**Not English, but Anglican**

**By Gordon J H Pont**

You will remember that when Pope Gregory asked about fair-haired children in the slave market in Rome; he was told that they were Angles from Britain. According to the Venerable Bede St Gregory said something like ‘No - not Angles, but angels’. In ‘1066 and all that’ the writers’ version of this was ‘Not Angles, but Anglicans’.

To use a similar phrase, the Scottish Episcopal Church is ‘not English, but Anglican’- it has a history of its own, and is firmly rooted in Scotland [[1]](#footnote-1)– we are not just the ‘chaplaincies for English emigrants and visitors’ you find in towns in Europe, for example, although, of course, people from England and everywhere else are welcome in our churches, whether as visitors or new residents. Let me explain.

The way different parts of the Church acted at the Reformation in the sixteenth century varied – while all agreed about some things, not least making the Bible available to people in their own language, for some the aim was to dispose of as much as possible of what the mediaeval church believed and did. For others the aim of reformation was to dispose of what was wrong, but to retain the rest. Two points of difference were the sort of ministers there were and the way the Church worshipped – for some, the ministry of Bishops, Priests and Deacons that went back to early times was essential, for others, not so important; for some, continuing to have liturgical worship which used prayer books, but in the local language, was also important, while others preferred total freedom from traditional forms.

We see examples of the first in the Church of England, which retained the three-fold ministry of Bishops, Priests and Deacons, and worshipped with the English Prayer Book, and of the second in The Church of Scotland, where the form of ministry is Presbyterian, with only one order of minister or presbyter, and there are no formal set forms of service. This contrast is well-known. What is not so widely appreciated is that in Scotland after the Reformation there were also Christians who retained the three-fold ministry and liturgical worship. After 1560 there were times when the ‘official’ Church in Scotland was Presbyterian (without Bishops), and times when it was Episcopalian (with Bishops), until 1689, when the Presbyterian Church became the ‘established’ Church in Scotland, but for political rather than doctrinal reasons. This was because many Episcopalians were loyal to the Stuart Kings, like James VII and II, who were deposed in 1688 and replaced by King William of Orange and Queen Mary.

Their continuing allegiance to the Stuart dynasty resulted in years of difficulty for the Episcopal Church, and clergy were ousted from their churches. Very few congregations now can trace their history back to pre-Reformation times, but the little church at Kilmaveonaig, above Blair Atholl, is one. Particularly after the Jacobite Rising in 1745, the Episcopal Church was reduced ‘to the shadow of a shade’ as Walter Scott put it. Nevertheless, the life of this little branch of the Church in Scotland continued, and the succession of Scottish Bishops was carefully maintained. To order the life of the Episcopal Church, the Bishops drew up the first Canons (church rules) in 1727, and published a ‘Scottish Liturgy’ in 1764 - from these the present Code of Canons and our services today have evolved over the centuries.

Of course, in Scotland there were some Episcopalians and people from England who were willing to recognise - and to pray for, which was the critical factor - the Hanoverian monarch, and a number of congregations were formed, whose clergy were ‘qualified’ to act under the various Acts of Parliament passed in London during the eighteenth century. The death in 1788 of Bonnie Prince Charlie brought an end to hopes of restoring the Stuart monarchy, and laws against the Episcopal Church were gradually repealed, and the way was open for reconciliation with the qualified chapels. The number of members and congregations grew in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and many churches were built.

Before that, however, one particular event in the eighteenth century demonstrates the distinct life of the Scottish Episcopal Church. In 1776 the United States of America became independent of Britain. A serious problem arose when Church people there were looking for a new Bishop for their new country. A Bishop can only be consecrated by at least three clergy who are already Bishops, so in 1783 when the Reverend Dr Samuel Seabury was elected by the clergy in Connecticut to be their new Bishop, he came to England to ask to be consecrated. But it was decided in England, by the Archbishops among others, that this was impossible, because of the close relationship between the Church of England and the state, illustrated by the oaths of allegiance to the King made by English Bishops, which could not be taken by an American.

There had been earlier contacts between the Scottish and American Episcopal Churches, and Dr Seabury then sought the help of the Scottish Bishops. He was consecrated Bishop of Connecticut in Aberdeen on 24 October 1784 by three Scottish Bishops. He went back to America promising to encourage the Church there to look to the Scottish Liturgy for a pattern for its Communion Service, which it did. This event in the life of the Episcopal Church in the United States was significant. As Bishop Edward Luscombe says, ‘it might fairly be said that the Anglican Communion had its beginnings outside and despite the Church of England’.

Let me finish by imagining that St. Gregory went further along in the slave market and saw other fair skinned children, this time with reddish hair. When he asked ‘More Angles?’ he was told that these were from Northern Britain. ‘Picts or Scots?’ the Pope asked, to be told, ‘We don’t know that, your Holiness, but they say they are Episcopalians’. ‘Ah,’ the Pope said, with a kind twinkle in his eye, ‘Not English, but Anglican’.

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1. Thus making The Scottish Episcopal Church unusual among the Churches of the Anglican Communion in that it lacks any direct historical connection with the Church of England from which it differs in being a product not of the English but of the Scottish Reformation’. From Code of Canons of the Scottish Episcopal Church 2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)