

H. Lewis Ulman

## GEORGE CAMPBELL

(1719-1796)

Born on Christmas Day 1719, the son of Aberdeen minister Colin Campbell, George Campbell received an education that must have prepared him well for three focuses of his intellectual life: language, theology, and rhetoric. At the Aberdeen Grammar School and Marischal College, he received a firm foundation in Latin and Greek that would serve him well in his later career as a translator of the gospels. After completing his arts course at Marischal in 1738, he set out to study law, serving an apprenticeship with a writer to the signet in Edinburgh. But in 1741, before he finished his apprenticeship, he began to study theology in Edinburgh. After serving his term as an apprentice, he continued his theological studies in Aberdeen at both King's and Marischal Colleges.

After having completed the normal divinity course and passing review by the presbytery of Aberdeen, Campbell was licensed as a probationer, or preacher of the gospel, on 11 June 1746. Two years later, after an unsuccessful bid for the parish of Fordoun, Kincardineshire, Campbell was ordained on 2 June 1748 as minister at Banchory-Ternan, Aberdeenshire (17 miles west of Aberdeen), a post he held for the next nine years. Though spent in the relative isolation of a country parish, these were important years for Campbell. It was in Banchory-Ternan that Campbell established his reputation as a "scripture critic, and lecturer of holy writ," that he first determined to translate the gospels, and where, around 1750, he composed the first two chapters of *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (Keith xii-xiii).

On 23 June 1757, Campbell was appointed one of the ministers of Aberdeen, a move that brought him back to the intellectual center of the northeast, and he soon took advantage of the opportunity. Six months after his return to Aberdeen, he and five others established the Philosophical Society. In 1759, he successfully sought appointment as principal of Marischal College. Soon thereafter, his reputation spread beyond northeast Scotland. His *Dissertation on Miracles* (1762), a refutation of David Hume's essay "Of Miracles" (1748) originally drafted as a sermon delivered to the provincial

synod on 9 October 1760, enjoyed great popularity in Great Britain and was translated into French, Dutch, and German. In 1764, King's College honored Campbell with a doctor of divinity degree, and in June 1771 he was elected professor of divinity at Marischal, replacing Alexander Gerard, who assumed the corresponding chair at King's. Along with his teaching post at Marischal, Campbell assumed the ministry at Greyfriars Church and resigned his other charge as minister of the city of Aberdeen. He held these three posts--the principalship, professorship, and the ministry at Greyfriars--, until shortly before his death. About two years after Campbell assumed his new duties as professor of divinity, the Aberdeen Philosophical Society dissolved, ending an important episode in Campbell's scholarly career. In 1776, he published in *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* revised versions of all the discourses he had read before the society.

Campbell was certainly a pillar of the Philosophical Society. He attended more of the society's meetings than all but two other members and served as president of the society for 1762 and secretary for 1765. He delivered eighteen discourses (all dealing with rhetoric), again more than any member except Gerard. Often reading voluntary discourses, he addressed the society quite regularly from 1758 to 1771, missing only the years 1761 and 1762, when he was busy preparing his *Dissertation on Miracles* for publication. He presented no discourses after 1771, perhaps because his new duties as professor of divinity kept him too busy. Or he may have felt that he had completed his investigation of rhetoric, for the subject of his final discourse, "the words connecting sentences & periods" (8 January 1771), corresponds to the final chapter of *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*. Critics have always complained that Campbell failed to complete his plan in the *Rhetoric* (he identifies five "discriminating properties" of eloquence--purity, perspicuity, vivacity, animation, and music--, but discusses only the first three in detail). Perhaps part of the explanation lies in the closing of a window of opportunity provided by the meetings of the Aberdeen Philosophical Society during the middle years of Campbell's career. In his account of Campbell's life, George Skene Keith claims that Campbell "had not such a call for exertion" between 1758 and 1771 as he would after he became professor of divinity, "and of course did not study with that intense application, which he felt himself obliged to do at a more advanced period of life" (xx). Keith must mean that Campbell devoted much of his vast energy to favorite projects rather than obligations, for he goes on to list Campbell's many

accomplishments during this period: his study of botany (an interest he shared with other members of the Philosophical Society, including William Ogilvie, Thomas Reid, and David Skene), his discourses on rhetoric, and his study of languages, including Hebrew, Greek, Latin, French and Italian! Still, as Keith points out, after 1771 Campbell held three posts concurrently: principal and professor of divinity at Marischal as well as minister of Greyfriars, a post which obliged him to preach every Sunday. Moreover, Campbell doubled the traditional number of lectures delivered by the professor of divinity. Small wonder, then, that his work on *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* began drawing to a close after 1771.

After completing *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, Campbell published several sermons and one other major work, *The Four Gospels, Translated from the Greek* (1789), which saw a seventh edition by 1834. He survived a severe illness in 1791, but ill health finally compelled him to resign his professorship and ministry on 11 June 1795 and his principalship soon after. He died of a paralytic stroke on 6 April 1796. His *Lectures on Ecclesiastical History* (1800), *Lectures on Systematic Theology and Pulpit Eloquence* (1807), and *Lectures on the Pastoral Character* (1811) appeared posthumously. Of all his published works, however, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* has had the most lasting influence.

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Reference: Adapted from H. Lewis Ulman, ed., *The Minutes of the Aberdeen Philosophical Society, 1758-1773* (Aberdeen, Scotland: Aberdeen University Press, 1990), 25-27.

[http://www.cohums.ohio-state.edu/english/People/Ulman.1/Campbell/Campbell\\_bio.htm](http://www.cohums.ohio-state.edu/english/People/Ulman.1/Campbell/Campbell_bio.htm)