TOM TORRANCE

Thomas Forsyth Torrance
1913–2007

T. F. TORRANCE was one of the most capable and widely influential Scottish divines of the second half of the twentieth century. Possessed of seemingly limitless drive and industry, he deployed his energies over a long and remarkably full career in a number of spheres. He was an authoritative exponent of Christian doctrine, a pioneer in the conversation between theology and the natural sciences, a senior figure in the Church of Scotland and in the international ecumenical movement, and the *animateur* of all manner of scholarly and collaborative projects. To all his activities he brought the same qualities which characterise his prodigious literary output: concentration, seriousness of purpose, acute intelligence, decisiveness and vivid Christian conviction.

I

Torrance was born in China on 30 August 1913 to missionary parents working for the American Bible Society in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan province. His father, Thomas senior (1871–1959), a Scottish Presbyterian from Lanark, went to China in 1896 under the auspices of the China Inland Mission, moving to Bible Society work after the 1910 Edinburgh Missionary Conference. In 1911 he married Annie Sharpe, an Anglican mission worker who had been in China since 1907. T. F. Torrance was their second child and first son; two more boys and two more girls were to follow, all the boys taking Presbyterian orders and all the girls marrying ministers.

Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy, XIII, 417–436.

During the period of Thomas senior's service in China, foreign missionaries faced considerable hostility from the conservative element of the imperial regime and from other nationalists, and they and their converts were routinely subject to violence, of which the massacres by Boxer militants at the turn of the century were only the most extreme instance. Nevertheless, in later life Torrance looked back with gratitude to his early formation in a missionary household, with its warm biblical piety, the closeness of those who were foreigners in an exotic culture, the proximity of danger and the lived sense of the operations of providence, as well as the adventurousness and freedom from narrow suburban routine. More than anything, it made belief in God entirely natural, not something acquired by laborious dealing with doubt, and it bequeathed to Torrance a permanently missionary attitude and vocation.

Torrance received his early education at a Canadian Missionary School in Chengdu, but in 1927 the family returned to Scotland to improve the children's educational prospects. Torrance senior went back to China shortly afterwards for a last spell of missionary work, returning finally in 1934 just before the Maoist revolution swept away most of the work of Western missionaries (not all, however: when Torrance returned to China in old age, he found remnants of his father's activities). The family in Scotland was left in the hands of Torrance's mother, a purposeful and intelligent woman for whose virtues he had the highest esteem. At first they settled in Bellshill, a grim area in the depth of recession; Torrance attended Bellshill Academy, working hard to catch up on Latin and Greek. Then in 1931 they all moved to Edinburgh when Torrance began his studies at the University in classical languages and philosophy, registering for the ordinary degree to shorten his course and ease the family's financial burdens.

Torrance's intention was a first degree in Arts before proceeding to New College for Divinity studies in preparation for missionary work. He was a zealous undergraduate. Finding it hard to compete in Latin, Greek and Ancient History, he opted for courses in classical and modern philosophy under A. E. Taylor and Kemp Smith, began study of early church history and theology, and delved into the philosophy of science; a course in geography was later regretted. In an unpublished autobiographical account from his retirement years, Torrance presented his undergraduate self already assembling a set of philosophical and theological judgements and attitudes which would stay with him for the rest of his career: he never seriously qualified his early antipathy to Augustine and Schleiermacher, for example. Even when one allows for some retrospective simplification

and imposition of order, the picture that emerges is one of remarkable intellectual energy, as well as of an early instinct for synthesis which became so strong in his published writings.

Torrance's sense of missionary vocation remained firm throughout his undergraduate career. Like other missionary children he was much involved in student mission work through the Evangelistic Association; the Torrance family flat in Edinburgh became a centre for student gatherings. He was awarded the MA in 1934, and moved to New College to study for the BD. Founded after the Disruption in 1843 as the college of the Free Church of Scotland, New College merged with the University Faculty of Divinity from 1929, when the United Free Church and the Church of Scotland became a single denomination, though the merger was not completed until 1935. Alongside institutional transformation, New College in the 1930s was a place where the theological shifts in Continental Protestantism associated with the Swiss theologian Karl Barth were being registered. Though Torrance specialised in systematic theology, he also immersed himself in biblical studies, warming to the theological and devotional exegesis of Norman Porteous in Old Testament and William Manson in New Testament. (Torrance would later edit a posthumous collection of Manson's writings.) He learned a good deal from Daniel Lamont, who taught apologetics and encouraged Torrance's nascent interest in thinking theologically about natural science. He was much less enthusiastic about John Baillie, Professor of Divinity and one of the last and most distinguished representatives of the moderate liberal Protestant trend in Scottish theology. Torrance thought Baillie's lectures marred by Kantianism and lacking in commitment to divine revelation.

Most of all, Torrance was captivated by the teaching and example of H. R. Mackintosh, Professor of Systematic Theology. Mackintosh knew liberal Protestantism from the inside: he had studied in Marburg with Wilhelm Herrmann (also Barth's revered teacher), and translated Schleiermacher and Ritschl. In lectures and writing, however, he espoused an *evangelisch* version of Christian doctrine increasingly at odds with his teachers, emphasising the primacy of divine revelation and the inseparability of teaching about incarnation and teaching about God. All this was calculated to attract Torrance's attention in a way which Baillie's patient correlations of Christian faith and theism were not able to do. In his closing years at New College, Mackintosh was strongly drawn to the work of Barth and communicated his enthusiasm to Torrance, thereby awakening a life-long dedication.

In 1936 Torrance was awarded the Blackie Travelling Fellowship for a term, enabling him to travel in the Middle East, determined to see and do everything. The trip proved adventurous in a rather John Buchan style (amongst other things, he was caught up in Arab–Jewish conflict in Palestine and arrested in Bosnia). While in Syria, Torrance heard the news of Mackintosh's sudden death. He returned to New College for a final year, graduating *summa cum laude* and receiving the Aitken Fellowship for postgraduate research. Henceforth his missionary vocation was to be enacted in academia, and he set off for Basle and doctoral studies under Barth, recently returned to his native city after expulsion from his post in Bonn.

II

Torrance spent only one year in Basle, but the impact of his time under Barth's supervision was immense. He heard Barth lecturing on the doctrine of God (the material would be published as *Church Dogmatics* II/1), attended Barth's seminar on the natural theology of Vatican I, and secured entry into Barth's smaller *Sozietät*, where the privileged group studied Wollebius's *Compendium* (a classic of early seventeenth-century Reformed scholastic theology). Torrance wanted to write a dissertation which would explicate the Trinitarian and Christological structure of Christian dogmatics in relation to the theology of grace; Barth wisely trimmed his ambitions and set him to work on the doctrine of grace in the apostolic fathers of the second century.

The period in Basle reinforced the theological convictions learned from Mackintosh and others, and deepened his admiration for Barth's theological achievement. After a year, however, his doctoral studies were interrupted when Auburn Seminary in upstate New York approached him to teach for a year (Baillie, who had taught at Auburn in the 1920s, had recommended him). The choice of teaching over continuing immersion in doctoral work is characteristic: he relished a busy, external vocation, even if it meant forgoing the opportunity to acquire advanced scholarly training. From the beginning, Torrance's intellectual powers were more those of the innovative thinker and advocate than those of the pure *Wissenschaftler*.

Torrance was not wholly at ease in the progressive ethos of Auburn. But it stimulated his evangelistic zeal as well as his limitless industry. He bore a heavy course load in doctrinal theology, studying and writing

lectures at breakneck pace. The lectures, much influenced by Mackintosh and Barth, enabled Torrance to sketch out views on doctrinal topics which in later life he would amplify but not substantially revise. During the year, he was approached by other US institutions: McCormick Seminary in Chicago, and, more temptingly, the newly established Department of Religion at Princeton University, whose offer of a post was nevertheless declined. War was looming, and Torrance determined to return to Europe.

Back in Scotland, he applied for work as an army chaplain, but was told to wait a couple of years. He spent a year in Oxford working on his dissertation at Oriel, overseen by the Provost W. D. Ross and the epigraphist Marcus Tod (both unlikely mentors for a determinedly theological doctorate). But the shortage of parish ministers pulled him away from full-time studies once more: in March 1940 he was ordained to parish work in Alyth in Perthshire. With the interruption of war service, he was to remain in parish work for the next decade. Ministerial work brought him great happiness. He was conscientious in fulfilling his duties, and kept up theological interests by attending the Angus Theological Club and writing reviews and articles. In 1943 he again tried to enlist as an army chaplain, but was diverted to work in the Middle East with the Church of Scotland Huts and Canteens, providing pastoral and practical support to Scottish soldiers overseas. Subsequently he took up a gruelling post as chaplain to the 10th Indian Division in Italy; he was awarded the MBE for his war service.

When the war ended, Torrance returned to Alyth, picking up the threads both of parish work and of his still unfinished doctorate. He submitted the work in 1946, and spent a term in Basle preparing for what proved to be 'a fearful *rigorosum*'; he passed *magna cum laude*. The dissertation, published as *The Doctrine of Grace in the Apostolic Fathers* (Edinburgh, 1948), argues that New Testament teaching about the radical character of divine grace is fatally compromised in second-century Christianity by the incursion of moralism. It is not the work of one destined to become a front-rank patristic historian; though textually detailed, it lacks historical perspective, its argument is schematic and its judgements are at times peremptory. Its impact on the discipline of patristics was negligible. But it should be read for what it is: historical *theology*, extended consideration of a dogmatic topic through the medium of a body of texts. This genre was already losing favour when Torrance made use of it, but it was one to which he was often to have recourse, later examples achieving greater sophistication.

Shortly before his final term in Basle, Torrance became engaged to Margaret Edith Spear, an English woman whom he had come to know through one of his sisters. They married in October 1946, and enjoyed a long and happy marriage (Margaret survived her husband); Torrance's pursuit of his vocation would have been unthinkable without her presence. There were two sons, Thomas and Iain, and a daughter, Alison.

In late 1947, Torrance moved to become minister of Beechgrove Church in Aberdeen, a larger suburban parish where H. R. Mackintosh had ministered at the beginning of the century. The new parish gave him greater scope, as well as opportunities for contact with university staff, particularly Donald MacKinnon, recently arrived from Oxford to take up the Regius Chair of Moral Philosophy. Torrance was by now a rising star in church and theology. His enterprising side had already shown itself in his role in founding the Scottish Church Theology Society in 1945 (some of whose members like Ian Henderson and Ronald Gregor Smith became prominent in Scottish divinity) and, more importantly, in launching the *Scottish Journal of Theology* with J. K. S. Reid in 1948. The journal quickly established itself as a platform for the doctrinally serious, ecclesially and ecumenically engaged theology which was gathering momentum in the post-war period, and also provided an instrument for the dissemination of Barth's theology in Britain. It was destined to play a significant international role in theological publishing. From 1949 he participated in bi-lateral conversations between the Church of Scotland and the Church of England. And he continued to publish: in 1949 there appeared *Calvin's Doctrine of Man* (London), a detailed account of the Reformer's anthropology which contains early formulations of epistemological positions Torrance would later elaborate. It was becoming clear that a move to academic work would be a natural next step, and in 1950 he accepted the chair in Church History at New College, where he remained until retirement in 1979.

III

The merging of New College and the University Faculty of Divinity had resulted in two chairs of church history, the 'church' chair which Torrance assumed, and a 'university' chair occupied by J. H. S. Burleigh. Given Torrance's distinctly theological leanings, it was hardly an ideal appointment, but he worked hard in it, lecturing on topics in European Reformation and Scottish historical theology. Any chafing was short-

lived. In 1952, G. T. Thomson, Mackintosh's successor, retired early, and the chair of Christian Dogmatics fell vacant. Torrance asked to be transferred; Baillie, Principal of New College at the time, was reluctant, but the transfer went ahead, and Torrance began his long tenure, teaching alongside Baillie in the Divinity chair and, from 1956, Baillie's successor, John McIntyre.

Once installed, Torrance's staple teaching was in the area of the theology of incarnation and atonement. Torrance sometimes regretted that the division of labour between the dogmatics and divinity chairs did not permit him to teach the doctrine of the Trinity. Reading the lecture texts—recently edited by a devoted former student (Robert Walker) and published in two volumes as *Incarnation* (2008) and *Atonement* (2010)—communicates something of his classroom presence and manner. They are didactic and polemical rather than exploratory, laying out a position and expecting assent rather than surveying possibilities, and their tone is intense, without a trace of detachment or irony. Some students found his teaching rather overwhelming: one had to be intellectually athletic to get the best from the lectures, and Torrance could be devastating in response to classroom questions he considered to indicate lack of engagement. Others were enthralled, exhilarated by the devotion, directness, clarity and comprehensiveness of his teaching, as well as by acts of kindness to students outside the classroom.

The scholarly and the ecclesial were never separate domains for Torrance, his choice of topics, his intellectual procedures and his rhetoric all shaped by a compelling sense of vocation as *doctor ecclesiae*. Especially in the 1950s, he directed the greater part of his ample energy to the theological renewal of the church—both the ecumenical church encountered in his participation in the post-war movement for church unity, and the domestic Reformed church in Scotland. Most of his writings from this decade were either occasional pieces or more substantial essays laying out principles of church reform; they were brought together in 1959–60 in a two-volume collection *Conflict and Agreement in the Church* (London). The dedications of the volumes speak of the world of Protestant ecumenism in which Torrance moved: the first was dedicated to Barth, the second to two leading Lutheran churchmen, the Swedish theologian and bishop Anders Nygren, and Edmund Schlink, the Heidelberg ecumenist. The collection shows Torrance at work on some of the chief topics of post-war ecumenical discussion: the apostolic character of the church in relation to ministerial order, intercommunion between separated denominations, and the nature of the sacraments. Torrance was committed to the ecumenical

fruitfulness of theological clarification, convinced that institutional reconciliation of the churches must derive from repentant affirmation of such doctrinal principles as the priority of divine grace which both chastens ecclesial self-assertion and establishes the church as the social coordinate of the work of God.

His work from this period was animated by a variety of commitments. He was persuaded of the value of what came to be known as 'biblical theology', which used topical analysis to draw up a synthesis of biblical patterns of thought, and which invested heavily in the distinctiveness of biblical terminology and in its stability across the canon. To this were added a particular reading of the Reformed tradition, in which Calvin's vision of a renewed catholic church was set against later predestinarian Calvinism, and a vivid sense of ecumenical opportunity.

Torrance's post at New College gave him responsibilities for theological leadership in the Church of Scotland, and his co-editorship of the *Scottish Journal of Theology* occasions for published commentary on its life. From 1954 to 1962 he was Convenor of the Church of Scotland Commission on Baptism, established by General Assembly in 1953 to clarify the church's baptismal theology and discipline. Its various reports and proposals reflected his more sacramental perspective which allied him with those of 'Scoto-Catholic' persuasion (and also caused him to regret Barth's repudiation of infant baptism in the mid-1960s). The Commission's eventual proposals were largely ignored. A similar fate awaited the so-called Bishops Report submitted to the General Assembly in 1957, which grew out of bi-lateral conversations between the Church of England and the Church of Scotland in which Torrance had been a representative. The report proposed reunion of the two churches, but was vilified by a campaign orchestrated by the *Scottish Daily Express* which regarded episcopal government an offence to Scottish nationalist honour.

Torrance's efforts to shift the ethos of the Church of Scotland were grounded in an interpretation of the Reformed tradition which did not commend itself to the denomination as a whole. From H. R. Mackintosh, he had learned disaffection for purely forensic and extrinsic accounts of the relation of Christ and the believer, preferring a theology of union with Christ. This, in turn, attracted him to a certain sacramental realism of which Calvin, not Zwingli, was the exemplar, the attraction no doubt reinforced by family connections to Anglicanism. A number of writings from the 1950s stake out his position. In 1958 he edited and translated from Scots the eucharistic sermons of Robert Bruce, preached at St Giles in Edinburgh in 1589, a work of profound sacramental piety, and in the

same year contributed a substantial introduction and notes to a re-issue of an older translation of Calvin's *Tracts and Treatises*. A year later he published an edition of the catechisms of the Reformed churches, including Scottish domestic texts such as Craig's Catechism. A very lengthy introduction explained, *inter alia*, Torrance's preference for the sixteenth-century Reformed tradition over later high Calvinist scholasticism. Similarly, his 1960 revised and expanded edition of Wotherspoon and Kirkpatrick's *Manual of Church Doctrine According to the Church of Scotland* (his co-editor was Ronald Selby Wright, the liturgically minded minister of Canongate Kirk in Edinburgh) reinforced the high Genevan churchmanship of the original edition from earlier in the century.

Two longer pieces of ecclesiological writing from the mid-1950s gave more sustained expression to his amalgamation of evangelical and catholic sympathies. One, *Kingdom and Church* (Edinburgh, 1956), studied the relation of eschatology and ecclesiology by offering synthetic studies of Luther, Bucer and Calvin. The eschatology Torrance discovered in the Reformers is not apocalyptic or catastrophic so much as teleological: the new age inaugurated at the incarnation is at work in the temporal forms of the church, though such forms remain imperfect anticipations of the final end. Eschatology, in effect, both relativises and confirms visible order. A second piece, *Royal Priesthood*, published in 1955 as a *Scottish Journal of Theology* occasional paper, expounded what Torrance considered a biblical and ancient catholic account of the derivation of the church's ministry from the priestly ministry of Christ. The book is a minor classic of post-war ecumenical theology, rooting a high doctrine of ministry and sacraments in a vivid Christology, and resistant to the naturalisation of church order. The book was overshadowed by the remarkably hostile treatment given to it by Torrance's Edinburgh colleague James Barr in *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London, 1961). Barr launched a vigorous attack on the biblical theology of the 1940s and 1950s, with its emphases on the coherence and distinctiveness of the biblical thought-world and on the way in which its 'Hebraic' character can be traced by etymological study of biblical language. In example after example, Barr sought to show that modern linguistic theory left no room for this style of theology; many of the examples were drawn from Torrance's work, which Barr clearly judged to be wholly without value. The rift which Barr's assault generated was lasting, the immediate tension somewhat eased by Barr's departure for Princeton Theological Seminary in the same year as the publication of his book. In later years, Torrance came to think that Barr's arguments expressed the 'phenomenalism' of modern biblical

studies, which segregated biblical language from divine revelation. Torrance and Barr represented divergent theological cultures, one making its appeal to revelation and church, the other *wissenschaftlich*. Torrance was to devote much time over the next four decades to advancing reasons for the divergence and its effect on theological science and hermeneutics.

The latter part of Torrance's first decade at New College saw the appearance of the first fruits of two substantial editorial projects. One was a new translation of Calvin's New Testament commentaries (his brother David was also named as series editor), the initial volume of which in 1959 was the first half of the Gospel of John, translated by the Anglican Calvin scholar T. H. L. Parker, who shared Torrance's theological sympathies. But by far the most ambitious and influential editorial undertaking was the English translation of Barth's *Kirchliche Dogmatik*.[1] A number of Barth's writings were already available in English, including some collections of essays, some expositions of confessional texts, and Sir Edwyn Hoskyns's startling translation of the second edition of Barth's *Romans* commentary. But of Barth's huge *magnum opus* (by the mid-1950s Barth had published ten volumes) almost nothing had appeared in English. An abortive start had been made with G. T. Thomson's 1936 translation of the first part-volume, but his work was unsatisfactory. In the absence of a decent translation, Barth's mature work, easily the most eminent exercise in Protestant dogmatics for a century, remained almost wholly unknown to English readers, leaving reception (and rejection) of his work dependent on a limited selection of older occasional and polemical writings.

Torrance was ideally placed to remedy the situation. He knew Barth and Barth's writings, and his position in New College afforded a platform from which to promote Barth's ideas. From the early 1950s, Torrance began to plan a full translation of the *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, covering the volumes which had already appeared in German and those still in preparation. Torrance shared editorial oversight with Geoffrey Bromiley, at that time an Edinburgh Episcopalian clergyman; a translation team was established, and from 1956 the volumes appeared in rapid succession, so that by 1961 the English had caught up with the German. By this time, Barth had largely ceased to work on his *Dogmatik*; a final fragment was published in English in 1969 and in 1975 a re-translation of the first part-volume. completed the work

[1] G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (eds.), K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (13 vols., Edinburgh, 1956–75).

The impact of the translation is difficult to exaggerate: it opened up the full scope of Barth's mature thought, which as a result began to enter the mainstream of English-language theology, and to attract much better-informed and more sophisticated discussion than hitherto. Torrance's own interpretation of Barth did much to direct that discussion. A substantial study, *Karl Barth. An Introduction to his Early Theology 1910–1931* (London, 1962), was the leading account of Barth's earlier work for a quarter century; it was complemented by a large number of essays on Barth, collected after retirement as *Karl Barth. Biblical and Evangelical Theologian* (Edinburgh, 1990). Torrance held Barth in the highest esteem, ranking him alongside his other giants, Athanasius and Calvin. He brought his own interests to his reading of Barth. He was much preoccupied by Barth's thinking about the nature of divine revelation and human knowledge of God, and was captivated by Barth's orientation of all Christian teaching towards the person and work of Christ, as well as by Barth's integration of the doctrines of the Trinity and the incarnation. Barth represented the contemporary possibility of uninhibited theology on the grand scale, all the more impressive when set alongside what Torrance regarded as the dreary sceptical revisions of Christian doctrine on offer in mainstream British theology in the 1960s and 1970s.

Aspects of Torrance's interpretation of Barth have not stood the test of time. Posthumous publication of a good deal more of Barth's early writing makes his account of Barth's development in the 1920s less secure. Moreover, Torrance's way of articulating the supremacy of divine grace made him insufficiently alert to Barth's abiding interest in moral theology as integral to dogmatics. Barth thought of the Reformed tradition as a kind of theocentric humanism, with a double theme of divine and human action; Torrance more naturally gravitated to the theology of human participation in Christ, leaving less space for ethical considerations. The difference emerged over Barth's late doctrine of baptism, which Torrance thought gave too much space to human agency. His puzzlement over what he took to be Barth's misstep indicates his unease with something deep in the fabric of Barth's thought. Such matters aside, Barth's secure place in the canon of modern theology for English readers would be unthinkable without Torrance's determined advocacy.

IV

By the end of the 1950s, Torrance was a considerable presence in theology in Scotland and beyond. His chair in Edinburgh provided access to a large

company of ministerial candidates and graduate students eager to learn from him, as well as an abundance of external academic and ecclesial activities in Britain and abroad. He was able to appoint like-minded colleagues: his brother James, Alasdair Heron and John Zizioulas. Only once, in 1961, did he give serious consideration to moving (to Basle, as Barth's successor), but decided to stay the course at New College, partly for family reasons, partly because of the demands of operating in a very different academic culture. Long tenure at New College often entailed a spell as Principal, but Torrance's frank dislike of administrative and committee work, as well as his manifold outside engagements, relieved him of the prospect. There were, naturally, occasional frustrations or disagreements, but they did not extend beyond the usual differences of conviction and temperament. He did not always see eye to eye with John McIntyre on theological questions, and was unpersuaded by the broadening of the curriculum to include religious studies which McIntyre oversaw as Principal from 1968. But their differences lacked any trace of personal animosity, and Torrance remained content at New College for the rest of his teaching career.

Torrance's theological work over the next two decades until retirement, and on into the mid-1990s, ranged very widely: historical theology (especially patristic and Reformation), hermeneutics, the principles of theological rationality and the relation of theology and natural science, his inquiries into all these fields directed by a conviction that the chief articles of Christian dogma possess very substantial heuristic power. Despite this conviction, Torrance's published output in dogmatics remained relatively modest until retirement, mostly made up of journal articles and book chapters—some collected in two volumes of essays, *Theology in Reconstruction* (London, 1965) and *Theology in Reconciliation* (London, 1975)—along with a short book, *Space, Time and Incarnation* (Oxford, 1969), which brought together three lectures from different occasions, and, in 1976, a somewhat longer related work, *Space, Time and Resurrection* (Edinburgh). Often his thinking about dogmatic topics has to be gleaned from writing on related matters—the history of Christian thought, or the implications of Christian doctrine for the nature of reason. Moreover, the range of dogmatic topics treated in the 1960s and 1970s is fairly restricted: the doctrines of Christ and the Spirit, and some issues in ecclesiology and sacramental theology. Themes such as the divine attributes, creation and creatures, providence or sanctification rarely appear, and even the doctrine of the Trinity, in whose primacy Torrance was deeply invested, did not become a matter for extensive consideration

in published work until the 1980s. Much of his most enduring dogmatic writing saw light after retirement, in a series of books which began with the published version of his 1981 Warfield Lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary (*The Trinitarian Faith*, Edinburgh, 1988) and was completed by *Trinitarian Perspectives* (Edinburgh, 1994), which assembled essays from the early 1990s, and by the monograph *The Christian Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh, 1996).

A good deal of British theological writing of the period around 1960 to 1990, especially the work of some distinguished patristic historians, was sceptical about the permanent validity of conciliar trinitarian and incarnational thought, its confidence eroded by biblical and doctrinal criticism and by a sometimes inchoate sense that the metaphysical principles assumed by classical Christian thought had been rendered untenable by modern philosophy. Torrance stood apart from that theological culture, and did not share its inhibitions; he criticised it variously as nominalist, dualist or phenomenalist, and considered the favoured alternatives—exemplarist Christology and non-trinitarian theism—wholly deficient. His intellect and imagination, as well as his religious affections, were profoundly stirred by the ideas of those theologians whose writings formed the canon out of which he generated his own understanding of Christian teaching, and by which he judged other accounts: Athanasius, the Cappadocians and Cyril of Alexandria among the fathers, Calvin among the Reformers, Barth among the moderns. Each afforded access to an immensely spacious and satisfying world of thought, free from the cramping effects of over-zealous attention to modern scruples, and provided a stock of concepts and patterns of argument which formed the matter of the extensive description of Christian doctrine to which some of his later writings were devoted.

Torrance's dogmatic writing commonly took the form of positive explication and commendation of the articles of the catholic creeds, and of some Reformation distinctives in the theology of grace and salvation. As he reached out to the great matters which seized his attention, his rhetoric often took on a measure of urgency, pressing the reader to share his sense of the spiritual import and explanatory power of a range of theological ideas and arguments. He wrote from within a set of traditions by which he was captivated; his texts are saturated with quotation and allusion. On occasions, analytical and logical order, as well as elegance and economy of phrasing, were compromised in the rush of ideas. The reader is persuaded by accumulation of concepts and description, with frequent restatement and amplification, the style bearing some resemblance to that of Barth,

who also wrote *in extenso*, though usually less loosely than Torrance. The result is one of the most stirring, consistent and conceptually innovative bodies of theological writing in English from the last fifty years.

The cardinal, and inseparable, doctrines are those of incarnation and Trinity. Torrance considered Nicene teaching about the substantial unity (*homoousion*) of the incarnate Son and God the Father to be of limitless import. He did not think of the Council of Nicaea as a rather messy and indeterminate process of pastoral, political and doctrinal negotiation, but as a moment in which the mind and conceptuality of the church were stamped with divine truth. In its wake, resolution of all manner of theological questions may be effected by attention to the ontological and epistemological primacy of Christ's person and work. Christology is that from which other elements of Christian doctrine may be derived, and that in relation to which doctrinal authenticity is to be determined. Torrance often rehearsed the ancient and modern history of dogmatics as an intellectual and spiritual contest between affirmation of the *homoousion* and its entailments and refusal to acknowledge its constitutive place. On his account of the matter, the union of divine and human natures in the incarnation is such that the history of Jesus Christ is a double movement—of God to creatures in revelation and reconciliation, and of creatures to God in perfect actualisation of human relation to the creator. In descriptions of the first movement, Torrance wrote indefatigably of the ultimacy and unrestricted efficacy of the union of God and humanity in Christ: all history leads to and flows from this point, and in it all history finds its redemption. The second movement—that of Christ's 'vicarious humanity' which gathers all other human creatures into itself—was also much emphasised by Torrance, to forestall any idea that creatures complete their nature autonomously.

Torrance considered the doctrine of the Trinity a confession of the identity and nature of the one who works in the world in Christ and the Spirit. From this, much follows: the correspondence of God's inner being to God's external acts; the definition of each divine person by reference to that person's relations to the others (for which Torrance coined the term 'onto-relations'); the trinitarian order of divine action upon created things. Torrance was one of a number of theologians who contributed to the sea-change in English-language theology in the final two decades of the last century, by which trinitarian doctrine came to be considered not a problem but a resource.

Torrance's writings frequently address questions about the relation of material doctrine and the nature of created rationality. Of all those who

operated within Barth's ambit, he was the most self-conscious and sophisticated in treating the nature of human intelligence, his work animated by belief that part of the apostolic vocation of theology is to expose the modern (and ancient) breach between mind and reality, and to display their proper kinship. He considered much modern biblical and dogmatic work to be constrained by conventions about reason and rational practice, and sought to show that, rightly conducted, theology can unmask and illuminate such conventions, as well as exemplify reason's proper exercise. Three related topics attracted his attention: biblical hermeneutics, theological rationality, and the relations of theology and the natural sciences.

His extensive writings on the nature and interpretation of Scripture have not found their way into the canon of modern literature on biblical hermeneutics. In part this is because a large-scale historical and constructive project on the theme was never brought to completion, though some of it appeared as journal articles, and in retirement Torrance published a short monograph on *The Hermeneutics of John Calvin* (Edinburgh, 1988) and a substantial collection of essays on patristic hermeneutics, *Divine Meaning* (Edinburgh, 1995). Moreover, Torrance did not engage with the key ideas and texts of Continental philosophy and literary theory which dominated the hermeneutical agenda from the 1970s: he had some familiarity with Heidegger, but Gadamer, Ricoeur and Derrida, for example, did not make an appearance in what he had to say. Further, most of his writing on hermeneutics took the form of *grandes lignes* readings of figures from the Christian past—the Alexandrians, Aquinas, Erasmus, Calvin, Reuchlin, Schleiermacher—in which his own proposals were often underexplored.

His chief concern was not with the detailed texture of Christian literary culture and its exegetical practices but with hermeneutical first principles, and with the pathology of what he judged to be modern hermeneutical defect. On his account, modern theological hermeneutics suffers from a dichotomy of linguistic-literary sign and thing signified, or an extrinsicist separation of divine communication and created media, of which the naturalism and nominalism of biblical studies is only the most telling example. To counter this, Torrance proposed a theological semantics in which human texts, along with the apostolic forms of ecclesial life in which they emerge, are fitting instruments of divine speech. The biblical writings are instrumental, and therefore possess a certain depth; they are constituted by their expressive or referential relation to the revelatory divine word, and properly to read such texts is to grasp their 'depth dimension'.

If Torrance's integration of biblical hermeneutics and doctrinally derived semantics, unique among his contemporaries, has largely been passed over, his writings on theological rationality and especially on theology and the natural sciences have evoked a good deal of attention.

Torrance found in Barth the consummate positive theologian of the modern era who pursued Protestant dogmatics free from the thrall of subjectivism and idealism, and operated under the conviction that the exercise of theological intelligence at full stretch requires eager assent to divine instruction. Like Barth, Torrance did not think this divine instruction limited to a sacred text; it is, rather, an act of self-communication, which it is the task of theology to indicate in language and concepts which are transparent to divine revelation. He wrote copiously on what he called the 'philosophy of theology' (reflection on the way in which theology's cognitive principles and procedures are shaped by its matter), presenting theological inquiry as inseparable from mortification of error, or as the mind's interrogation and formation by objective, self-bestowing divine reality. On this account, the intellectual virtues which Torrance prized in the theologians he most esteemed, and which he himself sought to exercise, are a certain adaptability and conceptual transparency to divine truth.

Similar themes recur in the substantial and strikingly original body of work on the relation of theology and natural science which some consider Torrance's most weighty intellectual achievement. He had lectured on the topic at Auburn in the late 1930s, but other tasks and preoccupations were such that it was only from the late 1950s that he was free to devote a great deal of intellectual and practical energy into shaping the nascent conversations between theologians and natural scientists; his contributions were recognised in 1978 by the award of the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion. His published work in the field began with an authoritative text, *Theological Science* (London, 1969), followed by a host of articles and chapters and, after retirement, by a number of shorter monographs: *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture* (Belfast, 1980); *The Ground and Grammar of Theology* (Belfast, 1980); *Divine and Contingent Order* (Oxford, 1981); *Transformation and Convergence in the Frame of Knowledge* (Belfast, 1984); *The Christian Frame of Mind* (Edinburgh, 1985); and *Reality and Scientific Theology* (Edinburgh, 1985). His work gravitated to discussion of the first principles of inquiry, the 'frame of mind' which forms intellectual activity in theology and natural science. The history which Torrance offered is, doubtless, schematic; that aside, he was persuaded that the revolution in cosmology associated with Einstein (and, before him, with the Scottish physicist James Clerk Maxwell, whose

Dynamical Theory of the Electromagnetic Field was republished in 1982 under Torrance's editorship) presented unique opportunities to advance beyond the self-contained mechanistic physics of Copernicus and Newton which severely inhibited theological affirmations about natural reality. Torrance was quick to seize on the convergences between a theological metaphysics of nature and the new cosmology, and often frustrated by theologians who still undertook their work in captivity to an exhausted physics. He found in the new cosmology much that resonated with Barth's deep sense of the sheer givenness of divine revelation, most of all a coordination of acts of knowledge with the intelligibility of reality, reinforcing his conviction that, in natural science as in theology, thought is properly 'kataphysic', in accordance with the nature of its objects. Some of the most forceful passages in his published work describe progress in theology and science as conversion of the mind away from false representations by submission to the inherent order of reality, divine or contingent. Further, Torrance was attracted to a conception of a stratified universe in which lower-level natural phenomena refer to and are ordered by a higher purposive level, and so possess an intrinsic depth. The ideas were refined in conversation with the émigré Hungarian chemist and philosopher of science Michael Polanyi: Torrance promoted and wrote about his work and acted as his literary executor.

Torrance's interest in natural science—highly unusual for one so indebted to Barth—led him to distance himself from Barth's unqualified hostility to natural theology. Barth considered the modern project of natural theology and natural religion an assertion of the priority of human capacity over divine revelation which issued in idolatry. Torrance took a different tack, conceding Barth's worry about the independence of some natural theology, but maintaining that natural theology is not necessarily a bid for autonomy: it may be a subordinate extension of positive theology which traces the ways in which created reality, illuminated by divine revelation, may in turn illuminate its creator. If Barth's rejection of natural theology is the obverse of deist natural religion, Torrance's account of the matter recalls earlier theologies of nature in which 'positive' and 'natural' theologies are not competing but complementary.

In the midst of his professorial work in the 1960s and 1970s, Torrance's busyness as churchman and ecumenist showed no abatement. His stature in the Church of Scotland led to appointment as Moderator for the year 1976–7. He fulfilled the duties of the post—which is representative and ambassadorial rather than executive—with typical vigour, travelling widely within and outside Scotland, and promoting an elevated theological

conception of the church's identity and mission. After demitting the office, he remained a figure of influence in the Church of Scotland General Assembly.

In ecumenical activity, he was much occupied with conversations between the Reformed and Orthodox churches. His knowledge of the Orthodox world was remarkably extensive. He pored over the classical texts of Eastern Christianity. Through involvement in the Faith and Order Commission in the 1950s he developed a host of friendships and working relationships with Orthodox theologians such as Georges Florovsky. He mentored Orthodox students in Edinburgh, including those like George Dragas and John Zizioulas who became interpreters of Orthodoxy in the West. He was associated with the Foundation for Hellenism in Great Britain, established by a leading Orthodox cleric, Methodios Fouyas. It was Fouyas who in 1973 arranged for Torrance to lecture in Addis Ababa on the 1,600th anniversary of the death of Athanasius; on this occasion, Torrance was consecrated an honorary protopresbyter of the Greek patriarchate of Alexandria. Torrance's first foreign tour as Moderator was to the Orthodox patriarchates of the East. These visits sowed the seed for the dialogue between the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Orthodox churches which, after initial consultations, began in 1988 and produced an agreed statement on the doctrine of the Trinity in 1991. Torrance was prominent in the discussions, and edited the papers which emerged from the dialogue. As with earlier ecumenical efforts in which Torrance was involved, however, the proposals failed to receive acceptance.

Torrance retired from his Edinburgh chair in 1979, widely esteemed and recognised by a string of honorary degrees and by his presidency of the Society for the Study of Theology and of the Académie Internationale des Sciences Religieuses. In his retirement year he was elected to a Fellowship of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, and in 1982 to the British Academy.

Until the mid-1990s, Torrance remained extraordinarily productive: a good deal of his most consequential writing appeared when retirement gave him greater freedom to set out at length ideas which had preoccupied him for decades. Between 1979 and 1996 he published sixteen books, edited a couple more, and wrote scores of shorter pieces. The topics are largely those which had engrossed him throughout his career (Christian doctrine, hermeneutics, the nature of scientific thought), though there were some new departures, including a charming, if somewhat partial, history of Scottish theology from John Knox to McLeod Campbell (*Scottish Theology*, 1996). Over the course of his professorship, he had toyed with summing up his thinking in a comprehensive dogmatic

theology, but it did not make its appearance. Partly this was because the project was pushed aside by other writing tasks, but also partly because Torrance's intellectual urgency did not suit him for a large-scale systematic exercise in which proportion and a sense of the whole are of great consequence. Moreover, Barth's remarkable talent cast a long shadow: to those in his circle, the sheer scale of his achievement seemed such that any other Reformed dogmatics would be bound to appear feeble in comparison.

Alongside his writing, he continued to travel extensively. He lectured widely in Britain and North America in the 1970s and 1980s. He was deeply moved to return to the China of his childhood in the 1980s, to retrace his father's summer missionary trips to the upper Min valley, and to meet and take financial support to Xiang Christians descended from his father's converts.

In his final years he was confined to a nursing home, frustrated in some measure by the diminishment of his powers and activity but supported by his wife and family. He died on 2 December 2007; his funeral at St Mary's Whitekirk was attended by his extensive family and by colleagues and friends from around the world.

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Torrance was a strenuous and decisive person, purposeful, frank, and, if the occasion required, able to mount a spirited challenge, though without any trace of vanity or desire for personal ascendancy. His resoluteness went along with warmth of pastoral concern. Beneath the external activity there was deep privacy: he was suspicious of introspection, and such autobiographical materials as remain are entirely concerned with external events and with the development of his thinking.

The character and measure of his achievements may be seen when he is set alongside two near-contemporary Scottish divines of similar distinction: John Macquarrie and Donald MacKinnon. All three were church theologians; all three possessed remarkable conceptual prowess; all three sought to pursue the tasks of Christian divinity with an eye to the changed cultural conditions of modernity, though they differed widely in their judgements about how those conditions were to be understood.[2] Torrance

[2] For the other two see Stewart Sutherland, 'Donald Mackenzie MacKinnon 1913–1994', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 97 (London, 1998), pp. 381–9; and K. Ward, 'John Macquarrie 1919–2007', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 161, *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows*, VIII (London, 2009), pp. 259–77.

found little to attract him in Macquarrie's correlation of existentialism and Anglican incarnational theology. Where Macquarrie learned much from Heidegger, Bultmann and Tillich, Torrance's mind was thoroughly catechised by the texts and ideas of the Greek patristic and Reformed theologians, believing them to outbid the claims of modern habits of thought. Macquarrie was by nature serene, even-tempered and attracted to synthesis; Torrance was an intense, and at times combative, thinker who treated intellectual problems as a summons to repentance and regarded compromise with distaste. Torrance found much more affinity with MacKinnon. Neither was pacific in temper or intellectual disposition; both were attracted to Barth as a vivid alternative to the buoyant liberal theologies of the pre-war years; both found in the doctrines of Trinity and incarnation the elements of a comprehensive metaphysics. But where MacKinnon's intelligence was agonised, endlessly self-interrogative and self-subversive, and frequently reduced to silence, Torrance, though no less averse to intellectual complacency, enjoyed far greater confidence and fluency: he thought by writing. Further, Torrance combined intellectual interiority with a busy external vocation as churchman, advocate and animator. In this, and in other ways, few contemporaries equalled him in range and scale of attainment.

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