

Scottish Railways & The Christian Sabbath: Controversy in the Mid-Nineteenth Century Scottish Church

By Sean G. Morris

INTRODUCTION

As doctrinal debates go, the question of the proper observance of the Sabbath is a perennial one. What seems to be a settled matter in one generation inevitably undergoes another round of contention within the next generation. Twenty-first century Reformed Christians often lament the lackadaisical devotion given to the observance of the Fourth Commandment—a hallmark of the Scottish Presbyterian heritage—by adherents in their own day; they pine for the days of yore when observance of God's Law was allegedly more uniform and pervasive. Yet, a closer examination of the history will reveal that the Golden Age of Scottish Presbyterianism was not without its taints. While names like Robert Murray M'Cheyne and Robert S. Candlish invoke a sort of nostalgic luster to the nineteenth-century Scottish church, modern-day Christians sensitive to the Scottish Presbyterian tradition will take some solace in knowing that the doctrinal disputes waged in our day are not unlike those waged by their forebears. While twenty-first century Christians will debate as to whether it is appropriate to watch television, patronize cafes, or attend sporting events on the Sabbath, their nineteenth-century predecessors grappled with a similar question relative to the technological capabilities of their day: is it appropriate to make use of passenger trains and modes of public transit on the Lord's Day?

If there is any familiarity at all with this controversy in the Victoria-era Scottish church, it is likely that such a reader would have been apprised of the matter by way of M'Cheyne's essay "I Love the Lord's Day."¹ In it, M'Cheyne takes aim at the anemic Sabbath-piety that was plaguing the Scottish people in his day, calling attention to three particular evidences of Scotland's spiritual apathy: 1. the popularity and operation of public reading rooms on the Lord's Day; 2. the popularity

and operation of public houses (taverns) on the Lord's Day; 3. and—most egregiously—the pending decision of the Edinburgh and Glasgow Railway to begin operating a passenger rail service on the Lord's Day. M'Cheyne summons his readers' attention with the alarming salvo:

A majority of the directors of the Edinburgh and Glasgow Railway have shown their determination, in a manner that has shocked all good men, to open the railway on the Lord's day. The sluices of infidelity have been opened at the same time, and floods of blasphemous tracts are pouring over the land, decrying the holy day of the blessed God, as if there was no eye in heaven, no King on Zion Hill, no day of reckoning.²

M'Cheyne provides a popular-level window into a complex matter in that particular historical context. The proposal of the Edinburgh and Glasgow Railway to operate passenger transportation on Sundays and the ensuing debate is but one facet of a broader consideration regarding the appropriate parameters of the Christian Sabbath in light of Industrial Age advances.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

While the development of a national railroad infrastructure had been mounting for a number of years, it was not until the late 1830s when public conflict arose

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1. R.M. M'Cheyne, "I Love the Lord's Day" in Andrew Bonar, ed., *Memoir and Remains of Robert Murray M'Cheyne* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), p. 594.

2. M'Cheyne, p. 594.



Sir Andrew Agnew of Lochnaw (1793–1849).

with regard to Sunday train services.³ The smaller mining railways established before 1835 had no real desire to operate on Sundays, but between 1836 and 1838 the first major Scottish companies were authorized, linking Glasgow with Ayr, Greenock and Edinburgh, and Arbroath with Dundee and Forfar.⁴ Additionally, the delivery of mail on Sundays via the railroad had been practiced for some time. But as these rail lines approached completion in the early 1840s, the more controversial matter of passenger services arose, with the Edinburgh & Glasgow Company's proposal becoming the primary item of contention in what Robertson calls "a confused warfare of theology, economics, social concern and pragmatic political manoeuvring."⁵

The heart of the disagreement centered on the Fourth Commandment and its rightful application: Was the

prohibition of Sabbath-day labor absolute in the current Christian era? Given the language of Westminster Confession of Faith 21.8 where it states "This Sabbath ... [is to be] taken up, the whole time, in the public and private exercises of his worship, and in the duties of necessity and mercy," there was clearly a legitimate exemption for works of necessity and mercy. Of course, the more needling question, then, was how should those works of necessity and mercy be defined? In light of the burgeoning industrial age, was there any leeway for a modern-day application or interpretation of these texts regarding Sabbath-day regulations? Should a man be allowed to use his rest day as he pleased? If the Sabbath regulations were still valid, and if a man willingly violated God's Law, was that judgment not on his own head? Scores of pamphlets from both sides of the argument were printed and distributed as the parties strove to prove their position with the hope of persuading the railway to acquiesce accordingly.

After the Disruption of 1843, it was the Free Church that came to be most closely associated with the Sabbatarian position against the interests of the railroad companies. The man who emerged, more or less, as the figurehead of those opposed to Sunday train services was Sir Andrew Agnew of Lochnaw in Wigtownshire. Agnew served as MP for Wigtownshire from 1830 to 1837 as a "moderate reform" Tory.⁶ He gained a notable reputation in Parliament for his strong advocacy of Sabbath observance, a cause he continued to pursue until his death in 1849. An annual feature of Agnew's parliamentary docket was the introduction of bills to prohibit all labor taking place on Sundays except works of necessity and mercy. In 1839, Sir Andrew became the first chairman of the Scottish Society for Promoting the Due Observance of the Lord's Day, and in his first speech in office, he declared his vested and determined opposition toward "the threatened invasion of Sabbath-breaking customs from England by the railways."⁷

The Sabbatarian party was not persuaded that regular train services could reasonably be called "works of necessity," as endeavors of necessity generally fell under the category of "emergency" or along the same lines as daily meal preparation. Some of the party, including notable men such as Robert S. Candlish, were willing to accept that there might be specific occasions for which a case for exemption could be made.⁸ Refusals by Sabbatarian-sympathizing boards of directors to provide transportation for reason of compassion were, predictably, an opportune weapon for the anti-Sabbatarians to wield. The most widely publicized—and embarrassing—of such incidents occurred in 1849 when the

3. A. L. Drummond and J. Bulloch, *The Scottish Church 1688-1843* (Edinburgh: St Andrew Press, 1973), p. 214.

4. C. J. A. Robertson, "Early Scottish railways and the observance of the Sabbath." *Scottish Historical Review* 57 (1978): 143.

5. Robertson, p. 143.

6. Robertson, p. 144.

7. T. McCrie, *Memoirs of Sir Andrew Agnew of Lochnaw* (London: Bart, 1850), pp. 315–22, 345, 354, 362.

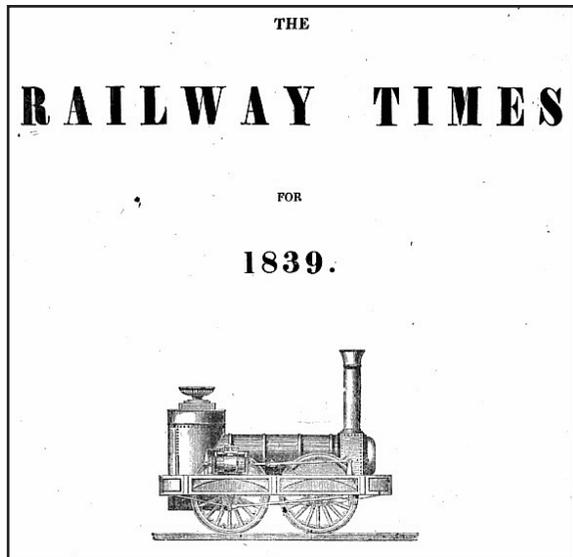
8. *Running of Railway Trains on Sabbath. Report of the Proceedings of a Great Public Meeting of the Inhabitants of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh, 1846), p. 8; *Speeches delivered at the Town Hall of Manchester, January 23rd, 1847* etc. (Manchester, 1847), pp. 28–29; This meeting was called specifically to discuss Sunday trains on the Edinburgh & Glasgow.

Scottish Central Railroad refused to allow the duchess of Sutherland a seat on a mail train in order to see her dying father, who ended up passing away before her arrival the next day.⁹ *Herapath's Railway Journal* (decidedly anti-Sabbatarian along with the majority of the railroad press) pounced on the opportunity: "It proved that, instead of doing good, the stoppage of Sunday travelling did a vast deal of harm; that if sin entered into the question, it rather created sin than prevented it."¹⁰

Further hampering the Sabbatarian cause was the perception that the Sabbatarians were not attacking the use of *private* vehicles on the Sabbath, but merely *public* transit. This seemed an inconsistent position since the use of private transportation and carriages required the use of hired labor, such as drivers and groomers. More to the point, this contention seemed to indicate little care for the poor working class in *private* employment while giving inordinate attention to the relief of the poor working class in *public* employment. One pamphlet claimed that the Free Church was unwilling to act against private transit because it needed its owners' money.¹¹ Prior to the Disruption, as Robertson notes, the *Railway Times* suggested that the failure to challenge the Sunday arrival of steamships near Glasgow was due to the large shipping interests of various Church of Scotland leaders.¹² Politicians, both Liberal and Tory, argued that, logically, if Sunday train services were to be required to cease, so also should horses and the labor of domestic servants, cooks, and doctors. Put another way, the outworking of this line of thought would mean that many of the church-going population dependent on horse and carriage use would be prevented from attending worship by any means other than walking. For those living any modest distance from the church building, this would quickly become an onerous burden.¹³

Conversely, pro-Sunday train service advocates would argue that the use of Sunday trains would make it easier for the working poor to attend church services, as well as provide an affordable means for rest and recreation on the day of rest. Some advocates even went so far as to argue that enjoying a day on the trains was a healthy alternative to pub-frequenting and drinking, the recreational bane of the working poor's existence.¹⁴

Further undermining the Sabbatarian argument (and likely the item which prompted the suggestion of passenger service in the first place) was the precedent of the operation of mail delivery trains on the Sabbath. For some time, mail trains had been operating on Sundays.¹⁵ With such a precedent being established, the commercial interests of the railroad company's directors extended to the question of passengers: if the trains are



The title page of volume 2 of *The Railway Times* (1839).

already running on Sunday in order to deliver the mail, why not simply open the services for willing customers? Hence, the proposal of the Edinburgh and Glasgow Railroad Company: to establish *two* Sunday passenger services going in either direction between these two cities in 1842.

A NEW STRATEGY

The reactions to the proposal were fairly predictable: pro-Sunday train service, the *Railway Times* cheerfully declared that "the anti-Sunday travelling agitation may be looked on as at an end. It is high time that it were,"¹⁶ while the pro-Sabbatarian party decried the accelerated waning of the Scottish Sabbath and threatened excommunication to those who would use the Sunday rail service.¹⁷ However, with the inauguration of the

9. Robertson, p. 146.

10. *Herapath's Railway Journal*, 10 Feb. 1849; J. Devey, *Life of Joseph Locke* (London, 1862), p. 263; Robertson, p. 146.

11. 'Tom Pipes', *Letter to the Rev. Robert S. Candlish*, D.D. (Edinburgh, 1847), p. 1; Robertson, p. 146.

12. *Railway Times*, 17 Apr. 1841; Robertson, p. 146.

13. Robertson, pp. 146–148.

14. Robertson, p. 148.

15. Robertson, pp. 151–152. It should also be noted that a traditional Scottish understanding of the Sabbath would not allow for the operation of public transport while English culture had grown used to the convenience for some time. As such, the Sabbatarians argued that these English majority shareholders would surely pressure the company directors to cater to their baser financial interests.

16. *Railway Times*, 10 September 1842.

17. M'Cheyne, "I Love the Lord's Day," pp. 598ff.; Robertson, p. 153.

services in 1842, the Sabbatarian party took a different, more pragmatic tactic: purchasing company shares. By doing so, the Sabbatarians were able to attend the regular shareholders meetings and thereby exercise greater influence on the board of directors' deliberations and the company's policies. For five years, the semi-annual company shareholders meetings were taken up with prolonged theological debate on this matter. While theological and humanitarian arguments ultimately held little sway, the Sabbatarian shareholders discovered the most effective tactic was to demonstrate that the Sunday train services were not a financially viable investment nor adequately profitable to justify the expense of Sunday operations.¹⁸

Financial crisis struck in 1846, and the company directors came under fire for their management of the shareholders' finances. The occasion offered a prime opportunity for the Sabbatarians to maneuver. In September of 1846, the shareholders rejected the board's semi-annual report, and numerous board members subsequently resigned. The pushback from the company meeting had nothing to do with Sunday trains, but rather with opposition to mergers with other transit companies and concerns about profitability. However, the Sabbath issue was now a political token that could be leveraged for negotiation. The other shareholders were content to court the Sabbatarians' position if it meant they had the necessary votes to accomplish their agenda. As such, within a month, a newly installed board (including seven Sabbatarian directors) had terminated the operation of Sunday passenger rail service yet still allowed for the transportation of Sunday mail on the lines.¹⁹ Fueled by the euphoria of this recent victory, Candlish boldly claimed that a revival of nationwide Sabbatarian observance was within grasp:

If the Christian proportion of the community succeed in preventing the running of trains on the Sabbath on the Edinburgh & Glasgow railway, then we gain the battle of Sabbath observance in all broad Scotland, and for all time to come.²⁰

18. Robertson, pp. 154ff.

19. *Herapath's Railway Journal*, 15 Aug. 1846, 22 Aug. 1846, 5 Sept. 1846, 26 Sept. 1846; H. G. Lewin, *The Railway Mania and Its Aftermath* (London: The Railway Gazette, 1936), pp. 272–274.

20. *Speeches delivered at . . . Manchester*, p. 22; Robertson, pp. 156–157, 160.

21. Douglas M. Murray, "The Sabbath Question in Victorian Scotland in Context." *Studies in Church History* Volume 37 (2002): 319–330.

22. Pipes, p. 1.

A SHORT-LIVED VICTORY

The Sabbath was still arguably "in the blood" of the mid-nineteenth century Scottish church. While English shareholders had little sympathy for what they considered Scottish idiosyncrasies, they *were* concerned about profits. So long as the company's endeavors proved profitable, the English shareholders were content to acquiesce to Scottish Fourth Commandment sensibilities. This triumph, however, lasted only until the middle of the following decade: when the Edinburgh & Glasgow railway merged with the North British Railway in 1865, Sunday passenger services were re-introduced. This led to what has been called the 'Sabbath War' of 1865–66, a conflict in which the Sabbatarian party was ultimately unsuccessful, a reality indicative of the decline of Scotland's traditional Sabbath understanding.²¹

WHITHER FOURTH COMMANDMENT?

Why the initial period of success followed by the eventual overturning of these Sabbatarian statutes? A brief analysis will have to suffice: the impetus leading to a broad, weakened Sabbatarian view can be traced to two general trends: a growing industrial-cultural persuasion that, in the minds of proponents, necessitated the constant operation of certain segments of the workforce; and, secondly, a shifting understanding of the religious significance of the Christian Sabbath, both within and without the church.

With regard to the mindset of Industrial Age Scotland, the change from a predominantly agricultural to an industrial community was no small factor in the eventual overturn. It was not the case, for example, that no Sunday trains ran prior to this time, as noted above. Notably, it was that railways were *public* companies in which Sabbatarians could exercise pressure by seeking to influence the shareholders, and by purchasing shares themselves. However, another popular transit system in the day, the steamboats, were owned by private companies and were less open to such pressure. It may also be that, as one pamphlet claimed, the Churches depended on the shipowners' donations for financial support.²² Whether such allegations are valid or not, the appearance of inconsistency from church leadership (e.g., suppressing one form of transportation in the name of keeping the day holy, but not suppressing a different form of transit) did not sit well with the wider populace—such actions did little to ingratiate the pro-Sabbatarian argument in the minds of the people. While the Scottish *church* may have still been

Sabbatarian at heart, it is not altogether clear that such a conviction was as firmly held by the *populace*. It may have been that such convictional legislation was maintained by sheer force of personality (with men such as Sir Andrew Agnew). Moreover, when men such as Agnew employed domestic labor for their own convenience, it seemed—in the mind of many onlookers—to be undermining the pro-Sabbatarian argument, such that when the strong Sabbatarians like Agnew faded from public life and influence (coupled with the merging of Scottish railways with the North British Railway in 1865), the demands and sensibilities of Industrial Age convenience won out over what was perceived to be a nostalgic religious dogma.²³

With regard to the changing convictions on the Sabbath's enduring religious significance, there are two trajectories of thought to be noted: secular and religious. On the religious front, we must limit ourselves to mentioning the view popularized by Norman MacLeod. MacLeod, and those of like persuasion, argued that, rather than insisting that the law should support a strict Sabbatarianism, the Church should seek to convince people about the truth of Christ's teaching. Thus, for MacLeod, evangelism was the issue rather than legislation. It would be far better if people wished to observe the Lord's Day voluntarily and as a result of coming to faith in Christ.²⁴ These views, associated with the liberal wing of the Church of Scotland, eventually won the day as they tended to be the prevailing opinion of the majority of ministers and elders within the Kirk and the delegates at the General Assemblies in the late 1860s.²⁵ While no formal revision occurred to the Westminster Confession relative to this doctrine, this *laissez-faire* approach to Sabbath enforcement became the functional policy of the Kirk. With such a convictional change, it is little wonder, then, that there was effectively no resistance from the Kirk when such broadscale, industrial-cultural customs began to be implemented.

On the secular front, there was a movement afoot in those days sometimes called the "Sabbath literary initiative," occurring in the 1840s and 1850s. Names like Sir Walter Scott and John Henderson are closely associated with this movement. Not desiring to force people to become "godly by legislation," essayists would argue for the necessity and good of an abiding Sabbath habit as a cultural element (especially for the benefit of the working-class poor), but they would not ground their arguments for Sabbath observance in the fourth commandment. Thus freed from the necessity of basing an argument in Scripture, a "clean slate" was before them in terms of calling for Sundays to be utilized in any

number of endeavors that were beneficial to wider society. Broader democratic and Romantic cultural movements were greatly influential in this line of thinking: the Sabbath was to be a day for the people, to rest from their Monday-Saturday frenetic labors, to recalibrate the senses, to spend leisurely time in nature, and be refreshed. Moreover, it was argued that there ought to be opportunities for exposure to fine writing and poetry; the theatre, opera, and music halls were said to elevate the senses and morals of all mankind, especially the working-class poor. Therefore, for the benefit of all society, to lift men away from their baser instincts and to provide for wholistic, social improvement, Sunday afforded an opportune time for cultivating such aesthetic sensibilities. In this view, the Sabbath should be maintained as a "free day" of sorts, but in place of primarily religious exercises, the day's opportunities ought to be expanded to include artistic and literary endeavors—another avenue for the improvement of man's soul.²⁶

Given that the era had already experienced widespread upheavals in the habits of tradesmen and labor forces, it was unlikely that this provincial dispute involving the Edinburgh and Glasgow Railway would long hold—it may have been destined to be nothing more than a minor delay of the inevitable. And, if accommodation to the demands and conveniences afforded by the Industrial Revolution were not enough, the softening of a Sabbatarian conviction in the national church (coupled with the populist-impulse, Romantic-ideal Sabbath literary movement) served only to strengthen and accelerate the trajectory feared by M'Cheyne and others. The role of the railways was to continue unabated in their contribution to the ongoing decline of Scottish Sabbatarianism. ■

23. Murray, "The Question of Sabbath," pp. 321ff.

24. *Ibid.*

25. Murray, p. 326.

26. Martin Spence, "Writing the Sabbath: The Literature of the Nineteenth-Century Sunday Observance Debate," *Studies in Church History* Volume 48 (2012): 289ff.

In Brief: William Perkins, Days, and months, and times, and years, and the Lord's Day. A Commentarie or Exposition, vpon the five first chapters of the Epistle to the Galatians (London: Legat, 1604), pp. 313–317. The text has been edited for modern spelling and punctuation.

In the former verse, Paul sets down the apostasy of the Galatians in general term, saying, *How turn ye again to the elements of the world?* In the tenth verse, he shows what these elements be, *Ye observed days, and months, and times, and years.* By *days* are meant Jewish Sabbaths: by *months*, the feasts observed every month in the day of the new moon. By *times*, some understand the feast of the Passover, the feast of Pentecost, and the feast of Tabernacles. But the word (καιροὺς) signifies, seasons, or fit times for the doing of this or that business. So is it translated, Acts 1:7, *It is not for you to know the times and seasons.* It was the manner of the Gentiles to make difference of times in respect of good or bad success, and that according to the signs of heaven. And it is very likely that the Galatians observed days not only in the Jewish, but also in the heathenish manner. By *years* are meant every seventh year, and the Jubilee years, which the Galatians observed after the fashion of the Jews.

Again, there is a fourfold kind of observation of days; one *natural*, the other *civil*, the third *ecclesiastical*, the fourth *superstitious*. *Natural* is when days are observed according to the course of the sun and moon (Gen. 1:14), thus day follows night, and night follows day, and every year has four seasons, spring, summer, autumn, winter. And the observation of these times is according to the law of nature. *Civil observation* is when set times are observed for husbandry, in planting, setting, reaping, sowing: for household affairs and for the affairs of the commonwealth, in keeping of fairs and markets, etc. And thus to observe days is not unlawful. *Ecclesiastical observation* of times is, when set days are observed for order's sake, that men may come together to worship God: these days are either days of thanksgiving, or days of humiliation. Of days of thanksgiving, take the example of the Jews, Esther 9:26, who observed yearly the feast of *Purim*, for a memory of their deliverance. In like manner they appointed and observed the feast of *Dedication*: and it seems that Christ was present at Jerusalem as an observer of this feast (John 10:22). And thus for order's sake, to observe certain days of solemnity is not forbidden. *Superstitious observation* of days is twofold, *Jewish*, or *heathenish*. *Jewish*, when set days are observed with an opinion that we are bound in conscience to observe them, and when the worship of God is placed in the observing of this or that time. *Heathenish*, when days are observed in respect of good or bad success. Now then, to come to the point, the intent of Paul is only to condemn the Jewish manner of observing of days, in these words, *Ye obserue days, months, years:* and the heathenish manner, in these words, *ye obserue seasons.*

Against this interpretation, the place of Paul may be ob-

jected, Romans 14:6, *He that observes the day, observes it to the Lord.* *Ans.* Indeed, Paul in these words excuses the Romans that observed days, and says that their intention was to observe them to the honor of God: and this he says because as yet they were not fully instructed touching Christian liberty: but withal, let it be remembered that in mild sort he notes this to be a fault in them, when he says that *they were weak in faith.* Now, the case was otherwise with the Galatians, because they observed days after they had been informed touching their liberty in Christ: and withal they placed their salvation, in part, in the observation of days: and thus they mixed the gospel with the law. And therefore they were justly to be blamed.

Again, it may be objected that now in the time of the New Testament, we in religious manner observe *the Lord's day.* *Ans.* Some men both godly and learned are of opinion, that *the Lord's day* was appointed by the apostles for order's sake: and that it is in the liberty of the church to appoint the Sabbath upon any other day in the week, because they say all days without exception are equal: and they add further, that when the public worship of God is ended, men may then return to their labors or give themselves to recreation on the Lord's day. But this doctrine seems not to stand with the fourth commandment.

It seems to be a truth more probable, that every seventh day in the week must be set apart in holy rest unto God: for this is the substance of the fourth commandment. And it is also very probable that the Sabbath of the New Testament is limited and determined by our Savior Christ to *the Lord's day.* For Paul and the rest of the apostles observed the first day of the week for a Sabbath day (Acts 20:7), and he says, *Whatsoever ye have heard, and what ye have seen in me, that do* (Phil. 4:9). Again, it was the decree or constitution of Paul that the collection for the poor should be *the first day of the week* at Corinth: now this collection in the primitive church, followed preaching, prayer, sacraments, and it was the conclusion of all other exercises in the assembly (1 Cor. 16:2). And this first day of the week is called *the Lord's day* (Apoc. 1:11), and it is so called because it was dedicated and consecrated to the honor of Christ our Lord. And who is the author of this dedication but Christ Himself, the Lord of the Sabbath? It is alleged that the Sabbath and the commandment touching the Sabbath, is ceremonial: and upon this ground, they take liberty and keep no Sabbath at all. But the truth is, that the commandment touching the Sabbath is not wholly ceremonial. It may be, the first words, *Remember the Sabbath day to sanctify it*, and the words, *In it thou shalt do no manner of work*, etc., are spoken of the Jews' Sabbath: but the words, *Six days shalt thou labor, and the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord thy God*, are moral and contain a perpetual truth. Therefore, the words of Paul must be conceived with an exception of the Sabbath day, which is the seventh day in every week; which day Christ has limited by his apostles to *the Lord's day.* ■