

Seeking Roots

Allan White OP

One of the best-selling Scottish books of 1989, The Root of the Matter (Mainstream Publishing, Edinburgh, £9.95) recalls the earlier part of the life of its author, Anthony Ross OP, a convert from Presbyterianism who ended up as a Dominican priest widely known in Scotland for his work with young people, and who was elected Rector of Edinburgh University and then Prior Provincial of the English Dominican Province. Allan White OP, who was one of the first two Dominicans since the Reformation to take a degree in Scotland and for six years was Superior of the Dominican Community in Edinburgh, here puts the story of Anthony Ross in the context of a wider story.

I have caught a glimpse of the seamless garment
And I am blind for evermore.

Hugh McDiarmid

An old friar once remarked to me that, whilst he was glad to live in the midst of a community of young and high-spirited Dominicans, he often missed the companionship of a brother of his own generation with whom he could share his memories. At various stages in our lives we cast backward glances over our shoulders but there comes a time when we look to our beginnings, uncovering the summer in the seed. Father Anthony Ross's book is an exercise not only in the uncovering of memory but in the sharing of memories, and in the sharing there is a healing too; the work is dedicated to his parents and step-mother in the belief that 'love covers all offences.' In this book he offers us a lyrical account of his boyhood in the north of Scotland, somewhat reminiscent of the work of Tomas O'Crohan's *The Islandman* and Maurice O'Sullivan's *Twenty Years A'Growing*, his subsequent university career, his entry into the Roman Catholic Church and admission to the Dominican Order. Father Anthony is a historian by training and it is his particular gift to disclose 'the past quivering in what is'. His own life has coincided with major developments in the political and cultural life of the Scottish people with related implications for the Catholic Church in Scotland in general and the Dominican Order in particular. His book is

part of his own story but is also a chapter in the history of his country and his Church.

Ian Ross was born in the midst of a storm on a wild June night in 1917. The Great War still raged in Europe and had not yet entered its final stages. A few weeks after Ian's birth the British army was to lose 500,000 in gaining five miles of territory at Passchendaele. Memories of battles like this were to decisively affect the formation of Ian's generation and to seal the political and economic fate of Scotland. His father was one of those who survived the war but who remained deeply scarred and embittered by it. He had been recruited early into the Seaforth Highlanders and served in France from 1914 until the Armistice. Over 100,000 Scots were to die on the battlefields of Europe, comprising 13% of the British total of war dead and 5% of the male population of the country. These figures represent almost twice the average British figures. As in other countries, the overwhelming number of casualties comprised infantry privates, and almost every working-class family, both urban and rural, would have been touched by bereavement and the resulting economic hardship. Fr Anthony describes his father's loyalty to his fellow infantrymen and his mixture of pity and contempt for many officers whose social origins had not compensated for the training they needed to face the challenge of combat. Like many veterans, Ian's father had looked to the establishment of a more just and peaceful order as a result of the war. Again, like so many others, he was to be disappointed. As Lewis Grassie Gibbon wrote:

They died for a world that is past, these men; but they did not die for this that we seem to inherit.

Many of the themes and concerns which were to drive Fr Anthony later in life arose directly or indirectly out of the legacy of the Great War.

Although Fr Anthony's story can be read in terms of a bucolic idyll, there are more subtle undertones which paint a picture of slow and inexorable decline within Scottish society. This decline was a more or less direct result of the war, although the seeds had been sown in the nineteenth century. The empty glens and tumbled ruins of crofts and townships still testify to the Highland clearances; the memory was still vivid to those of Fr Anthony's grandfather's generation. However, the Great War was to be as formative for the urban and economic life of the urban population of Scotland as the clearances had been for its rural inhabitants. It is certainly true that the war was to affect the landscape of the Highland region in particular; there was wholesale felling of trees in aid of the war effort and more and more land was brought under cultivation in order to increase food supplies. Neither of these developments was to contribute to the long-term prosperity of the crofter and smallholder. However, the economic impact of the war was felt much more strongly in the industrial centres of the country.

In many ways Scotland could be said to have done quite well out of the war. Before 1914 its industrial strength lay in its heavy industry; the outbreak of hostilities confirmed the position of this sector of the economy. Clydeside became the centre of the munitions industry, with about 250,000 workers employed in the Clyde area. Iron, steel, shipbuilding and engineering flourished as never before. Scottish industry had benefited from military expenditure even before the war, with large sums being invested in equipping Britain to keep up with the German armaments drive. Needless to say, the armaments boom had its price: after the war, when demand fell, Scottish industry found itself hampered by its own lack of diversity. The heavy industry on which the industrial base of the country rested was not adequate to meet the post-war challenge: high interest rates designed to combat inflation inhibited investment in the light industry that would have broadened the country's economic base. Those capitalists who had made their fortune from the war took their money out of the country, either investing it in property or in financial services south of the Border. The returning soldiers, like Fr Anthony's father, found themselves faced with a depression of mammoth proportions and with no obvious way to express their discontent.

Traditionally the Scottish polity has never been as centralised as its English counterpart; that *mélange* of Tudor despotism mixed with Palmerstonian abrasion which has so unaccountably come into vogue in recent years did not find favour north of the Border. Scotland has, since the middle ages at least, understood itself in terms of a commonwealth of regions. Various institutions, including certain sections of Presbyterian opinion, have attempted in the past to develop a 'little Scotland' attitude amongst Scots, but they have been regularly defeated by the cultural complexity of the country. Some of these cultural differences can be ascribed to the different place held by the sea in the respective national psyche. John of Gaunt, in Shakespeare's *Richard II*, has proved an enduring spokesman for England as he waxes lyrical about the 'sceptred isle ... this fortress built by nature for herself.' The 'silver sea' serves England 'in the office of a wall, or as a moat defensive to a house, against the envy of less happier lands.' (Act II Sc. 1) Danger to England comes from the sea; the sea is a defence against which the forces of the rapacious and perfidious foreigner must pit themselves. The ultimate threat to the Englishman in the past was garlic and a diet of Brussels; the results of the last elections to the European parliament suggest that times may be changing but the suspicion remains that the English are less than enthusiastic Europeans. Contrast this with the Scots.

The sea has always been Scotland's window on the world, not so much her pre-eminent defence as a lifeline to the continent sustaining her cultural integrity and her political independence of the larger and wealthier neighbour with which she enjoys a land frontier. Scandinavia, Ireland, Flanders, northern Germany and France were the most powerful

influences on Scotland until the Act of Union diverted trade and energy southwards. The cultural adaptability of the Scots and the increasing lack of opportunity at home ensured that many of them would make their careers in the service of the British Empire. Scottish schools, like Inverness Academy, Fr Anthony's own school, became fertile recruiting grounds for the Indian civil service, and almost every literary work set against an imperial background must have its obligatory Scottish doctor, engineer or minister, doused with the appropriate admixture of cynicism, common sense and alcohol. As a young man Fr Anthony was confronted with the cultural differentiation of Scotland's regions: the Gaelic softness of Morar, the polychrome blend of Scandinavian, Pictish and Celtic influences in the north and the industrial wasteland of Lowland Lanarkshire and Glasgow. In all of them he spotted seminal decline.

Fr Anthony's moving description of the death of his mother and his regular reading of the Gaelic bible to his grandmother carry their own weight of tragedy. In 1891 there were 250,000 Gaelic speakers in Scotland, spread throughout the country; in a survey conducted in 1961 that number has been reduced to 80,000, mostly concentrated in the Western Isles. Emigration and depopulation of the glens accounted for the degeneration of Gaeldom within Scotland. In Fr Anthony's own highlands the population fell by 10% in the 1920s, and in the same decade almost 400,000 Scots left the country. The effects of this flood of life and ingenuity from the country were also visible in the ecclesiastical sphere; congregations in the Free Presbyterian tradition, which drew their strength from the Highlands and Islands, were decimated. Similarly with Roman Catholicism, in the days of persecution it had found shelter under the protection of the powerful noble families of the north and west of Scotland; in many ways until the Industrial Revolution these regions could claim to be the Catholic heartland. They preserved their own traditions which gave the expression of the faith its distinct character. Fr Anthony describes one of the pastors of this community at Morar, Canon McNeil, educated in one of the Scots seminaries abroad, widely-read and at home in a number of European languages. Fr Anthony was fortunate in experiencing this vivid and distinctive world before its strength was depleted by the haemorrhaging of its young people to the search for work in the cities or the colonies. The tide of population out of the north and west has been so great as to threaten the very existence of the Catholic Church in the rural communities. The loss of its distinctive witness, so well-portrayed by Fr Anthony, represents the end of one chapter in the story of the Church in Scotland.

Clearly the pattern of decline which has been a constant theme throughout the last sixty or seventy years of Scotland's story is inextricably linked with economics. The short post-war boom ended in 1922 with 80,000 unemployed in Glasgow alone; Fr Anthony records his own stay in the Lanarkshire village of Whiterigg some ten years later when the entire community was out of work. It was only the tragedy of

the Second World War that wrought any change in the regular pattern of recovery and decline in Scottish industry. Throughout it all the foundations were being laid for the current state of Scottish industrial and commercial life: foreign ownership of firms and financial institutions. During Fr Anthony's youth those heavy industries which did not collapse completely saw their ownership transferred south of the Border. In the matter of heavy industry, English-controlled firms ensured that in the event of financial difficulty jobs would be shed in Scotland first; a traditional pattern which contemporary businesses have not been slow to follow. During this time the Labour Party was making headway in Scotland, picking up on working-class discontent and disenchantment with the traditional radical party, the Liberals.

A sense of the frustration felt by many Scots at their lack of influence over their own affairs was expressed by Fr Anthony in his own association with the Scottish National Party and the Scottish Literature Society during his university years. However, despite the Scottish literary renaissance associated with the name of Hugh MacDiarmid to which Fr Anthony refers briefly in his book, an increasing number of Scots were to look not to Scottish Nationalism but to the Labour Party to articulate their desire for change. Over the past seventy years that trend towards Socialism has increased in dynamism, resulting in the rejection of the Conservative Party north of the Border at the last General Election and its almost certain annihilation at the next. Mrs Thatcher, like Edward I, has managed to introduce a remarkably harmonious tone into Scottish political life, as the existence of the Scottish National Convention admirably demonstrates. In the General Election of 1922 the Labour Party won twenty-nine of the Scottish seats, almost sweeping the board in Glasgow with ten out of the fifteen seats. The election of the following year saw the party increase its support to thirty-five seats, capturing most of the urban and industrial areas of the country, leaving the Liberals in their Highland and agricultural strongholds; only sixteen Unionists were returned. The strength of the Labour Party and the pressure for some form of social reform is alluded to in Fr Anthony's book, as are the pressures that produced it.

Until comparatively recently universities were seen not so much as specialised centres of vocational training but as institutions in which individual experience was widened through exposure to the study of the humanities. As George Davie has pointed out in *The Democratic Intellect*, his magisterial work on the Scottish educational system, the traditional Scottish emphasis on a classically broad pattern of education, with a significant place awarded to the study of philosophy, had been undermined by the end of the nineteenth century. The Universities Commission of 1899 had fuelled the assimilation of Scottish and English educational practice by compromising with a dual curricular system. A general degree, a peculiarly Scottish phenomenon including a compulsory philosophy component, was available to those who either

intended local or provincial careers, or who aimed for one of the professions such as the ministry or law which still required a first degree before admission to these faculties. A more specialised degree course with honours in one or two subjects, greatly influenced by the English practice, was on offer to those who preferred to cast their net wider and find a career in the service of nation or empire. Fr Anthony's own intellectual formation was forged within what was left of the native Scots tradition of the 'lad o' pairts', the promising youth with wide interests and accomplishments. During his student days Edinburgh University was still a primarily Scottish institution, with a distinguished professorial body. Students were encouraged to pursue intellectual interests right across the academic board. Fr Anthony recounts his own interest in the teaching of A.E. Taylor and Norman Kemp Smith. However, university also introduced him to the desperate urban deprivation and poverty which aroused in him a concern that was to remain with him for the rest of his life.

The Edinburgh which confronts the tourist today is a classical and medieval city that has escaped more by luck than good judgement the ravages of the redevelopment which has so marked Glasgow and Dundee. Many of the plans for urban transformation drawn up under the successive Conservative town councils which dominated the city until the 1980s were fortunately never effected. Instead of demolition and 'concretization', the city fathers have encouraged gentrification; as a result property developers have made a great deal of money, the close-knit urban communities of the Grassmarket, the Cowgate, Dumbydykes and many similar neighbourhoods have been dismantled and transported to the dreich council housing schemes on the edge of the city, but a remarkable sixteenth-century and seventeenth-century townscape has been conserved. What are now fine tenements of former merchants' and bailies' houses were once amongst the worst slums in northern Europe. One of the areas in which Fr Anthony worked as a student was, at that time, able to boast the highest density of population per square mile in Europe, all crammed into the recognisably Scottish patterns of single ends and double apartments. No significant onslaught had been made on Scottish housing problems until after the war and even then Scottish town councils were not as eager as their English counterparts to live up to their responsibilities in this regard. The report of the Royal Commission on Scottish Housing of 1917 gives a suitably grim description of conditions which were not substantially different twenty years later. It describes:

... gross overcrowding and huddling of the sexes together in the congested industrial villages and towns, occupation of one-room houses by large families, groups of lightless and unventilated houses in the older burghs, clotted masses of slums in the great cities.

It was no surprise that such an environment should be a breeding ground for all kinds of epidemics, which accounted for an abnormally high infant mortality rate, out of all proportion to comparable English figures.

Poor housing, lack of educational opportunity, wholesale unemployment and depression form the shadowy background of Fr Anthony's account of his youth. What is remarkable is the apparent inability of Scottish politicians to significantly alter conditions. A sizeable part of the Labour Party's strength was drawn from its Scottish representation; despite the impact men such as John Wheatley and James Maxton made on the British scene, their effectiveness as spokesmen for Scotland's needs was negligible. Like most Scotsmen at Westminster, then and now, they gave the impression that they were glad to have escaped from the 'kailyard' and were more interested in cutting a braver figure on a larger stage. Popular discontent there certainly was in Scotland but civil disorder was never seriously threatened save during the brief Glasgow industrial troubles in 1919, when an anxious government fearful of revolution drafted 12,000 troops and 6 tanks to Glasgow to intimidate the workers.

Fr Anthony's response to this pattern of decline was typically individual and, in its own way, revolutionary. He found himself drawn, by the God who had walked with him since his earliest days in the deeply religious Calvinist community of his birth, into communion with the Roman Catholic Church. His reception brought about a breach with his own family and with the tradition which had formed him and led to a great deal of personal suffering. Not content with that, he was soon after, on the eve of another great war, to seek admission to the Dominican Order, at that time represented in Scotland by a group of three brethren in Edinburgh and a community of Third Order sisters in Hawick in Roxburghshire. Many of his contemporaries understandably found this decision surprising since little was known in Scotland of the Order; all of this has changed in Fr Anthony's lifetime, not least because of his contribution to Scotland's national life.

One of the first things to strike Fr Anthony about the small group of three Dominican friars who maintained the Catholic chaplaincy to Edinburgh University was how different they all were from one another. Fr Fabian Dix, the superior, a convert Anglican clergyman and aesthete at home in the company of artists and performers like Anton Dolin the ballet dancer; Fr Aelred Whitacre, a distinguished Thomist scholar, sculptor and polymath; and Fr Giles Black, another convert Episcopalian clergyman, with a simple faith and a sophisticated repertoire of homiletic techniques which easily won him the devotion of numerous spell-bound congregations. The foundation had been established in 1931 by Fr Bede Jarrett almost seven hundred years after the Dominicans first came to Scotland. Fr Bede's intention was that the new house in George Square, with its apostolate to the University

modelled on that of the earliest days of the Order in Paris, Bologna and Oxford, should form the base for the Order's preaching and teaching mission throughout Scotland. He looked to the eventual erection of a novitiate in Scotland and the establishment of a study house in George Square. Part of his dream was realised in 1976, when the English Dominican Province sent two of its students to study in the Divinity Faculty of the University; another came to fruition in 1980, when the first Scots candidates were received into the newly-established Scottish novitiate in Edinburgh, and in 1988, against the tide of the previous four hundred years, the Provincial Chapter of the English Province decided to establish the novitiate for the entire Province in Edinburgh. However, all of these developments were to be a long way in the future when Fr Anthony made his way to begin his novitiate at Woodchester, in Gloucestershire. The Dominican presence in Edinburgh was small but powerful in that it attracted three other members of Fr Anthony's generation of Edinburgh University students into the Order, all of whom were to serve with distinction and two of whom were to become Priors Provincial of the English Province.

The Root of the Matter ends with an account of Fr Anthony's first Easter as a Catholic in the novitiate at Woodchester. He does not go on to recount the story of his formation in the Order, how he furthered his interest in Scottish history and began to work on the history of the Dominican Order in Scotland. In many ways his most fruitful years were spent as chaplain to Catholic students in Edinburgh, where his own journey in faith had taken a new direction. It would not be appropriate to list Fr Anthony's many achievements during all of those years; they are outlined on the dustjacket of the book. He would be the last to claim that the story of the Dominican Order in Scotland could be narrated in terms of his personal biography. However, the story of his life as he tells it does illustrate something of the story of his Order and his country.

Recent political history has crystallised the increasing sense of divergence of interest between the constituent parts of the United Kingdom. Scotland has perhaps a keener and more aggressive sense of purpose now than at any other time in the last half-century. Public opinion is, of course, volatile and unreliable, but a desire on the part of the vast majority of Scots for a greater degree of self-government than was envisaged even in the 1979 devolution debate is evident. The result of the last election proved that the Scots could resoundingly reject the party of government and still not hope to escape the effect of that government's policy. Indeed, the pattern has been that the most unpopular items of government policy have been applied in Scotland before any other part of the United Kingdom. The present government suffers the considerable embarrassment of hardly being able to fill the ministerial posts in the Scottish Office. If the Conservative Party wins the next election but loses more seats in Scotland then it may be forced to restructure the Scottish Office or undergo the ignominy of giving English

MPs Scottish portfolios. As it is, there is increasing pressure from south of the Border for conformity in all kinds of spheres, including the educational and legal, between England and Scotland. It is a tribute to the Scottish legal system and the integrity of its College of Justice that Scots Law has managed to survive so well for so long without the support of a legislature. Much of what Fr Anthony saw begin in the 1930s has become a reality in the 1980s, not least because of the new dimension brought to the Scottish consciousness by membership of the European Economic Community. These are challenging times for the country and therefore for the Dominican Order as it seeks to play its own part in events.

Today Dominican friars in Scotland are principally involved in their traditional work of preaching, study and scholarship in the academic environment of the universities of Edinburgh and Strathclyde. Like many other publicly-funded institutions, universities are in crisis; corporations which proclaim that education is a value in itself are not likely to be treated well in a world that exalts accountancy to the almost total exclusion of philosophy. In Edinburgh University the only rapidly expanding departments with young and keen lecturers are Accountancy and Business Studies. Years of financial stringency have seriously diminished teaching resources and cut back on research and recruitment of staff; in most universities you would be hard put to find a lecturer under the age of forty five. Perhaps more serious is the emergence of generations of young people who will be opinion-formers in the country, who are steeped in the negative values of possessive individualism. Clearly a religious community, like the Dominican Order, whose origins are so closely bound in with the golden age of the universities, should have something to say to that ideology, not only in its preaching but in its way of life. It was this sense of their being an alternative way that drew Fr Anthony to the Dominicans on the eve of a terrible war. As the bonds which bound much of Europe as a consequence of that war begin to unravel now, the necessity of articulating that alternative way is all the more pressing.

A further challenge facing the Dominican Order in Scotland, and by extension its brethren in England, is the part it is to play in national life. The two university communities in which it has its major presence are very different in character: two more different cities than Glasgow and Edinburgh could not be imagined. The difference, often a source of conflict and rivalry, is actually a demonstration of the richness and diversity of the Scottish cultural community. Strathclyde is a technical university drawing on students who mostly live at home and commute from Glasgow and its hinterland. Edinburgh, with its reputation for the humanities and medicine, appeals to a much wider constituency but even this has been threatened in recent years. Foreign students, inhibited by fee-increases, have ceased to come in such numbers, but at the same time the university has been undergoing a process of anglicisation. This is

visible not only in the composition of the teaching body, a large proportion of which is English, but also in the increasing numbers of English applicants gaining entry to the university. Indeed, it was recently disclosed that with 'A' levels rather than Scottish Highers behind them, English applicants were likely to receive more favourable terms of entry to the university than Scottish students. Edinburgh has also become an acceptable alternative for those candidates from public schools who fail to gain entrance to Oxford or Cambridge. The proposals for the introduction of student loans, by penalising those students from working-class or lower income brackets, will inevitably alter the composition of the university, including its Catholic community. This will clearly be a major challenge to those Dominicans who work in higher education, forming students in the faith and educating them towards accepting their role in the Church in Scotland.

The sectarianism that Fr Anthony encountered in his youth is still, regrettably, a feature of the Scottish scene. Its more public expression at football matches is not quite so sinister as when it is being pounded out in the rhythms of a lambeg drum on an Orange march, or in the polite condescension of professionals at a reception. The absurd and pernicious attempts by General Assemblies of the Church of Scotland in the 1920s to prove its national credentials by passing resolutions warning of the dangers of the 'Irish' incubus in Scottish society serve only to point up one of the more unattractive aspects of life in Scotland. In response to this enforced exclusion the Catholic community began to see itself as alien and even defiantly emphasised this alienation. The myth of Catholics always coming from somewhere else was useful to both Catholic and Protestants alike, even when it takes the absurd form of inhabitants of Catholic mining villages in Lanarkshire claiming to be Irish when their families have lived in Scotland since the 1840s. Scots Dominicans have to face the challenge of sectarianism squarely and to realise how much they may be prisoners of their own experience.

The motto of the Dominican Order is *Veritas*, truth. Fr Anthony's own search for truth led him to uncover the story of his own country in its history and literature. Throughout these researches he has constantly stressed the role of the Christian community in the formation of the Scottish people and has even claimed a small share in that contribution for the Dominican Order. In his youth he was criticised for being 'narrowly nationalist'. It is a criticism that is often levelled against those who stress the enrichment that flows from acknowledgement of difference, for without difference there can be no communion and communion is the foundation of our faith. Against this many Scots have often maintained the suspicion that 'English nationalism was the least publicised but most potent of all in Britain.' Fr Anthony answered his critics by claiming that he was not rejecting all the rest of the world but simply pleading for 'the recognition of what Scotland had produced, and

as producing again in our time.’ Pope John Paul II confirms Fr Anthony’s belief that the truth of the Gospel sets us free and is, in fact, the seamless robe contrived of many threads which it was given to him to glimpse as he searched for the root of the matter:

The Gospel does not lead to the impoverishment or extinction of those things which every individual, people and nation and every culture throughout history recognises and brings into being as goodness, truth and beauty. On the contrary, it strives to assimilate and to develop all these values: to liven them with magnanimity and joy and to perfect them by the mysterious and ennobling light of Revelation.

(Slavorum Apostoli. 18)

Why create Hitler?

James Sadowsky SJ

‘If God knows how people like Hitler are going to behave, why does he create them?’ One reply to this objection goes as follows. It is impossible both for God to know what Hitler is going to do and for God to decide not to create him. If He is not going to create Hitler, there will be no Hitler to do anything and no future act for God to know. God’s knowing what Hitler will do presupposes the decision to create. God does not first know how Hitler will act and then decide to create him. It is the other way around.¹ It is as if God is ‘surprised’ by the results of his decision to create—not that he learns something he did not previously know, but that he knows from all eternity something he would not otherwise have known. The decision to create is, in a sense, taken blindly.

While it is true that God does not know what people are freely going to do unless He decides to create them, it is also the case according to many that without having to know whom he shall choose to create he knows what people will freely do in case they are created. He is able, therefore, to take into account these hypothetical choices when deciding to create. If this is true, then the problem of evil becomes more acute. God creates with the *prior* knowledge of moral evil. One then has to