

## The Lee Lecture for 1968

ROBERT LEE (1804-1868) — A CENTENARY TRIBUTE

Delivered in the Kirk of the Greyfriars, Edinburgh, on  
Sunday, 24th March, 1968, by the Rev. R. Stuart  
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ON 14th March, 1868, the Rev. Dr. Robert Lee died at Torquay, infirm from a paralysis which had struck him on 22nd May of the previous year, causing him to fall from his horse in Princes Street, Edinburgh. The distinguished minister of Old Greyfriars had that stroke on the eve of the 1867 meeting of the General Assembly, at which the case being made against his practices in worship at Greyfriars was to have been heard—a case, which, postponed because of his sudden illness, was never heard and happily never judged. It now seems little to the credit of Lee's generation in the Scottish Church that cruel charges of "innovation" and even "popery" were levelled against this devout minister of the Gospel who helped his church to enter into more of her catholic heritage ; who awakened her to the riches of church music ; and who endeavoured to contribute form, dignity, beauty and light to a worship which was deplorably bleak and barren at the time. Doctor Lee was negatively hindered and opposed as "Innovator" by those who, so accustomed to Scotland's narrow paths of ecclesiastical controversy, failed to share his vision of a more enlightened and enriched life, witness and worship within the *Ecclesia Scoticana*.

For the last four or five months of Doctor Lee's ebbing life at Torquay, he enjoyed the ministry and pastoral attention of the Rev. Alfred Edersheim, then minister of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church there. Edersheim, an Austrian Jew, had been converted to Christianity in Budapest, one of the first fruits of the Scottish Mission to the Jews of Central Europe, launched under the zealous leadership of Robert Murray McCheyne shortly before the Disruption in 1843. Alfred Edersheim, author of the valuable two-volume "Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah", was ordained to the Holy Ministry by the Free Church of Scotland at Old Aberdeen in 1846, in the small congregation where I began my ministry and was ordained in 1938—for me another indirect, but personal link through Edersheim with Doctor Lee.

Following his death at Torquay, Edersheim wrote this of Doctor Lee : “ The first and always very marked characteristic impressed on me by intercourse with him, was that of his gentleness, kindness and amiableness. He was thoroughly a family man, full of warmest affection and tender attention towards his own, and at the same time one who would make friends, keep friends, and shew himself friendly. He was a most pleasant companion also, and had remarkable powers of conversation . . . . Dr. Lee was a Presbyterian by conviction, and prepared to vindicate Presbytery against all opponents . . . . He was a capital—perhaps too good, a controversialist. Possessed of a most subtle intellect, which could see at the same time all points, he seemed to me to have a tendency not usual in minds of that order, and (if a foreigner may write it without offence) not at all common in Scotland, viz., that of seeing and asserting ‘ the other side of the question ’, sometimes from generous feeling for those who are decried ; sometimes from dislike to those who decry ; sometimes in the very exuberance of intellectual vigour ; sometimes even from love for the contest . . . . Seeing him so frequently, and conversing so intimately with him, you will not wonder that I learned to esteem and love Dr. Lee ”.

It is most fitting that under the Trust of the Lee Lectureship, founded to promote the principles and aims within the Church, for which Robert Lee laboured and strove, often at great personal cost, a centenary tribute should be paid to him. It is appropriately done, moreover, in his own Greyfriars Church, which it would have rejoiced none more than him to see restored in dignity and design, and greatly enhanced in beauty. These stained glass windows alone are visible token of Doctor Lee’s own efforts towards a restoration here in 1857. Our centenary tribute to Robert Lee is one of gratitude and respect, admiration and appreciation, to a notable churchman who passed on into higher service a hundred years ago.

*Eternal rest grant unto him, o Lord, and let light perpetual shine upon him. May he rest in peace.*

A centenary tribute to Robert Lee must seek to disentangle from the local and current situations a century ago, and from the controversies which surrounded his supposed “ innovations ”, the objectives and aims which he pursued in his ministry at Greyfriars, Edinburgh ; and to assess how it now fares with these concerns a hundred years after his death. Worship in the Church of Scotland in the mid nineteenth century has altered out of all recognition into those forms and

patterns which we all take for granted in the second half of the twentieth century, and to this movement of change, development and, one hopes, betterment, the activities of a Dr. Lee made an important initial contribution. In this, he was the true Reformer and Reformed Churchman, and it is from the angle of on-going and continuing reformation that we must assess his influence upon the Renaissance (sic) of Scottish worship.

Among his published works, Dr. Lee set out to produce one to which he gave the somewhat pretentious title of "*The Reform of the Church of Scotland in Worship, Government and Doctrine.*" The section covering the subject of "*Reform in Worship*" was first published in 1864; and it is important to grasp how this churchman, correctly in my view, understood the position of a Reformed Church: the *ecclesia reformata* understood as the *ecclesia semper reformanda*—the Church always requiring reformation and renewal and never static or petrified in worship, government or doctrine.

"The religious Reformers of the sixteenth century", he wrote, "accomplished, perhaps, the most daring, sudden, radical and extensive revolution the world ever saw. It is wonderful, and also sad, to find so many of their successors—I mean the clergy of the churches which they either founded or reformed—now actuated by the very spirit against which these Reformers had to contend, and using arguments which would show that reformations of churches are needless, dangerous, or even sacrilegious, unless they chanced to take place in the sixteenth, or at latest in the seventeenth century: as if it were our duty to follow in the footsteps, not of the Reformers, but of those who denounced them as revolutionists and heretics, enemies of God and man, and therefore worthy to be exterminated like other noxious creatures. All this, no doubt, is justified by a pretended deference to the Reformers, and a professed zeal for the doctrinal systems which they introduced . . . . But none of the Reformers imagined that their ideas were to become the standards according to which all succeeding Protestants were to think."

It is proper to allow Robert Lee thus to affirm from his own written word the sense in which he ought to be regarded as the true "Protestant" and "Reformer" in Scottish worship, and not the "innovator" or "papist" which his unimaginative opponents sometimes dubbed him. It must always be a cardinal principle within a Reformed Church that things should continually be considered afresh and *de novo*; that deeper loyalty to the Bible and more sensitive

response to the Holy Spirit's guidance will afford new insights and truer assessments ; that the life of the Church is *in via*, never finalised, set as the Church is in this critical epoch of tension, poised between the Resurrection and Ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Return of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In the preface of the Scots Confession—and its adoption by the Scots Parliament on 24th August, 1560, abolished the Papal jurisdiction in our Kingdom and made Scotland Protestant—those who framed it “ protest ” (their word) that, “ if any man will note in this our Confession any article or sentence repugning to God's holy word, it would please him of his gentleness, and for Christian charity's sake, to admonish us of the same in writ ; and we of our honour and fidelity do promise unto him satisfaction from the mouth of God (that is, from his holy Scriptures), or else reformation of that which he shall prove to be amiss.”

In 1968, when this principle of Reform is so often forgotten by those loudest in their assertion of loyalty to Scottish Presbyterianism, it is important to identify what are the requirements for on-going reformation, which were applied in so necessary and timely a way by Dr. Lee in his attempts at reform in worship. The situation which he found in Scottish Presbyterian worship, at his ordination and induction at Inverbrothock on 10th April, 1833; on his translation to Campsie on 5th May, 1836 ; and at his later translation to Old Greyfriars Parish, Edinburgh, on 9th November, 1843 (a few months after the Disruption had decimated that city congregation), was indeed depressing, and to a sensitive and devout spirit, bleak and bare to a forbidding degree. Faith and devotion seemed sadly absent from austere and unadorned sanctuaries, where the unaccompanied singing was almost offensively unharmonious, and where wordiness marked formless prayers and apparently endless preachings *at* rather than *to* the people ! Little wonder that the mid nineteenth century was a period of desertion of the Established Church by some of its more cultured adherents for the more devotional and tasteful worship of the non-conforming Episcopalian chapels. In his Lee Lecture of 1909, the Rev. John Kerr of Dirleton noted how at the re-opening of Old Greyfriars in 1857 Robert Lee “ took occasion to disown the adulterated usages which, under the absurd name of Purity of Worship, had hypnotised our forefathers, and to revert to the Catholic customs which our great reformers, Knox included, never meant to be given up.”

Robert Lee's approach to the improvement of the form and content of public worship in Scotland was essentially aesthetic and psychological. He determined to replace the current formlessness, heaviness and wordiness with a more gracious, cultured and devotional atmosphere. He himself had described many a minister at prayer as "plunging on each occasion into a great wilderness of thought and language—like Abraham who went forth not knowing whither he went." Again, later in the century, Principal Story could look back on the situation which Dr. Lee tackled, noting that "an ill-ordered, slovenly, uncertain service was a fault and grievance which, wherever it obtruded itself, either blunted all reverential feeling, or drove devotion and culture from the sanctuary which it profaned."

We can study the lines of Robert Lee's remedial action in his own published "*Order of Public Worship and Administration of the Sacraments as used in the Church of the Greyfriars, Edinburgh*", first printed in 1864, and put into the hands of the congregation—the so-called "Prayer-book" which was the occasion of the actual case preferred against him! Orders for Forenoon Service and Afternoon Service are provided for the five Sundays of the month. The form of service is conventional; the language scriptural and dignified; the prayers are traditional and formal, though occasionally slightly verbose; and in each service there are printed one or two suitable prose psalms, printed for chanting in the Anglican manner. In general, the Greyfriars service-book provides material for public worship of a dignified and ordered quality, which would still be acceptable for use in our churches more than a century later, were improved material not now available in print.

One of the greatest obstacles Dr. Lee had to overcome was the kind of mystique and idolatry which had gathered round so-called *extemporary* prayer in the Church of Scotland, a usage which had been enthroned since even the Westminster Assembly's *Directory for the Publick Worship of God* (1645) had been forgotten. He shrewdly observed that "what is commonly styled '*the gift of prayer*', is nothing else but fluency of speech—a faculty which implies neither special intellectual endowments nor spiritual graces, nor even moral virtue, but is often found to distinguish the shallow, the ignorant, the conceited, and the presumptuous." Lee's aesthetic sensitivity, in contrast, felt order and arrangement to be of great importance in public worship, seeing a good church service (to the horror of some people!) as "a work

of art'', and affirming that "the Spirit quickens and blesses those who use and improve His gifts."

Dr. Lee's Reform in worship, then, had *aesthetic* rather than technically *liturgical* origins. Indeed, he was rather suspicious of a liturgical scholarship set on investigating the original forms of Christian worship; and when his own efforts in Greyfriars led to the foundation in 1865 of the Church Service Society of the Church of Scotland, he wrote to the foundation-members: "I hope you will be prudent and wise, and not take up your time by talking of Greek liturgies, and such far away projects. None who have any tolerable acquaintance with these formularies will imagine they can furnish anything suitable for us."

This failure to appreciate the history of Christian worship, which meant the practice of judging and formulating on *a priori*, aesthetic premisses, had unfortunate effects on subsequent Scottish forms and orders of worship, however greatly they were "improved". The only widely known printed service-book in English was, of course, the Book of Common Prayer of the Church of England, and its influence in Scotland in the second half of the nineteenth century was, while aesthetically enriching, yet at the same time liturgically misleading. The forms of Anglican Matins and Evensong stamped their influence upon our Scottish books of common order, and it was not noticed that these services were in origin sixteenth century translations of the regular services (offices) of religious communities. This influence excluded us for many years from knowledge and understanding of the essentially Reformed history and tradition in public worship, characteristic of Geneva, Strasbourg and Frankfurt; and, more inimical, made it less likely that the Lord's Supper should be restored as the norm for the Sunday morning worship of the People of God. The Anglican Communion today is moving speedily towards this latter tradition, while the Church of Scotland and Presbyterianism as a whole have been very slow in rediscovering the Reformed emphasis in worship or in giving the Communion Service its central place.

Another problem which is still with us a century after Dr. Lee's death is that of the language of public worship. It would be impossible to exaggerate his achievement in rescuing Scottish worship from the prevailing formless wordiness and in restoring the language and images from the prevailing language and images of the Bible to the prayers of the Church. But a critical examination of the Greyfriars Service Book reveals the temptation to indulge in "purple passages";

to employ extravagances of language or irrelevant archaisms; to be pompous, vague and repetitive. These faults can be traced in all our Scottish printed prayers, right up to the *Book of Common Order*, 1940; and we are faced today, in association with other denominations and with the Roman Communion turning anew to the vernacular, with the urgent task of finding a viable language for public worship, a language at once crisp, objective, clear, devout and reverent. Allied to this, is the current consideration of the claims of a “You”-practice instead of a “Thou-Thee” one in addressing Almighty God.

Nothing that Robert Lee undertook for the improvement of the Church’s worship in any way denigrated the Preaching of the Word, or diminished the vital place of the Sermon in the church service. First appointee to the Chair of Biblical Criticism in the University of Edinburgh, a task which he undertook in plurality with his pastoral charge in 1847, Dr. Lee was a student and expositor of the Bible, eloquent and effective in his generation. His pulpit ministry also made a striking impact on many of the public issues of his day, religious, social, educational and even political. The minister who gave so distinguished leadership in the form and content of the devotions of the sanctuary was also a faithful Preacher of the Gospel ; and his published sermons still make impressive reading.

In terms of “reform”, however, it is Robert Lee’s activity in relation to the praises of the sanctuary which we must consider along with his devotional and liturgical interests. It is difficult for us to imagine just how grim, jarring, tuneless, and musically hideous, was the unaccompanied church praise in Scotland just over a century ago—with practically only the metrical psalms in use, and an incredibly small range of tunes for these ; with the unmelodious lining out of the words by the precentor ; and the deplorably low level of musical education in our land.

The re-introduction of instrumental music was one obvious line of amelioration for this unhappy situation, but it is significant that in his “*Reform in Worship*”, Dr. Lee had to devote about thirty pages, or one sixth of his whole book, to a justification of instrumental music in church ! Prejudices against music and other forms of art as man-made and therefore non-spiritual, and the obscurantist use of the Holy Scriptures for opposing the use of instrumental music (in spite of references in the Psalms to the trumpet, harp and other instruments), had to be laboriously met and answered

by Dr. Lee in defending even the harmonium which he eventually introduced into Greyfriars. The opening paragraph of his chapter on "*The Praise of God—Instrumental Music*" is revealing :

"To enlightened Christians it may appear incredible that in the year of grace 1864, persons, and even sects, should still be found, that consider it not only inexpedient, but even sinful to employ an organ, or any other musical instrument of man's invention in the worship of God. It is conceivable that some particular instrument might be so associated in the people's minds with vulgar, ludicrous, or unhallowed ideas, that it could not be used in the service of God without suggesting these, and so obstructing the ends of divine worship ; but in regard to the *organ* at least (and the same may be said of the excellent substitute for it, recently invented—I mean the harmonium), the reverse of all this is the case ; for that noblest of instruments is not only specially adapted for sacred music, but it may be said always to have been consecrated to the service of the Church, and so to be associated in the mind of all Christendom with the solemnities of religion."

Well, apart from the pipe-organ installed in St. Andrew's Parish Church, Glasgow, in 1807, and, by decision of the Presbytery never used to lead the praise there ; and an organ used in the colonial charge of St. Andrew's, Bombay : the first post-Reformation instrumental music to lead the praise of a congregation in a Presbyterian church in Scotland, came with the harmonium introduced into Old Greyfriars in 1863, followed by a pipe-organ in 1865—the year when the rebuilt Anderston Church in Glasgow was opened also equipped with a pipe-organ. This much discussed and mis-called "innovation" of Robert Lee's made possible all that has been accomplished in the development and enrichment of church music in Scotland over the past century. The real task in this sphere has only just been launched : Scotland has not yet created a living tradition or "school" of church music ; moreover, the recruitment of competent church organists has slowed down, and the electronic organ is menacing the quality of instrumental music heard in our churches. The recollection of the courage and effort required to allow instrumental music back into the worship of the Scottish Church at all, should give impetus to greater interest, training and education in the realms of church music and organ-playing.

In the appendix of Metrical Psalms, Paraphrases, and Hymns included in Dr. Lee's Greyfriars Service-Book, we

see the material which he hoped to have his congregation sing in church. Items 1 to 203 are portions of the *Scottish Metrical Psalter of 1650*, printed each as a suitable item of praise on its own, rather than the printing out of entire psalms. Items 204 to 253 are a similar selection from the *Scottish Paraphrases* (1781). A novelty at the time were the fourteen hymns listed as items 254 to 267. Hymns, "human hymns", which the Relief Church, formed in 1761, had been first to introduce, were still slightly suspect, and also in short supply. Robert Lee rejected much of the religious verse offered as hymnology, pointing out that real hymns had to be "acts of worship, i.e. of adoration, praise, blessing, dependence, humiliation, and the like—addressed to God." This is the type of criterion which the Church Hymnary Revision Committee has had to remember in its present exacting task of selection.

Soon after Dr. Lee's death, *The Scottish Hymnal* was published in 1870, followed by *The Church Hymnary* in 1898, and *The Revised Church Hymnary* in 1927. In some ways, the Church of Scotland still awaits the kind of composite book of praise, suggested in the appendix to the Greyfriars' Service Book of 1864. The proposals of the Church Hymnary Revision Committee for the inclusion in one book of selections from the Scottish Metrical Psalms and Paraphrases, together with hymns, canticles, prose psalms and other items of congregational praise, all numbered consecutively, suggests the possibility of Dr. Lee's conception in 1864 being realized by 1970 !

One part of the Church's inheritance in praise has suffered a severe recession since the days of Dr. Lee's reforms, namely, the Prose Psalter. It was his view that "the prose psalms contain the best materials for worship: they furnish the true basis of the Christian Liturgy, both for prayer and singing . . . These psalms which are properly acts of praise should be set apart to be chanted, or, if that be inconvenient, to be recited responsively as psalms, or acts of adoration, blessing and praise to God." He made good his view by including portions from the prose psalter in his forms of service, these being pointed for chanting. The decline in the use of the Prose Psalter for either chanting or responsive reading has been a sad deterioration in Scottish worship in our time. A challenging task now awaits skilled and resourceful church musicians to provide settings, readily singable by congregations, for the prose psalms and other doxological portions of the Bible, some of these, possibly, in

modern versions. The Psalter is much too precious a part of the praise of the Holy Catholic Church, for it to be allowed to slip into desuetude within Scottish Presbyterianism.

All the changes which Dr. Lee effected in the practice of worship, had the purpose of increasing the spirit of reverence and devotion among the people. This was why he was active behind the much discussed "change of posture" in worship, namely, the change from sitting to standing for the singing, and from standing to kneeling for the prayers. The adoption of standing for praise was undoubted gain, but it remains regrettable that the posture for prayer became the non-descript lounging in pews whose shape made kneeling well nigh impossible. It is to be hoped that modern building and design will promote the possibility of kneeling for prayer in church.

Concern over bodily posture at worship, was accompanied by Robert Lee's initiatives in endeavouring to make the outward setting for worship more attractive and reverent. The stained-glass windows in Old Greyfriars, the first in a Scottish Presbyterian church since the Reformation, were a first small step in this direction ; but the restorative work on some of the nation's great churches, like the Cathedrals of Brechin and Dunblane, soon followed ; and this concern for the *Church Beautiful* has made enormous strides forward in Scotland. The Church of Scotland now has its General Trustees alert and conscious of the nation's inheritance in ecclesiastical stone ; and the General Assembly has its Advisory Committee on Artistic Questions, trying to promote proper aesthetic and ecclesiological standards in the building, restoring and furnishing of churches.

Robert Lee's achievement in the reform of worship is mirrored as much in the liturgical, ecclesiological, hymnological and devotional tasks facing our Church today, as it is in the specific achievements of his own immediate efforts at Greyfriars and on behalf of the Church of Scotland as a whole last century. As Dr. A. K. Robertson has written, "We must give Dr. Lee all credit for having started a movement which won the right, for those who wished to exercise it, to prepare and use services on liturgical lines. He opened the door for the enrichment of services and churches in a manner which but a few years earlier would have been condemned out of hand as Popery or Episcopacy."

In this way he was a true son of the Reformation, and a loyal upholder of the *ecclesia semper reformanda*, although he had to fight hard to maintain this truer understanding of

“Reform”. As he could write in 1864, “*Non possumus* is the reply which Pío Nono and his College of Cardinals make to all projects of reform. The words are history and prophecy united ; they furnish at once a true character and an appropriate epitaph.” But a vast world of change separates Pope Pius IX from Pope John XXIII ; and since the Second Vatican Council, the sad possibility is that the Reformed Churches might surrender to the Church of Rome, the whole essential of “*Reform*”, which is to be ready to look at things *de novo*, and to be alert to the Holy Spirit leading the Church into new truth.

A centenary tribute to Robert Lee should imply a fresh interest in and concern for the Church’s worship, which like every other aspect of her life, must be undergoing continual renewal and reformation. It would be wrong to regard any form or order of worship as absolute and final ; and accordingly imaginative experiment and discerning reconsideration must be exercised in this realm all the time. Liturgy, the divine service of Almighty God, must be both traditional and novel, rooted in the faith but always dynamic and alive. Only so can it be the activity of the Holy Spirit Who has yet many things of Christ to show more clearly to the Church.

The Rev. Dr. Herbert Story summed up Dr. Robert Lee’s achievement by writing, soon after his death, that “the broad results—of which organs, choirs, devotional postures, decorated Churches, and Church Service societies, were the visible indications—were a deeper and purer devotional feeling permeating the mind of the Church, and especially of the younger clergy ; a more exalted sense of the solemnity and necessity of worship as the true bond of union among Christians ; a more charitable, liberal and catholic tone of thought and sentiment ; a franker recognition of the diversity of forms and gifts through which the one Spirit may develop its growing life.”

R. STUART LOUDEN