

RONALD WILLIAM VERNON SELBY WRIGHT
CVO, TD, HonSCF, JP, MA(Edin), HonDD(Edin), FRSA, FSA(Scot)

The Very Rev Dr Ronald W V Selby Wright (always known as Ronnie), Minister Emeritus of the Canongate Kirk, Edinburgh, was born in Glasgow on June 12, 1908, the son of Vernon O Wright and Anna Gilberta Selby, and died peacefully on October 24, 1995 seated in his armchair at his home, the Queen's House, Moray Place, Edinburgh. He was educated at Edinburgh Academy and Melville College (then called The Edinburgh Institution, where he became Captain of Rugby), graduated in Arts from Edinburgh University where he was deeply influenced by Alfred Edward Taylor, the devout Professor of Moral Philosophy, and went on to study theology at New College under the great Hugh Ross Mackintosh to whom he became deeply attached. During his student years in Edinburgh, 1929-36, he was a cadet officer, The Royal Scots, student assistant at St Giles' Cathedral, and Warden of St Giles' Boys' Club. Although he was a close friend of George McLeod, he never became a member of the Iona Community.

After being assistant minister of St Mungo's Cathedral in Glasgow for one year he was called back in 1937 to Edinburgh to the Canongate Kirk, the Church of the Palace of Holyrood House and Edinburgh Castle, where he ministered for the next forty years among the problems of a very deprived parish. There he continued his student work among the boys from the back streets and crowded closes of the Royal Mile, where conditions were rough and life was very hard, and re-established it as the Canongate Boys' Club, with camp extensions in East Lothian. Although he was unusually tolerant with the mistakes of youth his standards were unchangeably high, and when he had to 'tell off' anyone he did it straight from the shoulder. Like much of the lower end of the Royal Mile, the old Canongate Kirk was in a very run down condition but through Ronnie Wright's untiring efforts, especially after the war, it was restored to something like its old glory. At the same time he set about recovering the historic worship of the Church in line with John Knox's *Book of Common Order*, giving the sacraments a central place in the life of the parish, and provided the congregation with the rich theological and evangelical liturgy for which it has become famous and which is now so well served by the Rev Charles Robertson.

Before the war Ronnie Wright had been a Territorial Army chaplain, but with the outbreak of war he was sent on active service as a padre with the 7th/9th Royal Scots in France. There he shared with them the disastrous plight of the British Expeditionary Force and after appalling experiences at St Valéry, unlike his friend, padre David H C Read (later to become one of the 'Prominente' imprisoned in Colditz), he managed to escape from the German army, and after six days and nights 'without one kip' got back to Britain on one of the last little ships leaving the beaches of Dunkirk. Back in Britain he was recruited by Melville Dinwiddie, the BBC Scottish Controller, to engage in regular 15-minute broadcasts to the Country and HM forces, in which he soon became widely known and loved as 'the Radio Padre'. He had an inimitable way of communicating the Christian message on the radio in a direct conversational epigrammatic style, to which during those years of dire peril and grief there tuned in week after week seven to eight million listeners at home and abroad. It was a very remarkable form of 'war service' in which he gave inspiration and encouragement and kindled hope throughout the dark days of the war.

In 1942 he became Senior Chaplain of the 52nd (Lowland) Division and travelled to the Middle East and around the Mediterranean, continuing his radio ministry from transit camps in Italy. In 1943 he published *Let's Ask The Padre*, the fruit of what he taught and learned in his many 'padre's hours', a book which Tam Dalyell has called a 'a brilliant summary of questions that 'jocks and anybody else' might ask before going into battle and facing the all-too-real possibility of death'. Then in 1944 in his eagerness to be with fighting troops he joined us in the 10th Indian Division in Italy where he was welcomed by its commander Major-General Denys Reid (a son of the Manse), and served under him until the end of the war. In those final desperate months he translated into direct personal contact his radio ministry from transit camps in Italy, in the same caring way and with the same deep human sympathy that characterised his ministry to the young people of the Canongate. A few weeks before Ronnie joined us there came into my tent a young Scottish soldier to tell me that his 'nerves had gone' and did not know how he could go on. On learning that he came from the Canongate, I asked him if he knew padre Wright, when he told me he had been a member of his Boys' Club. The memory of those days and the very mention of padre Wright had the effect of putting him back on his feet. When Ronnie joined us several weeks later, I told him what had happened, and when I mentioned the name of the soldier, Ronnie said, 'What, that old rogue!' - but the very mention of Ronnie Selby Wright's name had the effect of restoring his courage. That was the effect of his cheerful kindness and personal care for people's welfare as an army 'man of God' in Italy. He was generous in his judgements of others, with a discreet but sharp sense of humour even in the face of wrong. He was the kind of person someone could go to at any time and never feel a nuisance, knowing he would listen and help. Such was the healing and invigorating force of his wonderful ministry, in peace and war and in peace again, which continued throughout his life, in his chaplaincy to the army in Edinburgh Castle, and to members of the Services whenever and wherever he met them in Italy, Austria and Germany during the war, and later in Northern Ireland or in his Moderatorial visits to army posts in Hong Kong and Singapore and elsewhere. This was a ministry which Selby Wright sustained for many years as Editor of *The Scottish Forces Magazine*, a quarterly supplement to the Kirk's magazine, *Life and Work*.

In his passionate concern to make Christianity real not only to members of his congregation in Edinburgh but particularly to young people, he got to know them as Warden of his Boys' Club and through his chaplaincy to several Edinburgh schools. He made a point of understanding their needs, temptations, and worries, and finding simple direct answers to moral and spiritual problems. That was what gave rise to the successful series of little books entitled *Asking Them Questions*, in which with the help of some of his friends in church and university he sought to answer the questions put to him by boys. These questions arose at the Epilogues which ended each meeting of the Club, and came from boys at the various public schools, - Edinburgh Academy, Loretto, and Fettes - where he was an an honorary chaplain, and also from boys at Rugby, Harrow, Eton, and elsewhere in England.

After the war the Kirk and Manse of the Canongate were the base from which he called for creative reconstruction, not only in the parish and in the old Town but in fresh appreciation of the spiritual, ecclesiological and literary heritage of Scotland in which he was steeped. It was in this connection that he published, among other works, *The Kirk in the Canongate* (1956),

St Margaret Queen of Scotland, with Ronald Knox and Lucy Menzies (1957), *Fathers of the Kirk* (1960), a revised edition of *A Manual of Church Doctrine according to the Church of Scotland*, with T F Torrance (1960), and *An Illustrated Guide to the Canongate - Kirk, Parish and Churchyard* (1965). While Ronnie Wright was ecumenical in outlook he was deeply devoted to the Reformed tradition of the Church of Scotland. Thus he wrote in the foreword to *Fathers of the Kirk*, 'It must be clearly understood that the reformers believed that the continuity of the Church in Scotland was not broken by the Reformation, for it was by the Church herself that the Reformation was effected. There was never any question of setting up a new church...the Church of Scotland counts itself as a branch of the Catholic Church Reformed, members of no national sect, but of the universal kirk. The Church of Scotland is not only *reformata*, but *semper reformanda*.' This was of course in accord with the great motto of the Church of Scotland, *Nec Tamen Consumebatur* with the symbol of 'the burning bush' - recalling, as one of the Fathers of the Kirk pointed out (with reference to Athanasius), that as the human nature of Christ was not consumed by his deity so the church is not consumed by the divine fire. All Ronnie Wright's many publications, like his Canongate sermons and school addresses, were illuminated with brilliant allusions revealing unusually wide reading and literary foraging in his huge library.

It was in line with his reverence for the tradition of the Church of Scotland that Ronnie Wright devoted considerable attention to renewing the character and form of divine service in the Canongate Kirk. He drew upon the theological and liturgical insights of the Universal Kirk, but in such a way as to blend together historic reformed and classical liturgical traditions of worship. This was in continuation with the 'high Church' tradition of the Kirk and the publications of the Church Service Society in its different editions of *Euchologion or Book of Common Order* begun in the nineteenth century. But Ronnie Wright's particular concern was to restore to people an active part in the public worship, in connection with which he revived the choir of 'singing boys' (then recruited from the Boys' Club), such as had been customary in the Canongate and at the Abbey of the Holyrood in past times. The Canongate under his ministry became and still remains a paradigm of liturgical renewal and pastoral care in the Kirk.

It was characteristic of Ronnie Wright that his concern for the renewal of Church worship was not divorced from renewal of the human and social life of people in the parish and indeed in Edinburgh, which fell into line with the post-war movement for much needed social security. His ceaseless pressure for reconstruction in Edinburgh brought him into wider civil activities. He served as a Justice of the Peace, was a member of Education Committee and a Chairman of Edinburgh and Leith Old People's Welfare Council. He was always jealous of the Kirk's connection with the state as the established Church in Scotland, and accepted appointment by Edward Heath, then Prime Minister, to the Douglas-Home Constitutional Committee which he felt he must serve as a *parish* minister.

In 1961 in commemoration of his twenty-five years in the Canongate, Ronnie Selby Wright was appointed by the Queen as one of her extra chaplains in Scotland. Two years later he became her Majesty's Chaplain and served the Royal Family until 1978. He was also Chaplain to the Queen's Bodyguard for Scotland, the Royal Company of Archers (for 1973-93) and was appointed Chaplain to The Merchant Company of Edinburgh, 1973. Just before his 65th birthday he was called to be Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, an office which he fulfilled in his own natural way through charming personal and pastoral contact as well as through preaching, and the conduct of worship on special occasions of national and church importance. His moderatorial visits took him to India. He brought home to the Kirk the horror of the slums of Calcutta and Old Delhi, and did much to strengthen and quicken the link between the overseas work of the Church of Scotland and the Church in South India. At home he made a point of maintaining contact with the Roman Catholic Church, not only through his friendship with Cardinal Gray, but also in his visitation of various Roman institutions such as St Augustine's secondary School in Edinburgh and Sancta Maria Abbey at Nunraw.

Rarely has a minister of the Kirk been so widely and happily acclaimed by Crown, Church and University. His services to the Crown and the Community were recognised when he was appointed Commander of the Royal Victorian Order in 1986, his scholarship and ministry were honoured when he was awarded a Doctor of Divinity by his Alma Mater in 1956, his Ecumenical activities were sealed by the Cross of St Mark conferred on him by the Patriarch of Alexandria when visiting the General Assembly in 1970, while the Royal Society of Edinburgh elected him a fellow in 1973. When in a BBC interview in 1993 he was asked how he would like to be remembered, he said: 'I think I would rather be remembered because people have always been kind to me and I have had a most wonderfully kind life'. That was typical of his modesty, but those of us who have known him throughout his long life in Christian, social and national service will remember him for his own unflinching kindness to others, his unflagging concern for the needy, especially for disadvantaged youth and the ragged down-and-outs of the Canongate, for his Christian ministry to poor and rich alike in times of peace and war, for his joyful godliness, for his selfless Christian ministry and his utterly impeccable moral character and purity of life. He was in every sense a veritable 'man of God'.

T F TORRANCE