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A Brief Commentary on William Bruce by Alan Misson

Earlier in the year I watched a repeat of one of the BBC programmes on *Great British Railway Journeys* presented by Michael Portillo. In the particular episode he was travelling from Glasgow to Cumbrae and towards the end he mentioned the Polar Explorer William Speirs Bruce. When I heard this name a bell rang in my New-Church History grey-cells! William Bruce must be a very common name especially in Scotland but like many New Church people over the last 150 years I have delved into Rev William Bruce's commentaries on Matthew, John, and Revelation on many occasions and have found them inspiring and very useful. Could there be a connection I wondered. But what really set me going was the name Speirs since I was well aware of James Speirs, particularly in connection with the Swedenborg Society. In his *A History of the Swedenborg Society*, Richard Lines wrote – 'James Speirs (1842-1912) had a remarkable career with the Society. He had responded to an advertisement in the New Church periodical the *Intellectual*

Repository when a successor to C P Alvey as the Society's Agent was sought and was appointed to the post. ... he was also a respected member of the Glasgow society of the New Church and was its treasurer.'

So I began to feel certain that William Speirs Bruce and Rev William Bruce must be connected. And sure enough a quick internet search showed that he was indeed the grandson of Rev William Bruce. Finding this information I felt I needed to know more about William Bruce's origins and family connections, with the result that this article provides a brief commentary on his life and also his wife Charity's family history which is really fascinating in its own right.

My story begins in the Orkney Islands with the birth of Caleb Isbister in August 1769 to Thomas and Ursula Isbister in Stenness. When Caleb was about 18 he travelled to London and became acquainted with the New Church congregation at Great East Cheap, where he was baptised into the New Church on 21st August 1791. Caleb's name appears on the same page as William Butter whose wife Mary hosted the early meetings of the Swedenborg Society. Also on the same page is the baptism of Sarah Larkin who married Caleb at St Andrew's Holborn in 1793.

Their first child, Charity, was baptised into the New Church on the 2nd of February 1794, a month after her birth. Over the next 18 years another 10 children were born to Caleb and Sarah, all of whom were baptised into the New Church. In 8 of these cases the baptism follows within a month or so of the child's birth but in the case of their sons Caleb, Thomas, and Joshua there is a delay of 2 or 3 years. In Caleb's case he was definitely not born in London but back in the Orkneys on the 17th July 1797, so it appears that from time to time the family made the very difficult journey back home and stayed there for lengthy periods before returning to London and the New Church. Intriguingly, Volume 1 of the *Annals of the New Church* has this entry for the year 1800: *Orkney Islands – Readers of the Writings are said to exist in these remote islands.*

Caleb Isbister was a cabinet maker and according to his daughter Charity's obituary in the *Intellectual Repository* for January 1865 he was initially very successful, becoming prosperous, but then things went wrong for his business and adversity set in, so much so, that he and his family returned to Scotland but this time to Edinburgh. How they made the journey with their 11 children, all of whom were still alive at the time, is hard to understand. But in 1814 tragedy struck and Caleb's wife Sarah died leaving Charity and a younger sister in charge of the remaining 9 children. Charity's obituary tells us – *In this last capacity she had much and sad experience; for the younger children, like tender plants removed to a less congenial soil and under a severer sky, one by one dropped and died till only four were left.*

Now at this point I need to write about the establishment of the New Church in Edinburgh and the arrival on the scene of a young William Bruce.

The Edinburgh New Church met for the first time on the 8th October 1815 under the lay leadership of Thomas Parker who had been a barrister working in York and a Methodist Lay Preacher, and who had gone to London sometime in the late 1780's with his wife Margaret. He soon became attracted to Swedenborg's Writings and is named as one of the early members of the Theosophical Society instituted for the promotion of the Heavenly Doctrines of the New Jerusalem. Margaret Parker was baptised into the New Church at Great East Cheap on the 7th August 1791, just 2 weeks before Caleb Isbister. Thomas Parker was baptised a few months later with the result that he lost a lot of his London clients who were Methodists and his law business suffered greatly. He then gave up his work as a barrister, removed briefly to Glasgow and then settled in Edinburgh, by which time he was in his 70's.

In chapter 21 of Rev Dr Jonathen Bayley's *Early Worthies of the New Church* we can read the following – *He [Thomas Parker] preached the doctrines for some time in Glasgow, and then removed to Edinburgh. He taught the truth privately for a year or two to souls who hungered and thirsted for it; but after the memorable visit of Mr Hindmarsh in 1817, he began to preach the doctrines publicly, and a considerable number, among whom was the young man who became the Rev. W. Bruce, looked back to him as the blessed medium of their entry within the gates of the Holy City.*

In 1817 William Bruce was 18 years old and he became Secretary of the Edinburgh New Church. William must have supported himself in some way and interestingly his future father-in-law's will describes William Bruce as a shoemaker. Seven years later he was invited to serve the church in Dundee. The following year, on Monday 30th May 1825, William married Charity Isbister in Dundee and there they settled for a while. Unfortunately William's health gave way and after three years he had to give up his work in Dundee and return to Edinburgh.

William Bruce was ordained into the ministry of the New Church by Rev Samuel Noble on July 21st 1829 to serve the church in Edinburgh. In 1832 William and Charity had a daughter Sarah and then in 1834 a son Samuel Noble, who would become the father of William Speirs Bruce.

Now I can return to Charity's father Caleb and her brother Caleb.

Caleb Isbister senior, having suffered severe business problems in London, seems to have recovered from this setback, and his cabinet-making business in Edinburgh developed well. Following this success he was able to establish another cabinet-making business in Glasgow and to marry for the second time, with the result that on

his death in 1852 Caleb Isbister senior had significant assets, described in his will, in both Edinburgh and Glasgow.

Caleb Isbister junior seems to have followed his father's footsteps in to the cabinet-making business. But in 1819 at the age of 22 it seems he had a desire to leave Edinburgh and go as a settler to the Cape of Good Hope. However this move did not take place although his desire to emigrate remained strong. In May 1823 he married Elizabeth Newton, and then ten years later in 1833 he set sail from Greenock for America with his wife Elizabeth, arriving in New York on the 17th August 1833 with four children and a baby of five weeks.

As I will show in a moment, Caleb junior, having grown up in London and Edinburgh amongst New Church people, maintained his interest in the New Church despite his arrival in America. Whether the family stayed for any period of time in New York I do not know but by 1836 they were settled in Sharpsburg, Allegheny City on the north shore across the river from Pittsburgh [Allegheny City was incorporated into Pittsburgh in 1907]. At some stage Caleb had made contact with the developing New Church in America and by 1839 Caleb Isbister was listed as an 'isolated receiver'. A small circle of New Church people began to gather in Pittsburgh and during a visit by Rev Richard de Charms Caleb was drawn into that circle which eventually turned into the Pittsburgh New Church in 1841. For some years Caleb was the president of this small society and his name can be found at the end of a letter from the Western Convention to the 29th Meeting of the General Convention of the New Church in 1847.

For several decades Pittsburgh had been referred to as the 'gateway to the west' and many potential settlers passed through there on their way west to Ohio, Indiana and Illinois. It seems that Caleb Isbister still had itchy feet and sometime around 1860 he purchased land in the area of Onarga, Illinois and the family, including four children born in Allegheny, moved west. Did he maintain contact with the New Church? I don't know. But the land he settled in Onarga was very close to the new Illinois Central Railroad running from Chicago some 90 miles north on its way south ultimately to New Orleans. So maybe he was able to get to the Chicago New Church, which had been established in 1849, using this railroad.

But it is time to get back to Caleb's brother-in-law William. William Bruce remained as the minister at Edinburgh for some 20 years, attending the 42nd General Conference as President in August 1849 at the church in Cross Street, Hatton Garden, London, where Rev Samuel Noble was still the minister. But by February 1851 the family had moved south and William had taken over the role of assistant to Samuel Noble whose eyesight was failing from cataracts. Rev Samuel Noble died on 27th August 1853 and William Bruce took over as minister of the Cross Street society, which he continued to lead until he resigned due to illness in 1861.

It was over the next 20 years that he now concentrated on the books for which he has become very well known throughout the New Church world. Perhaps the most popular of these is his commentaries on Matthew, John, and Revelation, but there is also his commentary on The First Three Kings of Israel. I have a copy of Bruce's commentary on Revelation with an inscription to me from Rev Claud Presland whose grandfather Rev William Alfred Presland had also been the minister in Edinburgh and then later the minister at Camden Road in London to which the congregation at Cross Street had moved in 1874. My copy is a second edition printed in 1906 by James Speirs, 1 Bloomsbury Street.

As I noted earlier in this article Charity Bruce's obituary appeared in the *Intellectual Repository* for January 1865 following her death on 24th November 1864, so sadly she missed the birth of her grandson William Speirs Bruce on 1st August 1867 whose fame led to the comments about him in the programme on *Great British Railway Journeys*.

Alan Misson

P.S.

Having written this article I became aware of another programme, Episode 2 of 4 in the series *The Last Explorers* presented by Neil Oliver with the title *William Speirs Bruce*. Unfortunately I have yet to see this programme.