of topics and reproduced them in the *Select Remains of the Rev. John Brown* (1789). Even allowing for filial editing, Brown’s words reveal a man of considerable faith, who was not afraid to die. Just before his death on 19 June 1787, he is recorded as saying, ‘the Lord has his own way of carrying on his own work!’<sup>428</sup> On 24 June, Brown’s ‘remains were followed to their place of repose in Haddington church-yard, by nearly the whole inhabitants of the town, and a large concourse of his friends and brethren’.<sup>429</sup>

John Brown’s contemporaries included David Hume (1711-1760), William Robertson (1719-1793) and Adam Smith (1723-1790), and, although he cannot be compared to these giants of the Scottish Enlightenment, he shared with them a quest for knowledge. However, while Hume, Robertson and Smith wrote for an educated elite, Brown wrote for the ordinary man and woman (and children) in the pew. In so far as he had a mission, it was to improve his readers understanding of the Christian faith in general, and of the Bible in particular. His *Dictionary*

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<sup>426</sup> J and E Brown (eds.), *Select Remains of the Rev. John Brown*, 120

<sup>427</sup> *ibid*, 120

<sup>428</sup> *ibid*, 161

<sup>429</sup> Unknown Author, *Life of the Reverend John Brown*, 12



*of the Bible* and *Self-Interpreting Bible* were, if not ground breaking, important contributions to the study of the Scriptures by lay people.

As Brown's tenure as Professor of Divinity last twenty years, he was able to influence a generation of Burgher ministers. The fact that many Seceders were well enough off to send their sons to university, meant that he was training young men who already had a grounding in the classics. Some of Brown's protégés turned out to be men of considerable intellectual ability. The most important was probably George Lawson (1749–1820), whom, because of his 'love of wisdom' Thomas Carlyle (1795–1181) dubbed him 'the Scottish Socrates'.<sup>430</sup> Lawson wrote a number of commentaries on the Bible which 'were widely read and appreciated in nineteenth-century Britain and America.'<sup>431</sup> In 1887 he succeeded Brown as Professor of Divinity and, in 1806, was given the degree of Doctor of Divinity by the University of Aberdeen.<sup>432</sup>

Although Brown's title was honorific, he was a gifted teacher, who was able to bring the best out of his students. A minute of the Associate Synod speaks of Brown's 'eminent piety, fervent zeal, extensive charity, and unwearied diligence in promoting the interests of religion' and adds that he 'will be long remembered by this court, especially by those members of it who had the happiness of studying divinity under his inspection.'<sup>433</sup>

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<sup>430</sup> H. Paton revised by N. R. Needham, *Lawson George (1749–1820)* (Oxford Dictionary of the Bible, 2004)

Available at <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/16197>

<sup>431</sup> *ibid*

<sup>432</sup> Lawson was the first Seceder to be given this accolade.

<sup>433</sup> *ibid*, 12



## Conclusion

‘From low circumstances, God hath, by his mere grace, exalted the orphan to the highest station in the church.’<sup>434</sup>

This dissertation has aimed to demonstrate that, a hundred year after the publication of MacKenzie’s biography, John Brown is worthy of reconsideration, not only as the author of *The Self-Interpreting Bible*, but as an individual, churchman, teacher, and religious writer.

Brown possessed certain characteristics that enabled him to overcome his early setbacks and become a significant figure within the Associate Synod. Above all he had a very strong sense of call and attributed his achievements to the providence of God, and his failures, which he was inclined to exaggerate, to his own weakness.<sup>435</sup> Brown also had, what *The Life* calls, ‘an intense solemnity and earnestness’,<sup>436</sup> which meant that his words were always treated with respect, and a capacity for hard work, which enabled him to produce a steady stream of publications,<sup>437</sup> without neglecting his pastoral and teaching duties.

Brown was one of the first generation of ministers to be ordained after the ‘breach’ of 1747. His gifts were recognised early in his ministry, when, in 1753, he was elected Moderator of the Associate Synod.<sup>438</sup> As ‘a staunch Presbyterian and Seceder’,<sup>439</sup> Brown helped re-form the denomination, by writing his *Account* of the origins and development of the Secession, and by providing his fellow Seceders with a corpus of

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<sup>434</sup> J. and E. Brown (eds.), *Select Remains of the Rev. John Brown*, xvi

<sup>435</sup> *Ibid*, xvi

<sup>436</sup> Unknown Author, *Life of the Reverend John Brown*, 5

<sup>437</sup> Between 1767 and his death, in 1787, Brown published 50 works.

<sup>438</sup> R. Mackenzie, *John Brown of Haddington*, 88

<sup>439</sup> Unknown Author, *Life of the Reverend John Brown*, 6



works, which expressed their beliefs and values. At a time, when the imposition of ministers on Church of Scotland congregations created a steady flow of new members into the Associated Synod, it was important that these newcomers understood the particular ethos of the Secession. So, alongside his academic treatises, Brown wrote several pastoral works, including *Practical Piety exemplified in the Lives of Thirteen Eminent Christians, and illustrated in Cases of Conscience* (1783),<sup>440</sup> designed to encourage the seriousness he valued in a Christian.

Brown could not have expected John Swanston, who was only fifty-five, to die suddenly,<sup>441</sup> and he certainly could not have expected to be elected as Professor of Divinity in his place. However, almost immediately he demonstrated that he well suited to the role, not only academically, but as a pastor who believed in the divine nature of the ministry. Mackenzie says, 'He entertained a high ideal of the work to which [his] students were called, and was fired with a glowing passion to inspire them to attain it.'<sup>442</sup> Towards the end of his life, Brown published *Six Letters on Gospel Preaching* (1785), which incorporated material he had presented as lectures to his students.<sup>443</sup> Mackenzie describes them as 'direct, concise and vigorous, pressing home the individual aspect of salvation'.<sup>444</sup>

David Wright says, 'In Scotland [John Brown] was the most voluminous religious writer of his day, and almost a household name.'<sup>445</sup> Although

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<sup>440</sup> J. Brown, *Practical Piety exemplified in the Lives of Thirteen Eminent Christians, and illustrated in Cases of Conscience* (Glasgow, John Bryce, 1783).

<sup>441</sup> R Mackenzie, *John Brown of Haddington*, 128

<sup>442</sup> *ibid*, 132

<sup>443</sup> *ibid*, 148

<sup>444</sup> *ibid*

<sup>445</sup> D. F. Wright, *Brown, John (1722–1787)*



Brown was required to be something of a polymath,<sup>446</sup> and, although he aspired to be a church historian,<sup>447</sup> he is remembered primarily as a biblical scholar. Between 1768 and 1784, he published six books on the Bible, including *A Dictionary of the Bible* (1769) and *The Self-Interpreting Bible* (1778) and, throughout his career, he displayed his extensive knowledge of the Scriptures by annotating works, such as *A Help for the Ignorant* (1759) and *A Compendious View of Natural and Revealed Religion* (1782), with copious biblical references.

Although Brown lived at a time of intense intellectual activity in Scotland, he did not use his knowledge of the Bible to acquire an academic reputation but rather to assist ordinary members of the church to understand the Scriptures. As a result, Brown's biblical writings were as much pastoral as they were hermeneutical. The sales of Brown's *Dictionary of the Bible*, and especially his *Self-Interpreting Bible*, show that there was a market for literature that explained the Bible and offered a pious interpretation of the Christian life and, as that market grew through the nineteenth century, Brown's reputation spread.

However, as the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth century there was no longer a demand for *Brown's Bible*, and the 1909 edition proved to be the last. Nevertheless, after the Second World War there were echoes of Brown's success in the even greater success of William Barclay (1907-1978), Professor of Divinity and Biblical Criticism at the University of Glasgow, whose '1959 edition of the *Daily Study Bible*

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<sup>446</sup> Although in the eighteenth century the tradition of a regent teaching every subject was phased out in Scottish Universities, David Wright says 'Brown [taught] all the subjects of the curriculum.'

D. F. Wright, *Brown, John (1722–1787)*

<sup>447</sup> Wright says 'Perhaps Brown's ablest work was the 1784 *History of the British Churches*'

D. F. Wright, *Brown, John (1722–1787)*



(*New Testament*) sold more than 5 million copies'.<sup>448</sup> So it can be said that John Brown laid the foundations of a tradition of writing biblical commentaries for the lay reader that lasted almost two hundred years and helped to fulfil the Reformers' vision of a biblically literate nation.

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<sup>448</sup> J. D. Douglas, *Barclay, William (1907-1978)*, (Oxford Dictionary of National Biography 2004).

Available at <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/48827>



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