

1-1-1988

R. L. Stevenson's Scottish Christmas Story: "The Misadventures of John Nicholson", The Free Church, and the Prodigal Son

Kenneth Gelder

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Gelder, Kenneth (1988) "R. L. Stevenson's Scottish Christmas Story: "The Misadventures of John Nicholson", The Free Church, and the Prodigal Son," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 23: Iss. 1.
Available at: <http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol23/iss1/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in Scottish Literature by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact SCHOLARC@mailbox.sc.edu.

Kenneth Gelder

R. L. Stevenson's Scottish Christmas Story: "The Misadventures of John Nicholson", The Free Church, and the Prodigal Son



Stevenson probably began writing "The Misadventures of John Nicholson" at the end of October 1885, just after he had completed *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, intending to publish it in the Christmas number of the *Court and Society Review*. However, after "struggling" for less than a week, he put the story to one side and did not return to it until the following year:¹ as he wrote to Sidney Colvin on 14 December 1886,

I have been writing . . . a dam tale to order, which will be what it will be: I don't love it, but some of it is passable in its mouldy way, *The Misadventures of John Nicholson*.²

As before, Stevenson may have intended the story to appear at Christmas of that year, but by January 1887 it had still not been published and he wrote to Henry James about his "silly Xmas story (with some larks in it) which won't be out till I don't know when."³ As Roger G. Swearingen has noted, Stevenson probably left the story with Cassell and Co. "for publication at their pleasure,"⁴ and it finally appeared at Christmas of that year (that is, two years after it was begun) in *Yule Tide, 1887; being Cassell's Christmas Annual*

under the extended title, "The Misadventures of John Nicholson: A Christmas Story."

Some time later, in Spring 1891, Stevenson recalled the publication of this "Christmas story" in a letter to H.B. Baildon:

Cassell's published it in a thing called *Yule-Tide* years ago, and nobody that I ever heard of read or has ever seen *Yule-Tide*. It is addressed to a class we never meet--readers of Cassell's series and that class of conscientious chaff, and my tale was dull, though I don't recall that it was conscientious.⁵

Stevenson's opinion of his story ("mouldy," "silly," "dull") probably explains why it was never collected in book form in his lifetime: it was one of the several short stories he never took seriously. Of course, as an essentially comic tale anyway, it obviously lacks the grim power of his few other Scottish short stories ("Thrawn Janet," "The Tale of Tod Lapraik," and "The Body Snatcher" in particular); but, nevertheless, it has some interesting characteristics that are worth remarking on, in particular its presentation of father/son relationships.

The story begins with a short paragraph describing John Nicholson, and then launches into a lengthy description of John's father: Mr. Nicholson is clearly given a central and commanding role in the events to come. Indeed, this description forms a kind of premise from which the following events (John's "misadventures") can be traced. Stevenson presents, essentially, a devastating portrait of a conservative and reactionary Edinburgh patriarch; but this conservatism is expressed in specific terms. Mr. Nicholson is announced at the beginning as, in short, a representative of the Free Church of Scotland at its most orthodox:

(John's) father--that iron gentleman--had long ago enthroned himself on the heights of the Disruption Principles. What these are (and in spite of their grim name they are quite innocent) no array of terms would render thinkable to the merely English intelligence; but to the Scot they often prove unctuously nourishing, and Mr. Nicholson found in them the milk of lions. About the period when the Churches convene at Edinburgh in their annual assemblies, he was to be seen descending the Mound in the company of divers red-headed clergymen: these voluble, he only contributing oracular

nods, brief negatives, and the austere spectacle of his stretched upper lip. The names of Candlish and Begg were frequent in these interviews, and occasionally the talk ran on the Residuary Establishment and the doings of one Lee. A stranger to the tight little theological kingdom of Scotland might have listened and gathered literally nothing. And Mr. Nicholson (who was not a dull man) knew this, and raged at it. He knew there was a vast world outside, to whom the Disruption Principles were as the chatter of tree-top apes; the paper brought him chill whiffs from it; he had met Englishmen who had asked lightly if he did not belong to the Church of Scotland, and then had failed to be much interested by his elucidation of that nice point; it was an evil, wild, rebellious world, lying sunk in *dozenedness*, for nothing short of a Scot's word will paint this Scotsman's feeling.⁶

The passage locates Mr. Nicholson's character in the Disruption of 1843 when a number of ministers--Robert Candlish and James Begg in particular (but not John Lee, Principal at Edinburgh University)--broke away from the established Church of Scotland to form the Free Church. It was, as the passage suggests, a specifically *Scottish* phenomenon which, perhaps, underlined the Scottish sense of distance (or difference) from the "vast world outside," England in particular: the "English intelligence" might "have listened and gathered literally nothing" from Free Church discussions, where "nothing short of a Scot's word" would do to express Free Church attitudes and dogma. To further understand Mr. Nicholson's character and its consequences for the story, it might thus be helpful to look into this specifically Scottish phenomenon in some detail.

The split from the established but moderate Church of Scotland was based on the assumption that the Free Church movement would be more popular and powerful than it actually turned out to be. As Andrew L. Drummond and James Bulloch remark in their *The Church in Victorian Scotland 1843-1874*,

The Evangelicals who abandoned the Establishment would have been seen, not as the Free Church nor as a denomination, but as the Church of Scotland, the Church of the Reformers and Covenantors, in her rightful freedom.⁷

Central to this optimistic view of their future was the Evangelicals' sense that they were reviving a Covenanter tradition that had hitherto been somewhat marginalised by the Church of Scotland:

They assumed that the position for which they stood, the tradition of Calvinism, Knox and the Covenanters, was the authentic voice of their country's past, and they were equally confident that it truly represented the mind of the Scotland of their day for which they claimed to speak (p. 276).

One reason why the Free Church did not become as powerful and popular as it expected was, as Drummond and Bulloch suggest, because it maintained an essentially middle class temperament (p. 277)--it alienated both the working class and the landowners. But another reason was because it promoted its beliefs in a somewhat rigid and inflexible way:

The Free Church position was that of an intransigent Calvinism while the Church of Scotland . . . was less rigid, more ready to listen to the voices of time and, perhaps, to compromise (p. 32).

Drummond and Bulloch go on to present the Free Church as it appeared in the 1870s (around the time "The Misadventures of John Nicholson" was set), noting initially that it stood primarily for Scottish Calvinism's "strict adherence to the doctrines of predestination and divine decrees":

Two other elements, Sabbatarianism and Temperance, combined with the widespread indifference of its membership to the Arts to complete the picture of the Free Church as seen by the average modern Scot . . . Fundamentally, the Free Church stood for the Gospel of forgiveness and redemption as contrasted with the moralism of the eighteenth century but the continual emphasis upon such causes as Sabbatarianism and Temperance created quite a contrary impression. Within Scotland she was seen as the voice of Puritanism . . . Rightly or wrongly she was associated with hostility not merely to liquor and sabbath-breaking, but to gambling, dancing, the theatre, and most of the pleasures of the ordinary man . . . The issue was further complicated by the fact that the Free Church was so closely identified with those classes which were once described in Scotland

as "well doing," that is to say, reasonably prosperous even if not rich. The zeal of the Free Church organised opposition to vice . . . but the way in which the problems were approached and handled bore the mark of middle class consciousness on working class vices. Lack of sensitivity to the secular ethos of the time and theological differences led all the churches, but the Free Church in particular, to reduce complex social issues to matters of personal morality (pp. 28-9).

These remarks provide a useful context for understanding Mr. Nicholson's character (as a member of the "well doing" class) and his behaviour in Stevenson's story. Obviously, his angry reaction to his son John's nocturnal escapades at the "contraband hotelkeeper" Collette's with the confirmed idler Alan Houston reflects the Free Church's characteristic "opposition to vice" as outlined above. Significantly, John confronts his father on the Sabbath: stealing his father's money and leaving for California on this day, he is certainly guilty (from the Free Church point of view) of sabbath-breaking. According to Drummond and Bulloch, the Free Church "stood for the Gospel of forgiveness"; but Mr. Nicholson's treatment of his son creates (in keeping with his Free Church character) quite a contrary impression (and the implications of this in the story will be discussed below). More immediately, Stevenson's presentation of Mr. Nicholson's Scottishness (severing him from "the merely English intelligence") neatly captures the Free Church's revival of a specific movement in Scottish religious history that the Church of Scotland (it is suggested) had forgotten, namely, the "authentic voice" of the Covenanters. Stevenson's description of Mr. Nicholson confirms this conscious identification with that authentic voice in a partly concealed allusion to a passage from Patrick Walker's *Biographia Presbyteriana* (1827). The allusion occurs when Mr. Nicholson, intolerant of the "evil, wild, rebellious world" (p. 138) beyond the "tight little theological kingdom of Scotland" (pp. 137-38), returns to the sanctuary of his home in one of the stateliest parts of Edinburgh:

And when he entered his own house in Randolph Crescent (south side), and shut the door behind him, his heart swelled with security. Here, at last, was a citadel *unassailable by right-hand defections or left-hand extremes.* (p. 138, my italics)

The italicised line, as I've said, is lifted from Patrick Walker's *Biographia Presbyteriana*.⁸ Walker was a Covenanter historian and biographer, and Stevenson had used his text as a source in other Scottish stories too--for example, his "The Tale of Tod Lapraik" in *Catriona*.⁹ In his introductory address "To the Reader," Walker begins his account of the Covenanters and their experiences by recalling the many obstacles that faced him when he met certain "old Acquaintances" and talked with them about the Convenanter traditions and the days of the Persecution in the 1670s and 1680s:

When I travelled many Miles, enquiring for my old Acquaintances of the Gleanings of that unheard-of Persecution, it was for the most part answered . . . Others of them, whom I found alive . . . were obliged to say, that then it was better with them than now; especially those who have got the World in their Arms, and too much of it in their Hearts, and lost Sight of both their Eyes, and fallen in contentedly with this backsliding and upsitten Church . . . Others, upon the Right-Hand, of the bigot Dissenters, looking upon me with an evil Eye, and constructing all to the worst about me, gave me indiscreet, upbraiding Language, calling me a vile *old Apostate*. But these were no new things to me, being Weather-beaten, having been in the Midst of these Fires of Division, *between the Left-hand Defections and Right-hand Extrems*, upwards of Forty years.¹⁰

Stevenson has used this italicised passage from Walker in his story not only to express the Free Church's sense of reviving (and participating in) an authentic Covenanter tradition, but also as a means of suggesting just how conservative that tradition is. Walker's sense of righteousness is channelled through Mr. Nicholson to become a kind of reactionary insecurity, eased only when he returns to his house in Randolph Crescent (his "unassailable citadel"): the house, accordingly, comes to symbolise (from Mr. Nicholson's Free Church point of view) "the tight little theological kingdom of Scotland", separate from the "evil, wild, rebellious world" outside. Mr. Nicholson's son John, of course, is seen as a dissenter within that kingdom: expelled by his father from the house in Randolph Crescent, John is thrown out into the "rebellious world" beyond Scotland, emigrating to California (as Stevenson himself did at the end of the

1870s). This expulsion is, in other words, based on Mr. Nicholson's Free Church view of what his son now represents: John is shown to have no place in the conservative kingdom of an Edinburgh Free Church patriarch.

Stevenson presents his criticisms of Free Church conservatism in the framework of a conflict between father and son, a conflict (resulting in the son's expulsion from the father's kingdom) he had also described in other stories including the unfinished *Weir of Hermiston*. Set mainly in Edinburgh, "The Misadventures of John Nicholson" colours this particular father/son conflict with autobiographical detail: the story even mentions Howard Place, where Stevenson was born (p. 165), and as already indicated John, as Stevenson had done, leaves his father's house to go to California. But it would be hasty to suggest, on the basis of autobiographical detail, that Mr. Nicholson is thus a portrait of Thomas Stevenson, Stevenson's own father.¹¹ Indeed, Stevenson's essay on his father, "Thomas Stevenson," although written at about the same time as "The Misadventures of John Nicholson," offers little ground for such a comparison, especially in terms of their respective religious affiliations: whereas Mr. Nicholson upholds Free Church orthodoxy in the story, Stevenson recalls that his father, by contrast, "bore a clansman's loyalty" to the more moderate Church of Scotland.¹² Stevenson's essay on his father is, by and large, affectionate; but "The Misadventures of John Nicholson," of all his father/son stories, criticises the father-figure most severely, and its presentation of Mr. Nicholson is at times savagely satirical. Stevenson's treatment of Mr. Nicholson's Free Church conservatism focuses especially on the contrary impression the Free Church gave with regard to its supposed adherence to "the Gospel of forgiveness" and this is effectively incorporated into the father/son conflict through Stevenson's adaptations from the Biblical Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15. 11-32).

Ernest J. Mehew has noted that Stevenson's Vailima Library contained J. Goodman's *The Penitent Pardoned: or, a Discourse of the Nature of Sin, and the Efficacy of Repentance, under the Parable of the Prodigal Son* (1679).¹³ Goodman's religious tract discusses the implications of the Parable of the Prodigal Son, suggesting firstly that on the surface it simply describes

the Benignity, indulgence and condescension of a Father to his Son, together with the Folly and licentiousness of youth; then the Gradual progress and sad catastrophe

of a course of debauchery; after this the usual misgivings of heart and change of mind upon such change of affairs, the serious reflexions upon, and late repentance of such follies; Then again a description of Parental affections; the exorableness of a Father upon his Son's submission; the profuseness of his kindness upon his reformation; and, lastly, the transports of his joy upon his plenary recovery.¹⁴

Goodman then goes on to look into the Parable's second meaning, the meaning *under* the surface: "here we have God Almighty the Father of Spirits, pardoning and blessing penitent sinners" (p. 249). Stevenson takes this second meaning up in his story so that, for example, John's decision to leave his father's house in Randolph Crescent is presented as if he has now been expelled from the Kingdom of God:

. . . with a pathetic sense of leave-taking, he even ventured up the lane and stood a while . . . by the west end of St. George's Church . . . "Who is this King of Glory?" went the voices from within; and to John this was like the end of all Christian observances, for he was now to be a wild man like Ishmael, and his life was to be cast in homeless places and with godless people. (p. 153)

John's nocturnal escapades at Collette's and his later trip to California certainly recall the parable:

And not many days after the Younger Son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living (Luke 15:13).

In Chapter V of the story, aptly titled "The Prodigal's Return," John arrives back in Edinburgh and approaches his father's house with "a prayer upon his lips" (p. 163). However, Stevenson departs from the Biblical parable here: unlike "God Almighty the Father of Spirits" who welcomes back the penitent sinner, Mr. Nicholson receives John without forgiveness, and for all his Free Church sympathies, reveals a character that is essentially unChristian:

"Father," said John, steadily, and even cheerfully, for this was a moment against which he was long ago prepared, "father, here I am, and here is the

money that I took from you. I have come back to ask your forgiveness, and to stay Christmas with you and the children."

"Keep your money," said the father, "and go! . . . you are no son of mine; and in the sight of God, I wash my hands of youAnd now," with a low voice of absolute authority, and a single weighty gesture of the finger, "and now--go!" (p. 164)

Mr. Nicholson, with an intransigent Free Church character that runs contrary to the Gospel of forgiveness, refuses to receive his son (the penitent sinner) back into the house at Randolph Crescent (the "kingdom" of God).

In a sense, Mr. Nicholson's Free Church point of view not only results in John's expulsion from the house at Randolph Crescent but actually seems to create his subsequent "misfortunes." Of course, to some extent John creates those misfortunes himself: he is clearly "the author, as well as the theatre, of so much confusion" (p. 173). Yet although he may well be at fault, it is nevertheless clear in the story that circumstances are directed against him in an unusually malicious way:

John Varey Nicholson was stupid; yet, stupider men than he are sprawling in Parliament, and lauding themselves as the authors of their own distinction. He was of a fat habit, even from boyhood, and inclined to a cheerful and cursory reading of the face of life; and possibly this attitude of mind was the original cause of his misfortunes. Beyond this hint philosophy is silent on his career, and superstition steps in with the more ready explanation that he was detested of the gods. (p. 137)

This "more ready explanation" is important to notice and, indeed, Stevenson prefaces John's episodic misfortunes with pointed remarks which underline this sense that John is maliciously dealt with by the gods: "the very action sealed his doom" (p. 142); ". . . he turned that way; and by that quite innocent deflection, ripened the crop of venial errors for the sickle of destiny" (p. 144); "And this delay . . . was his second step into the snares of misfortune" (p. 156); "Henceforth we have to follow the spectacle of a man who was a mere whip-top for calamity . . ." (p. 157), and so on.

The question arises, does John (with his cheerful character) *deserve* to be "detested of the gods" and treated

so maliciously by circumstance in the story? He does, only if those gods manifest the kind of intransigent and unforgiving judgements characteristic of Free Church patriarchs like Mr. Nicholson--which is to say that Mr. Nicholson's Free Church gods permeate the story, not only expelling John from their "tight little theological kingdom" but moreover, since they detest dissenters, treating him with an exaggerated seriousness and so creating the misfortunes that follow. Just how John is detested of the gods is indicated in the following passage, showing how out of place he really is in that "tight little theological kingdom" symbolised by Mr. Nicholson's house in Randolph Crescent:

. . . imagine that natural, clumsy, unintelligent, and mirthful animal, John; mighty well-behaved in comparison with other lads, although not up to the mark of the house in Randolph Crescent; full of a sort of blundering affection, full of caresses which were never very warmly received; full of sudden and loud laughter which rang out in that still house like curses. Mr. Nicholson himself had a great fund of humour, of the Scots order--intellectual, turning on the observation of men; his own character, for instance--if he could have seen it in another--would have been a rare feast to him; but his son's empty guffaws over a broken plate, and empty, almost light-hearted remarks, struck him with pain as the indices of a weak mind. (pp. 138-39)

John's natural and mirthful character clearly has no place within those conservative conventions prescribed by old Edinburgh Free Church patriarchs: John naturally dissents from those conventions and is, accordingly, treated particularly harshly not only by his father but by the story itself, which reflects those conventions. However, it is not John's mirthful nature that is corrected at the end of the story; rather, it is those conservative Free Church conventions that are, through Mr. Nicholson, called into question.

After being rejected by his unforgiving father at the end of Chapter V, John wanders penniless around Edinburgh, a "discarded prodigal" (p. 165). However, he returns to Randolph Crescent towards midnight and, "thrusting his pass-key into the door-lock of his father's house" (p. 188), he quietly enters, meeting Flora and his brother Alexander. The pass-key has a significant role in the story: Stevenson draws attention to that role in the title to Chapter VIII,

"Singular Instance of the Utility of Pass-keys." In fact, the pass-key enables dissenters to enter and re-enter Mr. Nicholson's "unassailable citadel" so that, not surprisingly, after John is expelled from the house, Alexander's pass-key is taken away from him in case John's bad example is repeated:

"And how did you get in here?" inquired the younger.

"Oh, I had my pass-key," says John.

"The deuce you had!" said Alexander. "Ah, you lived in a better world! There are no pass-keys going now."

"Well, father was always averse to them," sighed John.

Alexander then borrows the "famous pass-key" (p. 195) and, clearing his brother's name that same night, essentially repeats that bad example (stealing his father's money, going out in secret at night, etc.). However, faced with this second case of (to recall Patrick Walker's phrase) "Left-hand Defections and Right-hand Extrems," Mr. Nicholson (rather than also expelling Alexander) is at last forced to admit dissenters into the house at Randolph Crescent:

That Alexander should have spoiled his table, taken his money, stayed out all night, and then coolly acknowledged all, was something undreamed of in the Nicholsonian philosophy, and transcended comment. The return of the change, which the old gentleman still carried in his hand, had been a feature of imposing impudence; it had dealt him a staggering blow. Then there was the reference to John's original flight--a subject which he always kept resolutely curtained in his own mind; for he was a man who loved to have made no mistakes, and when he feared he might have made one kept the papers sealed. In view of all these surprises and reminders, and of his son's composed and masterful demeanour, there began to creep on Mr. Nicholson a sickly misgiving. He seemed beyond his depth; if he did or said anything, he might come to regret it. The young man, besides, as he had pointed out himself, was playing a generous part. And if wrong had been done--and done to one who was, after, and in spite of, all, a Nicholson--it should certainly be righted. (pp. 199-200)

The "absolute authority" of Mr. Nicholson's Free Church conventions is challenged at this point and, accordingly, the

Nicholsonian philosophy is at last transformed: John is received back into the house at Randolph Crescent and Alexander (to quote the title of the last chapter) is conceded "the principle of an allowance." Stevenson's story ends by returning to the proper form of the Parable of the Prodigal Son, presenting through Mr. Nicholson the hitherto ignored Gospel of forgiveness: the penitent sinner is finally welcomed back into the kingdom of a forgiving (and moderated) "God Almighty," and the story finally manifests, in Goodman's terms, a "plenary recovery." With Mr. Nicholson's Free Church intransigence under question and with John restored to the house at Randolph Crescent (which at last has opened its doors to dissenters), the Nicholson family are thus "welded once more into a fair semblance of unity" (p. 202).

This restorative ending (or "plenary recovery") in "The Misadventures of John Nicholson" is certainly central to its role as (to recall its subtitle in *Yule Tide*) "A Christmas Story." As John himself considers, waking up on Christmas Day in Alan Houston's house in Murrayfield (the scene of a grisly murder),

Here were Christmas weather and Christmas morning duly met, to the delight of children. This was the day of reunited families, the day to which he had so long looked forward, thinking to awake in his own bed in Randolph Crescent, reconciled with all men and repeating the footprints of his youth; and here he was alone, pacing the alleys of a wintery garden and *filled with penitential thoughts*. (p. 171, my italics)

The story's Christmas message is clearly centred around the need to become reconciled with all men, even those who seem to belong to that "evil, wild, rebellious world" beyond the "tight little theological kingdom" of Scotland. In its closing example of "a penitent pardoned," this message is worked out through the transformation of an intransigent Edinburgh patriarch and the questioning of the conventions and authority of the Free Church in Scotland in the later part of the nineteenth century.

La Trobe University, Melbourne

NOTES

1. See Fanny Stevenson's letter to Charles Gray Robertson, 1 November 1885, held in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University Library (Beinecke 3726). See also R.L. Stevenson's letter to Robertson, 4 November 1885 (Beinecke 3229).
2. *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, ed. Sidney Colvin. 35 vols. (London, 1924), III, 111-12.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 115.
4. Cited in Roger G. Swearingen, *The Prose Writings of Robert Louis Stevenson: A Guide* (Paisley, 1980), p. 103.
5. *Letters*, IV, 56.
6. *Island Nights Entertainment. The Misadventures of John Nicholson* (London, 1924), XIII, 137. All further references are to this edition and will be incorporated into the text.
7. Andrew L. Drummond and James Bulloch, *The Church in Victorian Scotland 1843-1874* (Edinburgh, 1975), p. 5. Further references will be incorporated into the text.
8. I am indebted to Dr. Graham Tulloch of the Flinders University of South Australia for pointing out this allusion to Walker (which, as will be indicated, Stevenson reverses in his story).
9. See, for example, my essay "Stevenson and the Covenanters: 'Black Andie's Tale of Tod Lapraik' and 'Thrawn Janet,'" *Scottish Literary Journal*, II (December 1984), 59-60.
10. Patrick Walker, *Biographia Presbyteriana* (Edinburgh, 1827), I, p. iv (my italics, except for *old Apostate*); see also p. xvi.
11. See, for example, Paul Binding, *Weir of Hermiston and Other Stories* (Harmondsworth, 1979), pp. 28-31.
12. See *Memories and Portraits* (London, 1924), XXIX, 69.

13. *The Journal of the Robert Louis Stevenson Club*, ed. E.J. Mehew, 15 (February 1974), 10.

14. J. Goodman, *The Penitent Pardoned* (1679; rptd. London, 1689), pp. 2-3.