



## A Life Less Ordinary

The Life of Father John Comper:  
Founder of St. Margaret of Scotland, Gallowgate

## Lecture delivered at St Margaret of Scotland on the Eve of the Feast of St James the Great, 25<sup>th</sup> of July 2003.

Two very distinctive events shaped the destiny of the Scottish Episcopal Church in the nineteenth century. The first was the Synod of Laurencekirk 1804, the second the Oxford Movement 1833-1845.

The Synod of Laurencekirk held on the 24<sup>th</sup> of October 1804 was a decisive victory for the then Primus, John Skinner, Bishop of Aberdeen. In many ways Skinner who lived between 1744-1816 had engineered the resurgence of the shattered remnant of Scots Episcopacy from the obloquy which had attended the Church's support of Jacobitism. His final *coup de grace* had been to end the independence of the 'English Mission' as he called it and set in process the course of events that led to the Union of the English Qualified Chapels in Scotland with the native Congregations of the Scottish Episcopal Church. This momentous change facilitated the birth of the modern Scottish Episcopal Communion in Scotland, but at a price. This brave and energetic new church saw much of her distinctive Scottishness sacrificed on the altar of Anglicisation. As the nineteenth century wore on Anglicisation increased at a pace. The canons enacted at General Synod in 1863 gave predominance to the English Liturgy as contained in the Book of Common Prayer, the Scottish Office being relegated to second place. The argument of Bishop Alexander Ewing of Argyll being that the use of the English Liturgy if generally adopted would unite all parties in the Church.<sup>1</sup> Dean Ramsay of Edinburgh the celebrated author of Reminiscences of Scottish Life and Character had nonchalantly, and in cavalier fashion, committed his casting vote in favour of the English Rite declaring that it would be no

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<sup>1</sup> F Goldie, A Short History of the Episcopal Church in Scotland, (The Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, 1976), p96.

great thing, much to the annoyance of the subject of this lecture who regarded it as “ a shameful ” degradation of the Scottish Rite.<sup>2</sup>

The Oxford Movement is generally regarded as having begun in a sermon delivered by John Keble in the University pulpit at Oxford on the 14<sup>th</sup> of July 1833 on ‘National Apostasy’, which was a response to the progressive decline of church life and the spread of ‘Liberalism’ in theology which were causing grave misgivings among Churchmen; on the other hand, the works of Charles Lloyd, Bishop of Oxford, and others, coupled with the Romantic Movement, had led to a new interest in many elements in primitive and medieval Christianity. Among the more immediate causes were the fear that that the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829 would lead many Anglicans into the Roman Catholic Church, the anxiety occasioned by the passing of the Reform Bill in 1832 and the plan to suppress ten Irish Bishoprics.<sup>3</sup>

The Oxford Movement took deep root in Scotland and revitalised the Scottish Church.

The reason for this being that the High Church theology of the Scots was receptive to these ideas emanating from south of the border, but also from the close contact and relationships built up by the Scots with high ranking English Divines in the preparations for the consecration of Samuel Seabury as first Bishop *apud Americanos* at Aberdeen in 1784, and with the attempts to repeal the Penal Laws against the Episcopalians in the 1780’s and 1790’s.

The consecration of Samuel Seabury brought the plight of the Scots Episcopalians to the attention of a group of High Churchmen in late Georgian England who went under the curious title of ‘The Hackney Phalanx’. These men<sup>1</sup> shared a common

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<sup>2</sup> J Comper, The Scottish Liturgy, Speeches of Rev John Comper and Rev Myers Danson. (Aberdeen University Press, Aberdeen, 1890), p17.

<sup>3</sup> The Oxford Movement, The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church. ( Oxford University Press, London, 1974), p1019.

<sup>1</sup> The English group were in the main connected with the University of Oxford and had staunch High Church theological and ecclesial views, they included: William Stevens, George Horne, William Jones, George Gaskin, Samuel Glasse, Jonathan Boucher, John James Watson, Joshua Watson and Henry Handley Norris.

passion with the Scots for Hutchinsonianism which was a philisophico-religious system which had originated with a north of England layman Mr John Hutchinson (1674-1737) whose works had been published in collective form in 1738. The Hackney group was the precursor of the Oxford Movement and in many ways had been encouraged by theological intercourse with the Scots, particularly impressive to them had been the Seabury Consecration of 1784 which had given to America a '*free, valid and purely ecclesiastical Episcopacy*' devoid of the shackles of Erastianism. They assisted the Scots Bishops with the repeal of the Penal Laws. The strenuous efforts of these high churchmen on behalf of the disestablished and formerly persecuted church in Scotland was a practical reflection of their concern for the inherent spiritual rights and independence of the church.<sup>2</sup>

The Scottish Episcopal Church in the mid-nineteenth century was regaining confidence and consequently, its influence in Scottish society. The Church was beginning to expand; new congregations and new churches appeared. Congregations were re-formed and consolidated throughout Scotland and missionary congregations planted. Impressive schemes like the founding of Glenalmond College in 1847 and the Collegiate buildings at Cumbrae 1849 were initiated. The chancel and transepts of St Ninian's Cathedral Perth were consecrated in 1850 by Bishop Alexander Forbes of Brechin acting on behalf of the aged Patrick Torry, Bishop of St Andrews. Perth Cathedral's foundation stone was, in fact the first such stone to be laid in Scotland since Fortrose Cathedral was built in the fourteenth century<sup>3</sup>. It seemed that the devotion of most Episcopalians had won through, for their church was now re-establishing itself on the Scottish scene.

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<sup>2</sup> P B Nockles, 'Continuity and Change in Anglican High Churchmanship in Britain 1792-1850', (D Phil Thesis, University of Oxford 1992). p33.

<sup>3</sup> D M Bertie, 'Scottish Episcopal Clergy 1689-2000'. (T&T Clark Edinburgh, 2000). p643.

The anglicising of the Scottish upper classes and the sending of their children to English public schools made Episcopacy more readily acceptable to this section of society. In fact many belonged both to the Episcopal Church and to the Establishment and exercised dual churchmanship. The appeal of the Episcopal Church in Scotland in the nineteenth century then was to the intellectuals and to the Lairds, to whom as a church, she was “closer, socially congenial and more attractive”<sup>4</sup> and she did not hold to stern Calvinistic Creed. In the days before the Oxford Movement when- by later standards- the Church of England had been markedly Low Church, the principles of the Scottish Episcopal Church had been those of the Tractarians. She had taught the divine origin of the Church, the apostolic succession and the threefold ministry of bishop, priest and deacon, baptismal regeneration, the real presence, the eucharistic sacrifice, and the communion of saints; and she had practised prayers for the departed, the observance of the fasts and festivals of the Church’s calendar, and the reservation of the consecrated elements for the sick.”<sup>1</sup>

It is true that after the Repeal of the Penal Laws in 1792 there was a return of faithful Episcopalians, those who had kept their loyalties secret in the time of persecution. Men like Parson Duncan Mackenzie had helped keep the faith alive in Strathnairn, and many others contributed to the resurgence of the Church in old established parishes in the North East. Men like Arthur Petrie and the Skinners<sup>2</sup> and their associates, to name but a few. To be honest without the Diocese of Aberdeen it is debatable whether the church would have survived. Someone recently described our communion in Scotland quite correctly as *the North East compromise*

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<sup>4</sup> A L Drummond and J Bulloch, The Church in Victorian Scotland 1843-1874 (The Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh 1975). p202.

<sup>1</sup> W Perry, The Oxford Movement in Scotland (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1933). p38.

<sup>2</sup> See A E Nimmo, ‘Bishop John Skinner and the Resurgence of Scots Episcopacy’ (Ph.D. Thesis University of Aberdeen, 1996).

in terms of the concept of *Ecclesia Scoticana*. In Appin and in Glencoe; even in far flung Lewis a small remnant held on to the faith despite lack of pastoral care and ecclesiastical vicissitudes.<sup>3</sup>

What probably had the biggest impact on Scottish ecclesiastical life was the attraction of Episcopalian Liturgy to Victorian Scots. The Church of Scotland's liturgical practices had changed little since the days of the Covenanters and the English Puritan influence, whereas the Episcopal party had discarded this 'bald' tradition with the influence of the non-Jurors and the Anglo-Catholic revival. The Kirk became slowly more aware of its deficiencies in its standards of worship which stood in stark comparison to the more elaborate offices of the Episcopal Church.<sup>4</sup> Worship is always a good vehicle of conversion. The Rev'd Archibald Alison of the Cowgate Chapel Edinburgh attracted many with his preaching, Henry Lord Cockburn described his sermons as 'the poetry of preaching'<sup>5</sup>.

Yet Episcopalianism struck few roots among the working people of Scotland except in Bridgeton in Glasgow with the missionary zeal of David Aitchison, Alexander Penrose's labours in the slums of Dundee and of course John Comper with his endeavours in Aberdeen's East End. The old established parishes had included either clansmen or labouring elements whereas "the recently founded congregations in the New Town of Edinburgh were exclusively congregations of the wealthy."<sup>6</sup> The salaried congregations of Edinburgh's West End appeared in stark contradiction to the poorer parishioners of Old St Paul's in Carrubers Close.

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<sup>3</sup> A E Nimmo, 'Charles Wordsworth, Bishop of St Andrews 1853-1892; Reconciler or Controversialist?' ( M.Phil. Thesis University of Edinburgh 1982) p21.

<sup>4</sup> See D Forrester & D Murray *Studies in the History of Worship in Scotland* (T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1984).

<sup>5</sup> H Cockburn, *Memorial of his Time* (Adam and Charles Black, Edinburgh), 1856) p305-6.

<sup>6</sup> A L Drummond and JBulloch, *Op cit.* p60.

Many in England of poorer background or without the accolade of 'Oxbridge' education saw opportunity in Scotland for a career move either as priest or as school teacher. The founding of Glenalmond in 1847, much at the enthruse of William Ewart Gladstone, was perhaps the educational spearhead of the new Episcopal confidence in Scotland. Into that arena we now introduce the subject of this paper.

John Comper, the youngest son of a family of eleven, was born at the farmstead of Horsecroft, Nutbourne, near Pulborough, in Sussex, on October 1, 1823.

The family cannot be traced back for more than three hundred years in Sussex; and, as the name would seem to be exclusively Breton, it is not unlikely that they came to England about the time of Huguenot refugees. At any rate the name with the same and different spelling occurs in Brittany today. J Wiseman (who was one of Comper's pupils at Kirriemuir) penned a short Memoir of Comper and in it mentioned that Comper, in his latter years, enjoyed Brittany as a holiday resort; "how he spent his last winter there; how he enjoyed being mistaken for a Breton priest, and asked to say Mass; and how, alike in face and in manner and character, there was in him a distinct suggestion of the Breton."<sup>1</sup>

About the age of twelve, business ceased to prosper in his father's hands, and he sold the farm, retaining only a cottage at Nutbourne. After school John went with one of his brothers, at the suggestion of a relative in Chichester, to learn and assist in his business. The whole bent of his mind was towards theological and ecclesiastical study, and would have gone abroad as a missionary had it not been for his devotion to his mother. Zeal for his vocation, and how to

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<sup>1</sup> J Comper, Church Principles, (Elliot Stock, London 1904) pxiii.

surmount the apparent insuperable difficulties to being ordained, took him to take counsel with Archdeacon Manning. He walked all the way to West Lavington to consult him as to how he could best obtain admission into Holy Orders. The Archdeacon was ill, but he saw Samuel Wilberforce, afterwards Bishop of Oxford, who advised him to enter the Training College for Schoolmasters at Chichester.

After completing his course he acted for some time as usher in a private school, but the ultimate direction of his life was determined by his coming to Scotland in 1848, where he accepted office as master of the newly founded Church School at Kirriemuir. He was largely influenced by the hope of eventually obtaining admission to Holy Orders, and he did much work as a Lay Reader taking the offices of Mattins and Evensong under the direction of Dr Thomas Wildman the Incumbent of St Mary's Kirriemuir. In addition to the work at Kirriemuir, services were also given at a small chapel at Glen Prosen.

In 1849 Comper left Kirriemuir to assist the Rev'd Alexander Lendrum at Crieff. However the school at Kirreimuir continued to flourish, and was reckoned as one of the best memorials of his work.

The desire of John Comper's life was fulfilled when, on December 12<sup>th</sup> 1850, during the Octave of the aforementioned consecration of St Ninians Cathedral Perth, he was made Deacon by Bishop Forbes of Brechin, acting for Bishop Torry of St Andrew's. Comper's memorialist wrote...."one of the examiners was the Rev. J. C. Chambers, of St Ninian's Cathedral, who, in his anxiety to vindicate the Scottish Church from any charge of ordaining inferior men, procured the stiffest set of questions that he could from England, and, as a triumphant vindication of the candidate's fitness, sent his answers, including a written sermon, to the Rev. Dr Neale. The latter continued through his life to keep in touch

with the candidate who was thus introduced to his notice. He was present at his Ordination, and was very favourably impressed both by his demeanour then and by the remarkable transformation which he witnessed on the evening of the same day, when the shy, retiring young man of the morning was seen, in the exercise of his ministry, going hither and thither with active energy to collect the dispersed candidates who were to be presented for confirmation. Dr Neale afterwards referred to this as a proof of the grace of Ordination, and said of the young Deacon, words which proved prophetic, 'He is an excellent shepherd's dog and will make an excellent shepherd.' The friendship thus begun was only severed by death, and Mr Comper was one of those who stood by the graveside of John Mason Neale."<sup>1</sup> John Mason Neale was the godfather of Sir Ninian Comper the illustrious architectural progeny of Fr John Comper.<sup>2</sup>

After Ordination, John Comper served for a time as assistant Curate to the Rev'd Lendrum, who united the cure of St James, Muthill with that of St Michael's Crieff. It was during his Diaconate that he prepared at Crieff his Church Principles or The Scriptural Teaching of the British Churches. These were delivered at a time of great religious excitement, when, under the 'No popery'<sup>3</sup> pretext, the Scriptural and Catholic principles of the Scottish Church were publicly assailed. The Nine Lectures entitled Visible Unity, One Faith, The Apostolic Ministry (2), The Catholic Doctrine of Election, Sacramental Gifts through the Incarnation, The Doctrine of Baptism, Infant Baptism and Confirmation and the Doctrine of the Eucharist were applauded by Dr Charles Wordsworth Warden of Glenalmond, later Bishop of St Andrews and for the record one of the originators of the Ecumenical Movement in Scotland. It was Wordsworth who agitated for the publication of the Lectures.

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<sup>1</sup> J Comper, Op cit, pxvi.

<sup>2</sup> Sir John Betjeman to Fr Richard Price, 16<sup>th</sup> December, 1975. St Margaret's Archives.

<sup>3</sup> See J Cunningham, Popery and Scotch Episcopacy Compared- to the parishioners of Crieff or an enquiry, Edinburgh 1849: cf "popery is the parent of Scots Episcopacy", p7.

In Lent 1852 John Comper was ordained Priest by Alexander Forbes Bishop of Brechin, acting as before in lieu of Bishop Torry.

Easter 1853 saw Comper's removal to Nairn where he was charged by Bishop Eden to undertake the formation of an independent mission. Nairn had previously been under the pastoral care of the Rev'd Hugh Willoughby Jermyn, Incumbent of Forres, Bishop of Brechin after Forbes. At this time there was also an English Chapel in Nairn. Nairn by all accounts was hard going. Eventually Comper hired a newly built house, in the upper part of which he lived, the lower, originally intended for a shop, was fitted as a chapel. In June 1853 he was encouraged and assisted by a long visit from his future brother-in-law, Mr R. J. Taylor.

On the 15<sup>th</sup> of August 1853 at Holy Trinity Parish Church Hull, John married Ellen Taylor, daughter of Mr John Taylor, a prominent and much respected merchant in Hull. It was to be a marriage blessed with nearly fifty years.

Previous to the marriage, Comper had opened a Sunday school in Nairn, and after it, with only his wife to assist a Day school as well. Apparently this incited a preaching and press crusade against him. His response and the subsequent controversy increased his congregation and led to the closure of the English Chapel.

In 1854 the Compers removed to Inverness, John being appointed Chaplain to Bishop Eden. In the autumn of the same year he started a mission where he opened and taught a school, and had daily service. His work at Inverness, however, was cut short by a misunderstanding with the Bishop arising out of the words "sinless virgin", which Comper had allegedly used in a sermon. The words were used as a complaint to the Bishop, the subsequent correspondence led to his resignation and the acceptance of the historic charge of Stonehaven in 1857.

It is interesting to note that his mission at Inverness ultimately developed into the St Andrew's Cathedral congregation. Curiously

the present sandstone font in the St Nicholas Chapel once belonged to the Inverness congregation.<sup>1</sup>

We now enter upon a time of great debate in the saga of Scots Episcopacy, that is the Eucharistic Controversy. At The Diocesan Synod in August 1857 Bishop Forbes of Brechin delivered his famous charge, which was immediately published. This caused no end of a stir. Bishop Wordsworth, who had assumed the role of champion of official Anglicanism in Scotland was determined to have Forbes tried for heresy. Forbes had commented to Gladstone that “Bishop Wordsworth dominates over all the Bishops and gets them to do whatever he wills at the moment”. “I hear such accounts of Wordsworth’s bitter animosity, which has grown into fanaticism, of which the bent is that he has an apostolate to put me and those who think with me down.”<sup>2</sup> According to Comper’s memorialist, “a great ferment ensued, and the parsonage at Stonehaven was the scene of secret meetings of clergy some of whom came by night trains to escape notice”.<sup>3</sup> Seven priests, among whom Comper was one, were chosen from each Diocese, to preach sermons setting forth the Catholic view of the Real, Objective Presence in the Holy Eucharist, the same to be published. Thus Comper, in loyalty to the man from whom he had received the grace of Holy Orders, leapt to Forbes’s defence. Much later, in fact 1901, Comper published an edited and abridged version of Forbes’s The Brechin Case; The Theological Defence of the Bishop of Brechin before the Episcopal Synod 1860.

In the case of the Rev’d Patrick Cheyne of St Johns Aberdeen which arose in the wake of the Forbes controversy in 1858, and caused serious division in the Diocese of Aberdeen, Comper took the greatest interest. Apparently “he was wont to describe it as one of the proudest moments of his life when, after the sentence of

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<sup>1</sup> J M Wright, The First Hundred Years, St Margaret’s Episcopal Church, Aberdeen. 1980, p35.

<sup>2</sup> W Perry, Alexander Penrose Forbes, SPCK London, 1939 p93.

<sup>3</sup> J Comper, Op cit pxix.

deposition was pronounced, Mr Cheyne left the Synod leaning on his arm”<sup>4</sup>.

The Churchwardens at St Johns now offered the cure of souls to Comper but he declined and the Rev'd Frederick George Lee from England was appointed. However, on account of fresh troubles, Lee resigned St Johns in 1861 and founded the congregation of St Marys. Later that year Comper accepted the Incumbency of St Johns.

The fall-out from the Eucharistic Controversy was still around when a new contention was beginning to loom. There was, at this time, much talk of a General Synod and an assault was being prepared from diverse quarters on the Scottish Communion Office of 1764 or perhaps better known now as the Scottish Liturgy. The assailants wished to remove the Scottish Liturgy from its position of primary authority. They believed that if this could be achieved then the removal of final statutory disabilities against the Scots clergy would be removed.<sup>5</sup>

As one would expect it was the Diocese of Aberdeen<sup>1</sup> that championed the resistance to change. John Comper notoriously defending the Scottish Rite. He was determined to re-introduce it to St John's its use had somewhat fallen away. In response to a letter from the Churchwardens and one hundred and seventeen of the Communicants of St John's and in anticipation of the proposed Synodical changes they requested Comper to re-introduce occasional use of the Scottish Rite.<sup>2</sup> Comper laid their wishes

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<sup>4</sup> J Comper *Op cit* pxix.

<sup>5</sup> A Bill had been introduced into Parliament by the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1840, and in due course passed through both Houses and received Royal Assent. The intention being to remove extant disabilities imposed by the Repeal Act of 1792. Scots Bishops and priests could now minister two Sundays *per annum* in the C of E. In 1864 a new Bill removed all restrictions. Scots clergy were now eligible for appointment to any ecclesiastical office or benefice within the C of E. In a sense it was a *practical* union between both churches. Leading ministers in the Scots Establishment, particularly Robert Lee of the Greyfriars Kirk Edinburgh note this development with unease.

<sup>1</sup> The Diocese did not unite with the Diocese of Orkney until 1865.

<sup>2</sup> Papers relating to the Persecution of the Reverend Patrick Cheyne, Alexander Bishop of Brechin, and other Confessors of the Truth of the Holy Eucharist; and to the agitation against the Scottish Communion Office 1858-1862 also to the Revision of the Canons of the Scottish Church by the General Synod of 1862-63. St Margaret's Archives.

before Bishop Suther who resisted the request. Comper appealed to Episcopal Synod and won the day.<sup>3</sup>

It was during his time at St Johns that Anglican Sisters were first introduced into Scotland. He was fascinated with the religious life and was well acquainted and well read in all its aspects. In 1864 Dr John Mason Neale sent sisters from East Grinstead to work in Aberdeen, Neale's decision was partly influenced by Comper's love of the Scottish Liturgy.<sup>4</sup> At St John's Comper developed his love of liturgy and of the church's year especial attention being made to the celebration of the Dedication Festival held annually on the 6<sup>th</sup> of May. To this Comper invited clergy from within and out with the Diocese. One well known preacher being Canon Humble of Perth Cathedral.<sup>5</sup>

It was his memorialist's opinion that the most enduring part of Comper's work at St Johns was the erection of the day schools as a memorial to Patrick Cheyne.<sup>6</sup> John Comper flung himself with such vocational enthusiasm into the work at St Johns that he drove himself too hard. In 1868 a serious breakdown took place and he was ordered by Dr Kilgour his physician to take a complete rest for six months. He took three and went abroad for the first time in his life. According to his memorialist, he spent Palm Sunday at Amiens, where he was much struck with the beauty of the services, and on Monday he went to Paris, where he followed the Holy Week services with the keenest interest. From this French visit onwards he now became extremely interested in Liturgy. Provost Fortescue of Perth, one of that Cathedral's

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> J Comper, *Op cit*, pxxi.

<sup>5</sup> Bishop Wordsworth of St Andrew's refused for years to enter Perth Cathedral on account of Humble's High Church practices. It was known locally as 'theThirty Years War!'

<sup>6</sup> The stained glass window to the right of the altar within the St Nicholas Chapel at St Margarets contains a dedication the two Comper children who died in infancy. One of the children was named as Mary Cheyne Comper. She died on the 21<sup>st</sup> of December 1862. I can think of no other reason than the high regard in which John Comper held Patrick Cheyne that the child was given his surname as a Christian name. The name Cheyne is of Norman extraction and of course a North East name of great antiquity.

notorious High Churchmen, had given Comper advice on economic travel, and also what churches to visit.

These foreign *jaunts*, which occurred wherever and whenever possible, brought him into contact with high-ranking Churchmen abroad. One of these was Abbe Gueranger, the head of the Benedictine Monastery at Solesmes. While staying at the village inn Comper had attended the monastic hours from dawn until Compline so assiduously that the Abbot sent a monk to the inn at breakfast time to request the stranger to call on him. One visit led to more, and the acquaintance ripened into friendship. In the words of his memorialist..... “At parting, the good old Abbot embraced his friend, remarking that it was as if members of one family, who had been long estranged, had met after many years and found brotherly union again. Mr. Comper saw the Abbot again after the Vatican Council, and found him personally as kind as ever, but under greater restraint on the subject of ecclesiastical relations.”<sup>1</sup> The Dean of the Chapter of Quimper Cathedral was another with whom he had great discussion on Liturgies and Liturgical books<sup>2</sup>. A French Count, a strong Gallican, and one of old nobility whom he had met at Rouen became a longstanding friend, and actually journeyed to Aberdeen to visit him.

St Johns in Comper’s time contained a large number of poorer citizens but also prominent people like Professor Ogilvie, Mr Norval Clyne, the poet lawyer, and Dr George Grub, the ecclesiastical historian who published a four volume Ecclesiastical History of Scotland in 1861, and which in many ways is the standard history of our Communion in Scotland. George Grub in particular was a strong supporter of Comper, especially in the Scottish Liturgy controversy, and his advisor when Bishop Suther

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<sup>1</sup> J Comper, *Opcit.* pxxiii.

<sup>2</sup> The writer has in his possession a *Processionale* according to the use of the Brothers of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel *per* Belgium published in 1650 and presented by John Comper to The Sisterhood of St Margaret of Scotland Aberdeen in January, 1883.

ordered the use of Vestments and Lights at St Johns to be discontinued.<sup>3</sup> However, divergence between Grub and Comper became apparent with Comper's 'advanced' teaching and practice. Comper introduced non-communicating attendance at the Liturgy, the observance of an Octave for All Saints, the use of a processional cross and such like. Dr Grub was ousted from his position as Churchwarden at a congregational meeting, however after Comper moved from St Johns their friendship was renewed. The institution of Guilds was very much part of his work at St Johns, the Guild of St Agnes for girls was the first of its kind in Scotland. He was always the teacher and enjoyed instructing the young. During this time he also started the Aberdeen Guild, which afterwards developed into the Scottish Confraternity of the Blessed Sacrament, of which for the last twenty-five years of his life he was Superior General.

As a preacher it was said that his voice was weak but that he preached with such intense earnestness and conviction that he became to be highly regarded and respected. He often preached extemporarily. One of his hearers is reported to have written of his sermons..... "They all seemed to centre round the Sacramental Life, and open up its meaning and power. Their practical effect was to make one long after goodness in one's self, and the will to serve God better than ever before. Mixed with much love in his teaching, there was also a great note of severity, and he dwelt much on the necessity of self-mastery and sacramental confession. Mr Comper always took for granted, apparently, that, if anything ought to be done, it could and would be accomplished; and so it was that, acting under his influence, difficulties often disappeared, or proved surmountable when the time came to face them".<sup>4</sup> Even despite severe attacks of neuralgia the sermons were always impassioned. He always put others first, and in many ways living a

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<sup>3</sup> Comper did give up the Vestments, at that time they were not sanctioned by the Canons.

<sup>4</sup> J Comper, Op cit. pxxv.

vicarious life. He was often detained late after services by people desiring his counsel. In the midst of all this, finding time for his family.

In his time Comper was generally regarded as an exponent of advanced ceremonial, the clerical company he kept are proof enough of that. As his memorialist would testify Comper would have found it difficult to have relaxed in exact ceremonial or that tinged with fussiness. J Wiseman wrote of him..... “There was something of the Puritan in him in his early years. He laid hold of the principles of Evangelical Truth and Apostolic Order, and when he reached advanced doctrine in regard to the Church and sacraments, it was through the perception that such teaching was an essential portion of the faith delivered to the saints. If he came to value ceremonial, it was an instrument for the more effectual teaching of doctrines in which he believed, or because he regarded it as right, and conformed to the orders of the Church; but as the thing it signified, and not the outward sign, on which he always laid the stress.”<sup>1</sup>

The final chapter of Comper’s life was devoted to mission in the East End. The Gallowgate was a slum area, of narrow streets and closes, many named after the landlord of the tenement. The work began with the removal of the Sisters to a house in Ferguson’s Court, off the Gallowgate. The first services being held in a room there. In 1867 a separate mission-room was hired in Seamount Place. It was a large bare room, without any ornament of any kind, except that on the altar there stood a pair of very plain candlesticks, with a cross and vases. There was a surpliced choir, gathered from the streets and closes around.

In 1870 a School Chapel was built on the Port Hill, with an entrance from Ferguson’s Court, and this was dedicated on

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<sup>1</sup> J Comper, *Op cit* pxxvi.

November 9<sup>th</sup>, 1870, by Bishop Suther, in presence of the Primus, Bishop Eden, and Fr Mackonochie, of St Alban's Holburn, London. Services were held here morning and evening and on Sundays, and typically of Fr John a day school was carried on. John Comper soon became so engrossed with the work in the Gallowgate that he was forced to choose between St Johns and St Margarets. His memorialist described this as Mr Comper choosing to move from "ill paid S. John's to unpaid S. Margaret's, or as it was put by Mr Norval Clyne, he chose the unpopular path from Auchterless to Auchterlesser."<sup>2</sup> Not only did Fr Comper loose his financial security but he was reduced from being an Incumbent to assume title of Priest-in-Charge. However due to Comper's hard work St Margaret's was raised from the status of an Incumbency at the Diocesan Synod in 1871. It was soon found that a School Chapel did not suffice for the work of either school or church, and in 1879 separate schools were built. St Margaret's was then consecrated as a church on October 1<sup>st</sup> 1879, by Bishop Suther. The work at St Margarets continued to prosper but he still felt empowered to take the gospel into more deprived parts of the East End. Hence in 1886 he "opened a mission in Justice Street., to which no one could be admitted who wore a hat or a bonnet"<sup>3</sup>.

In 1889, the opportunity presented itself of acquiring the disused Free Church of St Clements, "and in fulfilment of a childhood's vow made on St Clement's Day, to build a church if possible and dedicate it to that saint, the buildings were bought by a near friend and handed over to him, along with the nucleus of an endowment, for a mission in the East End."<sup>4</sup> This new development was to be known as St Clement's Mission and was under the aegis of S Margarets as long as Comper remained as Incumbent.

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<sup>2</sup> J Comper, *Ibid* pxxviii.

<sup>3</sup> J Comper, *Ibid*, pxxviii.

<sup>4</sup> J Compre, *Ibid*, pxxviii-xxix.

It was in the year 1889 that another forward step was, when a notable addition was made to St Margaret's Church itself in the erection of a western chapel, dedicated to St Nicholas, patron of the city. The Foundation Stone relates that it was laid on the Feast Day of the Translation of St Margaret i.e. the 19<sup>th</sup> of June.<sup>1</sup> It was built from plans prepared by Ninian, John Comper's eldest son. Canon Mitchell wrote in the Bishop Seabury Memorial (Cathedral) booklet in 1927 which contains sketches of the proposed new cathedral for Aberdeen on a site opposite the Marischal College..... "It was from the steps of St Margaret's that the architect saw the old lead steeple of St Nicholas burned one Sunday evening before he went to school at Glenalmond in 1874. From there he went to draw at Ruskin's School in Oxford and was afterwards articled to Messrs. Bodley and Garner. His first work in 1889 was the addition of the Chapel of St Nicholas to St Margaret's Church which was perhaps the first stone vaulted ceiling built in Aberdeen since the 16<sup>th</sup> Century".<sup>2</sup> The thought was cherished that someday it might be found possible to rebuild the older part of the church in harmony with the new addition.<sup>3</sup> In 1892 Ninian drew the plans for the new Scottish Gothic Chapel, with its tower like east end, in connexion with the new convent in the Spital.

The spiritual side of St Margaret's went on at a pace through the years. As his memorialist wrote..... "The numbers baptised and confirmed; the ceaseless round of regular and special services; the frequent Missions and Retreats; the direction of all manner of classes and guilds, represent a wonderful expenditure of spiritual energy. Underlying it all, and permeating all, has been the gentle, unwearied ministrations of the devoted Sisters, who have visited

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<sup>1</sup> The inscription reads: In Nomine:Pati:et:Fil:et:Spi:Scti:Hic:Lapis:in:Fundamentum:No:va:Ecclesia:in:Honme:Santa Margarita:Regina:Scotia:Collacatui:in Festo Translationis:ejus:MDCCCLXXXIX.

<sup>2</sup> The Bishop Seabury Memorial, 1927, p32. St Margaret's Archives.

<sup>3</sup> This is depicted in a print housed in St Margaret's Rectory.

the poor and the lapsed in their squalid homes, and have striven to win them to godliness and self respect.”<sup>4</sup>

In the midst of all this activity Comper found time to study, to read and to write. He seemingly cared nothing for the financial side of things. In fact Comper detested Church bazaars and the such like. In his Lenten letter of 1893 he wrote (after referring to the Scriptural and ecclesiastical ways of contributing of one’s substance to works of piety or charity, he went on to say: “But we have introduced another method of raising money for sacred purposes, which the ancient church never knew of and would not have sanctioned, and the credit of which belongs to the present century. I refer to the very common. I fear almost universal, mode of raising money for religious, sacred, and Church purposes, by instituting and arranging a variety of entertaining and exciting amusements in combination with sales of work. No one can raise any reasonable objection, rather one would accord praise and approval to a simple sale of work, done often by poor people who could not give money but can give labour. But it is quite different when some elaborate pageant is got up, whether under the name of a bazaar, a fancy fair, or anything else. This represents the world, and the spirit of the world, in antagonism to the Spirit of Jesus Christ and His Church.....You may say, perhaps, ‘Why write to us about such things? You know we don’t have bazaars’. Well my dear friends, to be quite honest, I must say I have never had bazaars, because I would not allow it; but would rather want whatever seemed a necessity, though we had no means of supplying it, knowing that God would supply it. This He has graciously done; and will continue to do if you are faithful to your trust in Him. But from time to time, there have been whisperings ‘Why not a bazaar?’ and so in this, which may be my last pastoral letter, I leave you this my solemn testimony, which is in perfect accord with the beliefs and teaching of my whole life”.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> J Comper, Op cit, pxxxix.

<sup>1</sup> J Comper, Op cit pxxxii-xxxiii.

In regard to Comper's contribution to the Diocese he believed in Synods. We have noted how he successfully appealed to Episcopal Synod on the subject of the use of the Scottish Liturgy at St Johns. The Aberdeen Diocesan Synod recording his death recorded..... "No man did more in his day to raise the tone of the Synods of the Church, by discussing questions in the light of great principles, in the spirit of conciliation, and with constant recognition of the spiritual character of the Synod's proper work."<sup>2</sup> John Comper was strongly against what he regarded as the American ideal which was to allow Lay members on to Synod. "I say, do not let us imitate, in this particular, the American Church"<sup>3</sup>. He thoroughly approved of Lay people being on councils of the Church where their gifts could be totally utilised. He strenuously opposed the scheme in 1873 for the introduction of Lay people as constituent members of Synod. The introduction of Laity onto Synods had first been discussed at Diocesan Synods in 1852, and had first been ventilated by Mr Gladstone "a very eminent statesman, and a scarcely less eminent churchman."<sup>4</sup> Gladstone had moved from being a Tory High Churchman to being a Liberal Catholic. He had reached this position of liberal Catholicism due "profound political and ecclesiastical readjustment accompanied by not inconsiderable emotional upheaval"<sup>5</sup>. The nub of the argument for Comper was that the Church was a Divine Society created by our Lord, and formed into one Body in union with Himself, through the Holy Ghost. Our Lord constituted a Spiritual order or Ministry, to which He entrusted the power of teaching, ruling and dispensing the Sacraments. Comper wrote... "In this manner the right of jurisdiction and teaching in any parish or congregation is

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<sup>3</sup> J Comper, The Coming General Synod of the Scottish Episcopal Church, New Series No 1, A Brown and Co, Aberdeen 1873. p4.

<sup>4</sup> J Comper, Op cit, p7.

<sup>5</sup> P Butler, Gladstone: Church, State and Tractarianism ( A Study of his Religious Ideas and Attitudes 1809-1859). Oxford Clarendon, 1982, p234.

committed to a priest by institution”<sup>6</sup>. Again..... “ the admission of Lay people to sit and vote in Synods, or to the exercise of a power of veto over the action of Synods (as is now proposed to be given to a mixed council), would be a serious violation of the sacred principles on which the Church Catholic has been governed from the beginning”.<sup>7</sup> For John Comper... “ the progress of the Church must be looked for in the deepening of her spiritual life through prayer and sacraments, and the daily life and work of all her members; not by frequent meetings and public discussions, which necessarily excite controversy and lead to loss of charity”.<sup>8</sup>

He was greatly involved in a campaign to restore the office of Metropolitan to the Scots Church. Since the time of the inception of the College Bishops system in the early eighteenth century the office of Chairman Bishop has been called *Primus inter pares*. John Comper is not quite accurate when he states that the modern and hitherto unknown office of Primus replaced the title of Metropolitan. After the Revolution of 1690, the Scottish Church reverted to the ancient title Primus, which had been used in Celtic days.<sup>1</sup> In the ninth century the Bishop of Dunkeld was known as ‘*Primus Episcopus*’ or ‘*Summus Episcopus*’ the same applied at St Andrews in the tenth and eleventh Centuries. Comper’s argument was that the office of Metropolitan was Primitive, Universal and Anglican. For John Comper the office of Primus was an anomaly and since the Primus was called upon to exercise many of the functions of a Metropolitan, Why not give him the rank, title, and jurisdiction proper to that office? In truth he wrote.... “Our several Sees, in the absence of a Metropolitan, do not constitute a

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<sup>6</sup> J Comper, Reasons for Resisting the Claims Now put forth on behalf of the Laity to Veto the action of Synods, A Brown and Co, Aberdeen. 1873. pp 3-4.

<sup>7</sup> J Comper, Op cit, p5.

<sup>8</sup> J Comper, Ibid, p7.

<sup>1</sup> See G K B Henderson: “a *Primus inter pares* and a College holding the metropolitan authority ‘ in commission’-were seen as temporary expedients in the disastrous days post Revolution.” Primus, contained in A E Nimmo, Bishop John Skinner and the Resurgence of Scots Episcopacy, (Ph.D Thesis, University of Aberdeen 1996). Appendix II.

province, nor is our Episcopal Synod *formally* a Provincial Synod. Dr Neale affirms, ‘An aggregation of autocephalous Bishops can no more make a Provincial or National Church than a heap of sticks lying side by side can make a faggot.’<sup>2</sup> Perhaps this whole discussion had been initiated on account of the recent restoration of the Roman Catholic hierarchy in Scotland in 1878. Like the debate in the 1850’s over the resurgence of Episcopal Clergy in the country towns and villages of Scotland it is interesting to note the cross fertilisation of ideas between the churches in Victorian Scotland. Curiously enough when the subject of Metropolitan came up again in 1890 he opposed the change.

All through his life and certainly since his first sojourn to the Continent Comper was interested in Liturgy. In 1890, when proposals were made for the revision of the Scottish Liturgy, John Comper stood up with energy and effect for the retention of the Office as it was, being determined that “we will not that our Liturgical inheritance, which our fathers bequeathed us, should be changed”<sup>3</sup>. He was similarly conservative against all attempts to tamper with the marriage law of the Church through proposals to legalize marriage with a deceased wife’s sister, and with the faith when it was threatened by assaults on the Athanasian Creed.

His study of Liturgy resulted in the publication in 1891 of the first part of A Popular Handbook on the Origin, History, and Structure of Liturgies, the second part being brought out in 1898. The volumes are not of exact or detailed scholarship but were produced in popular and very readable form. Apparently the work was commended in the French Reviews.

After a long and serious illness in 1897 he was led to the conclusion that that he would have to relinquish the Incumbency of St Margarets, and turned his attention at the Chaplaincy at the Convent, a position which he held until he died. It was a sunny

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<sup>2</sup> J Comper, What is a Metropolitan, and why do we need one? A Brown and Co, Aberdeen 1884, p3.

<sup>3</sup> The Scottish Liturgy Speeches of Rev John Comper and Rev Myers Danson. The Mover and Seconder of Resolutions passed by the Aberdeen Diocesan Synod, January 15<sup>th</sup>, 1890. Aberdeen University Press, Aberdeen 1890.

afternoon on the 27<sup>th</sup> of July when he and Mrs Comper had gone to the Duthie Park in Aberdeen. He went for strawberries for his wife, and while returning, it was said, in the act of taking one strawberry<sup>4</sup> from the bag to give to a little child he passed away.

John Mason Neale was a long standing friend of Comper. Lord Forbes of Castle Forbes greatly aided Comper in his work. For many years he provided the stipend of a curate at St Margarets. Outwith the Episcopal Church and in addition to his friends on the Continent he was intimate with some of the Divinity Professors at King's College. He was a great friend of Professor Milligan and Dr James Cooper who became a Professor at Glasgow University.

The best monuments of his life are his work in the East End of Aberdeen, amongst the poor and under privileged. He never forgot where he had come from, which was a fairly ordinary life in the English countryside and against the seemingly over-whelming odds of wealth and privilege achieved the goal of his life to be a priest in the Church of God. Maybe that is why he laboured all his life amongst the poor, because he understood their position.

He is buried in the St Peter's Churchyard in Aberdeen. Above the grave is a tall crucifix surmounted with a pelican feeding its young with pecks of its own blood, symbolic of the Eucharist.

Below lie the remains of a priest whose whole life and fibre was devoted to saying Mass and dispensing that Sacrament.

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<sup>4</sup> Hence the strawberry as the insignia of the work of Ninian Comper.

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