

Thomas Chalmers and the Laying of the Foundation Stone  
for New College (3 June 1846)

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Thomas Chalmers, the first Principal of New College, was a distinguished Church of Scotland minister, theologian, moral philosopher, political economist, social reformer and ecclesiastical politician. He had devoted his life to seeking to improve social conditions, especially for the urban poor, by promoting innovative programmes for the parish ministry. In his theology, he endeavoured to combine the rational, social science approaches of the Scottish Enlightenment with the deeply personal, heart-felt religious faith of the Evangelical Revival. His work focused on how God meant for people to live together in society. In 1843, at the great Disruption, Chalmers led perhaps half the membership out of the national Church of Scotland, in protest against what they perceived, with much justification, as efforts by the British state to impose control over the Church for political purposes. Chalmers and the outgoing members formed the Free Church of Scotland as a new national Church, free of government patronage and control, and recognising only the headship of Christ. Soon they were building hundreds of new churches and schools across Scotland. They also became active in overseas missions, especially in India. Further, they established a college in Edinburgh for the training of ministers, initially in unpretentious rented rooms on George Street in Edinburgh. Chalmers became its Principal and Professor of Divinity, and devoted himself to developing an innovative curriculum, with a range of disciplines.

In addition to his Free Church College work, Chalmers had, since 1844, initiated a new community-building effort among the poor in Edinburgh. He recruited a team of voluntary workers to help him improve social conditions in what was then the deprived West Port district of the city. Chalmers and his team pursued innovative social programmes, including day and evening schools, nursery schools, Sunday schools, church services in a rented room, a reading room and lending library, savings bank, bathing and laundry facilities. He found peace and fulfilment in returning to his early work as a Christian pastor, working among the poorest in the city. He hoped that his West Port operation would inspire other local community-building efforts, leading to the permanent improvement of social conditions for the labouring orders. The West Port operation was also linked to his College work. He recruited students to help him in his West Port work, viewing service among the poor and marginalised as a vital part of the New College education. This led to the formation of the New College Mission Society, initially for work in the West Port and Grassmarket districts.

The mid-1840s were a difficult time for the new Church and for the nation. Scotland experienced economic depression from 1843, with tens of thousands thrown out of work. In Ireland and the Scottish Highlands, the potato crop failed in 1845 and some were predicting (rightly in the case of Ireland) there would soon be mass starvation. Many political conservatives, meanwhile, were attacking the Free Church as a rebellious movement. Free Church members were denounced as dangerous radicals and democrats, who rejected the established order in Church and State. Many landowners across Scotland refused to sell the Free Church sites for churches, and they evicted Free Church tenant farmers and dismissed labourers. Local authorities dismissed some 500 teachers who joined the Free Church. Many were sacrificing and suffering for their beliefs.

Undeterred by the challenges they faced, Chalmers and the Free Church decided they would erect a grand College building in Edinburgh. It would be a symbol of their faith and ideals, of their determination to persevere against persecution and denunciations. It would be a college free of government patronage and control, a college representing an independent voice, and a commitment to the highest standards of academic excellence. Some hoped that it would be not simply a theological college, but a great free university, with a full range of courses in the arts and sciences. The Free Church purchased a site on the Mound, and employed one of Scotland's premier architects, William Henry Playfair, to design an iconic building.

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of June 1846, Chalmers presided at the laying of the foundation stone for the New College. He spoke outdoors on what was a crowded building site. And what was he like as a person? He was now 66 years of age, of medium height and heavy set. He was clean shaven, and his hair, which had gone white, was long. He had never been a handsome man, but as he aged, he became almost so. He had had a long, companionable marriage, and there were six daughters, and no sons. So he had spent much of his life in a household of women, who bantered with him; he had a warm sense of humour and could laugh at himself. Later that summer, he would organise and preside over an outdoor party for the ragged children of the West Port, with strawberries and cream for each child. He could be hot-tempered, especially when he perceived injustice, but as the evening shadows now fell over his life and eternity approached, he had grown much calmer. He spoke with a broad Fife accent. He could appear stronger than he actually was; he had suffered a serious heart attack some years earlier and his heart was weak.

After a pounding on a stone three times with a mallet to summon attention, Chalmers spoke to those gathered around, who included a number of workers on the site. He pulled out a scrap of paper. He apologised, with a

broad smile, for taking to 'the paper' for his talk, but he joked that if he were to try to speak without notes, his remarks might become an 'interminable rigmarole'. In his address, he responded to those who portrayed the Free Church as a radical political movement, intent on subverting the social order – while at the same time insisting that the New College would be committed to building a better society. He looked in particular to the workmen present on the site as he spoke:

“It delights me to observe that so many of the working classes in our city now stand within the reach of my voice. Within the walls now to be raised by their hands there may or there may not in time be delivered the lessons of general science. But from the very outset, we hope, there will be the lessons of that higher wisdom which is often hid from the wise and the prudent, and revealed unto babes. We leave to others the passions and politics of this world; and nothing will ever be taught, I trust, in any of our halls, which shall have the remotest tendency to disturb the existing order of things, or to confound the ranks and distinctions which at present obtain in society. But there is one equality between man and man which will strenuously be taught, -- the essential equality of human souls; and that in the high count and reckoning of eternity, the soul of the poorest of nature's children, the raggedest boy that runs along the pavement, is of like estimation in the eyes of heaven with that of the greatest and the noblest of our land. The youth who frequent our classes will with all earnestness and emphasis be told, that the Christian minister is a man of no rank, because a man of all ranks; and that although he should have an education which might qualify him for holding converse with princes and peers, it is his peculiar glory to be a frequent visitant of

the poor man's humble cottage, and to pray by the poor man's dying bed. Heaven grant that the platform of humble life may be raised immeasurably higher than at present .... Let kings retain their sceptres and nobles their cornets, -- what we want is a more elevated ground-floor for our general population."

We would have wished that Chalmers had been more forthright in his call for social equality – more insistent on human rights and more inclusive of women and people of colour, in his vision of a better world. He was a man of his time. But there is nevertheless something moving in insistence on the essential equality of all peoples, and that learning should lead us to service to others, and especially the poor and marginalised. The late Professor Duncan Forrester described this short address as a mission statement for the New College.

Thomas Chalmers would be dead within a year of giving this address, and he would not live to see the New College building. But the New College that he envisaged, with its ideals of learning and social service, has endured.