

12th February 2022

Pimpernel

**“We seek him here, we seek him there, those Frenchies seek him everywhere.
Is he in heaven? Is he in hell? That demmed, elusive Pimpernel.”**

Baroness Orczy, The Scarlet Pimpernel (1905)

We had a visitor at church one Sunday when I was in my first parish. As he was leaving, this small and unassuming man shook my hand and introduced himself. “I’m Donald Caskie, a retired Church of Scotland minister. I wish you all the best for your ministry here.” Interesting, warm, friendly, but not extraordinary or special. How wrong I was! For this quiet, unremarkable man, was one of the heroes of the Church. With his exploits during World War II, he was known as “The Tartan Pimpernel”.

In June 1940, Rev Donald Caskie, minister of the Scots’ Kirk in Paris, preached for the last time for four years, locked the church and joined the mass exodus from the city. He had denounced Hitler from his pulpit and was on the Gestapo “Black List”. After a perilous journey, he arrived in Marseilles and commandeered the British Seaman’s Mission near the Old Harbour. And there the adventures of the Tartan Pimpernel began.

He was conscripted into service by Allied Intelligence Officers, and the Seaman’s Mission became a vital link on the escape route for POWs and soldiers escaping from Dunkirk. He fed, clothed and gave men shelter, before sending them through the Pyrenees with forged papers to Spain. Despite being exposed by a British traitor and banished to Grenoble, he continued his clandestine activities as an “underground padre”. Arrested by the Gestapo and sentenced to death in a Nazi Court, he spent time in seven different prisons before being saved from death by a German padre.

Through all of this, Donald Caskie was sustained by his faith in his Lord and his passion for freedom and justice. He died in 1983 and is buried at Bowmore on Islay. Various personal artefacts, including his wartime medals, are on display at Kilarrow church in Bowmore.

Small and unassuming this minister may have been, but he stands tall in the annals of my Church. I have shaken this man’s hand. Inspired by his story, I am still blessed by his good wishes from all these years ago.

A prayer for today

*Lord, when you seek me, I pray that you’ll find me
trying to follow the example of the heroes of the Faith. Amen*

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