REVIEW


There are surely not many who still regard the Scottish Kirk as a rather stern and colourless religious experience. But for those who may retain some doubts, then reading the life and times of Rev. Andrew Wylie will have very much the same effect of a cold shower after a cross-country run: to invigorate. Wylie’s cold shower came from his time as the first Chaplain to the North Sea oil industry. Preparation for this role came from a stint in the Royal Navy, ‘offshore’ as a former Minister in the Scots Kirk in Lausanne, first General Secretary of the Scottish Churches Council and former industrial chaplain at Inverclyde. Broad and challenging experiences, yet it was inevitably a struggle to convince the oil industry of a chaplain’s role amongst the hard grit and bottom dollar concerns of their business. His appointment came in 1985, but before he could visit his first platform, the North Sea oil fields suffered their first major accident. A Chinook helicopter ditched into the sea just off Sumburgh airport in Shetland, killing all but two of the 47 people on board (p. 9). Wylie, and all those involved, could ‘just be there’.

His experience offshore was an international one, not solely a male one, and he interacted with an assortment of characters, accents and corporate egos. Each platform was a community of around 200 people gathered closely together in a steel box for fourteen days at a time. Throughout this book Wylie reflects on his time in this unique Scottish ministry. He was impressed with the inner confidence and calm of the workers and support staff, especially the skilled helicopter pilots, each aware of their
interdependency in order that accidents be avoided. The sights, but especially the never-ending sounds of the sea and the process of extracting oil, were spectacular. The engineering skills learned only through experience in the harshest of environments were prodigious and to be honoured. The impersonal nature of the platform masked comradeship and vulnerability not often found elsewhere. It was institutional life, where the (remarkably high) quality and variety of the food was vital for morale and efficiency. Wylie worked alone, casting an envious glance over to the network of five chaplains engaged by the Norwegian oil industry, and spent much effort squeezing into survival suits to be transferred between the twenty seven oil fields then operating in the North Sea. He makes the point that the community created on each platform, and across the oil fields, was never an easy one with its eclectic mix of personalities and the inherent dangers of the job. With this in mind, he questions the psychological approach each worker was subjected to when going off-shore: (a) the request to fill out a next of kin form; (b) to then get into the survival suit and hear the survival lecture with its emphasis on optimism over realism; (c) to then get into the helicopter and wear headphones that, he muses, ‘leave you dangerously alone with your own thoughts’ (p. 64). Then there was the difficulty for the offshore worker of what he terms the ‘Intermittent husband syndrome’ (p. 118), adjusting constantly between lives, working two weeks on and two weeks off. Wylie’s time coincided with the worst disaster in the history of the search for oil in the North Sea, the explosion on the Piper Alpha platform in 1988 resulting in the loss of 167 lives. He flew out to lead a memorial service for the dead, with silence and disbelief enveloping those on other rigs. Wylie met and quotes the famous fire fighter Red Adair, brought in to quell the flames, ‘Who, but a nutcase, would place a factory, a hotel and a heliport on top of a wellhead’. But that, Wylie reminds us, is what North Sea oil platforms were all about. And it was a realisation not lost on the 5000 who attended St Nicholas Church in Aberdeen to commemorate that day.

This is a book about the human spirit in what many regard as an inhuman environment. Wylie found himself questioning his own role, often pressured to correct misunderstandings about religion rather than ministering to those in need. Yet he was glad, on a regular basis and when called upon, to conduct Services and offer a ‘pool of stillness’ in a very raucous world (p. 92). We
should aware that drilling for black gold has done more than boost returns to the UK Treasury, inspire the nationalists to claim ‘It’s Scotland’s Oil’, or fund probably more swimming pools per head of the population in Shetland than in any other part of Scotland (and their response that it is ‘Shetland’s Oil’!). This has been a remarkable period of Scotland’s social history, and Wylie has just been there, out in the cold.

Aberdeen is the focus on continuing research on those who work in the oil industry¹, and it can confirm the impact upon childhood of an ‘intermittent parent’. To help older children deal with some of the challenges of the world, Susan Edwards, PhD (as she states on the front cover), shows how friendship and the belief in heroes can benefit us all in The Kids Who Saved the World. Her Scottish science fiction story is focused on two twelve year old friends, one Scottish, the other American, living in Edinburgh. Hunting round some of the capital’s most famous sites in search of a time portal, finally discovered at the Dean Bridge, the friends travel back in time to re-write history. A big no-no as aficionados of the long-running Dr Who TV series will tell you, but our intrepid heroes are undaunted.

Merlin and King Arthur make an appearance, meeting up with James I & VI at the Union of Crowns before bumping into a large man who introduced himself thus: ‘I am William Wallace. I am sometimes known as Braveheart to the children of the future’ (p. 77). Working together, this cast of characters conquer their childhood fears to sit around two Round Tables, one in England and one in Scotland, in order to better guide the future. King James learns to become a better father to his son Charles ‘who as a result, became a better king when he was grown’ (p. 90).

It is all great fun, and includes a little guide at the back to the places and (Scottish) words mentioned in the text. In Susan Edwards’ world Edinburgh is ‘sweltering in July’ and our heroes are ‘athletic’ and grandfathers dispense ‘wisdom’, but who is to disagree?

The book ends with Culloden losing its elegiac tones when a new plaque is unveiled proclaiming that ‘This government is dedicated to the children of the future in Scotland and in England … Help us to remember that children need heroes and kings need
the honesty of a child’s heart’ (p. 109). Perhaps, then, it is not just Dr Who’s famous companion Jamie McCrimmon, a young Scottish piper who escaped Cumberland’s butchery, who is able to go back in time to change Scotland’s history and leave the world a better place?

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1 ‘Lives in the Oil Industry’ oral history project at the University of Aberdeen, http://www.abdn.ac.uk/oillives/