

3. Paisley's Connection with the American Revolution

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In Paisley Abbey there is an attractive plaque to the Rev. John Witherspoon. In the 18th Century Witherspoon was for a number of years the minister of the Laigh Kirk (now Paisley Arts Centre) before emigrating to America. There he subsequently threw in his lot with the American rebels and signed the American Declaration of Independence. Horace Walpole was later quoted as saying, 'Daughter America has run away with a Presbyterian parson!'

I recently had the great pleasure of visiting the delightful village of Gifford in East Lothian, the birthplace of John Witherspoon. I saw Yester Parish Church, a beautifully situated Scottish kirk, and viewed the memorial plaque on a nearby village wall. It reads: 'In honoured memory of the Rev. John Witherspoon DD LLd. Only clergyman to sign the American Declaration of Independence. The first moderator of the Presbyterian General Assembly in America and President of Princeton University. Born in the manse of Yester, Gifford, February 5th 1723.... the states of America may hand down the blessings of peace and public order to many generations. Erected by the St Andrew's Society of the State of New York 1955.'

The name Witherspoon is perhaps better known in America than it is in the land of his birth. How did a Scottish minister become so deeply embroiled in the turbulent politics of the American Revolution?

Witherspoon's later radical American politics may have had their roots very firmly planted in his previous activity in the Scottish Kirk; although early in his career, while a minister at Beith in Ayrshire, Witherspoon was still loyal to the British Crown as was evident at the time of the Jacobite rebellion of 1745 when he reported as a volunteer to oppose Bonnie Prince Charlie. Though he saw no action Witherspoon was captured by Jacobites at the battle of Falkirk and imprisoned in Doune Castle. The ever-resourceful minister, however, made his escape down a rope of knotted bedclothes.

Witherspoon was a leading light in a particular wing of the Scottish Kirk. He was associated with the staunchly Calvinist 'Popular' or 'Orthodox' party, and led the constant demand that congregations should choose their minister without the meddling impositions of landlords or gentry. In short, Witherspoon battled against the law of Patronage; and for the popular will in the election of ministers. This democratic concern was also illustrated in Paisley where Witherspoon contested the decision of the Presbytery to refuse admission to two elders who had been elected by the Kirk Sessions. The matter was raised at the General Assembly, and Witherspoon won a victory over his own Presbytery. It is likely that his championing of popular rights in the Scottish Church adumbrated his bold stand in support of the American Revolution. Both conflicts could be portrayed as clashes between popular rights and arbitrary power. In America the arbitrary power was the British Crown.

Witherspoon also became a well-known author. His best known literary

contribution was 'Ecclestial Characteristics,' a satire directed at his church rivals. It was a controversial publication; but Witherspoon believed that 'a satire that does not bite is good for nothing!'

It took several years of persuasion before the Witherspoons agreed to emigrate from Paisley to America where John Witherspoon had been invited to take over the Presidency of the struggling College of New Jersey at Princeton. The family boarded the Glasgow brigantine 'Peggy', at Greenock. From onboard her Witherspoon continued to express his concern for his Paisley people, writing to his clergyman brother, David, with instructions concerning worship in the Laigh Kirk until a successor could be found. In the era of sail an ocean voyage was not to be undertaken lightly and it took the 'Peggy' more than eleven weeks to reach America.

In the following years Witherspoon threw himself wholeheartedly into the various challenges that faced him. His tried-and-tested Scottish democratic intellect was planted in the new environment of the American colonists, and he took their side against the British Crown. When the British occupied Princeton Witherspoon was moved to anger. Thomas Nelson Jnr wrote to Thomas Jefferson: 'Old Weatherspoon (sic) has not escaped their fury, they have burnt his library. It grieves him much that he has lost his controversial tracts. He would lay aside the Cloth to take revenge on them. I believe he would send them to the Devil if he could.'

Witherspoon, as noted on the commemorative wall plaque in Paisley Abbey, signed in the American Declaration of Independence 'that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.' However, a significant but especially sad reference in the Declaration is to 'the merciless Indian Savages' - what about their rights, their lands, their liberties and pursuit of happiness? Indian rights were brutally ignored.

Witherspoon's last years were clouded by the death of his wife, but he did marry again. His second wife was a young widow called Ann Dill. Although with increasing age he lost his sight, he continued to preach the Word of the Lord until his death in 1794. Witherspoon was a truly remarkable man and Paisley can be proud of its connection. He was a subscriber to the view that a just cause was worthy of divine support: 'If your cause is just,' he insisted, 'you may look with confidence to the Lord and intreat him to plead it as his own.' He believed that the example of good men to the wicked is 'like the sun upon the weak eye, distressing and painful, it flashes light upon the conscience.

