

## **John Alexander Mackay 1889-1983**

John A. Mackay was born in Inverness, Scotland, May 17, 1889, and like a true-blue Highlander was graduated from the University of Aberdeen with First Class Honors in Philosophy. "A raw youth," as he later described himself, he ventured across the ocean to Princeton Theological Seminary. It was the first of many extended voyages that during his life took him several times around the globe.

Graduating from Princeton Seminary in 1915 with a fellowship for graduate study, he had hoped to go to Germany. Central Europe was then into the first years of World War 1, and John Mackay decided to go to Spain to study with Miguel de Unamuno, the Spanish existentialist who, before most, had discovered and written about Kierkegaard. It was the beginning of a love affair with the Iberian Peninsula and Hispanic culture to which he would be devoted throughout his life. Later, he wrote of Unamuno that "he incarnated Spain in much the same way as the soul of Russia was incarnated in Dostoyevsky." Though divergent in many ways, the Highland Celt and the Spanish mystic converged in a vision of existentialist missionary witness to the living Christ.

In 1916, John Mackay and Jane Logan Wells were married, and they set off as educational missionaries for Lima, Peru. There they founded a Protestant school, now known as the Colegio San Andres. While in Peru, John Mackay was invited to occupy the chair of Philosophy in the National University of San Marcos. The first Protestant to be appointed to such an academic position in this renowned university, founded in 1551, it was an honor equalled only many years later by an award of the "Palmas Magisteriales" by the Peruvian government for John Mackay's contribution to education.

Under special assignment with the South American Federation of the YMCA, he began to lecture and write first in Uruguay and then in Mexico. He was appointed a member of the Board of Foreign Missions of the

Presbyterian Church with general oversight of Latin America and Africa. Through this association, he began a life-long friendship with Robert E. Speer who, at this time, was President of the Presbyterian Mission Board and a Trustee of Princeton Seminary.

John Mackay was called in 1936 to the presidency of Princeton Seminary, where he served for twenty-three years not only as President, but as Professor of Ecumenics, the first such designated chair in an American seminary. It was a time of theological disruption, and a few years earlier several reactionary trustees, faculty, and students seceded during the fundamentalist controversy, which was then dividing churches and denominations across the country.

John Mackay came into this unpromising situation with his eyes open and with missionary zeal. In short order, he restored stability to the campus, transcending the and debates that had split the Seminary and enlarging and strengthening the faculty. He began overtures with the University toward mutual recognition of academic programs, raised the morale of the campus with his ecumenical enthusiasm, insisting all the time that the theology must be an intellectually respectable discipline.

The chronicle of John Mackay's life during the following two decades reveals a series of eminent positions to which he was appointed. His long and distinguished ecumenical career began at the Oxford Conference in 1937, where he headed the Commission on the Universal Church and the World of Nations. This occasioned his often-quoted directive, "Let the Church Be the Church." He was a member of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches (1948-1954), President of the American Association of Theological Schools (1945-1950), Chairman of the International Missionary Council (1947-1958), and President of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (1954-1959). He was elected Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the USA in 1953. After his retirement from Princeton, he taught at the American University in Washington as Adjunct Professor of Hispanic Thought.

In all these church and official positions, John Mackay was governed by the interdependence of what he liked to call "Order and Ardor." He argued for balance between ecclesiastical unity and evangelical mission, between the ecumenical and the confessional, between the structure of doctrine and the freedom of the Spirit. Those who heard him speak remember his impassioned contrasts between "The Balcony and the Road," "Don Quixote and Robinson Crusoe," "The Badge and the Banner," "The End and the Beginning," "The Way to Tomorrow Leads Through Yesterday."

A prolific author, John Mackay was always in the process of writing--articles, editorials, reports, dedicatory inscriptions, and books. He published thirteen books, three of which he wrote in Spanish. In 1944, he founded and edited the religious quarterly THEOLOGY TODAY. The first "Aim," as he formulated it for the journal, read, "To contribute to the restoration of theology in the world of today as the supreme science, of which both religion and culture stand in need for their renewal."

In 1953, John Mackay, disturbed not only by the so-called "McCarthy Hearings" and other allegations of unpatriotic trends in this country, but also by the silence and timidity of ecclesiastical and educational institutions, drafted "A Letter to Presbyterians," calling for reasonable reflection. In one of his favorite phrases, he urged leaders in church and culture "to take the lead." The "Letter" was widely distributed and acclaimed as a lone voice crying in the wilderness.

In the same vein, he repeatedly advocated open dialogue and summit meetings of political leaders for China, Russia, and the troubled areas of Latin America. Many remember a dramatic community meeting in the Auditorium of the Seminary Campus Center when John Mackay, with an emotional introduction, welcomed J. Robert Oppenheimer, then the Director of the Institute for Advanced Study and at the time under a cloud of suspicion because of his association with the atomic bomb.

At the time of his retirement in 1959, a special issue of THEOLOGY TODAY, against his better judgment,

carried a series of tributes to John Mackay from some of his friends and associates. Among those who wrote were John Baillie, Walter Lowrie, Emil Brunner, Harold Dodds, Eugene Blake, Nathan Pusey, James Pike, and F. W. Dillistone. But high-sounding praise was not to his liking, for John Mackay was in many respects a plain man with simple tastes and frugal ways. If to many he seemed at times austere, to a few intimates, such as his Seminary roommate, Peter K. Emmons, he was always "Jock," and on rare occasions he was known to demonstrate his soccer footwork on the front campus to an astonished group of seminarians.

Coming out of a small sectarian Scottish church, John Mackay became a world-recognized ecumenical ambassador. He liked to say that no one could teach him anything about divisive sectarianism or rigid orthodoxy. A born missionary, for whom personal piety provided the spark for his relentless drive, he hated proselytism, sentimentality, and piosity. An essentially reflective person, he had unlimited confidence in the persuasive power of the spoken and written word. His public addresses were delivered with dramatic eloquence, punctuated not only with rhetorical flourishes, but with imaginative and symbolic language. He would have made a distinguished Secretary of the United Nations or a superlative Shakespearean actor; but John Mackay's ruling passion was in "bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ," in words which he invoked when granting diplomas to graduating divinity students.

In 1932, and the date is significant, for it was mostly a time of theological wasteland, John Mackay was invited to give the Merrick Lectures at Ohio Wesleyan University. He titled the series "Prophetic Thinkers." He dealt, prophetically as it turned out, with Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Unamuno, and Barth. These early lectures set the tone for later titles, all hinting at what he called the dimension of "Beyondness." The following captions are typical: "The Endless Journey Starts," "Keep Moving Beyond," "Heritage and Destiny," "An Ecumenical Era Calls for Missionary Action," "Let the Church Live on the Frontier."

On the tombstone for Sir Christopher Wren in St.

Paul's Cathedral which he had designed, we can read the Latin inscription *Si Monumentum Requirit Circumspice*. So, too, of John Alexander Mackay, as we survey his life and work, and as we try to calculate his continuing influence, we can say that if anyone searches for a monument to his memory, all we need do is look around us.