

McCHEYNE'S
DUNDEE

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Bruce McLennan



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McCheyne's Dundee

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Introduction: Instruments of Spiritual Blessing

While Dundee was gradually establishing itself in the mid-nineteenth century as the third city of Scotland, with a rapidly expanding economy, it was the religious revival that began in the autumn of 1839 that drew the attention of observers throughout Scotland and beyond. Two names associated with the awakening in Dundee and the surrounding district are William Chalmers Burns (1815–1868) and Robert Murray McCheyne (1813–1843), in spite of the relatively short time they spent in that city. Burns spent only about seven months there from early April to late November 1839. (He did spend an additional four months as a temporary pastor in the Dudhope area of Dundee, beginning in December 1840.)¹ During 1839 he made two trips back to his father’s charge in Kilsyth and saw God at work in revival there.

Although minister from November 1836 until his death in March 1843, McCheyne was often involved in the Lord’s work outside Dundee for a variety of reasons. He was often away at Communion seasons—for example, at Newton-on-Ayr in Ayrshire, Auchtermuchty in Fife, and at Larbert or Kelso.² David Robertson comments that for much of 1840 he was “busy speaking at churches all over the

1. Tom Lennie, *Land of Many Revivals* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2015), 353.

2. McCheyne preached at Auchtermuchty August 5, 1841. Manuscript Notebooks and Letters of Robert Murray McCheyne, 1.12 (hereafter cited as MACCH); L. J. Van Valen, *Constrained by His Love* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2002), 365, 410; and Andrew A. Bonar, *Memoir and Remains of the Rev. Robert Murray McCheyne*, new ed. (Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson and Ferrier, 1892), 136.

country to crowded meetings on the subject of Jewish evangelism.”³ To illustrate this, McCheyne records in his diary a trip to Glasgow with Andrew Bonar of Collace on behalf of the Jews when he had been back in his parish only a few weeks after his Palestine trip, which had taken him and Bonar from Scotland for six months.⁴ This also took him to the United Synod of Northern Ireland on two occasions, from July 7 to 25, 1840, and again in July 1841.⁵ In 1840 he exchanged pulpits for a month with Bonar while their *Narrative of a Mission of Inquiry to the Jews* was being written up.⁶ Midweek services elsewhere, visits to London and the General Assembly to make a maiden speech in May 1840, together with many periods of illness meant that his time in Dundee would have been less than five years rather than about six and a half.⁷ It is no wonder that his congregation “began to murmur at his absence.”⁸

From their student days, both Burns and McCheyne had strong interests in the mission field abroad. There is a retrospective note in Burns’s diary in which his missionary interest is revealed:

At Glasgow University, during the winter of 1837–8, I was led, from my connection with the college missionary association, to feel so deeply my personal responsibility in regard to the spread of the gospel among the heathen, that after much prayer and many exercises of soul, I took the solemn step of writing to my father, to request, if he thought good, he should communicate with Dr Gordon, the convenor of our

3. David Robertson, *Awakening: The Life and Ministry of Robert Murray McCheyne* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2010), 155–56. In a letter from McCheyne to his parents, dated April 24, 1841, he wrote, “In Ireland for Jewish mission work.” MACCH 2.7.1.

4. Andrew A. Bonar, *Memoir*, 124.

5. Andrew A. Bonar, *Memoir*, 133; McCheyne to parents, April 24, 1841, MACCH 2.7.1.

6. Andrew A. Bonar, *Memoir*, 141. Bonar records, “Accordingly, during four or five weeks, he remained in Collace, my flock enjoying his Sabbath day services and his occasional visits, while he was set free from what would have been the never-ceasing interruptions of his own town.”

7. He was ordained November 24, 1836, and called home March 25, 1843.

8. Andrew A. Bonar, *Memoir*, 145.

India committee, and let him know that, should the Church deem me qualified, I would be ready to go as a missionary to Hindustan.⁹

This fell through because the India committee did not like the idea of Burns going to St. John's, New Brunswick, at the request of the colonial committee, before going to India. Two months after Burns began his ministry at St. Peter's, the India committee asked Burns to go as a missionary to Poonah in Bombay, and the Jewish committee asked him to go to Aden in Arabia. Having begun his labors in Dundee, "that memorable field," service abroad had to wait. After being greatly used in evangelism in Scotland, England, Ireland, and Canada, he at last sailed as a missionary to China in 1847 for what was to be his life's work.¹⁰

Even before he attained his majority, McCheyne's missionary interests were developing. As his student days drew to a close, he often discussed and prayed with his close friend and prayer partner Alexander Somerville about whether God was calling them to missionary work or to serve as a minister at home. In his diary for June 4, 1832, he recorded, "Walking with A. Somerville by Craighleith, conversing on missions. If I am to go to the heathen to speak of the unsearchable riches of Christ, this one thing must be given me, to be out of the reach of the baneful influence of esteem or contempt. If worldly motives go with me, I shall never convert a soul, and shall lose my own in the labor."¹¹ McCheyne followed the labors of missionaries abroad with great interest. In particular, he was greatly impressed by the life of David Brainerd.¹² Bonar remarked of his friend that "to the last days of his life, his thoughts often turned to foreign lands."¹³

9. Andrew A. Bonar, *Memoir*, 145.

10. Michael D. McMullen, *God's Polished Arrow: William Chalmers Burns* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2002), 24; Islay Burns, *Memoir of the Rev. William Chalmers Burns* (London: James Nisbet, 1870), 56.

11. Andrew A. Bonar, *Memoir*, 17.

12. Andrew A. Bonar, *Memoir*, 20.

13. Andrew A. Bonar, *Memoir*, 28.

Although Burns appeared to be of a robust constitution, McCheyne, by contrast, suffered much ill health. While still at university in 1830, he first showed signs of weakness.¹⁴ Bonar noted in his diary his concern that McCheyne was “already threatened with dangerous symptoms about his lungs.”¹⁵ McCheyne himself felt his weakness. On November 18, 1834, he composed one of his best-loved hymns, “Jehovah Tsidkenu,” during a fever from which he was not sure he would recover. He really felt himself to be “treading the valley, the shadow of death.”¹⁶ Even his trip to Palestine did not seem to make much difference to his constitution. Burns met him on his return to Dundee and commented, “He seems in but weak health, and not very sanguine about ever resuming the full duties of a parish minister. O Lord, spare thy servant, if it be for the glory of thy name, and restore his full strength that he may yet be the means of winning many souls for Jesus. Amen.”¹⁷ In his biography, Robertson has given more consideration to McCheyne’s condition than others, suggesting he not only suffered from depression, which his brother David had also had, but questions if he could be called a “workaholic.”¹⁸ Certainly, as chapter 3 will reveal, he was a tireless worker.

The above factors might suggest that Burns and McCheyne would not make any great impact on Dundee: the short amount of time they spent there, their missionary interests, their relative youthfulness and inexperience—in Burns’s case as a largely untried and untested licentiate. Added to this was McCheyne’s ongoing bodily weakness. Nevertheless, both these men proved to be, in the providence of God, instruments of great spiritual blessing to the people of Dundee and beyond, linking their names forever with those times of refreshing in the late 1830s and early 1840s. It is necessary first, however, to set the scene by considering something of the social and economic conditions of the town in which they labored.

14. Robertson, *Awakening*, 67.

15. Robertson, *Awakening*, 67.

16. Andrew A. Bonar, *Memoir*, 62–63; Robertson, *Awakening*, 68.

17. Islay Burns, *Memoir*, 130; McMullen, *God’s Polished Arrow*, 45.

18. Robertson, *Awakening*, 67–74 (chap. 6, “Oppression and Depression”).

Dundee in the 1830s and 1840s

In population, manufactures, and trade; in the luxury and comfort which prevail, Dundee has perhaps advanced faster than any similar town in the kingdom. There are men alive in it who remember when its population was only one-fifth of what it is now; when its harbour was a crooked wall, often inclosing but a few fishing or smuggling craft; when its spinning-mills were things unknown and unthought of; and its trade hardly worthy of the name.

—*Dundee in 1793 and 1833: The First and Second Statistical Account*

The social consequences of the appearance of the swelling sea of new faces in the early decades of the Victorian era were profound. Plague had disappeared but only to be replaced by other killer diseases—some of which had made an appearance earlier—such as cholera (1832, 1849, 1853 and 1866), typhus (1837 and 1847), smallpox, measles, whooping cough and scarlet fever. Typhus lingered on in Dundee.... The spread of these had much to do with chronic overcrowding, notably in the vicinity of the mills and factories.... In large part the squalor...was associated with cramped living conditions, as property was further and further sub-divided to house the incomers. The existing housing stock, however, was insufficient to cope with such a massive influx of people. Few employers built houses for their workers.

—C. A. Whately, D. B. Swinfen, and A. M. Smith,
The Life and Times of Dundee

One of the results of both the Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions was a major demographic shift, which led to a concentration of Scotland's population in towns and cities. Prior to this, the population of Scotland had been much more evenly distributed throughout the country. A survey conducted by Alexander Webster in 1755 revealed that 51 percent of Scotland's population lived in the Highlands, and only 37 percent in Central Scotland, which included Dundee. The government census of 1861 presented quite a different picture: the Highland population was reduced to 33 percent, while that of Central Scotland had risen to 58 percent.¹

The growth of Dundee in the late eighteenth century had been gradual: 12,426 in 1766; 15,700 in 1781; and 19,329 in 1788. The 1833 statistical account for Dundee, however, revealed a more rapid growth: 26,804 in 1801; 29,616 in 1811; 30,575 in 1821; and 45,355 in 1831. This did not include the seafaring people, who might number 2,500, which would then give a total of 47,855.² This was to shoot up in the next decades to 79,000 in 1851, and then 90,000 in 1861.³ With regard to the phenomenal growth that was taking place, in 1831 the *Dundee, Perth, and Cupar Advertiser* commented, "We are not aware that the population of any other town in the empire has increased with equal rapidity."⁴ Ten years later, the population was 66,232, an increase of 20,877.⁵ Dundee was on its way to becoming the third-largest city in Scotland, after Glasgow and Edinburgh.

1. James Grey Kyd, ed., *Scottish Population Statistics, Including Webster's Analysis of Population, 1755*, Scottish History Society, 3rd series, vol. 44 (Edinburgh: T. & A. Constable, 1952), xviii. For the purposes of Webster's survey, Central Scotland comprised the counties of Ayr, Dumbarton, Lanark, Renfrew, Clackmannan, Stirling, the Lothians, Fife, and Dundee City.

2. *Dundee in 1793 and 1833: The First and Second Statistical Accounts*, with an introduction by Annette M. Smith, facsimile ed. (St. Andrews: St. Andrews University Library, 1991), 17, 84.

3. S. G. E. Lythe and John Butt, *An Economic History of Scotland 1100-1939* (Glasgow and London: Blackie and Son, 1975), 245 (see esp. appendix 2, "Population of the Principal Towns").

4. *Dundee, Perth, and Cupar Advertiser*, July 21, 1831.

5. *Dundee, Perth, and Cupar Advertiser*, June 18, 1841.

Dundee's growth can be attributed to several causes. Some of those affected by the Highland Clearances and, from the 1840s on, by the Highland potato famine, made Dundee their home. There was a sufficient number for a Gaelic chapel to be erected in 1791, though only just over one percent of the town's population was Highland born.⁶ Many came in from neighboring counties like Angus and Fife, either because they had been displaced by the gradual introduction of machinery on the farms or because they hoped to earn more than they had as poorly paid farm workers. Dundee was also developing one of the largest whaling fleets in Britain.⁷ From 1810 on, the harbor commissioners supervised the enlarging of the Dundee docks. This enabled as many as 319 different sailing vessels to be registered and sail from Dundee. There was, therefore, a substantial seafaring community, which continued to grow for some time.

It was the linen trade in particular, however, that drew the population. While handloom weaving continued until midcentury, by 1832 there were more than thirty flax-spinning mills driven by steam engines.⁸ Peter Carmichael (1809–1891), who rose to become manager of Baxter Brothers and engineer of some impressive industrial buildings, noted that the mills in the 1830s employed more than three thousand workers. Of these, more than a third were under eighteen, and about one-fifth were under fourteen years of age.⁹ All in all, 6,828 families were employed in the different departments of the linen trade.¹⁰ With this concentration on the one trade, Dundee "led Europe in its capture of the world's markets for machine-spun flax

6. *Dundee in 1793 and 1833*, 40; C. A. Whately, D. B. Swinfen, and A. M. Smith, *The Life and Times of Dundee* (Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers, 1993), 103. The 1851 census gives 809 as the figure for Highland-born residents.

7. Whately, Swinfen, and Smith, *Life and Times of Dundee*, 89–90.

8. Bruce Lenman, Charlotte Lythe, and Enid Gauldie, *Dundee and Its Textile Industry, 1850–1914*, Abertay Historical Society, no. 14 (Dundee, Scotland: n.p., 1969), 8.

9. Peter Carmichael Biographical Works, Dundee University Archive Room, MS 102/1, 177.

10. *Dundee in 1793 and 1833*, 91.

and the coarse linen cloth woven with it.”¹¹ By the mid-1850s, however, jute had begun to overtake linen, and Dundee soon earned the reputation of being a “one-industry town.”¹²

Conditions of Employment in the Mills

There being no compulsory education until the 1870s, work began at a young age, though “the deepest horrors of child exploitation were gradually eliminated in the middle decades of the nineteenth century.”¹³ Evidence of these horrors was brought more and more to the attention of the government. In 1832 Dundee workers sent two petitions to Parliament. In one they protested the hours that young people between the ages of six and eighteen had to work, praying that the hours might be reduced. In the other they asked for a reduction to eleven and a half hours a day, or a sixty-six-hour week.¹⁴ To petitions like this throughout the country was added the revelations of the parliamentary Royal Commission set up to investigate conditions in the factories. In 1833 Robert Arnot gave evidence to a parliamentary committee from his time as overseer at Baxter’s Mill in Dundee. He described what he saw: “The boys, when too late of a morning, dragged naked from their beds by the overseers, and even by the master, with their clothes in their hands to the mill, where they put them on.” This was done “oftener than he can tell, and the boys were strapped naked as they got out of bed.” His testimony was confirmed by Barbara Watson, who worked at the same mill. She described similar treatment being meted out to the young girls.¹⁵

11. Louise Miskell, C. A. Whately, and Bob Harris, eds., *Victorian Dundee: Images and Realities* (Edinburgh: Tuckwell Press, 2000), 3.

12. Miskell, Whately, and Harris, *Victorian Dundee*, 2.

13. T. C. Smout, *A Century of the Scottish People, 1830–1930* (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 95.

14. Peter Carmichael Biographical Works, 178; Peter Carmichael, *The Dundee Textile Industry 1790–1885: From the Papers of Peter Carmichael of Arthursstone*, ed. Enid Gaudie, Scottish History Society, 4th series, vol. 6 (Edinburgh: Constable for the Scottish Historical Society, 1969), 51.

15. Parliamentary Papers 1833, vol. 20, A1, 40, quoted in E. Royston Pike,

Sir David Barry, a doctor appointed by the Royal Commission to report on Scotland, related the sad case of a worker who had entered the mill at the age of nineteen:

Married. No children. Very hoarse. Aged twenty-five. Employed in carding room. Began mill-work about six years ago. Has felt her chest much oppressed about nine months ago: threw up a tea-cup full of dark blood with thick spittle this day at two-o'clock. Breathing much oppressed with wheezing, is really very ill. If any other employment presented, would leave the mill. Was brought up at country service. Obligated to sit up in bed at night from difficulty in breathing. Earns five shillings per week. Cannot write.¹⁶

Not only were conditions in the mills unhealthy, with temperatures being kept artificially high, but also the bosses were manipulating working hours. One local lad, James Myles, who described his early work experience at a spinning mill from seven years of age in a book that was not questioned or challenged at the time, had this to say with regard to hours of work: "In reality there were no regular hours, master and managers did with us as they liked. The clocks at the factories were often put forward in the morning and back at night, and instead of being instruments for the measurement of time, they were used as cloaks for cheatey and oppression."¹⁷

The Althorp Factory Act of 1833, in the light of evidence presented, stipulated that no child under nine years of age should be employed. Those aged nine to thirteen should work no more than nine hours a day. Those aged thirteen to eighteen years were limited to twelve hours a day. Factory inspectors were also appointed to see to enforcing the act. The hours of work were still long, however; a

Human Documents of the Industrial Revolution in Britain (London: Allen and Unwin, 1966), 150–51.

16. T. C. Smout, *A History of the Scottish People 1560–1830* (London: Fontana Press, 1972), 389.

17. James Myles, *Chapters in the Life of a Dundee Factory Boy: An Autobiography* (Dundee, Scotland: McCosh, Park and Dewars, 1850), 12–13.

maximum of fifty-four hours a week for those aged nine to thirteen, and seventy-two hours for those thirteen to eighteen. By the early 1830s, therefore, “it was overwhelmingly an industry [i.e., textile] employing adolescents rather than one employing young children.”¹⁸

The day was still long, however, with only two half-hour breaks, one for breakfast, and the other for dinner. A six-day week was normal with only two days off in the year. Sunday would be regarded by many as a time to sleep and to recover strength for the next week's work.¹⁹

One of the unfortunate features of employment in the mills, from a family point of view, was that the owners, like Baxter or Cox, preferred to employ women and children at much less cost. Dundee was known as a women's city for at least two reasons: for one hundred years, women outnumbered men, and more women worked in Dundee than in any other town or city in Scotland.²⁰ Dundee was described as “a city where men were frequently dependent upon the earnings of mothers, sisters and daughters.” Men were often reduced to doing the household chores in a role-reversal situation.²¹

Wages were not high. Flax dressers got from ten to twelve shillings weekly, girls and boys three to six shillings, women five to eight shillings, and weavers seven to ten shillings a week. In those days, twenty shillings made up one pound sterling, and rent could be as much as four pounds a week, consuming half a family's income. Yet these wagers were regarded as adequate to live on.²²

18. Smout, *History of the Scottish People*, 389.

19. Smout, *History of the Scottish People*, 390.

20. Norman Watson, “Emerging from Obscurity: How Dundee Women Made Their Mark,” in *Dundee: A Voyage of Discovery*, ed. Graham Ogilvy (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1999), 199; A. M. Carstairs, “The Nature and Diversification of Employment in Dundee in the Twentieth Century,” in *Dundee and District*, ed. S. J. Jones (Dundee, Scotland: Dundee Local Executive Committee of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, 1968), 321.

21. Whately, Swinfen, and Smith, *Life and Times of Dundee*, 114.

22. Carmichael, *Dundee Textile Industry*, 52.

Inadequate Housing for the Growing Population

While working conditions were still hard and wages were not high, the most glaring deficiency in Dundee, in the second quarter of the century, was the lack of adequate housing for the rapidly growing population. The 1793 statistical account claimed, with some pride, that the council “has exerted itself to promote the public good. The building and endowing of new churches, the paving and lighting of streets, the opening of new ones, especially a new passage to the shore, the building of new piers, and the general improvement of the harbour, are works which they have executed within these 10 or 12 years, and which are both of great importance and entitle them to no small share of praise.”²³ While the appearance of the town may have seemed more impressive to the visitor, however, this did nothing to improve living conditions for the workers. The same 1793 account went on to state: “The principal causes of unhealthiness in Dundee, are the height of the houses, the narrowness of the tenements and of some streets, by which the people are too much crowded upon one another.”²⁴ The account went on to describe the greater part of the families as “living by half-dozens...under the same roof, with common stairs, without back yards or courts, and many possessing only single rooms.” There were next to no parks or open spaces to which people could resort to get a breath of fresh air.²⁵

Forty years later the housing situation was much more acute. There is no accurate figure for the number of houses being built until after the 1851 census, though it has been claimed that “in spite of a rise in population of 30,000 between 1841 and 1861, only 568 new houses were built.”²⁶ Dundee was building upward. Typical of the time were the four stories and attics, accommodating fifteen or sixteen families in one- or two-room houses at a rent of two, three,

23. *Dundee in 1793 and 1833*, 37.

24. *Dundee in 1793 and 1833*, 8–9.

25. *Dundee in 1793 and 1833*, 52.

26. Whately, Swinfen, and Smith, *Life and Times of Dundee*, 106.

or four pounds per week.²⁷ Long after “successive commissions deplored their existence,” Dundee (along with Glasgow) continued to build “single-ends,” one-room apartments. These were deemed to be adequate for some families and could also be justified in the light of the large number of spinster mill girls. There were also cellar dwellings known as “sunk flats” below pavement level.²⁸

Segregation of the Classes

Another unfortunate feature, certainly from the point of view of church life and fellowship, was the way in which, as workers crowded into the town, the upper class tended to move away from the working areas. This led to a segregation of the classes. In December 1840, Reverend George Lewis of St. David's Church gave a series of lectures in the Watt Institute on the physical, educational, and moral statistics of Dundee. He commented on the effect of class movement as follows: “There is moral and social distance between the dwellers at the extremities of our cities, greater far than the physical distance between the centre and extremities of the island; it were easier to construct a moral bridge between Dundee and the remotest of our Western Isles, than between its own extremes.”²⁹ In his parish membership there was a small middle class and an even smaller upper class, which had taken to commuting in to town, using the recently developed railway lines.³⁰ The result was that there was no interaction between rich and poor. In the opinion of Lewis, “One of the

27. Enid Gaudie, *Cruel Habitations: A History of Working-Class Housing 1780–1918* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1974), 172.

28. Gaudie, *Cruel Habitations*, 95, 162.

29. George Lewis, *The State of St. David's Parish, with remarks on the Moral and Physical Statistics of Dundee* (Dundee, Scotland: William Middleton, 1841), 3.

30. Dundee-Newtyle was the earliest, begun in 1833. The Dundee-Arbroath line was opened in October 1838. S. G. E. Lythe, “The Dundee and Newtyle Railway,” *The Railway Magazine* (August 1951): 548–50; Peter F. Marshall, *The Railways of Dundee* (Oxford: Oakwood Press, 1996), 17–20; S. G. E. Lythe, “Early Days of the Arbroath and Forfar Railways,” *The Railway Magazine* (January/February 1953): 55–57; and *Dundee, Perth, and Cupar Advertiser*, October 12, 1838; April 3, 1840.

great evils in St. David's Parish, in common with other manufacturing districts, is the want of a mixture of different ranks of society."³¹

The town houses of the local upper-class members were vacated for the more pleasant, nearby country areas. Their houses were often turned into tenements or inns. For example, Sir John Ogilvy moved out of the city center to the Baldovan area on the north bank of the Dighty Burn.³²

The Health of the Working Classes Was Affected

The health of the working classes was greatly affected by their living conditions. The 1793 statistical account regarded Dundee as "a very healthy place," where "fevers are seldom infectious, and agues almost unknown."³³ Forty years later, however, the 1833 account would observe that malignant cholera afflicted the town in "two eruptions, one in July [1832], the other in October... carrying off 512 persons out of 808 seized."³⁴

Increasingly in the 1830s and 1840s, concern was expressed over mortality from various diseases, particularly among the working class. Although the classes were largely segregated, well-meaning citizens sought to raise awareness in the press. In September 1837, one correspondent to the *Advertiser*, commenting on the medical report of the infirmary for the previous year, wrote of 1,009 cases, with 251 in surgery, making a total of 1,260. The article went on to state, "The mortality in Dundee last year... is far greater than in any other large manufacturing towns, such as Manchester, Liverpool, Glasgow, and nearly twice as great as the average of Scotland." Of the 1,009 cases, no fewer than seven hundred were cases of typhus fever. Fifty had died of smallpox.³⁵ Just after the arrival of McCheyne

31. George Lewis, *The Tavern Bill of Dundee, and what might be made of it* (Dundee, Scotland: William Middleton, 1841), 9.

32. Lenman, Lythe, and Gauldie, *Dundee and Its Textile Industry*, 4, 10.

33. *Dundee in 1793 and 1833*, 9 (1793 account).

34. *Dundee in 1793 and 1833*, 67.

35. *Dundee, Perth, and Cupar Advertiser*, September 8, 1837.

in Dundee, the *Advertiser* carried an article on the state of health in Dundee:

Since the commencement of the Bill of Mortality in November last, the state of disease and the number of deaths have been very heavy. The average of deaths for a year or two back has been about thirty-two weekly; but from the rapid increase of our population this year, particularly in those classes which from various causes, are most liable to be attacked with fever, etc., a rather higher average may have been expected. For some weeks back the deaths have been about fifty; and in the week ending on Saturday last it rose as high as ninety-six. The mortality since then has rather increased than diminished. The diseases most prevalent and fatal during the above period have been the measles, consumption, smallpox, and various kinds of fever. . . . In general, the greatest mortality has taken place among the old and infirm, and amongst children.³⁶

Reverend Lewis calculated that from 1833 to 1839 there were 11,808 cases of fever in Dundee, resulting in 1,312 deaths. This meant that fever took away more than a tenth of the population. The average mortality in Dundee in those years, 1833 to 1839, was one in thirty-two annually, whereas the Scottish average was one in forty-five.³⁷

Repeatedly, comparison was made between the state of health in Dundee and in other cities. One concerned correspondent, in an article titled "One of Seventy Thousand," wrote to the *Advertiser* of "the alarming state of public health of the town—the prevalence of the malignant disease called typhus fever." He went on to comment, "No other conclusion can be come to than that there is something radically wrong in the sanitary regulations of this crowded town. Diseases rage in other cities, but it is only in Dundee where they assume a peculiar virulent character and where they find a permanent abode."³⁸ The authorities were slow to act in the matter. In 1820, surgeon William Dick, in his *Remarks on Endemic Fever*, had recommended the setting

36. *Dundee, Perth, and Cupar Advertiser*, January 6, 1837.

37. Lewis, *State of St. David's Parish*, 41, 44–45.

38. *Dundee, Perth, and Cupar Advertiser*, January 8, 1840.

up of a local board of health.³⁹ Once set up, the board ordered, in 1832, during the outbreak of cholera, a general fumigation of the town. Tar barrels were to be placed at different points in the street, and set fire to.⁴⁰ A decade later, in 1842, Dundee received, along with every town and burgh in the land, a copy of the sanitary report of the poor law commissioners. Nothing was done to implement the various reforms suggested. An *Advertiser* editorial for January 1843 claimed that neither the authorities nor “benevolence” had acted. “The Report... is, so far as regards this town and neighbourhood, a dead letter.” Not only was the report ignored, but no effort was made to “ascertain the possibility of curing these evils. Fever continues to hold high festival and the Authorities continue to cry for more money.”⁴¹

Robert Murray McCheyne, fully aware of the brevity of life and the more unhealthy and stressful locality in which he was now placed, took advantage in his ministry of the death from fever of several in his parish. Preaching a sermon on the brevity of life titled “Death’s Lessons,” from Job 14:1–2, he said:

We have had solemn experience of these truths in these few days. There have been five solemn deaths, all connected with our parish, and taken together, they form a practical commentary on these words. Two children died, both lovely and pleasant in their lives.... A young man in his prime... has been sent away. Another was the blooming mother of eight blooming children, beloved and admired by all around her, with all this world could give to make her happy: but the cry came at midnight.... The last was an aged man, called upon, after long forbearance, to give his account. How solemn the lesson! The child, the young man, the mother, the hoary head—all laid low this day! Man that is born of a woman is of few days.⁴²

39. William Dick, *Remarks on Epidemic fever, commonly called Typhus* (Dundee, Scotland: Alexander Colville, 1820), 12, 63–71.

40. *Dundee, Perth, and Cupar Advertiser*, October 4, 1832.

41. *Dundee, Perth, and Cupar Advertiser*, January 27, 1843.

42. R. M. McCheyne, *From the Preacher’s Heart: Sermons and Lectures of Robert Murray McCheyne* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2001), 348–49. Preached February 20, 1843.

Shortly after this, McCheyne himself caught typhus fever while engaged in his regular pastoral duties and was called home on March 25, 1843. The years 1842 to 1843 were a particularly bad time for typhus fever. The King Street Infirmary, first opened in 1798, could not cope with increased admissions. By the 1840s it was declared “utterly inadequate.” It was not until 1855 that the new Dundee Royal Infirmary was opened.⁴³

In the meantime, with people constantly crowding into the town, the situation in St. David’s Parish was drawn to the attention of Dr. Arrott, physician at the Infirmary, by one of Reverend Lewis’s elders. He described how three families, comprising fifteen people in total, were crammed into two small, badly ventilated rooms. Another three families, making up sixteen people altogether, were housed in two similar small rooms. Dr. Arrott took two of Lewis’s elders with him to verify for himself. He found 129 persons crowded into 27 rooms, “being rather more than four persons to each room. 101 of the 129 had fever.” He pointed out the contrast by observing that while in the Scouringburn area seven dwelt in a room 15 feet by 11 feet, with only one bed and one set of bed clothes, just down from the Infirmary in King Street, 42 inhabitants lived in 93 rooms, that is, two rooms to each person, and no fever cases.⁴⁴

The Water Question

Another problem that affected Dundee more than some other towns found expression in what became known as the “water question.” There was a desperate need for water to be supplied from outside the town. Peter Carmichael recorded how Dundee was in a “state of turmoil over the water question”: “All were agreed that the nine ancient wells within the burgh supplemented as they were by carts from the country which sold water at the rate of four pitcherfuls for a penny, had become altogether inadequate for the supply of the town.”⁴⁵ At first there was agreement that the Dighty Burn and its tributaries to

43. Whately, Swinfen, and Smith, *Life and Times of Dundee*, 107.

44. *Dundee, Perth, and Cupar Advertiser*, April 14, 1843.

45. Peter Carmichael Biographical Works, 234–35.

the north of Dundee should be used to provide an adequate supply of water. Business interests, however, killed this idea: mill owners and the water caddies opposed it as they saw their livelihood threatened.

In 1836, civil engineer and water consultant George Buchanan of Edinburgh was brought in to advise. He proposed drawing a supply of water from the River Isla twelve miles away to a reservoir at Dundee Law. He had the backing of a London consultant also.⁴⁶ Others, however, favored using the water at Monikie as a source of supply. The matter dragged on because the authorities could not agree as to whether a privately owned joint stock company should have the responsibility for providing the water, or if it should be financed by a publicly owned water commission that would assess all householders.⁴⁷ The “Water War,” as it had become known, raged, and in the process the town went further into debt, leading to the bankruptcy of the corporation between 1842 and 1864.⁴⁸ It was not until 1845 that progress was made with the Dundee Water Act, which initially provided a “highly unsatisfactory supply of water, from Monikie and Stobsmuir.”⁴⁹ Only as late as 1876 could the chamber of commerce claim that Dundee now had a piped supply sufficient for all domestic and industrial purposes.⁵⁰

Years of Trade Depression and Unemployment

What added to the difficulties of the inhabitants of Dundee in the 1830s and 1840s was the instability of the market for cloth. This led to great unemployment. During the decade from 1826 to 1836 there

46. George Buchanan, *Abstract of Report on the Proposed Plan for supplying the Town of Dundee with water* (Dundee, Scotland: D. Hill and Son, 1836), 3–4; W. Cubitt, *Report on the Plan for supplying the Town of Dundee with water, as proposed by G. Buchanan, esq. Edinburgh, Civil Engineer* (Dundee, Scotland: D. Hill and Son, 1836), 4–5.

47. *Charters, Writs, and Public Documents of the Royal Burgh of Dundee, the Hospital and Johnston's Bequest: 1292–1880* (Dundee, Scotland: D. R. Clark and Son, 1880), 225–26; Whately, Swinfen, and Smith, *Life and Times of Dundee*, 138.

48. Carmichael, *Dundee Textile Industry*, 15.

49. Whately, Swinfen, and Smith, *Life and Times of Dundee*, 107.

50. Lenman, Lythe, and Gauldie, *Dundee and Its Textile Industry*, 9.

was a rapid growth of manufactures, with abundant employment and good wages for workers. The years 1833 to 1836, in particular, were a period of great commercial prosperity. Then, in September 1836, a great stagnation of trade began, resulting in the closure of mills and unemployment for operatives. The pattern was set for several years. In November 1839 the *Advertiser* noted that the unemployed amounted to nearly two thousand and was increasing daily.⁵¹ Upward of twenty mills were closed, and others were not working at anything like full capacity. The following year the *Advertiser* remarked, in the local intelligence columns:

We have seldom known our trade more depressed than at the present time. . . . The demand for flax is very languid indeed at our notations; yarns are also in slack demand, and are if anything a shade lower in price. The accounts from America, our most extensive market for linens, are far from encouraging, and the low rates for cotton goods form a strong opposition to a demand for flax and linens.⁵²

Peter Carmichael recorded the year 1841 ending in gloom, and that “the trade of the country continued in a state of depression throughout 1842.”⁵³ Other trades were also affected. By 1842 the number of mechanics (workers in metal) working was a quarter of what it had been in 1837.⁵⁴ Half those in shipbuilding were out of work. Of 159 journeymen tailors, only five were in full employment.⁵⁵ The only people who seemed to benefit were the innkeepers. Reverend Lewis commented, “Of all the trades of Dundee, the publican seems to have the lion’s share of the poor man’s earnings.”⁵⁶ The number of unemployed soon exceeded four thousand.

51. *Dundee, Perth, and Cupar Advertiser*, November 29, 1839.

52. *Dundee, Perth, and Cupar Advertiser*, April 10, 1840.

53. Peter Carmichael *Biographical Works*, 260–61.

54. Carmichael, *Dundee Textile Industry*, 86.

55. *Report of the Great Anti-Corn Law meeting held at Dundee, on Thursday, 6th Jan. 1842* (Dundee, Scotland: J. Chalmers, Wm. Livingstone and F. Shaw, 1842), v, vi.

56. George Lewis, *The Pauper Bill of Dundee, and what should be done with it* (Dundee, Scotland: William Middleton, 1841), 5.

As work became scarce, for some emigration was an attractive alternative to struggling to survive at home. At the end of 1836, the *Advertiser* carried a notice offering free passage to New South Wales, with a guarantee of one year's employment, for married mechanics age thirty-five and under, with families and unmarried female connections between eighteen and thirty. The following year 328 Dundonians took advantage of free passage on the specially chartered *John Barry*. This was the start of a continuous stream of emigration.⁵⁷

Attempts to Relieve the Distressed Poor

How to relieve the distressed poor was a major headache for the authorities in those years. In 1832 the number of paupers requiring assistance stood at 744. By June 1842 it had risen to 1,761. What augmented the problem was that "almost all the poor of the county take refuge in the towns."⁵⁸ As the number of poor and unemployed requiring assistance increased, a meeting of the magistrates, heritors, and general kirk session set up a committee to report on pauperism in Dundee. The convener was P. H. Thoms, an elder of St. Peter's Church. Up to 1845 it was the responsibility of kirk sessions to provide poor relief. In that year a Poor Law Amendment Act gave local authorities the right to impose assessments on property holders.⁵⁹ Meanwhile, the committee recommended "laying the assessment upon means and substance, or upon real rents and incomes combined." Most of the churches had "monthly pensioners" to support. Chapelshade Parish had the highest number at 149, and St. David's was a close second with 131. Expenses were also incurred by the parish in looking after children abandoned by their parents. In St. David's there were 336

57. *Dundee, Perth, and Cupar Advertiser*, December 2, 1836; March 24, 1837; and August 17, 1968. The 1968 article, "To Australia the Hard Way in 1837," referred to forty deaths on board the *John Barry*, including twenty-seven children. There was an eight-week wait before landing, because typhus was diagnosed on board. Carmichael, *Dundee Textile Industry*, 83n1.

58. *Dundee, Perth, and Cupar Advertiser*, June 17, 1842; July 1, 1842.

59. J. H. S. Burleigh, *A Church History of Scotland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), 381–82.

widows, which meant every sixth family was deprived of its father. The kirk session also took responsibility for boarders in the asylum.⁶⁰ During the stressful years of the late 1830s and early 1840s, the churches found it increasingly difficult to provide for the poor from their weekly collections.

Various public meetings were held, in the Magdalen Yard Green⁶¹ and in the town hall, to consider additional means of relieving destitution. One suggestion was relief in the form of outdoor work developing Magdalen Yard Green, which was undertaken. Another suggestion, which showed the paternalistic attitude to poverty in early Victorian times, was to set up a committee and open a subscription for the purpose of supplying food and coals to those most in need. Eight soup kitchens were set up. Other enterprises included a ball in the Thistle Hall and an oratorio and other amateur performances for the benefit of unemployed operatives. The annual soiree of the Mariners' Abstinence Society was devoted to helping the unemployed.⁶²

Political Agitation

It is not surprising that, given the distress of those years, many in Dundee were attracted to political movements of the time. The Chartist Movement, arising out of disappointment with the Great Reform Act of 1832,⁶³ was strong in Dundee, drawing much of its support and leadership from textiles workers. Public meetings were held to

60. *Report on the Pauperism of Dundee: by a committee appointed at a meeting of the magistrates, heritors, and general session* (Dundee, Scotland: David Hill, at the Courier Office, 1839), 3, 4, 23; General Kirk-Session Minutes, March 29, 1837; March 14, 1838; April 7, 1842; March 6, 8, 1843, Dundee City Archives, MS CH3/338/ 5; Lewis, *Tavern Bill of Dundee*, 9; and *List of the Poor of Dundee from 1st January to 31st December 1840*, comp. Tay Valley Family History Society, 2007, CD-ROM.

61. Whately, Swinfen, and Smith, *Life and Times of Dundee*, 141.

62. *Dundee, Perth, and Cupar Advertiser*, June 16, 23, 1837; March 2, 1838; November 22, 1839; January 8, 10, 1840; April 3, 1840; March 25, 1842; June 17, 1842; July 1, 1842.

63. The Chartist Movement, which lasted from 1838 to 1858, took its name from the People's Charter of 1838, which called for (1) votes for all men over twenty-one years of age, of sound mind and not undergoing punishment for a crime; (2) voting by secret ballot; (3) abolition of property qualifications for members of Parliament

agitate for universal male suffrage and the secret ballot.⁶⁴ Chartist activity moved from meetings to demonstrations. In June 1839, seven to eight hundred trades lads, with flags and bands of music, processed from the Nethergate to Magdalen Yard Green with their Chartist demands.⁶⁵ The following year a Chartist church was set up, meeting on Lindsay Street, with John Duncan as their preacher.⁶⁶ If a petition of 20,523 signatures to commute the death sentence of a Welsh Chartist is to be taken at face value, their strength in Dundee made them a force to be reckoned with; this was more than a third of the entire population.⁶⁷ David Robertson suggested that “to some extent they regarded themselves as being in competition with evangelicals like McCheyne for the affections of the working class.”⁶⁸

In spite of the presence of radical “physical force” promoted by Chartist leader Feargus O’Connor in Dundee in October 1841, the local Chartists stuck to “moral persuasion,” only small elements being desirous of using force. Nor did they heed the Chartist National Convention’s call for a month of “idle begging” (a sacred month), or even two or three days’ withdrawal of labor.⁶⁹ There was one notable incident that hit the newspapers. Some Chartist leaders were indicted for the crimes of mobbing, rioting, and breach of the peace, “to the great terror and alarm of the lieges.” For disrupting a church defense meeting, the leaders got four months in jail.⁷⁰

Concurrent with Chartist agitation was the work of the Anti-Corn Law League. One of the leaders was Edward Baxter of Baxter Brothers Mill. In Dundee the league was comprised of local merchants, manu-

(MPs); (4) payment of MPs; (5) equal electoral districts; and (6) annual parliamentary elections.

64. *Dundee, Perth, and Cupar Advertiser*, April and December 1837.

65. *Dundee, Perth, and Cupar Advertiser*, June 21, 1839.

66. *Dundee, Perth, and Cupar Advertiser*, September 25, 1840.

67. Robertson, *Awakening*, 87.

68. Robertson, *Awakening*, 88.

69. Peter Carmichael Biographical Works, 257–58; Carmichael, *Dundee Textile Industry*, 81–82.

70. *Dundee, Perth, and Cupar Advertiser*, January 6, 1843; *Dundee Warder and Arbroath and Forfar Journal*, January 24, 1843.