

John Welch and his Garden.

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The garden of John Welch is one of the most sacred and historic places in Ayr. It is situated immediately behind the building adjoining the Picture House in the High Street of the town, and is entered from the car park behind the picture house.

When Welch first came to Ayr no suitable house could be found for him, and accommodation was provided for a time in the house of John Stewart, who was a merchant in the town and an eminent Christian who became a warm and devoted friend of the Minister. By 1602 he was able to obtain a rented house for himself and family. The back of this house looked on to the garden, the front faced the High Street. From the opposite side of the street a passage-way led down to the river where there was a ford, at that time known as the Gadgirth Ford. When Welch was a prisoner in Edinburgh Castle, "his wife," Kirkton informs us, "used for the most part to stay in his company; but upon a time she fell into a longing to see her family in Ayr, to which with some difficulty he yielded. But when she was to make the journey he strictly charged her not to take the ordinary way to her own house when she came to Ayr, nor to pass by the bridge through the town, but to pass the river above the bridge, and so get the way to his own home, and not to come into the town; for said he, before you come thither you shall find the plague broken out in Ayr; which accordingly came to pass." By following the instructions of her husband, Mrs. Welch would cross the river by the Gadgirth Ford, and on reaching the town-side of the river would have but to cross the street and so she would arrive at the house.

The Reverend Kirkwood Hewet, F.S.A. (Scot.) writing in 1898 tells us that "the building used as the Manse in Welch's time, and which stood at the back of the High Street, was demolished only some three years ago (1895) in order to make room for some larger modern erection. The present writer, he goes on to say, "was present at the demolition, and it was pathetic to gaze on the old rooms with their venerable mantle-pieces, wainscot panellings, and other reminders of an age long since passed away. Much of the old Manse garden, however, still remains. . . ."

Here then was the garden of John Welch which he knew so well and which was often the scene of much of the prayer life of the man. Although wearied with the journey, on his return from his first appearing before the Privy Council, he preached to his beloved people. In his preaching there were clearly discerned forebodings of impending trouble. That same night, the evening of Sunday,

22nd July, 1605, he rose from his bed, as was his custom, for private devotion, and retired first to an adjoining apartment, and afterwards to his garden, where, we are told, his prayers were ardent and prolonged. On his returning, his wife, fearing injury to his health, tenderly reproached him for his long absence. He told her that he was greatly perturbed because of the troubles which he felt were coming to his Church, to himself, and to her, and that his work at Ayr would soon be closed. How soon were his fears to be realised! Ere he awoke in the morning a King's Messenger arrived to summon him again before his judges: in reality, as events proved, to carry him away as a prisoner. Thus his last night in Ayr was spent in prayer in this old garden.

Welch was a man of intense religious earnestness (the type which the times demanded) and his prayer-life is a matter of history. Eight hours out of the twenty-four were given to prayer, and the burthen of his petitions was that Scotland might be won for the reformed faith and that her people might be loyal to it. His biographer tells us that "his prayers were fervent, prolonged, and often accompanied with strong crying and tears. For this reason that he might have the greater liberty he would retire sometimes to his garden, and at other times to his Church, there to pour out his intercessions, and so engrossed was he as sometimes to forget himself and require to be sought for."

Who was this John Welch, the doughty champion of the reformed faith and of Presbyterianism? The standard biography has been written by the Reverend James Young and was published in 1866. Earlier memoirs were written by Woodrow and by Kirkton, the latter forming the preface to various editions of Welch's published sermons. John Welch was born about 1568. Kirkton informs us that he "was born a gentleman, his father being laird of Colieston in the Shire of Nithsdale." In his youth he was reckless and extravagant and associated himself with a band of border thieves. In due course there came the time of want and remorse, and through the good offices of a relative of the family a reconciliation was effected between the returned prodigal and the exasperated father. On earnest entreaty and passionate pleadings and on promises of reform, Welch was sent to the University of Edinburgh, where "he became a student of great expectation and showed himself a sincere convert."

At Edinburgh he took his Master of Arts degree, and in 1589 was ordained Minister of Selkirk and later, in 1594, was translated to Kirkcudbright. About this time the fearlessness of the man began to show itself. His attitude towards the Bishops, and his public utterances regarding King James, who sought to enforce Episcopal jurisdiction over the Scottish Church, gave so much offence to the King that for a time Welch was forbidden to continue

his ministry. On the petition of the Assembly of the Church, however, he was allowed to resume his labours. In 1600 Welch came to Ayr as assistant or colleague to the then minister of the town, Mr. John Porterfield, and on the death of the latter was appointed the town's minister in 1604.

John Welch married Elizabeth, the youngest daughter of John Knox, Scotland's great Reformer. Her heroism, like that of her illustrious husband, has made her one of the outstanding characters in Scottish history. She did not long survive her husband: she died at Ayr on the 8th January, 1625, and was buried in the graveyard beside her husband's Kirk, the Church of St. John the Baptist. To this day the old tower of the Church keeps silent watch over her unmarked grave.

As we have seen, it was the fearless attitude of Welch towards the persistent arbitrary proceedings of King James that led to his banishment from Scotland. While in Ayr he preached against the rule of Episcopacy and upheld in public his belief in Presbyterian church government. He openly associated himself with those in the Scottish Church who held similar views. He declared his concurrence with the doings of the General Assembly which met at Aberdeen in July 1605 in defiance of the royal veto. Together with several of those ministers who had attended that famous Assembly he was imprisoned first at Edinburgh and afterwards in Blackness Castle, where he endured great hardship. Summoned before the Privy Council he refused to acknowledge the jurisdiction of that court as his judges, was then tried before a judicatory at Linlithgow, and, being found guilty of treason, he was sentenced to death. The King, however, fearing the consequences should the death sentence be carried out, commuted the sentence to one of banishment. On November 7th, 1606, Welch left the shores of Scotland for France never to see his homeland again.

His friends, among whom were men of influence, importuned for his return, but the King was obstinate. Mrs. Welch then managed to obtain an audience with the King and pleaded for her husband's return. The royal conditions were emphatic: her husband would be allowed to return to Scotland if he would renounce his Presbyterianism in favour of Episcopacy; but with a heroism worthy of her husband she refused the conditions. At that time Welch's health had greatly failed, and in 1622 he was permitted to return to England but not to Scotland. He died in London in the month of March of that same year and is buried in the Churchyard of St. Botolph, Bishopsgate. Such then was the cost at which this son of the Scottish Church championed the cause of Presbyterianism in Scotland. In the memorials of the time he is generally classed with Wishart and Knox.



Statuette of John Welch, formerly in the Garden.
(See Page 52).