The Brave New World: Young Porteous and Scottish Presbyterianism in the Interwar Years

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Norman Walker Porteous, Church of Scotland minister and Old Testament scholar, completed his education and began his professional career at a time of profound uncertainty for Church and society in Scotland. The two decades following the end of the First World War were a time of stark contrasts—a time of passionate convictions and also of cynicism regarding all beliefs and ideals; a time of high views of human potential and also of pessimism about the prospects for the human race; a time of hopes for a brave new world to emerge out of the sacrifices of the Great War and also of disillusionment over the grim social realities of economic recession, unemployment and mass poverty. The interwar years were a testing time for a young, aspiring minister and scholar-teacher, seeking to hold on to a life-affirming faith. Yet they were also an exciting time, when beliefs and ideologies mattered, when old Victorian moral certainties and intellectual landmarks were fading, and when the Christian faith was being challenged to redefine itself for a new social order.

To understand the life and work of Norman Porteous, it is important to consider the context of Presbyterianism, politics and society in Scotland during the interwar period. In this essay, I wish to review some of the events shaping the Scottish Church and society during these years – giving particular attention first, to the impact of the Great War on the Scottish Churches; second, to the social crisis that accompanied the post-war economic recession; and third, to the growing international crisis associated with the rise of totalitarian regimes on the Continent. The title of this essay evokes Aldous Huxley's interwar novel portraying a utopian society gone wrong, a *Brave New World* that turned into a nightmare, and is meant to remind us of a time when, as the poet W. H. Auden sang, 'Waves of anger and fear/ Circulate over the bright/ And

darkened lands of the earth.'[15] At the close of the Great War, the 'War to end all wars', Britain would, many had believed, see the emergence of a new, more just, more egalitarian social order, a Christian social commonwealth that would in some senses be a recompense for the horrendous sacrifices of the war, a brave new world in which poverty, class hatred, exploitation and social violence would fade. That this was not to be should not surprise us, given the emotional exhaustion, the disillusionment with high-sounding ideals and perhaps above all the economic stagnation of the post-war years. But the failures to achieve the high social ideals were painful, when set against the sacrifices made in the Great War and the promises made to those who had survived the war.

The Great War and the Scottish Church

The First World War came to an end in November 1918. The war had cost Scotland an estimated 110,000 war dead, and many thousands more, while they had survived the holocaust, were shattered in body or mind. Scotland's casualties in the Great War were higher per capita than any other nation within the British Empire.[16] Numerous homes were darkened by grief. Britain's economy had been devastated, burdened with a crippling national debt while its overseas markets had been largely taken over by North American and Asian competitors. When wartime contracts suddenly ceased, unemployment soared. As hundreds of thousands of soldiers and sailors were demobilised, many returned to the same atrocious housing they had left, but now with little prospect of employment. While probably the large majority of those returning from military service had no real connection with organised religion, a substantial number were Christians and even if not Church members they nonetheless looked to the Churches for consolation and a moral and spiritual interpretation of the awesome events.[17] One of those returning from service was Norman Porteous, the son of a schoolmaster in Haddington, who had grown up in a close-knit family secure in the certainties of Victorian values of self-help, respectability, learning, and Christian faith. Porteous had been raised within the United Free Church, and he would decide to prepare for the Presbyterian ministry. What was the position of the United Free Church to which Porteous

returned? How had it, and its sister Church of Scotland, been affected by the ordeal of the Great War?

The two mainstream Presbyterian Churches of Scotland had been deeply shaken by the war. At the beginning of hostilities, Church leaders had, on the whole, given warm support for the war, portraying it as a righteous struggle for the preservation of international law and the rights of small nations, such as Serbia and Belgium. There had been faith that God would favour the Allies, and reward their principled stand with victory. However, as the war continued, with stalemate on the Western Front and growing casualty lists, many in the Churches began to doubt their early convictions and come to new interpretations. In 1916, the General Assemblies of both the Church of Scotland and the United Free Church had formed special commissions to interpret the moral and spiritual meaning of the war. When the commissions reported to the General Assemblies of the two Churches in 1917, they portrayed the war as a visitation from an angry God, in the Old Testament sense.[18] The war was now to be viewed, not as a righteous crusade, but as a punitive visitation, an outpouring of divine wrath for the collective sins – the irreligion, materialism, selfishness, imperialism and militarism – of pre-war Scottish and Western society. It was also a remedial visitation, a divine summons to the nation to repent its pre-war sins, and to pledge itself to work for the fundamental reform of society in the post-war world, so that the horrors of the Great War would never be repeated. For the two Church commissions, fundamental reform of society meant a Christian socialist agenda, including increased state intervention in the management of the economy in order to reduce the negative effects of competition, market forces and class divisions. As the state had assumed the management of key industries during the war to ensure maximum productivity and a decent standard of living for workers, so it should continue a high level of economic regulation, to ensure improved industrial and social conditions after the war. 'We answered the call of Belgium', wrote the United Free Church minister, D. M. Robertson of Dunfermline, in 1917, 'Shall we turn a deaf ear to the wronged at home . . .or shall we again stand shoulder to shoulder in the coming Great War against Poverty?'[19] In the final months of the

war, both major Presbyterian Churches had jointly hosted national conferences on housing and industrial organisation. Further, they had instructed congregations to organise study groups, to help plan for the new Christian social commonwealth that would follow the war.

Many in the Church, however, could not accept this new interpretation of the war as a visitation from an angry God; they could not believe that God was punishing Scotland through the slaughter of its young men. On the contrary, they continued to view the war as a righteous crusade and to believe that God would reward the allied powers with victory, if they would keep faith with the fallen and persevere. Far from being a divine punishment, the heavy costs that Scotland had borne in its righteous crusade were a testimony to the religious and moral worth of its existing society. Scotland did not need fundamental social reform, as the Church commissions claimed, but rather it needed fortitude, to enable it to press on to victory.

Congregations found it difficult to follow the instructions from their General Assembly and conduct study groups on post-war reform, when there was no real consensus about the meaning of the war. 'The Commission', concluded one West of Scotland minister in January 1918, 'is just wasting paper, and paper is scarce.'[20] Some blamed the slow progress towards victory, not on a vengeful God punishing Scotland for its collective sins, but on enemies within. In June 1918, for example, *Life and Work*, the magazine of the Church of Scotland, directed an attack on the Roman Catholic Church as 'the enemy of Great Britain' and as the perpetrator of numerous 'outrages [against] international right and human liberty since the war began.'[21] Such sectarian attacks ignored the tens of thousands of Catholics who had fallen fighting for Britain. Others denounced advocates of peace negotiations. In the spring of 1918, the newly ordained Church of Scotland minister, Charles Warr, condemned from his pulpit anyone speaking of a negotiated peace as 'a moral and spiritual leper' who should be cast off from the community. The remark, Warr later recalled with shame, was 'duly lauded' by the press. 'That was', he added, 'the muddled, fuddled atmosphere we were living in during the last years of the war.'[22]

In December 1918, a month after the armistice ending the Great War, the moderators of the General Assemblies of both the Church of Scotland and the United Free Church issued a joint call for a National Mission of Rededication. The Churches would lead the nation in thanksgiving for its deliverance and call upon the nation to work together for social reconstruction and the creation of the new Christian social commonwealth. After weeks of prayer and preparation, the National Mission was conducted over a six-week period in March and April of 1919. It culminated on Rededication Sunday, 19 April, when congregations throughout the land rose and solemnly pledged to work for the sovereignty of Christ over all spheres of social, economic and political life. The National Mission, however, proved to be little more than a gesture, and it failed to arouse much commitment among a Scottish population emotionally exhausted and weary of high-sounding phrases. Conservatives in the Church suspected the National Mission was intended to commit the Church to a collectivist and socialist reform agenda. Liberals suspected it was an attempt to divert the Church's energies away from social issues towards an evangelical revival campaign. In the event, meetings were poorly attended and many congregations refused to participate. 'The [National] Mission', admitted one of its organisers, Lord Sands, 'was handicapped in the same way as the Commission on the War which originated it, viz., by indefiniteness of aim.'[23]

When the General Assemblies of the two major Presbyterian Churches met in May 1919, they formally renewed their commitment to build a new Christian commonwealth in Scotland, as a living monument to the war dead. However, there was more interest within the congregations in erecting stone monuments and inscribing plaques with the names of their dead. At the Church of Scotland General Assembly of 1919, the Moderator, Professor W. P. Paterson of Edinburgh University, called on the Church and nation to 'covenant together' as of old in order to create the new social order. 'As it was the nation as a whole', he continued, 'which did the work and endured the agony of the war, so there should be a more equitable distribution among all classes of the blessings of our splendid modern civilisation.'[24] However, much more enthusiasm was generated by the visit of Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, an elder

in the Church of Scotland and the architect of victory on the Western Front, to the Church of Scotland General Assembly. Haig was given a rapturous welcome by the Assembly. Here was a symbol of victory, a Scottish Presbyterian soldier-hero whom Church and nation could unite in honouring, without committing themselves to further struggle for social reconstruction. Scottish Presbyterians were weary of struggle, and many simply wanted to find their way back to the world they had known. In 1918, the Church of Scotland and United Free Church had renewed the negotiations, begun in 1909 but suspended during the war, for a union of the two Churches. These negotiations would continue for another decade after the end of the war, providing Church leaders with familiar nineteenth-century debates about Church and State upon which to focus their attention.

Norman Porteous had been conscripted into the army in April 1917, after having begun classical studies at the University of Edinburgh, and he had served as an officer in Ireland and at the Western Front. On his return from the war, he resumed his classical studies. He gained his MA with First Class Honours in Arts from the University of Edinburgh in 1922 and then travelled to Oxford, where he gained the MA with First Class Honours in the Humanities in 1924. He gained a broad knowledge of ancient languages and literatures. Then in 1924, he entered New College to prepare for the ministry of the United Free Church. He would later maintain that it had been his aim since the age of fifteen to enter the ministry. In the midst of the uncertainties and divisions in the Churches over the meaning of the Great War, this young veteran now sought to become a pastor of souls and a spiritual guide for troubled communities. He would seldom speak of his experiences during the First World War. Like many who had survived the Western Front, he would have been haunted by the lost friends and comrades, and also burdened by a sense of guilt for having survived, when so many had not. He had been fortunate as a young officer to have survived his time at the Western Front; indeed, had he not been withdrawn from his unit with measles during a period of heavy fighting in 1918, he would probably have perished. Yet while his own survival might have been viewed as providential, he did not have much of a sense of the war as a righteous crusade that would usher in a new and better world.

The Social Unrest of the 1920s

By the early 1920s, the prospect that Church and nation in Scotland would 'covenant together' to achieve a more just social order was fading. The idealistic rhetoric of the Churches' wartime commissions, the National Mission of Rededication or the General Assemblies of May 1919, had failed to arouse a war-weary and emotionally drained population. Further, the post-war British state had quickly moved away from any sweeping programmes of social reconstruction. The general election of 1918 had returned a majority for the Conservative-dominated Coalition Government. The Government decided that a return to the normalcy of pre-war industrial capitalism would be the best path to post-war economic recovery, and Parliament had moved rapidly to dismantle wartime economic controls. In late 1920, moreover, a brief post-war economic boom ended, and the British economy as a whole sank into a prolonged slump, as the real costs of the war in terms of lost markets, lost investment and sagging international demand became clear. The Scottish economy, dependent on traditional heavy industries and the export of coal, was especially hard-hit, and unemployment rose to 18 per cent by 1921.[25] In such a situation, it was difficult for the Church of Scotland and United Free Church to maintain their call for sweeping social reforms. The difficulties were compounded by the new political realities. The Liberal party, which had dominated Scottish politics since the 1860s, had been shattered by the pressures of the war. The Labour party, with a professed socialist agenda, emerged as a significant political force, especially as the Franchise Act of 1918, which finally brought democracy to Britain, made its impact felt. At the general election of November 1922, Labour won twenty-nine of Scotland's seventy-four parliamentary seats, and became Scotland's main opposition party. Politics became divided between a Conservative party, looking for national recovery through a return to the pre-war capitalist order, and Labour, looking for national recovery through socialism.

In this polarised political order, the two mainstream Presbyterian Churches ceased their calls for social reconstruction. Such calls could only be divisive, alienating middle- and upper-class conservative

Church members. The situation in Russia, where by 1921 the Communist party had emerged victorious in the prolonged Civil War and was combining social engineering and persecution of Christians, served further to diminish Scottish Presbyterian interest in social reconstruction. By the early 1920s, the position of the Churches became one of silence on economic issues. The Church, it was argued, was a spiritual society, and as such had no competence to speak on economic and political questions. It should rather restrict itself to areas in which it had competence—that is, to matters of faith and personal morality. This was the position of leaders of the Church of Scotland, most notably John White, minister of the Barony Church in Glasgow, and Lord Sands, a judge and prominent elder. The United Free Church leadership was more liberal in its political orientation, but now followed the lead of the Church of Scotland on social questions.

The economic slump, meanwhile, was having a devastating impact on the British coal industry, which had suffered the loss of overseas markets and now faced a glut of cheap coal resulting from German war reparations. The coal owners forced a reduction in miners' wages in 1921, and the miners' resistance to this had been broken after a prolonged lockout. Yet another wage reduction was averted in 1925, when the Government agreed to provide a substantial state subsidy to the industry. However, in 1926, the Government withdrew the subsidy and the coal owners gave notice of the wage reduction. When the miners' union refused to accept the reduction, the miners were locked out. The Trades Union Congress now stood by the miners, and called a general strike in May 1926. However, the general strike was defeated after nine days, in what James Harvey, outgoing Moderator of the United Free Church General Assembly, called 'a victory for God'.[26] As the general strikers returned to work, the miners remained locked out. John White, outgoing Moderator of the Church of Scotland General Assembly, offered the services of the Church of Scotland to mediate a settlement of the miners' lockout in Scotland. This, he claimed, would be a fitting role for the national Church – to help reconcile social differences and overcome class conflict. The United Free Church joined in this offer of mediation. The Scottish miners' union accepted the offer. The owners, however, knowing that they had

the upper hand, refused Church mediation, and the Churches quickly dropped its attempt. The two Churches did allow representatives of the miners' union to address their General Assemblies in 1926.[27] After giving them a respectful hearing, the Church remained silent while the owners' power prevailed.

The United Free Church, meanwhile, had another kind of plan for the coal miners. Since early 1926, it had been planning a major evangelistic campaign among the mining communities of West Fife, aimed primarily at combating what it viewed as materialistic socialism among the miners. It was, in many respects, a return to the methods of Victorian revivalism. In introducing the campaign to the United Free Church General Assembly of 1926, Daniel Lamont of the Church Life and Social Problems Committee referred to West Fife as a place of irreligion and immorality. 'It was just in such a place', he maintained, 'that they would find the fighting line where the enemy was battling. The enemy was at his strongest there, and so it was there the whole Church should gather.'[28] In his closing address to the Assembly, the new Moderator, Dr George Herbert Morrison of Wellington Church, Glasgow, asserted that God had intervened to defeat the general strike and conditions were now ripe for a revival of religion among those who would have seen the futility of socialism and strike action.[29]

Throughout the summer of 1926, the organisers prepared for the West Fife revival campaign. Working with churches in the area, they recruited and trained a 'corps of visitors', booked halls, mapped out districts for house-to-house visiting, and prepared tracts and leaflets. The campaign was launched in early October, as twenty clergymen arrived in West Fife to lead meetings. By now the miners of West Fife had been out of work for over five months and their communities were suffering extreme deprivation. During the summer, poor relief scales had been lowered by more than 20 per cent, and the parishes of West Fife were still hard pressed to pay allowances from their reduced resources.[30] 'Over the whole area', one of the mission organisers, W. R. Forrester, later reported, 'hung an uncanny quiet. The tension was something that could be felt'.[31] The miners and their families were hungry, angry, and feeling abandoned by the rest of the country, and they were in no mood

to be preached at by revivalists. The campaign was soon in trouble. In the second week, the United Free Church Moderator, George H. Morrison, appeared to provide leadership. However, his attempts to speak at public meetings were disrupted with shouted questions and mocking comments from the miners, who also had the audacity to laugh at his moderatorial costume. He broke off his visit on the second day, and the campaign was brought to a close a few days later, having failed, as one participating clergyman put it, to touch 'the heart of the community'.[32]

The miners' resistance was finally broken in December 1926, and they returned to work on the owners' conditions, which included reduced wages. Many union activists were not allowed to return to work. Conditions in 1927 were in many respects worse than the previous years, with families deeply in debt and many men unable to work. In April 1927, the United Free Church made another attempt at conducting a revivalist campaign in West Fife. This time they sent a number of volunteers from among the students preparing for the ministry at the United Free Church's New College in Edinburgh. Among the student volunteers was Norman Porteous, then in his final year of study. For Porteous, the experience of revival work was a profoundly moving one. He found it difficult to discuss the Christian faith and the Church's social ethics on street corners and at door steps with miners, including hard-bitten Communists and atheists, who challenged him to say what the Church had done for the labouring poor. But he also found that the experience opened his eyes. Many of the men he encountered were veterans of the war, like himself, who had risked their lives and in some cases been wounded in the defence of a nation that now seemed indifferent to their suffering and that of their families. They had been promised by politicians and Church leaders during the war that a more just and egalitarian social order would come out of their sacrifices. But in the impoverished mining communities of West Fife, it was clear that little was being done; and Porteous could feel their pain and anger. In part because of his experiences in the trenches, Porteous was able to overcome the effects of his middle-class background and education, and convince suspicious miners that his concern was genuine; he believed he gained their respect. He could now see how absurd George Morrison

must have seemed the previous year, preaching nervously to miners in his moderatorial finery about the downpouring of the Spirit upon their community, while their children were hungry and ill-clothed. He could understand how cocky and self-important many of the New College student evangelists must have appeared to the miners and their families. With this understanding, the friendships that he now began to form in West Fife meant all the more to him.

The United Free Church as a whole also seemed to have learned from the experiences of the West Fife campaign. In reporting on the West Fife campaign to the United Free Church General Assembly of May 1927, John Mansie, convener of the Church Life and Social Problems Committee, gave a very different account of West Fife than that given by the same Committee in the previous year. Mansie now denied that the revivalists had ever thought of West Fife as 'enemy' territory. 'They did not select West Fife', he assured the Assembly, 'because they thought of miners as being farther off from the kingdom of God than other people. They did not regard West Fife as a black country in any moral or spiritual sense.' This is not, of course, what had been said in the United Free Church Assembly the previous year. In any event, those who had participated in the campaign, including Porteous, had come away with an appreciation for the human endurance and communal solidarity that they had encountered among the miners of West Fife.

On completing his BD at New College in 1927, Porteous was awarded a Cunningham Fellowship, which enabled him to study in Germany for two years, from 1927 to 1929. While he was away, the Church of Scotland and United Free Church completed the final stages of the prolonged union negotiations, and in 1929, the two Churches were finally united. The architects of the union presented it as one of the great achievements of the ecumenical movement and one of the greatest events in Scottish religious history. It was, to be sure, an important ecclesiastical achievement, but after the bitter controversies of the 1920s, it did not arouse much excitement in Scotland as a whole. Porteous, meanwhile, was in 1929 ordained minister of the Church of Scotland parish church of Crossgates, in the West Fife mining district. Significantly, then, he set aside his extensive knowledge of classical

and biblical languages and literature, and chose to enter the pastorate alongside the miners and their families in the West Fife coalfields. At the time, he thought he would devote his life to the parish ministry. During the next two years, he embraced a commitment to a socially engaged ministry, aimed at creating conditions that would enable people to flourish. He saw part of his role as parish minister to be a peacemaker, drawing people together, and he found fulfillment as a pastor. He was profoundly shaped by these experiences in Crossgates; and in a very real sense, he would remain a pastor all his life.

The International Crisis

During the 1920s, the mainstream Presbyterian Churches could not be blind to events on the Continent. There had been expressions of concern in the United Free Church General Assembly about the harshness of the Versailles peace treaty imposed on Germany after the war, and the suffering and continued instability that this would bring to central Europe. There had also been concern over reports of the brutality of the Communist regime in the new Soviet Union, and of the systematic persecution of Russian Orthodox Christians after 1921. When in 1933 the National Socialists gained control in Germany, a sincere desire to forgive former enemies meant that liberal Church leaders, such as W. P. Paterson, strained every nerve to understand the German fears that lay behind the rise of the Nazis. Further, some Presbyterian Church leaders in Scotland could sympathise with the German desire to preserve the racial 'purity' of the nation. 'To-day there is a movement throughout the world', the Church of Scotland leader John White asserted with approval in an article in the *Glasgow Herald* of 15 April 1929, 'towards the rejection of non-native constituents and the crystallisation of national life from native elements.'[33]

When in early 1933 Adolf Hitler's Government declared a state of emergency and began rounding up dissidents, many within the Church of Scotland profoundly disapproved. However, there were also some within the Church who still sought to give the new regime the benefit of the doubt. The Nazis, after all, promised to halt the spread of atheistic Communism from Russia, as well as to eliminate moral decadence and

promote spiritual renewal within the borders of Germany. In 1933 the Nazi regime had arranged a Church union in Germany, drawing the Lutheran and Reformed provincial Churches together into a single Evangelical State Church. Many in the Church of Scotland welcomed the Nazi-sponsored Church union as similar to the Scottish Presbyterian Church union of 1929. It would create a strengthened national Church, better able to exercise moral and spiritual leadership in Germany. In an article published in *Life and Work*, the magazine of the Church of Scotland, in April 1934, the Paisley minister David McQueen expressed warm support of both the Nazi regime and the German Church union. The Nazi party, McQueen asserted, represented 'the best brains and the cleanest minds of all parties in Germany' and this could be seen in their 'cleansing of German life of its moral problems'. McQueen supported Nazi policies against the Jews who had, he argued, for too long dominated German finance and professions, and ought now to be taught the value of manual labour.[34]

At the General Assembly of 1934, the Church's Continental Committee, under the convenership of Professor William Curtis of New College, expressed deep concern over the Nazi regime and its Church policies, and called upon the Church of Scotland to support the Confessing Church movement. The report was challenged in the Assembly by McQueen, who repeated his call for close relations with the pro-Nazi German Christians. His speech was received with applause. As the Assembly seemed evenly divided, John White suggested a compromise motion, which was that the Church should send a deputation to Germany, both to gather information and also to convey fraternal greetings to the state-supported German Evangelical Church.[35] It is not clear that the deputation was sent. In the following year, there was another inconclusive debate on the German Church situation in the General Assembly, at which Professor W. P. Paterson of New College bid the Assembly remember that 'the Hitler regime had checked the militant atheism associated with continental Communism'.[36] In short, many within the Church of Scotland were uncertain about the nature of the Nazi regime and its German Christian supporters, and were striving to avoid a renewal of war.

One who was not uncertain, however, was the minister of Crossgates in West Fife. During his years of study in Germany between 1927 and 1929, Norman Porteous had become aware of the tendency among some Christians in Germany to downplay portions of the Scriptures. In particular, he had become concerned over the tendency of some German Christians, influenced by the higher criticism, to view the Old Testament as less than the inspired word of God. He noted that these views were connected with the rising anti-Semitism in Germany. While studying at Münster, Porteous may have been the first English-speaking student to attend the dogmatic classes of the young Professor Karl Barth. It was the beginning of a life-long friendship with the man who would in 1934 become the leading figure in the Confessing Church movement.

In 1931, the Regius Professorship of Hebrew and Oriental Languages at St Andrews University became vacant, and Professor Adam Welch of New College, Porteous' former teacher, pressed Porteous to apply for the position. On the one hand, Porteous was undoubtedly drawn to an academic career. He had demonstrated considerable scholarly ability and invested years of effort in the study of classical and Semitic languages and literatures. On the other hand, it had also been his ambition since the age of fifteen to be a pastor, and he knew that his work among the mining communities of West Fife was needed. He was in the core of his being a pastor of souls. The decision in 1931 was profoundly difficult. In deciding to return to academic life, he would later recall, it was largely his concern over challenges to the place of the Old Testament within Christianity that convinced him to apply for the St Andrews post. In 1931, he received the appointment to the Regius Professorship of Hebrew and Oriental Languages at the University of St Andrews, and he demitted his pastoral charge at Crossgates. In 1935, Porteous moved from St Andrews to Edinburgh's New College, where he would spend the remainder of his professional career.

The post-war years were a time of divisions and uncertainties for Church and nation in Scotland. The Great War had marked a profound break with the past, and the ideological landmarks and religious beliefs of the Victorian era could no longer offer much practical guidance. The hopes that the sacrifices of the war would help to bring a new

social order, a Christian commonwealth, had soon faded amid the grim economic and social realities of the post-war era. The social unrest and the polarised politics of the 1920s had confronted the Church with new challenges, which, wearied and haunted by the trauma of the Great War, it found difficult to meet. The international setting, with the anti-Christian campaign in Communist Russia and the emergence of the racist and militaristic Nazi regime in Germany, raised the spectre of a new era of barbarism and inhumanity. Within the Church, some strained to avoid recognising the radical evil of these regimes, in the hope of avoiding the equally radical evil of a renewal of world war. It was a difficult time for a young minister, called upon, in the midst of so much uncertainty, to provide spiritual guidance and to disseminate Christian knowledge. Norman Porteous was shaped amid the trauma, the hopes and the shattered illusions of these decades. He emerged from the Brave New World of the interwar years with an abiding concern for people and their human dignity, and with a deep desire to achieve social reconciliation. One of the major themes of his Old Testament scholarship would be the community of the common people, the unknown men and women whose lives were shaped by the promise of the Covenant. These were the common people he had known in the trenches of the Western front, and in the mining communities of West Fife. It was these people who needed the promise of the ancient Scriptures to make sense of the tumult of their times; it was the image of these people that would inform much of his Old Testament teaching and his scholarship.