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Andrew G. Ralston, *Nevile Davidson: A Life to be Lived* (Eugene, Or.: Wipf and Stock, 2019), pp. xv + 205, ISBN 978-1532687808. £17.00

Nevile Davidson (1899–1976) was a major figure in mid-twentieth century Scottish Christianity, serving as a Church of Scotland minister in three parishes, most notably Glasgow Cathedral from 1935 to 1967, and as Moderator of the General Assembly in 1962–63. Davidson and Glasgow Cathedral represented an ideal partnership, admirably suited to the times.

On the one hand, here was a man of a privileged background who revelled in the pomp and circumstance of civic ceremony, and who led the renovation of the Cathedral building to enhance the aesthetics of worship, essential to the liturgical and sacramental leanings of a dedicated Scoto-Catholic ‘high churchman’ (pp. 154–59). As to his humanity, Andrew Ralston sets out descriptions of the public face of Davidson as being outwardly reserved and austere. Born at the end of the Victorian era, Davidson lived his whole life in the company of servants or a housekeeper at home. His scrupulous formality and decorum were not only products of his upbringing and class, but were also appropriate and expected of a minister in the life of the Cathedral in that era.

Davidson was of a generation of ministers who had long participated in the power and privilege of the Church of Scotland in late Christendom, where the Kirk enjoyed significant prominence and importance in the social, moral and political outlook of the nation. In his theology, Davidson was an exemplification of the ‘liberal evangelical tradition’ (p. 149), which had characterised the Church of Scotland for many decades. He was thus drawn to the work of his good friend, John Baillie, which he much admired. That tradition sought to avoid theological extremes in the name of common endeavours in mission and ecumenism. It maintained the scholarly focus of the educated minister, thus acknowledging the insights of biblical criticism. However, it was also very clear that tenets such as the bodily resurrection of Christ, or a theology of substitutionary atonement, were not up for negotiation. In response to the stirrings of secularisation and youth rebellion in the late Fifties and early Sixties, Davidson, like many others in the Kirk, held fast to solidity of doctrine, with little



sympathy for the ‘religionless Christianity’ of John Robinson (p. 151). Davidson also struggled to reconcile the gradual eroding of the Kirk’s influence, speaking on the regaining of moral and spiritual rectitude and voicing traditional and conservative views on issues such as the role of women (including ordination) and the liberalisation of laws on homosexuality. He came to accept both, somewhat reluctantly. Davidson would have difficulty in recognising the place of the church in society today, or in accepting its breadth of theological convictions.

On the other hand, one of the pleasures of reading this insightful biography is to learn that this is not the whole story of the public and personal lives of Nevile Davidson. A caricature of Davidson as a prominent but one-dimensional product of a bygone era would be insufficient. Beyond such a consideration, Ralston identifies Davidson as something of an ‘enigma’ (p. xiv), displaying in his ministerial role a deep sense of dedication to his congregation and the city, including the decidedly working-class Cathedral parish of Townhead; and in his private personality embodying a sense of humour, a love of nature, and a wide-eyed wonder at the many pleasures derived from the worldwide travel that came his way due to his prominent church positions. As a minister, Davidson was consistently caring, generous, listening, and humble, seeking the way of reconciliation in conflict.

Furthermore, that ‘enigma’ was to be expressed in Davidson’s theological and ecclesiological outlook. Ralston identifies in Davidson a ‘double alertness’ (p. 189) to both tradition and change. From a present-day perspective, one of the more startling realisations about the Church of Scotland in the immediate post-war period is that some of its key leaders, such as Davidson, publicly expressed the view that the church was failing to communicate the Gospel and had been complacent in allowing a significant cleft to form between church and society. It is startling in that they did so against a backdrop of Church of Scotland membership reaching a century-high peak of around 1.3 million in 1956, some four times its present size. The solution to bridging that growing chasm that such leaders identified would be to revolutionise the church, to enable the ‘apostolate of the laity’ within its walls, and to communicate the Gospel in intelligible terms to ordinary people, particularly amongst the urban poor and city underclass.

Along with his contemporary Tom Allan and his close friend George MacLeod, Davidson exemplified this position. He served on the Baillie



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Commission in the war years, and was behind much of the influential *Into All the World* report of 1946, both of which initiated those directions in the post-war church. Like Allan and MacLeod, he preached consistently on the necessity of regarding faith as intersecting with every aspect of life, and not simply as a Sunday experience; an understanding which he described as the ‘consecration of the commonplace’ (p. 153). In his initial parishes in Aberdeen and Dundee, he expressed this further by open-air street preaching. He was strongly supportive of the cross-denominational ‘Tell Scotland’ campaign, and of the Billy Graham ‘All-Scotland Crusade’ of 1955. It was to enable widespread collaboration in mission, as well as to reflect his ‘high church’ outlook, that Davidson embraced his most significant national and international work in the ‘golden age’ of ecumenism. This took him to prominent roles in the Inter-Church Relations Committee, as Chairman of the Multi-Lateral Church Conversations and within the British and World Council of Churches, championing a cause of unity which he continued beyond his ‘retirement’ until his dying day.

This is an excellent biography in many ways. It is well-written, coherent and engaging. It is clearly the product of many hours of research, particularly of the extensive diaries of Davidson that are housed in the National Library of Scotland. As a result, not only does Ralston’s enthusiasm and respect for Davidson’s life and work shine through, he has also brought a depth of insight and detail to light which hitherto has not seen public prominence. If there is any criticism to be made of the biography, it is that such enthusiasm and respect do not often admit constructive criticism. An important issue that remains is whether the nature of a prominent ministry in the late 1950s and early 1960s, such as that of Davidson, and his reluctance to relinquish the power of the church or adapt its theology, contributed in any way to the growth of the chasm between church and culture that developed thereafter, rather than narrowing the gap as the church had hoped in the immediate post-war period. As the journalist Harry Reid commented:

The 1950s in particular were a fat and good period for the Kirk, but the alarming decline that has set in since then may well be rooted in a lack of far-sightedness at that time and in a failure to respond



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adequately and imaginatively to the fresh challenges that were beginning to emerge.¹

Those allegations against Davidson's generation remain, for the most part, unanswered by Ralston's biography. The positive aspects of the book are, however, in the clear majority.

Ralston has preserved Davidson's legacy within living memory and re-established his rightful place as a significant influence on the Kirk and the city of Glasgow in the mid-twentieth century. He has also provided a further crucial reminder of the scale and confidence of the Kirk in that time, and of its innovative, creative and dynamic approaches to mission, as well as its dedication to ecumenism. In doing so, despite the passage of time and the vastly altered social circumstances, as in the work of Allan and MacLeod, there are key lessons to be learned for the church today in those areas. Andrew Ralston's book has, therefore, much to be commended, not only for Scottish social and church historians, but for all those keen to identify how the legacy of our immediately preceding generations can be honoured and applied in today's world.

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<https://doi.org/10.15664/tis.v28i1.2188>



Margaret Newbiggin Beetham, *Home Is Where: The Journeys of a Missionary Child* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2019), pp. 240, ISBN 978-0232534085. £12.99

Home Is Where is a memoir seen through the lens and language of Margaret Newbiggin Beetham's childhood, combined with journal entries and occasional pieces written after the death of her sister. The title is left suspended, incomplete as a sentence and unframed as a question, which suggests that the story involves loss and longing.

¹ Harry Reid, *Outside Verdict: An Old Kirk in a New Scotland*, (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2002), 55.

