

Alexander Cruden – Madness or Affliction?

Alexander Cruden (1699 - 1770) is famous for writing his (arguably the best) *Concordance of the Old and New Testament in English* and infamous for his apparent madness. Charles Spurgeon, in his *Commenting and Commentaries* recommends that all Christian ministers “buy a genuine unabridged Cruden and none of the modern substitutes”. In a hand written note on his own copy, Spurgeon also states: “this half crazy Alexander Cruden did more for the Church than all the DDs and LLDs who ever existed”.

Alexander Chalmers' biography of Cruden prefixed to the early editions of the concordance paints Cruden as a man of diseased mind, who was more than once the inmate of a lunatic asylum, and subsequent biographers have similarly painted him as “*not ... in his right mind...a man of weak intellect...a perfect fool*”. But was Alexander Cruden really mad? A new biography of Cruden, written in 2004 by Ms. Julia Keay, argues that he was not. Although not written from a Christian perspective, the book is useful in restoring the reputation of this remarkable man.

1) Childhood and education

Alexander Cruden was born on June 8 1699 in Aberdeen, the 2nd son of William and Isobel Cruden. His father had inherited money and a nice house from Alexander's grandfather who was a merchant. Alexander was educated first at Aberdeen Grammar School and then from the age of 13 at Marischal (pronounced “Marshall” College at the University of Aberdeen. It is said that like William Tyndale, Alexander was “singular addicted to the study of Scriptures”. He believed the Bible was “a guide-book or instruction manual” of life and he soon made the decision to enter the ministry. Alexander graduated with a MA, and was accepted by Rev Thomas Blackwell, Professor of Divinity and Principal of Marischal College to study Theology. Unfortunately, just when Alexander seemed about to embark on the life of a Pastor/Theologian, circumstances arose which led to his first imprisonment for lunacy and put paid to his ambition to be made a minister of the Church of Scotland.

2) First imprisonment

It is known that in 1720, Alexander Cruden was locked away in a mad-house in Tolbooth. Biographers give two main theories for what precipitated his imprisonment:

- 1) he was bitten by a dog and contracted rabies (this has been discredited by some);
- 2) he fell in love with a daughter of a clergyman from Aberdeen and his interest was not returned.

This second theory is supported by his first biographer, Alexander Chalmers whom, though sympathetic to Cruden, is careful not to disclose the details of what happened as the people involved were still living at the time of writing and had considerable power and influence. Piecing

together details from Cruden's diary and other documents, Keays concludes that Cruden was interested in Thomas Blackwell's daughter, but she unfortunately eloped with her own brother. Perhaps Alexander Cruden became "mad" as a result of that incident, but more likely he was thrown into the madhouse because he knew too much. He would later write concerning his first imprisonment "I was in treacherous manner decoyed into a public prison by the advice of a conceited man (plotter)". Thomas Blackwell was at that time the most powerful and influential man in Aberdeen. If the relationship between his children had become public, he would have been completely ruined.

In those days, 2 types of mad-houses existed – the government run institutions for the "sick" among the general public and those that were privately run. Private mad-houses were sometimes unlicensed, unregulated and the system abused – whoever was willing to pay the owner of the mad-house could put a person away. Rich husbands could put their wives away, so that they could have affairs. Children could put their parents away so as to enjoy their wealth and freedom etc. Such places were "receptacles of misery". The so-called doctors were often unqualified psychiatrists whose methods of treatment included chaining the patients to their beds. The living conditions were damp and overcrowded and the food sparse and terrible. The madhouse was known to be a "sink of vice and debauchery"– inmates were often fighting, and as Alexander Cruden was a small built, well educated man, he was often beaten up or taunted. We can safely say that by the Grace of God, "The LORD preserveth all them that love him" (Psalm 145:20).

Cruden was in the asylum for months before he was released. This episode effectively ended his ambition to be an ordained minister of the Church of Scotland, however, in the Providence of God, Cruden still had God's Work to do.

3) London

Cruden left Aberdeen for London, where he was helped by the Puritan, Edmund Calamy (who knew Principal Thomas Blackwell) to become a private tutor. He became a tutor to 3 families in succession – teaching the children until they went to University. Not bad for a "mad-man"! Cruden liked London but felt that he "*heard the Gospel preached more fully and agreeably by ministers in Aberdeen than ever I had the happiness to hear it from the ministers of the south part of this island.*" He later became a "corrector of the press" – a proof-reader. It was then he decided to embark on the Lord's Work. He could not be a theologian or pastor, but his gifts were in logic, methodical thinking, order and rules, so he decided to prepare a concordance to the Bible.

4) Cruden's Concordance

"A concordance is a **dictionary**, or an **index** to the Bible, wherein all the words used through the Inspired Writings are arranged alphabetically, and the various places where they occur are referred

to, to assist us in finding out passages, and comparing the several significations/meanings of the same word". Alexander Cruden

While the *Authorised Version* of the Bible contains approximately 800,000 words, Cruden's *Concordance* has 2.4 million words. It took him about 10 years to complete. He omitted words like "a", "the", "with", etc, and gave separate entries where necessary – for example the word "wine" has 94 separate entries, such as "wine-bibber", "wine-bottle", "wine-cellars", "wine-fat", "wine-press", "wines", etc. Sometimes, Cruden provided explanations for certain words, of varying lengths – e.g. he includes a 4,000 essay on the word "synagogue". No one really knows how one man could complete such a mammoth task.

Cruden's concordance was not the first. The Roman Catholic priest, Cardinal Hugo, prepared one for the Latin Bible, but he employed about 500 monks to help him in his task! John Marbeck, organist at Windsor Chapel, had prepared the first English concordance in 1550, however, it was not a good concordance. It was Alexander Cruden who prepared the first proper English concordance to the King James Version - quite remarkable, considering it was the work of one man, living alone in a small room in London, with a day-job as proof-reader. [By comparison, Samuel Johnson prepared his *Dictionary of the English Language* while he worked full-time on it and employed 6 secretaries.]

With Cruden's own savings and a list of keen subscribers, he embarked on printing the first 1,000 copies of his concordance in 1737. The production cost approximately £34,000, in today's equivalent – a large sum of money.

Why did Cruden embark on such a task? Let's hear from Cruden himself... "My great aim and design in this work, is to render the study of the holy scriptures more easy to all Christians, whether private Christians or ministers of the gospel who make the scripture the standard of their preaching" (*1st edition*). He also wanted "the means of propagating among my countrymen, and through all the British dominions, the knowledge of God" (*2nd edition*).

That is a good lesson for us – we must always seek to study the Word and propagate amongst our communities, the knowledge of God.

Cruden continued to edit his *Concordance* (he edited it 3 times) till his death in 1770. By 1870, there were 32 editions; in the 19th century, 44 further editions appeared; in the 20th century, another 20 editions were added... it has since been never out of print.

5) Second imprisonment

In 1737 when Cruden was ready to publish and sell his concordance, he decided to seek a royal warrant as a form of advertisement for his book. In the days before mass book publishing, it was common for authors to receive patronage from the wealthy. In return the authors dedicated their books to their patrons. Cruden managed to secure the patronage of Queen Caroline, wife to King George II. He met and gave her a copy and was due to receive £100 (a big sum at that time) as grant. However, she died 17 days later and Cruden never got the money. Being desperate for money, he attempted to marry a rich widow from church. Unfortunately, a rival suitor, a Robert Wrightman found out about Cruden's previous imprisonment and had him thrown into Matthew Wright's private mad-house in Bethnal Green. He was 39 years old.

The Chief physician of that place was James Monro, a Scotsman and son of a principal at Edinburgh University and even he did not believe that Cruden was mad. Christian friends and ministers from all around supported Cruden and he managed to escape after spending 70 days in the asylum whereupon he sought to sue Wrightman and Monro. During the hearing, Cruden used the court to plea for reformation of mental asylums by the introduction of legislation and regulation. Many witnesses including friends, family, colleagues, employers testified on oath that Alexander Cruden was sane. However, his case was thrown out – why?

- 1) He was a former inmate of an asylum.
- 2) The Chief Physician James Monro was too powerful to be trifled with.
- 3) Too much religion? There was an English/Scottish divide in religion. In Scotland, Christianity was generally accepted due to the influence of Scottish Presbyterianism. However, in England there was suspicion of Christianity following the English Civil War.

Cruden went on to prepare a concordance for John Milton's *Paradise Lost* – a work of 241 pages, which was published in 1741. It took him 2 years to complete. Not bad for someone who was considered mad by so many!

6) Third imprisonment

Tragically Cruden was to be imprisoned for a third time. His gold-digging sister Isabella had come to London to look for a husband. Alexander managed to find a pious rich man for her and gave her away in marriage. In 1753, after dinner, Alexander became embroiled in a fight between soldiers who were swearing as they fought. Unwisely, Cruden took a shovel and hit one of the soldiers while saying "You must not swear!". Perhaps he could have got away with that in Scotland, but not in London! As a result of his behaviour his sister and landlady had him sent to a private mad-house (run by a Peter Inskip) in Chelsea. Once again, the imprisoned Cruden demonstrated that he was not mad. It is known that Mrs Inskip would chat to him in his cell while she was stitching and sometimes Cruden would play with her 18-month old daughter. He was soon released – after being

imprisoned for a mere 17 days. What kept Cruden from cracking under the pressure of his imprisonments? In his own words:

“I am somewhat of a disposition that if I had a hundred hairs to hang by and ninety nine should fail, I would endeavour to hang on by the hundredth, and if that should fail I then submit to the will of God.”

7) Return to Aberdeen

In 1769, at the age of 70, Cruden finally returned to his hometown of Aberdeen. By that time, being more experienced in his Christian walk, he had changed from a timid, introspective and unassuming man to a generous, brave, if eccentric man. There he lectured in the Town Hall, where the 10 year old Alexander Chalmers (soon to be a eminent biographer) heard him. Chalmers wrote that he “remembered with pleasure the tender regard and winning manners by which Alexander Cruden endeavoured to allure children to read their bibles and catechisms”. Cruden also printed tracts which he gave to his townsfolk, and especially the children. He also wrote his will, leaving some money to his surviving family members and to the church in London which he was associated with. But the bulk of his money was given to the people of Aberdeen, in the form of good Christian literature.

On 1st November 1770 Alexander Cruden finally passed into eternal glory. Chalmers’ account of his death is instructive:

“No illness or decay indicated his approaching dissolution. He had suffered from a slight attack of asthma, but retired to rest on his last evening as usual. In the morning, the maid rang the bell to summon him to breakfast. No answer was returned; and she entered his bedroom, but he was not there. She proceeded to his closet, and found him dead, in the attitude of prayer, kneeling against a chair.”

8) Cruden’s Legacy

Though remembered for his concordance, Cruden was also instrumental in saving a weak-minded sailor named Richard Potter from the gallows for a crime he did not commit. He had, in 1762, rushed from government office to office for two days, pleading for the man's life. At every chance he got, he would fall to his knees in prayer for Potter's soul. He also visited Potter when he was ill, and nursed the man back to health.

From his visits to the prison and in his own experience in the mad-houses, he witnessed the terrible conditions that the inmates had to endure. He brought food, clothes, medicine and bedding to prisoners and read, taught, and preached the Gospel in prison. He wrote passionately for prison reform and the legislation of mad-houses. This was 100 years before the famous prison reformer,

Elizabeth Fry – a fact not appreciated today. It was said by Samuel Blackburn that “Such actions shed on the memory of Alexander Cruden a glory more pure and lasting than that obtained by the conqueror of nations.” (*10th edition of Cruden’s Concordance*)

Truly, the words of Holy Scripture can be best used to describe the life and legacy of Alexander Cruden - “And I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, Write, Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; and their works do follow them.” **Revelation 14:13**