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Thomas Chalmers and the Communal Ideal in Victorian Scotland

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On 14 April 1915, a public meeting was held in Glasgow's St. Andrews Hall to mark the centenary of Thomas Chalmers's arrival in Glasgow and the beginning of his celebrated experiments in the urban parish ministry. It is significant that amid the carnage of the war that was bringing an end to the Victorian age, Glasgow took this opportunity to commemorate a Scottish clergyman and his parish ideal. Among the speakers were leaders of the two largest presbyterian Churches, the Church of Scotland and the United Free Church, while representatives of eight other denominations appeared on the platform. The Lord Provost of the city presided. The principal speaker of the evening was another Scottish eminent Victorian, Lord Rosebery, the leading figure behind the creation of the Scottish Office in the 1880s, former leader of the Liberal party, and former prime minister. For Rosebery, Chalmers had been 'one of the greatest of our race', a man to be ranked with John Knox in shaping the Scottish identity. Chalmers's whole life had been informed by a grand vision: 'his ideal was to raise the nation by Christianity, by Christian co-operation, Christian education, Christian worship. He thought that by these means he would be able to rear a character and a race which would disdain State aid or State patronage, and be independent of all but faith'. This ideal had, to a large extent, defined the values and aspirations of nineteenth-century Scotland. None the less, Rosebery maintained, the dream was dying. 'The world creeps on in its blind course . . .', he observed with melancholy, 'we know not whither, but it certainly

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does not seem to tend towards the aims of Chalmers'. 'He was indeed', Rosebery continued, 'the Moses of his country, pointing to a land of promise into which neither he nor his countrymen entered or were destined to enter'.[1] Amid the horrors of World War, of great powers employing the technologies of mature industrial society for the grim work of mass killing, Chalmers's vision of a Christian commonwealth of small, co-operative communities did indeed seem but a utopian dream of a lost world.

Thomas Chalmers was widely acknowledged as the greatest Scottish Churchman of the nineteenth century. He was a powerful preacher, who stirred congregations with torrents of rich language, and brought many to share his evangelical faith. He was a theologian and natural philosopher, who combined the 'common sense' thought of the later Scottish Enlightenment with a traditional Calvinist orthodoxy, and who sought evidence of a beneficient design in the natural and social realms. He was a political economist, the leading disciple of Thomas Malthus, who accepted the doctrine of free trade, but who also recognized the darker aspects of unrestricted economic competition and economic individualism. Above all, he was a social reformer, the most creative social theorist of the nineteenth-century Scottish Church, who developed a practical programme of comprehensive Christian communal reform, emphasizing benevolence, co-operation and shared sacrifice. It was as a social thinker that Chalmers exercised his most lasting influence on Victorian Scotland. His scholarly contributions in theology, natural philosophy and political economy did not long survive his death in 1847; they were soon overshadowed by advances in Biblical criticism and biological science, and by the waning of Malthusian economics.[2] But his social reform activities and his Christian communal programmes exercised a pervasive influence on Scottish social thought and philanthropic activity throughout the nineteenth century.[3]

In recent years, scholars have devoted considerable attention to Scottish social thought in the nineteenth century – especially to the distinctive Scottish response to the challenges of urbanization and industrialization.

[1] *Scotsman*, 15 April 1915.

[2] For early views of waning influence of Chalmers's contributions in theology, philosophy and political economy, see [W.H. Smith], 'Dr. Chalmers as Political Economist', *Blackwood's Magazine*, vol 73 (May 1853), 598–616; [I. Taylor], 'Dr. Chalmers's Works', *North British Review*, vol. 26 (Nov. 1856), 1–71. In a perceptive recent study, Boyd Hilton sees Chalmers as a leading representative of those evangelical social thinkers who viewed the world primarily as a scene of trial and suffering – a world view that was waning amid the relative prosperity of the 1850s and 1860s. See *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1785–1865* (Oxford, 1988).

[3] For an eloquent expression of this argument, see A.C. Cheyne, 'Thomas Chalmers: Then and Now', in A.C. Cheyne (ed.), *The Practical and the Pious: Essays on Thomas Chalmers* (Edinburgh, 1984), 9–30.

There has been a new appreciation of the survival of a distinctive Scottish culture amid the expansion of urban-industrial society. The literary historian, William Donaldson, has demonstrated that, contrary to long accepted views, nineteenth-century Scottish fiction was not predominantly escapist and remote from the problems of urban society. On the contrary, there was a rich and diverse Scottish urban fiction which was published, not through the London book trade, but rather through serial editions in the popular newspaper press.[4] Christopher Harvie has noted the enduring importance of religion on Victorian social thought, while Donald Withrington has directed attention to the distinctive Scottish contributions to late nineteenth-century British idealism. Olive Checkland has described the rich diversity of Victorian Scottish urban philanthropy, Bernard Aspinwall has explored the pioneering achievements of late Victorlan municipal collectivism in Glasgow, and Ian Levitt has considered the development of Scottish social policy in the nineteenth century.[5] Such work has demonstrated that Victorian Scotland devoted more attention to organized philanthropy and the problems of the city than was previously recognized, and that Scotland's social attitudes were profoundly influenced by its communal traditions. This essay will explore the influence of Thomas Chalmers and his social vision on Victorian Scotland, directing attention to his role in reviving and preserving Scotland's communal traditions during a period when Scotland's weak central government and rapid industrialization might otherwise have resulted in intolerable strains on the social fabric. It will also consider the social engagement of the mainstream presbyterian Churches during the high tide of evangelicalism, between the 1830s and 1880s, and suggest that the evangelical social ethos was not as individualistic and obsessed with personal salvation as is sometimes supposed.

Thomas Chalmers was born in 1780, into a merchant family of modest means in the small east Fife coastal burgh of Anstruther.[6] He attended St. Andrews University, where he studied for the ministry and nurtured

[4] W. Donaldson, 'Popular Literature: The Press, the People and the Vernacular Revival', in D. Gifford (ed.), *The History of Scottish Literature*, vol 3 (Aberdeen, 1988), 203–15.

[5] C. Harvie, 'Industry, Religion and the State of Scotland', in D. Gifford (ed.), *The History of Scottish Literature*, vol 3, op. cit., 23–42; D. Withrington, '"A Ferment of Change": Aspirations, Ideas, and Ideals in Nineteenth Century Scotland', Ibid., 43–63; O. Checkland, *Philanthropy in Victorian Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1980); B. Aspinwall, *Portable Utopia: Glasgow and the United States 1820–1920* (Aberdeen, 1984), 151–84; I. Levitt, 'Welfare, Government and the Working Class: Scotland, 1845–1894', in D. McCrone, S. Kendrick and P. Straw (eds), *The Making of Scotland: Nation, Culture and Social Change* (Edinburgh, 1989), 109–22.

[6] For a fuller discussion of Chalmers's life and work, see S.J. Brown, *Thomas Chalmers and the Godly Commonwealth in Scotland* (Oxford, 1982).

ambitions to cut a figure in the literary world of the later Scottish Enlightenment. In 1802, he was ordained to the Fifeshire parish of Kilmany, a stable agricultural parish with a population of about 800. For nearly a decade, he neglected his parish, while he pursued literary recognition and academic preferment. Then, in 1811–12, following a prolonged illness, he experienced an evangelical conversion. He became a leading figure in the Scottish Evangelical Revival, an intense preacher and forceful advocate of missionary societies. In 1813, he directed his energies to his rural parish, beginning regular house-to-house visiting and embracing his responsibilities for parish poor relief and education with new zeal.

Chalmers's rising fame as a preacher brought him a call to Glasgow's Tron parish, where he began his ministry in July 1815. Profoundly disturbed by what he perceived as the collapse of social responsibility in Glasgow, he fastened on the need to restore the communal values of rural Scotland to the urban environment. During his four years at the Tron, from 1815 to 1819, he developed programmes designed to translate the rural parish ideal to the emerging industrial city. Recognizing that the supervision of a large urban parish with over 12,000 inhabitants was beyond the capacity of a single parish minister, he organized the lay members of his predominantly middle-class congregation for the work of house-to-house visiting on what he termed the principle of 'aggression'. Religion and education were to be pressed upon the people, as they had no natural appetite for these things. He organized a parish Bible society, and encouraged all his parishioners to contribute generously in support of a cause, that of overseas missions, which transcended their material self-interests and bound them together in shared sacrifice. His experiences convinced him that the radical evil of the emerging urban-industrial society was the expanding system of legal poor relief, based upon assessments on property and the recognition of a legal right to relief on the part of the indigent. This legal poor relief, he believed, created barriers between rich and poor, diminished 'natural' benevolence and communal sentiment, undermined the independence of the labouring orders, and threatened to unleash the Malthusian horrors of overpopulation. Thus, the abolition of legal poor relief would be necessary to establish parish-based, communal values in the city.

In 1819, Chalmers convinced the town council and magistrates of Glasgow to give him a free hand to pursue his parish community ideal in a new parish, St. John's, which was being created in a working-class district.[7] Here he developed his celebrated programmes for an urban

[7] For recent discussions of the St. John's experiment, see R.R. Cage and E.O.A. Checkland, 'Thomas Chalmers and Urban Poverty: The St. John's Parish Experiment in Glasgow, 1819–1837', *Philosophical Journal* (Glasgow), **13** (1976), 37–56; and S.J. Brown, *Thomas Chalmers*, op. cit., 116–44.

parish, or 'territorial' ministry. He divided the large parish into twenty-five 'proportions', each with about 400 inhabitants. He recruited an agency of lay officers and teachers from his predominantly middle-class congregation, many of whom had followed him from the Tron parish. The agency included elders, deacons and Sunday school teachers, who were each assigned a proportion and instructed to penetrate the district on the principle of 'aggression', visiting each household on a regular basis. An elder was assigned to each proportion, with responsibility to supervise moral and spiritual discipline and to investigate serious moral infractions such as child-abuse, wife-beating or chronic drunkenness. At least one Sunday school teacher was assigned to each proportion and instructed not only to conduct a district Sunday school, but also to visit the homes regularly to report on the children's progress and endeavour to see that every child received religious instruction and basic primary education at one of the day schools established in the parish.

Further, each proportion was assigned a deacon, who was to oversee the material needs of all the parishioners. To the deacons was given responsibility over the central, and most controversial aspect of the parish experiment – the effort to eliminate all legal poor relief in the parish. Chalmers was convinced that most pauperism could be eliminated by refusing relief to the able-bodied and appealing to each individual's capacity for self-help and desire for the respect of the community. Cases of genuine need could be met through appeals to the needy individual's extended family, neighbours, and, as a last resort, to the private philanthropy of wealthy persons. The deacons were to appeal to self-help and orchestrate communal sharing. They were to visit regularly the families in their respective proportions, and keep written records, or case studies, of those in need. In time, all parishioners would be educated to value both their personal independence and their contributions to the community, while the parish mission societies would encourage them to subordinate private interests to transcendent ideals. Lasting social improvement would come through the nurture of moral character and communal responsibility within the extended family of the parish.

In 1823, Chalmers left the Glasgow parish ministry for a university chair, first at St. Andrews and then, in 1828, at Edinburgh. While much of his work at St. John's was widely praised, there was considerable controversy over his poor relief programmes. Critics viewed them as callous in the treatment of the poor, more concerned to eliminate pauperism than to meet the real needs of the poor. Chalmers, however, was convinced that the entire St. John's experiment had been a success, and he publicized it widely through his writings. As a professor, he lectured regularly on his parish community ideal, and converted a generation of presbyterian ministers

to the benefits of the 'territorial' system and the principle of 'aggression'. In his *Political Economy* of 1832, he argued that neither free trade nor social legislation could achieve lasting social improvement. The permanent well-being of society could only be secured by educating people in the communal values of benevolence and co-operation through the parochial structures of the national Church.[8] In the early 1830s, Chalmers emerged as leader of the Evangelical party in the Church of Scotland – in large part because of his comprehensive social vision and his success in defending the established Church against challenges from organised Dissent.

In 1834, the Evangelical party gained a working majority in the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. Chalmers was now able to organize a Church Extension campaign, which aimed for the realization of his parish community ideal on a national level through the erection of hundreds of new parish churches and schools. He hoped to see the whole population of Scotland organized into parish communities of not more than 2,000 inhabitants. These parish communities would employ the methods developed at St. John's, including subdivision of the parish, regular house-to-house visiting, the replacement of legal poor relief by church-directed communal benevolence, and education through parish day schools and district Sunday schools. Scotland would become a 'godly commonwealth' of small parish communities, preserving Christian social values of benevolence and co-operation against the inevitable human dislocations resulting from the 'natural' laws of political economy. To collect the funds needed for church and school building, Chalmers created a national organisation of local societies, which encouraged popular participation through penny-a-week subscriptions, as well as larger contributions from the middle and upper classes. He sought to arouse the Scottish nation through what was termed a movement of 'spiritual O'Connellism', and by 1841 his campaign had added over 220 new churches to the Establishment.[9]

A key element in Chalmers's plan was a proposed endowment grant from the State. Parliament, he believed, should provide an endowment for each of the new parish churches and schools, in order to eliminate the need for high church seat rents and school fees and thus ensure that the churches and schools would be the common property of the whole community. He promised contributors to Church Extension that once Parliament had felt the moral force of their voluntary giving, it would provide the endowments. He was mistaken. Dissenters and radicals attacked Church Extension as both an unnecessary expense and a threat to religious liberty, and in 1838

[8] T. Chalmers, *On Political Economy in Connexion with the Moral State and Moral Prospects of Society* (Glasgow, 1832).

[9] S.J. Brown, *Thomas Chalmers*, op. cit., 233–79.

Melbourne's Whig Government declined to introduce the endowment grant. The result was growing ill-feeling between the Church of Scotland and the British State. When after 1838 the civil law courts declared Church efforts to restrict private patronage over church livings to be illegal, and insisted upon unrestricted patronage, Parliament refused to intervene to defend the Church's claims to spiritual independence. The conflict of civil and religious authority culminated in the Disruption of 1843, when nearly a third of the clergy and perhaps half the lay membership followed Chalmers out of the Established Church to form the Free Church of Scotland.

With the weakening of the Established Church in the late 1830s, the State had also moved to assert control over poor relief. Beginning in 1839, powerful voices, including that of the influential Edinburgh physician, W.P. Alison, urged that State control, an expansion of the system of legal assessments, and greatly increased expenditures were necessary to secure a decent maintenance for the poor.[10] They portrayed Chalmers's parish community ideal as utopian in industrial Scotland, where there was considerable geographic mobility and continuous economic fluctuation. Only through a decent State subsistence for the indigent, Alison maintained, could the masses gain the basic security required before there could be any lasting moral improvement and social progress. In 1843, the Government appointed a Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Scottish poor laws, and in 1845, Parliament passed a New Poor Law for Scotland, which transferred responsibility for maintaining the poor from the Church to elected poor law boards, and which encouraged legal assessments and indoor relief on the English model.

At the Disruption of 1843, Chalmers had hoped that the large majority in the Church of Scotland would sever their connection with the British State and form themselves into a free national establishment – which would continue the campaign to achieve the godly commonwealth in Scotland. In this he was disappointed. The vast majority had not gone out, and it soon became apparent that despite impressive sacrifices to build churches and schools, the new Free Church alone lacked the resources to realize the godly commonwealth. He became convinced that perhaps his ideal of a free and comprehensive national establishment would not be realized until the millennium.[11] In the meantime, as the old Church and the Free Church condemned one another and competed for paying members, much of the urban population seemed to be sinking further into deprivation

[10] O. Checkland, 'Chalmers and William Pulteney Alison: A Conflict of Views on Scottish Social Policy', in A.C. Cheyne (ed.), *The Practical and the Pious*, op. cit., 130–40; S.J. Brown, *Thomas Chalmers*, op. cit., 287–96.

[11] J. MacKenzie, *Dr. Chalmers's Views on Incorporative Union between the Non-Established Presbyterian Churches* (Edinburgh 1871), 17.

and irreligion. The Disruption was destroying all hope for the Christian commonwealth.

Then, in 1844, Chalmers announced the beginning of a new campaign of community-building in the urban environment, conceived for the conditions of post-Disruption Scotland. The new movement was to involve all Protestant churches, encouraging them to compete with one another in the work of reclaiming deprived urban districts to the traditional communal values of rural Scotland. His plan embraced his territorial and aggressive principles. Groups or congregations from the different churches should each map out a territory in a deprived urban area. They would then recruit a missionary and lay agency, subdivide the territory into proportions, assign a visitor and Sunday school teacher to each proportion and instruct them to conduct regular house-to-house visiting. While the missionary conducted Sunday services and week-day prayer meetings, the lay agency would organize day, evening and infant schools, along with a number of other facilities, including savings banks, reading rooms, cooking classes, laundry facilities, and help with finding employment. Poor relief would be left to the secular authorities, but the lay agency would show concern for the material needs of the inhabitants, using their influence to press the city officials for sanitary reforms, clearance of delapidated buildings, and closure of public houses. Their aim, he argued, should be to eliminate as soon as possible the need for outside support and an outside agency of visitors. They should concentrate on creating a self-sustaining territorial Christian community, in which the working-class inhabitants themselves would undertake the work of district visiting, Sunday school teaching, management of the savings bank, reading rooms and other services, support of the minister and teachers, and building of a territorial church, school and hall. They would elevate themselves to self-respect through collective self-help, and eliminate dependence on both outside philanthropy and State poor relief.[12]

With the assistance of a group of Free Church supporters, Chalmers began a territorial operation in the West Port, one of the most deprived districts of Edinburgh. The West Port operation was intended as a model for the proposed community-building operations, and Chalmers devoted his last years to the project. It had considerable success in attracting a working-class congregation, especially after the appointment of a committed minister, William Tasker – though Chalmers's critics argued that it was very costly and that it did not radically transform the surrounding district.

[12] For a fuller discussion of this movement, see S.J. Brown, 'The Disruption and Urban Poverty: Thomas Chalmers and the West Port Operation in Edinburgh, 1844–47', *Records of the Scottish Church History Society*, **20**:1 (1978), 65–89.

Chalmers's pleas and example convinced some others, mainly from the Free Church, to begin a few territorial operations in Edinburgh. Chalmers died in 1847. In his final campaign he had managed to adapt his parish community ideal to the new conditions which had developed following the break-up of the Established Church of Scotland and the passing of the New Poor Law of 1845. His territorial community-building scheme raised the possibility that through competition with one another in the work of reclaiming new industrial areas, the Protestant denominations might gradually learn mutual respect and co-operation, then move quietly toward reunion and shared effort for the achievement of the Christian commonwealth in Scotland.

Few Scots, however, were prepared to embrace such a vision of interdenominational co-operation in the mid and late 1840s. The sectarian jealousies raised by the Church Extension controveries and the Disruption remained acute. The Church of Scotland was insecure, and hostile towards those who had walked out in 1843. The Free Church was primarily engaged in the work of building churches, manses and schools for the nearly 800 congregations which had gone out in 1843, and had few resources to spare for Chalmers's ideal of a territorial mission in the urban slums. The other major presbyterian denomination in Victorian Scotland, the United Presbyterian Church, embraced the Voluntary principle and rejected the ideas of an establishment and territorial ministry. Of the four or five Edinburgh operations founded during the mid 1840s in the wake of Chalmers's appeal for an interdenominational territorial mission, only two seem to have been pursued with much vigour: the West Port operation, and a territorial mission established in the Fountainbridge by Robert Candlish's Free St. George's congregation.

Then, in the early 1850s, Chalmers's territorial community ideal was dramatically revived in the Free Church, mainly through the efforts of Robert Buchanan, minister of Glasgow's Free Tron church. In 1847, Buchanan's middle-class congregation had begun a territorial operation on the West Port model in the Wynds district, one of the most deprived areas of Glasgow, with a population of about 12,000. They recruited an agency of district visitors, established district schools, and in 1850 appointed a missionary.[13] Impressed by Buchanan's appeals and the pioneering work in the Wynds, the Free Church General Assembly of 1851 created a special Committee on Glasgow Evangelization, under the convenorship of Andrew Gray, to co-ordinate and encourage territorial operations in deprived areas of Glasgow. The goal was to revive Chalmers's Church

[13] N.L. Walker, *Robert Buchanan* (London, 1877), 300–29.

Extension campaign in Glasgow, and provide an example for other cities and large towns.[14] Within a year, the Committee was supervising four territorial operations, which included salaried missionaries, district visiting, district Sunday schools, day, evening and industrial training schools, savings banks, libraries, lectures in popular science, and clothing societies. In one operation alone, there were sixty-seven district visitors. With the General Assembly's approval, the Committee on Glasgow Evanglization established in 1852 a 'Chalmers Endowments' fund, to provide subsidies to territorial operations in Glasgow. By May 1854, the Committee had collected over £6,000 for the Chalmers Endowments and was supporting ten territorial operations.[15] In 1853, the Glasgow Committee reported that in two of the territorial mission communities, a process of 'self-extension' had begun; that is, working-class men from the new territorial missions were venturing forth into surrounding districts, visiting homes and seeking to lay the foundation for new territorial community-building operations.[16] Independent working-class communities were evidently emerging, which were pursuing their own home missions.

One of the most active figures in the territorial campaign in Glasgow was Dugald MacColl, who began mission work in the Wynds in 1853 while completing his divinity studies, and became the first minister of the Wynds territorial church in 1854. MacColl became convinced that the work of reclaiming the 'sunken masses' to Chalmers's Christian communal ideal would not be achieved by a number of isolated operations, but would need to be pursued comprehensively.[17] As soon as he felt the Wynds church and schools were secure, MacColl turned his attention to a neighbouring district. With the support of a wealthy iron manufacturer, he purchased a site for a church and hall in the Bridgegate, and with a portion of his Wynds congregation as his agency, he began a new territorial operation, which included a medical mission. The Bridgegate territorial church was opened in 1860, and almost immediately young working-class men from his congregation began venturing into surrounding areas for district visiting – laying the foundations for four additional territorial churches and schools at Cadder, Cathcart, Carmunnock and Crossmyloof.[18] The work of MacColl and other territorial missionaries was assisted by the revival of 1859–60.

[14] *Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland* (1851), 304–32; C.G. Brown, 'Religion and the Development of an Urban Society: Glasgow 1780–1914' (Glasgow Univ. Ph.D., 1981), 412–14.

[15] *Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland* (1852), 306–21; *Proceedings* (1854), 280–1; Appendix, 140–5.

[16] *Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland* (1853), Appendix, 261–2.

[17] D. MacColl, *Among the Masses; or Work in the Wynds* (London, 1867), 197.

[18] Ibid., 358–62.

Nativist fears of Irish Catholic immigration also encouraged support for territorial operations designed to achieve a Protestant commonwealth. Between 1854 and 1867, the Free Church added twenty territorial churches in Glasgow, with agencies of district visitors, schools, savings banks, clothing societies, temperance societies – intended to create and maintain Christian communities in working-class districts.[19]

In Edinburgh, the Free Church territorial movement initiated by Chalmers in 1844 was revived and strengthened by the example of the Wynds movement in Glasgow. William Tasker, Chalmers's choice as minister of the West Port territorial church, emerged as an impassioned propagandist for the movement. More influential was James Hood Wilson, a close friend of Glasgow's Dugald MacColl, who in 1853 became missionary to the Fountainbridge territorial operation. A 'muscular Christian', Wilson directed his physical strength against abusive husbands and local toughs, while he was fearless in the face of cholera. He treated the inhabitants of the Fountainbridge as his equals and gained their confidence.[20] Becoming the first minister of the Chalmers Territorial Church in the Fountainbridge in 1854, he founded schools, a soup kitchen, and a Chalmers Working Men's Club and Institute, with library, reading room, games room, night classes and public lectures. His working-class congregation then began a territorial mission of its own in a neighbouring district.[21] With a bequest of £10,000 from a Miss Barclay, the magnificent Barclay church was erected for the new territorial community, and Wilson became the minister there in 1864, bringing with him some of the congregation from the overcrowded Fountainbridge church.[22] Almost immediately, his new congregation began still another territorial mission. There was a tone of colonial enthusiasm in these operations, with their language of 'reclaiming' moral waste and expanding Christian 'territory'. In his opening address as moderator of the Free Church General Assembly of 1895, Wilson recalled the excitement which young ministers experienced in the 'territorial Movement' of the 1850s and 1860s. Theological students felt they should devote time to the territorial missions before settling into an ordinary charge. Under Chalmers's continuing influence, 'the Free Church had, in its Home Mission operations, become aggressive as no other church then was', and was 'in the best sense a national Church'.[23]

In 1854, the Home Mission and Church Extension Committee of the Free Church General Assembly began making special grants to encourage and

[19] Ibid., 257–306, 320–35, 373.
[20] J. Wells, *The Life of James Hood Wilson* (London, 1905), 36–61.
[21] Ibid., 72–127.
[22] Ibid., 143.
[23] *Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland* (1895), 3.

sustain territorial community-building operations in deprived urban areas throughout Scotland. During the first year, grants were made to five new urban territorial operations – two in Edinburgh, two in Dundee, and one in Ayr – which were in addition to the new territorial operations being supported by the Glasgow Committee.[24] Numbers continued to grow, until by 1868, the Free Church was supporting thirty-three territorial operations in urban Scotland. These operations included territorial day, evening, and Sunday schools, savings banks, clothing societies, libraries, reading rooms, temperance societies, as well as hundreds of voluntary workers. Indeed, a single territorial operation at the Pleasance in Edinburgh had alone over 150 voluntary visitors and workers.[25] The territorial operations were viewed as living expressions of Chalmers's godly commonwealth ideal. 'The territorial charges which they now had in their large towns', insisted a speaker at the Free Church Assembly of 1870, 'were all the offspring of Dr. Chalmers' West Port Territorial Mission; and the best monument they could erect to the memory of that distinguished man, would be to erect more'.[26]

The Free Church commitment to the territorial community ideal reached its high point during the late 1860s and early 1870s. There was growing concern over both the rising costs of poor relief and the continuing social misery and unrest. Many became convinced that the Poor Law of 1845 had failed. The total cost of poor relief was estimated to have risen from about £300,000 to over £850,000 per annum, while the New Poor Law had not fulfilled the promise of W.P. Alison and other proponents that a decent and secure State provision for the poor would encourage self-help and moral improvement, and elevate the condition of the labouring poor. Urban deprivation had not been eliminated, and conditions for the urban poor may even have deteriorated. New charitable associations were now created in Scottish cities – including an Edinburgh 'Chalmers Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor' – which embraced Chalmers's criticisms of legal poor relief and employed district visiting and case studies on the St. John's model. Growing criticisms of the Poor Law led to the formation of a Parliamentary Select Committee on the Scottish Poor Laws in 1869.[27] Some in the Free Church feared social unrest and revolutionary ideas among the irreligious 'sunken masses' of the cities,

[24] *Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland* (1855), 92–6.
[25] *Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland* (1868), 130–2.
[26] *Proceedings and Debates of the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland* (1870), 143.
[27] I. Levitt, *Poverty and Welfare in Scotland 1890–1948* (Edinburgh, 1988), 14–18; [A. Richardson], *The Future Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1870), 258.

fears which were greatly increased in early 1871 with the violent events of the Paris Commune.[28] For many, the only answer to the social crisis lay in Chalmers's territorial community ideal. 'As an instrument for overtaking the reclamation of the lapsed masses', the Free Church minister, John Pirie, assured the Glasgow Free Church Presbytery in December 1871, 'I have the most perfect faith in that particular form of missionary organisation known as Dr. Chalmers' Territorial Scheme'.[29] 'The true and only remedy for the irreligion of our City', asserted the Glasgow Free Church minister, James Johnston, in 1871, 'is a return to the old parochial system . . . so eloquently advocated by Dr. Chalmers'.[30]

During the mid 1870s, however, this Free Church enthusiasm for Chalmers's territorial system began to wane. The early 1870s had been the noon tide; after that the Free Church underwent a gradual, but perceptible, movement away from the godly commonwealth ideal. It began ceasing to perceive of itself as a national Church, with responsibility for the spiritual and social welfare of the whole people of Scotland, and increasingly viewed itself as a gathered Church of believers. In part, this was the result of the passing away of the older Free Church leadership, especially Robert Candlish and Thomas Guthrie (strong supporters of the territorial ideal), and the emergence to leadership of Robert Rainy, who embraced the principle of religious Voluntaryism. The Scottish Education Act of 1872 brought presbyterian schools under the management of elected school boards, greatly diminishing the educational functions of the Free Church territorial missions. In 1874, Rainy brought the Free Church into alliance with the United Presbyterians to campaign for the disestablishment and disendowment of the Church of Scotland, and the end of all establishments. The Free Church was strengthened in this new voluntaryist direction by the national revival of 1873–4 associated with Dwight L. Moody and Ira D. Sankey, two professional American revivalists who placed emphasis on personal salvation and the individual decision for Christ. While the Free Church continued to provide grants for territorial operations, the numbers of these operations and the attention given to territorial missions declined. When the Free Church held a great public meeting in Edinburgh in 1880

[28] *Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland* (1871), 248; See also T. Guthrie, *The Poor and How to Help Them* (London, 1868); J. Johnston, *Religious Destitution in Glasgow* (Glasgow, 1870); J. Begg, *The Ecclesiastical and Social Evils of Scotland, and How to Remedy Them* (Edinburgh, 1871); W.G. Blaikie, *The Future of the Working Classes: God or Mammon?* (Edinburgh, 1872).

[29] J. Pirie, *The Lapsed, with Suggestions as to the Best Means of Raising Them* (Edinburgh, 1871), 21.

[30] J. Johnston, *The Rising Tide of Irreligion, Pauperism, Immorality, and Death in Glasgow, and How to Turn It* (Glasgow, 1871), 43–4.

to mark the centenary of Chalmers's birth, virtually no notice was given to his territorial community ideal.[31] In 1883, the Free Church General Assembly was supporting only twenty-four territorial operations, and the Convener of the Home Missions and Church Extension Committee observed to the Assembly that 'there was a feeling in the Church against extension', including opposition to operations in 'mission districts that were poor, because going there involved a certain amount of liability'. By 1888, the Free Church was supporting only seventeen territorial operations, and by 1889, only twelve.[32] During the third quarter of the nineteenth century, the Free Church had devoted considerable enthusiasm, effort and money to Chalmers's territorial system and the creation of independent urban Christian communities, emphasizing co-operation and fellowship. It had created fifty or sixty urban territorial churches, many with healthy congregations and strong social commitments. These communal operations had reflected the ideal of independence from upper-class patronage and paternalism which had played such an important part in the Disruption of 1843, and which had continued to define the Free Church ethos. The territorial missions had also represented the high point of the Free Church's perception of itself as Scotland's true national Church with a mission to create, through voluntary effort, the godly commonwealth. But during the 1870s, the Free Church increasingly withdrew from its commitment to achieving the Christian commonwealth, and began regarding itself primarily as a gathered Church of Christian individuals, 'holding the fort' in the midst of a sinful, secular society.

While Chalmers's godly commonwealth ideal was waning in the Free Church, however, it was becoming increasingly important within the Established Church, helping to revive that Church's image as Scotland's national Church. The process of restoring Chalmers as a prophet of the Established Church had been a slow one. In the aftermath of the Disruption, Chalmers's reputation had fallen very low in the Establishment. He was the maker of the Disruption, the spoiler of the national Church. His name was scarcely mentioned; indeed, the Church of Scotland General Assembly, though it was meeting at the time of Chalmers's death in 1847, declined even to notice the event. Gradually, however, Churchmen began returning to Chalmers's social ideal and his reputation was quietly restored.

Much of the credit for reviving Chalmers's communal ideal in the

[31] 'Centenary of Dr. Thomas Chalmers: Full Report of Celebration Meeting in Edinburgh', *Daily Review* (Edinburgh), 4 March 1880.

[32] *Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland* (1883), 66, and 'Report of the Home Mission and Church Extension Committee', Appendix III; *Proceedings* (1888), Appendix III; *Proceedings* (1890), Appendix III.

Established Church belongs to Professor James Robertson, who had been an Aberdeenshire parish minister and an active member of Chalmers's Church Extension Committee during the 1830s. Robertson had remained in the Establishment in 1843, and was appointed to the Chair of Church History at Edinburgh University. In 1846, he became convener of a General Assembly Endowment Committee, which sought to provide endowments for the 222 Church Extension churches erected between 1834 and 1841 by Chalmers's Church Extension campaign. A great admirer of Chalmers. Robertson revived the idea of an endowed parish system as the means to create a sense of Christian community.[33] He worked to revive the conception of the Established Church as the Church of the poor – the Church that through its endowments was uniquely qualified to reach those who were unable to pay for religious and educational services, and reclaim them for the Christian commonwealth. 'It is by the attention she has thus bestowed on the interests of the poor', Robertson wrote in 1856, 'that the Church has been enabled to rally her broken forces'. He was extremely successful in his appeals for funds, both to endow existing territorial churches and to build new churches: he raised over £400,000 and added some sixty new parishes to the Church before working himself to a premature death in 1860.

His work made a great impression on the young A. H. Charteris, who wrote Robertson's biography. Charteris was a Church of Scotland minister in Glasgow from 1863 to 1868, during the height of the Free Church territorial movement. On moving to Edinburgh to take up an academic appointment, he became a leading proponent of the Church's social mission, and an advocate of Chalmers's ideal of an aggressive urban territorial mission. In 1870, Charteris organized his Edinburgh students into the Tolbooth University Mission, which proceeded on the lines of Chalmers's West Port operation, mapping out a district in Edinburgh's Old Town, conducting house-to-house visiting and establishing district Sunday schools, Bible classes, prayer meetings, mothers' meetings, clothing society, savings bank, reading room, library, games room, musical entertainments, and a work society to provide assistance with employment. The aim was both to create a sense of Christian community in a deprived urban area, and to educate future ministers in the benefits of the parish community ideal.[34] In 1869, on Charteris's recommendation, the Church of Scotland General Assembly created the Christian Life and Work Committee, to promote and co-ordinate the evangelical and pastoral

[33] A.H. Charteris, *The Life of the Rev. James Robertson* (Edinburgh, 1863), 51, 254–69.
[34] A. Gordon, *The Life of Archibald Hamilton Charteris* (London, 1912), 158–63.

work of the Church.[35] Under Charteris's convenorship, the Life and Work Committee advocated the territorial system. 'Had your Committee a thousand tongues', it asserted in its report of 1871, 'they would with them all proclaim that the *territorial home mission*, and it alone . . . is proved by all experience to be the only effectual means of bringing the Gospel to bear on the masses of the population, and raising them'.[36]

Also contributing to the revival of Chalmers's parish community ideal in the established Church were the brothers Norman and Donald Macleod, members of a prominent Scottish clerical family. An admirer of Chalmers and a close friend of James Robertson, Norman Macleod became minister of the Barony parish church, Glasgow, in 1851, and commenced an aggressive territorial operation in his parish in 1852. This included the usual district Sunday schools, several parish day schools, evening classes for adults, a savings bank, a tea and refreshment room, reading room, Young Men's Association and clothing society. His parish church also supported aggressive missionary activity into surrounding districts.[37] Macleod related to his working class parishioners with genuine personal warmth and respect, and treated them as equals. In 1860, he began editing a new popular religious magazine, *Good Words*, which became one of the most successful Christian periodicals in Victorian Britain. *Good Words* did much to popularize Chalmers's social ideal, directing attention in its first issue to the influence of Chalmers's thought on the efficient communal charity operation in the German city of Elberfeld.[38] In a pamphlet published in 1867, based on articles previously published in *Good Words*, Macleod advocated Chalmers's territorial community system as the only effective means to deal with growing urban poverty. 'Whatever may be the fame of Chalmers in the next generation as a theologian or as a Church leader', Macleod maintained, 'he is destined to tell on the future . . . by his wise and sagacious plans . . . for elevating the masses, economically and spiritually'.[39] Following Norman Macleod's early death in 1872, his brother, Donald Macleod of the Park Church, Glasgow, took over as editor of *Good Words* and as a leading proponent of Chalmers's territorial community ideal in the established Church. He rejected as patronizing attempts to reach the urban poor through paid missionaries and

[35] Ibid., 303–12.

[36] *Reports on the Schemes of the Church of Scotland* (1871), 412. See also *Reports* (1872), 446–9. Later in the 1870s, Charteris lost some of his confidence in the territorial system. Lord Sands [Christopher N. Johnston], *Dr. Archibald Scott* (Edinburgh, 1919), 88.

[37] D. Macleod, *Memoir of Norman Macleod*, vol. ii (London, 1876), 1–14.

[38] 'Dr. Chalmers at Elberfeld', *Good Words*, no. I (January 1860).

[39] N. Macleod, *How Can We Best Relieve Our Deserving Poor?* (London, 1867), 31.

mission stations. The masses, he observed, rightly 'stand aloof and refuse to be missionised'. The only means of elevating them, he maintained, was through the creation of autonomous, self-respecting Christian communities on Chalmers's model. Such communities were needed to preserve the fabric of society amid large-scale industrialization and the anonymity of mass society. Chalmers's communal ideal would provide society with a 'deeper foundation than selfish utility or the cold requirements of the social contract'.[40] In the later 1880s, Donald Macleod emerged as a leading advocate of the municipal provision of working-class housing in Glasgow, calling for both increased governmental social legislation and a more efficient territorial system in the Churches.[41] He represented a link between Chalmers's godly commonwealth ideal of the 1830s and 1840s, and the Glasgow municipal collectivism of the later 1880s and 1890s.

The renewed commitment to Chalmers's parish community and godly commonwealth ideals in the Church of Scotland coincided with the remarkable revival of the Establishment, in membership and social outreach, during the 1860s and 1870s. Chalmers's parochial ideal also presented Scottish Churchmen with arguments for Church defence once the campaign for disestablishment began in earnest in Scotland in the early 1870s. In a pamphlet on *Endowed Territorial Work*, published in 1873, the Edinburgh minister and future leader of the Church of Scotland, Archibald Scott, argued that endowments and centralized authority were necessary for the organization of industrial Scotland into territorial communities. Only an endowed, established Church could commit itself to the needs of the whole nation, including the poor who could not afford to pay for church membership; the efforts of voluntary Churches could never achieve Chalmers's godly commonwealth ideal.[42] In his Baird Lectures for 1875, also published under the title *Endowed Territorial Work*, William Smith, minister of North Leith and James Robertson's successor as convener of the Church's Endowment Committee, defined Chalmers's territorial community ideal as 'essential to every rightly constituted Church'. Only a properly endowed territorial Church, he argued, could penetrate deprived urban areas, unite the social classes, reduce the growing burden of legal

[40] D. Macleod, 'The Parochial System', in *The Church and the People*, St. Giles Lectures, 6th Series (Edinburgh, 1886), 131, 154. See also, D. Macleod, *Home Missions* (Glasgow, 1883) and D. Macleod, 'Thomas Chalmers', in *Scottish Divines 1505–1872*, St. Giles Lectures, 3rd Series (Edinburgh, 1883), 273–316.

[41] D. Macleod, *Non-Church-Going and Housing of the Poor: Speech delivered in the General Assembly* (Edinburgh, 1888).

[42] A. Scott, *Endowed Territorial Work, the Means of Meeting Spiritual Destitution* (Edinburgh, 1873), esp. 9–33. For Scott's leadership of the Church of Scotland during the 1890s and his continued commitment to the parish community ideal, see Lord Sands, *Dr. Archibald Scott*, op. cit., 76–104.

poor relief and elevate the whole population to communal responsibility.[43] In a lengthy defence of Chalmers's parish community ideal and the endowed national Church, published in 1884, the Church of Scotland minister Robert Milne rejected *laissez faire* policies. 'The better classes', he observed, 'can take care of themselves; the very poorest cannot'. 'What is liberty', he asked, 'if it is only liberty to go to ruin?'[44] He advocated close co-operation between an endowed territorial Church and an interventionist State. The parish communities of the national Church, he argued, would end the rootlessness of the urban poor. Such stable communities would in turn render the State's increasing body of social legislation more effective in bringing lasting social improvement.[45] By the 1880s, then, it was increasingly the established Church which claimed the mantle of Chalmers, while the majority in the Free Church joined with the United Presbyterians in moving away from Chalmers's territorial system and campaigning for disestablishment. Chalmers's godly commonwealth ideal proved important in providing arguments for the intellectual defence of the established Church, and helping it stave off the threat of disestablishment during the 1870s and 1880s.

With the waning of the disestablishment movement in Scotland during the 1890s, Chalmers's territorial community ideal also began to fade. Scottish society was changing, with the growth of large-scale industries and the corresponding development of industry-wide trade unions. Class consciousness was becoming more acute, as reflected in the emergence of socialist organizations like the Social Democratic Federation in 1883 and the formation of the Scottish Labour Party in 1888 and the Independent Labour Party in 1892. Scottish urban society was also becoming more religiously pluralistic, with the massive immigration, especially during the 1870s, of Catholics from Ireland and Italy, and of Jews from Central Europe. District visitors found the principle of 'aggressive' house-to-house visiting less and less workable, as they encountered, not simply the indifference of the lapsed, but real hostility from non-presbyterian households. The increasing residential segregation of the 1880s and 1890s, with the middle classes moving to suburban neighbourhoods, decreased the amount of middle-class effort and money that could be called upon to initiate community-building operations in deprived urban districts. Further, as the State assumed a more active role in social welfare during the 1890s and early 1900s, the idea of rooting welfare in small,

[43] W. Smith, *Endowed Territorial Work: Its Supreme Importance to the Church and Country* (Edinburgh, 1875), 93, 236–72.
[44] R. Milne, *The Problem of the Churchless and Poor in Our Large Towns* (Edinburgh, 1884), 69.
[45] Ibid., 53–95.

Church-based, largely self-contained communities seemed less and less a viable alternative. Chalmers's communal ideal succumbed to what Callum Brown has termed a late nineteenth-century 'crisis for religion' associated with social change and new social visions.[46] In 1901, John Marshall Lang, convener of the Church of Scotland Commission on the Religious Condition of the People from 1890 to 1896, concluded that the territorial schemes of Chalmers and James Robertson had proved sterile. They had failed to reclaim the lapsed urban masses and it was time for the Church to explore new methods of social mission.[47] Chalmers's social ideas were not totally forgotten. His views on the importance of regular visiting and case studies in the distribution of relief continued to influence social workers, such as Helen Kerr, secretary of both the Edinburgh Social Union and the Edinburgh Charity Organisation Society, who was described in 1911 as the 'Octavia Hill of Edinburgh'.[48] But by the end of the Victorian era, Chalmers's communal ideal was no longer inspiring serious effort from the Scottish Churches; it was, as Lord Rosebery had noted, a land of promise that his countrymen were not destined to enter.[49]

Chalmers's social vision had exercised an enduring influence through much of the Victorian era. Through his godly commonwealth ideal, he had contributed to the preservation of the traditional communal values of pre-industrial Scotland amid the rapid social changes of industrialization and urbanization. His godly commonwealth ideal had survived the Disruption of 1843 and had profoundly influenced the mainstream presbyterian Churches throughout the Victorian era. Although its influence was at first most dramatically felt in the impressive urban mission of the Free Church during the 1850s and 1860s, by the 1870s and 1880s it was the established Church of Scotland which increasingly claimed Chalmers's mantle. Indeed, Chalmers's territorial ideal had played a major role in the revival of the established Church and in providing it with an effective defence against the disestablishment campaign. Although Chalmers had taken a leading role

[46] C. Brown, *The Social History of Religion in Scotland since 1730* (London, 1987), 169–208.

[47] J. Marshall Lang, *The Church and Its Social Mission*, the Baird Lectures for 1901 (Edinburgh, 1902), 115–33.

[48] H.L. Kerr, *The Path of Social Progress: A Discussion of Old and New Ideas in Social Reform* (Edinburgh, 1912), 1–37. For the comparison of Helen Kerr and Octavia Hill, see *The Churches' Task in Social Reform: Report of the Proceedings of the United Free Church Congress on Social Problems* (Edinburgh, 1912), 68.

[49] In the 1930s, following the presbyterian Church Union of 1929, John White, architect of the Union and leader of the Church of Scotland, sought to revive Chalmers's Church Extension campaign – though with only modest success. See A. Muir, *John White* (London, 1958), 285–95, 321–34. For comparisons of the Church Extension campaigns of White and Chalmers, see 'Thomas Chalmers and John White', *British Weekly*, 24 August 1933.

in the Disruption of 1843, his ideas, as represented by James Robertson, Norman and Donald Macleod and Archibald Scott, may well have later helped to save the Church of Scotland from disestablishment.

Through much of the nineteenth century, a time of weak government and great social tensions in Scotland, the godly commonwealth ideal had helped maintain a sense of social cohesion, especially in the urban environment. The territorial operations had involved thousands of voluntary workers, and affected tens of thousands of urban Scots. They had formed many successful urban churches. These operations, with their careful organization and considerable investment of resources, demonstrated that the Church was seriously concerned with the problems of urban society. They reflected a real effort to overcome the anonymity and fragmentation in the rapidly expanding industrial towns and cities, and to place the Church at the centre of collective life. The continuing Scottish support for the territorial ideal is a reminder of the importance of community in Victorian Scotland. Ideas of social responsibility were strong; many looked upon wealth as held in trust for the general welfare. Although most nineteenth-century Scots accepted the laws of political economy as true and inexorable, they none the less also recognised the human need for a sense of community to set against the effects of economic individualism, the competitive marketplace, and the concentrations of wealth and productive power. While Evangelicalism was the predominant ethos in the Scottish presbyterian Churches between the 1830s and 1880s, concern for individual morality and personal salvation had coexisted beside the desire to organize society into closely-knit communities, independent from upper-class patronage and State paternalism, and embracing the values of corporate responsibility. The effort of the presbyterian Churches to organize Scottish society into small, autonomous communities, recognizing both the individuality of each member and the need for co-operation and benevolence, may have been utopian in an industrial century, increasingly dominated by large-scale firms, international finance capital, industry-wide trade unions, and the military-industrial complex. But many Victorian Scots had found Chalmers's godly commonwealth a compelling ideal, for all that.