

UNITARIANS AND THE REFORM MOVEMENT

Who are Unitarians?

- A non-conformist religious movement that began in 14th century Europe, championing the right to freedom of thought.
- In the 18th and 19th centuries, Unitarians were closely identified with campaigns for social and political reform.
- They believed that social ills were created largely by bad living and working conditions and thought that the government was failing in its duty to serve the people.

- In Scotland, reform ideas fell on fertile ground because a large proportion of the people could read and write.
- It wasn't quite respectable to be a Unitarian. Many were charged with sedition.
- This included the Reverend John Fyshe Palmer, a Dundee Unitarian. Remembered as one of the "Scottish Political Martyrs" along with Thomas Muir, he was sentenced in 1793 to 7 years deportation to Australia.

- It also included the Reverend Neil Douglas, a minister in both Glasgow and Paisley. Having referred to King George III as “*worse in his mental and corporeal capacity than Nebuchadnezzar*”, he was arrested on a charge of sedition.
- Neil Douglas’s trial became ridiculous. The public laughed at the expense of the royal family and he was acquitted.

One Unitarian & his fight for press freedom

- In the early nineteenth century there were no radical newspapers in Scotland.
- At the large gathering on Meiklriggs Moor, to protest the Peterloo massacre, the idea of printing a radical newspaper emerged.
- The 'Spirit of the Union', edited by printer and Unitarian, Gilbert McLeod first appeared on 30 October 1819.

The newspaper reported on:

- Large demonstrations in Glasgow, Rutherglen, Ayr, Kilsyth, Paisley, Airdrie and Stirlingshire.
- Musicians arrested for playing “Scots Wha Hae” at a meeting.
- Glasgow newsvendors being arrested and charged with distributing seditious literature.
- Brutality from the military and yeomanry.
-and, warnings about the activities of Government Spies.

- Eleven weekly editions were printed before it was suppressed by the authorities. The final edition appeared on 8 January 1820.
- Gilbert McLeod was tried for sedition.

- The jury at Gilbert's trial found him guilty but unanimously recommended leniency on the grounds of his previous good character.
- However, the court sentenced him to transportation to Australia for five years.
- This harsh sentence alarmed many - in England, the penalty for sedition had been limited to a fine for a first offence.

- Fortunately, Gilbert initially thrived in Australia.
- His wife and children joined him.
- He decided to remain after his sentence ended, becoming variously a schoolteacher, a clerk, and 'Under-Sheriff'.
- Gilbert died in 1828 after a short illness.

What role did other Unitarians play in the events of 1820?

- From 1800, English and American Unitarians funded a mission in Scotland which preached reformed religion and parliamentary representation.
- Many of those who led it had degrees from the Universities of Glasgow and Edinburgh which (unlike in England) did not require students to accept the creed of the national church.
- By 1820 there were Unitarian Churches in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Paisley and Dundee and several other towns.

- Many Radicals were Unitarians. This included John Fraser (see our presentation about his fascinating life).
- John was a good friend of Neil Douglas and later wrote a biography of him.

- Possibly significantly, minutes of Unitarian meetings became scant around 1820. Did members expunge 'dangerous' notes of what they were saying and doing in order to protect themselves from government reprisals?
- The huge growth in membership over preceding decades slowed around this time. Many members emigrated to America where there was greater freedom to think.
- Nevertheless, throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, the Unitarian Glasgow Church continued its emphasis on freedom of thought and social reform.

Some of its members were famous Glasgow citizens

- Stephen Mitchell, founder of the Mitchell Library;
- Allan Glen, who left his fortune to found two schools for the destitute;
- George Baillie, a lawyer who gifted reading rooms *“for the ordinary men and women of Glasgow”*;
- William Teacher, distiller and philanthropist.

Banner honouring famous Glasgow Unitarians



Glasgow Unitarian Church 2020

- There is no creed to accept in Unitarianism, though everyone is encouraged to follow their conscience.