THE NEW COLLEGE IN THE OLD TOWN

Ian Wotherspoon recalls the story of a building which has played an important part in Scotland's national life.

STANDING high above Princes Street close by Edinburgh Castle, New College's dreaming spires draw admiring glances from visitors and locals alike, even if most know little about the building or its history. Its commanding position on The Mound, between the Castle Hill and the Georgian New Town below, make it a central feature of the urban landscape, lovingly captured in paintings, photographs and postcards.

But this is no architectural folly designed merely to please the eye or provide a fine view. Rather, the building, known as New College, has played a significant part in Scottish life over the last 150 years, embracing many of the events, issues and personalities which shape the nation today.

Edinburgh's "new" college was born out of the break-up of the Church of Scotland in 1843 when the Free Church emerged in protest at what was seen as interference by the state in religious affairs. Future ministers of the new Church would no longer study at the town's "old" college, the University of Edinburgh, but at an institution which promoted sound scholarship as well as what the philosopher John Stuart Blackie called "broad and deep principles of humanity and fraternity" to meet the many challenges then facing Victorian Scotland.

Although the Free Church had a fine sense of its divine mission, it also had a good nose for a bargain! The New College site was acquired in 1844 at a knock-down price and the new premises opened six years later. Funds for the building came, in the main, from wealthy Free Church members, many of whom also contributed to the setting up of competitive bursaries to attract the brightest students.

The architect was the renowned William Henry Playfair who designed so many of the capital's classical buildings, including the Royal Scottish Academy and the National Gallery nearby. Playfair was always sensitive to the relationship of one building to another and to the townscape as a whole. New College was to be no different. Stepped into the hillside, its twin towers framed the steeple of St John's Highland Tolbooth Church directly behind. Now, as then, the view from Princes Street captures much of the drama and diversity of the Edinburgh skyline.

The dynamic preacher and social reformer, Thomas Chalmers, was the College's first Principal. He brought to his students a passionate interest in Christian mission together with a deep concern for the poor and vulnerable. His vision of a more just and caring society was to be the hallmark of Scotland's Free Church throughout its history and its legacy to the wider Presbyterian tradition.

The standing of men like Chalmers (his funeral in 1847 was a national event) and his successors like John Baillie, author of the devotional classic *A Diary Of Private Prayer*, first published in 1936 and translated into more than 20 languages, ensured New College quickly became, and remained, a leading centre for theological study in the reformed tradition.

New College was no stranger to the controversies regarding biblical criticism which whirled round the Victorian religious world. The Professor of Divinity, W. P. Paterson,

who championed the new German theology which sought to interpret the Bible in the light of scientific advances and the theory of evolution, aroused considerable opposition. But a gradual cooling of the theological temperature cleared the way for the College to promote a sensible balance between the demands of liberty of thought and sound doctrine.

Wherever they came from, most students remembered their days at New College with much affection. Now retired in the Borders, Jack Kellet, who ministered for much of his life at South Leith Parish Church in Edinburgh, was no exception. As a student in the late 1950s he recalls the outstanding qualities of the College's professors.

"They lectured us with phenomenal erudition as students in class; they joined us as fellow worshippers in morning prayers which we took turns in conducting; and they positively relished our friendship round the dinner table, accepting us as men and women who had also been called to the most important of God's tasks."

The reputation of men like the gifted New Testament scholar and eloquent preacher, James S. Stewart, brought many students from abroad, particularly from North America. Most came to study for their Doctorate. "For such dedicated souls," Jack remembers, "studying at New College had the added attraction that they could bring their new wives — Divinity Dames — to be with them while they were here. Being able to have their first babies free on the National Health Service could never have been a consideration!"

International in focus New College has witnessed some of the more remarkable events in our recent history. In May 1982 Pope John Paul II was welcomed by the Moderator of the Church of Scotland's General Assembly, Professor John McIntyre, and met other Scottish church leaders. "We still have to overcome many obstacles occasioned by the sad histories of past enmities," the Pope said. "We have to resolve important doctrinal issues; yet already mutual

love . . . can be a sign of hope to a divided world."

The College had earlier given a clear signal that the ecumenical spirit was more than just fine words and pious hopes. The appointment in 1979 of a Roman Catholic academic, Professor James Mackey, to the Thomas Chalmers Chair of Theology, was an outstanding achievement for what had often been seen as a bastion of Presbyterianism. To those who opposed the appointment, the gentle but incisive Alec Cheyne, Professor of Ecclesiastical History, argued convincingly that students would benefit from learning more about all aspects of Christianity. Even today theological colleges elsewhere might ponder his wise words.

Extended over the years, the New College complex includes an Assembly Hall which, as the venue for the General Assembly first of the Free Church and, since 1929, of the Church of Scotland, has been a lively public forum for the discussion of all aspects of Scottish life. Comprising as many lay people as ministers, the General Assembly meets once a year, usually in May, and is a colourful affair which reflects the democratic emphasis of our national Church. Acting so often as the conscience of the nation, successive General Assemblies have sought to understand the material and spiritual problems arising in a fast-changing society as well as the hopes and concerns of the people.

More recently such concerns were also to be addressed in the Scottish Parliament which met in the Assembly Hall at New College. In a building which throughout its life has been home to much fine oratory, what more poignant words can there be than those of Dr Winnie Ewing who chaired the first meeting in May 1999? "I want to begin with the words that I have always wanted either to say or to hear someone else say: the Scottish Parliament, which adjourned on 25th March 1707, is hereby reconvened."

With the Parliament now settled in permanent premises at Holyrood, New College has returned to more sedate, if no less eclectic, use. As the home of Edinburgh University's School of Divinity it is one of the largest centres for the study of theology and religious studies in Britain, with students coming from many faith traditions and none.

Its Library is a particular treasure with a wonderful collection of material, much of it related to Scottish Christianity. Here are the records of Scottish Christians who battled social problems in long demolished slums as well as of those who served as missionaries in Africa, Asia and beyond. Housed in what was formerly a Church, the Library with its stained-glass windows, church furnishings and vibrant pink and cream interior provides a unique, uplifting study environment.

Whether the statue of the Scottish reformer, John Knox, which greets visitors as they enter New College, is equally uplifting is an open question. But his legacy to Scotland is overlooked as often as it is misconstrued. Knox's vision of a school in every parish and bursaries for poor students had a lasting impact on Scottish education and society. In one form or the other, his revolutionary ideas were to be exported around the world, influencing the development of schools and colleges as well as ideas of personal accountability, freedom and justice. So perhaps it's not inappropriate that his steely, if not unkind, gaze should continue to look across the New College quadrangle as a reminder of his life and wider influence and the remarkable changes that have taken place since his time — many spearheaded by those who taught, studied and worked here.

New College has not only been a home to religious endeavour and agile minds, but also to strong hearts and great dreams as well. And in bearing witness, as it has done so often before, to the generosity of the human spirit, and the renewal of our national life, this wonderful old building enjoys an important place, and well-earned affection, in the history of modern Scotland.