

## **The history of the Scottish Metrical Psalter**

*Address at a meeting of the Scottish Reformation Society – Stornoway, 11<sup>th</sup> January 2013*

This talk deals with the history of the metrical Psalms in Scotland. I will look at how the Psalter was developed over a period of approximately 100 years. The timeline extends from the first metrical Psalms, introduced to Scotland during the early period of the Reformation, until the definitive Scottish Psalter was published in 1650. The 1650 Psalter is the one which remains in use till the present day. In this address I will look at the text of the Psalters, with only occasional reference to the melodies of the Psalm tunes.

In this talk I'll cover quite a large geographical area relating to the Reformation. The narrative will begin in Dundee and spreads through Germany, France, Switzerland, England, and America. Many well-known Reformation locations will feature in this talk, such as Wittenberg, Frankfurt, Strasbourg, Geneva, and St Andrews. Perhaps surprisingly the list also include Massachusetts in North America and Eton. The history of the Psalter also involves the august body of the Westminster Assembly of Divines, as well as the General Assembly and Presbyteries of the Church of Scotland.

I will also allude to the many changes in the government of our country at this time. First of all there was the Monarchy through the late Tudor line of Edward VI, Mary Tudor, and Elizabeth I. The Tudors were followed by the early monarchs of the House of Stuart, namely James VI of Scotland (*alias* James I of England), who was succeeded by Charles I. Then came the Civil War and the Commonwealth under Cromwell. These major changes in the government of the country all have a bearing on the history of the Psalter.

### ***Public worship before the Reformation***

Before we consider the Reformation era and the major strands of the Reformation, let us go a step further back to consider worship in the Roman Catholic Church in the pre-Reformation era. To understand this situation fully we actually need to go right back to the early history of the Christian Church. When we go all the way back to the fourth century we pick up the story of public worship as it altered at the time of the First Council of Nicaea, which took place in Bithynia in Asia Minor. The Council was an ecumenical gathering in 325AD, convened by the Roman Emperor Constantine. This was the first attempt to attain consensus in the Church through an assembly which represented all Christendom, and its doctrinal deliberations led to the issuing of the first part of the Nicene Creed. The Council of Nicaea also issued laws for the Church, known as canons. After deliberation, the Council decreed that 'besides the appointed singers, who mount the ambo [a raised platform in the church buildings] and sing from the book, others shall not sing in the church.' And that is precisely how the worship of God proceeded for well over 1000 years. Singing in the public worship

of the Church until the sixteenth century was confined solely to the priests. In the monasteries and convents the monks and nuns also sang, and that included the Book of Psalms. These acts of worship were conducted in Greek in the early years following the Council of Nicaea, and subsequently in Latin. Note that the members of the congregations did not sing at all.

We must remember that Latin was the language of worship until the Reformation. Those who were learned had some understanding of what was being said and sung. In contrast, most of the laity – the common people – had no understanding of what was transacted in church. Of course, from contemporary accounts there is considerable doubt whether many of the clergy had even a rudimentary knowledge of Latin. The Latin Psalms were chanted down through the centuries in churches, monasteries and convents. As time passed the music became more ornate, more ornamented. The singers sang what they wanted to sing, and each singer in the choir varied the volume and tempo according to personal preference. From contemporary records (even of persons sympathetic to the Roman Catholic system) we learn that public singing became a complete shambles.

### ***Singing God's praises in the early Reformation***

Let us consider what happened as the Reformation began in the sixteenth century. We may summarise the situation in the Roman Catholic Church before the Reformation in the following way: there was no congregational singing, as singing – in Latin – was restricted to the clergy and monastics [monks and nuns]. It is true that some individuals translated Psalms from Latin into the Old English language of the Anglo-Saxon era, and into Middle English, the later form of English in use between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries. However, we note that these Psalms were for private devotional use, for the edification of the individuals, and were not used in public worship.

It is against this historical background that I allude to one of the criticisms made against the Reformers, namely that they destroyed church music. It is a rather specious argument as participation of the laity in public singing simply did not exist before the Reformation. Let me emphasise rather that the Reformers actually reintroduced congregational singing into the public worship of God and they only got rid of the unseemly and unintelligible din of choral singing in a dead language.

It is also against this background that we examine the initial thoughts of the Reformers – Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin – who confronted the question of how people should worship God in private and in public. In many history books you see references to the antipathy of these early Reformers to congregational singing. Well, that is really because they were hesitant about introducing something that had not existed for about twelve hundred years.

Let us also note the position of the Roman Catholic Council of Trent which met in the mid-sixteenth century to consider the response of the Roman Catholic Church to the Reformation. It met from 1545 to 1547, thirty years after Luther initiated the Reformation. As well as dealing with doctrinal issues, the Council of Trent also considered the question of practical issues such as congregational singing. The musical performances – and I use the word advisedly – in churches had grown so complex that even the Papacy realised that this needed some form of change. In the event, the Council of Trent considered that the only cure for musical excesses would be to exclude music from church altogether. So there was an interesting situation, namely that the Reformers had restored congregational singing in the vernacular whereas the Council of Trent considered abolishing music altogether. The Council quickly decided against that because a new form of church music had arisen (under composers such as Palestrina) and this was more melodious and more suitable to Roman Catholic worship. Note, however, that Latin continued as the language of worship in the Roman Catholic Church: the Council unhesitatingly refused pleas from French and German bishops for congregations (not priests and monastics) to be allowed to sing in their own languages.

The Reformation movement (beginning with Luther in Wittenberg in 1517-1518) began less than a century after Gutenberg introduced the printing press in Mainz in 1439. The printed word was seminal to the way in which the Reformation spread. Printed material could be issued and disseminated very quickly. For example, Luther's tracts could spread throughout the length and breadth of Germany within approximately fourteen days. One of the interesting facts relating to Luther's period of voluntary incarceration in the Wartburg Fortress is that he issued books timed for selling at the annual book fair in Frankfurt. Luther made use of the marketing opportunities of the Book Fair which had been started the previous century by local booksellers. The Frankfurt Book Fair continues annually there to the present day.

Initially when Luther considered the public worship of God he made very few changes to the pre-Reformation practice. But he soon realised that singing the praise of God was fundamental to the worship of God, a scriptural position. Luther himself was quite poetical and he was also musical, being an accomplished lute player. He introduced rhymed poetry to the worship of God, both psalms and rhymed versions of scriptural narratives (which later developed into hymns and chorales). Rhymes helped people to memorise the words. The rhymes were written in stanzas of equal length and that meant the one melody could be used for each stanza of a particular psalm or chorale. Hence metrical music was introduced to the reformed church at an early stage. In passing, this was not the only type of sung music after the Reformation. Chanting was developed in the Church of England from the plainchant of the Roman Catholic Church. Anglican chant matches the natural speech-rhythm of the prose words to a short piece of repetitive music. However, the vast majority of the reformed churches sang metrical rhymed poetry.

To begin with, Luther proposed and introduced music which consisted solely of the melody. At a later stage, the music was harmonised. One of the notable features of the Reformation was that people turned away from vain songs and began singing music such as psalms, hymns and chorales. People sang them not only in

churches, but also in their own homes, at work, and when walking in the streets. This was a remarkable transformation. We can get some idea of the change which took place when we consider that Roman Catholic opponents of the Reformation used the terms 'psalm singing' and 'heresy' interchangeably. That shows how fundamental a transformation took place, and how psalm singing was associated intimately with the Reformers.

### ***The Gude and Godlie Ballatis - 1542***

Let us turn now to consider what happened within Scotland as the Reformation proceeded apace on mainland Europe. Lutheran influence began to affect Scotland in the 1520s and the Reformation was complete in 1560 when the Parliament accepted Knox's *Confession of Faith* and abolished Papal authority. There are three notable dates relating to the history of the psalter in Scotland. The year 1542 saw the introduction of *The Gude and Godlie Ballatis* (*The Good and Godly Ballads*). The next landmark was the first Scottish Psalter in 1564, just four years after the Reformation. Finally we come to 1650 and the production of the second Scottish Psalter.

These Reformed ballads first appeared in 1542, probably as individually printed sheets. They were eventually printed as a collection in 1567, entitled *The Gude and Godlie Ballatis*. You will note that this happened some three years after the first Scottish Psalter was introduced for public worship in 1564. Such was the popularity of the ballads that the collection was reprinted on numerous occasions through to 1621, long after the first Scottish Psalter was in use. *The Gude and Godlie Ballatis* were never used in the public worship of the Church: they were for private use only. But the book helped to mould the religious opinions of the Scottish people.

The ballads first saw the light of day in Dundee, at that time a town of around 11,000 inhabitants heavily dependent on wool and fishing, with extensive export trading links to Scandinavia and the Baltic countries – lands where the Lutheran Reformation had taken a firm hold. Lutheran books were clandestinely imported into Scotland on returning ships, not only to Dundee but also to other trading ports on the east coast. It was illegal to import Lutheran books as the Scottish Parliament in 1525 had banned the import of books expressing Lutheran views. *The Gude and Godlie Ballatis* are also known as *The Dundee Psalms* and *The Wedderburn Psalms* as three Wedderburn brothers from Dundee were responsible for introducing them to Scotland. These men adopted Lutheran views which were abhorrent to the Roman Catholic authorities. As a result, the three Wedderburns suffered for their religious principles. James Wedderburn fled to France and became a merchant in Dieppe, one of the two centres of Scottish exiles and traders in northern France, the other being Rouen. John Wedderburn also fled and went to Wittenberg in 1539-1540 and there he became a friend of Luther and Melancthon. The third brother, Robert Wedderburn, became vicar of Dundee.

The full title of the book in modern spelling is: *The Good and Godly Ballads: A compendious Book of Godly and Spiritual Songs. Collected out of sundry parts of the Scripture, with sundry other Ballads changed out of profane songs into godly songs, for avoiding of sin and harlotry*. I would like to draw your attention to the word ‘ballad’ as it refers to a popular form of poetry and song in mediaeval times. They were easy to sing, but the ballads of popular culture were often anything but edifying. The aim of Luther (and indeed the Wedderburns) was that people should sing godly songs to familiar tunes, with the express hope that the godly songs would encourage people to avoid sin and to avoid harlotry, as we see from the title of this book. The Wedderburns translated Psalms and Lutheran hymns from German directly into the Scots language to compile *The Gude and Godlie Ballatis*. In other words, these were not originally composed in Scots, and they bore no direct relation to ecclesiastical Latin or the original languages of the Bible.

*The Gude and Godlie Ballatis* contained a lot of material – not only Psalms and hymns based on scriptural narratives, but also metrical forms of the Apostle’s Creed, material about the sacraments, graces, prayers, and much more. And it should be noted that some ballads relating to doctrinal matters contained distinctly Lutheran teaching (as opposed to the teaching of Knox or Calvin). From our point of view in considering the history of metrical psalmody, the compendium contained 22 Psalms. Let us look at the first stanza of Psalm 23 as it appears in the book:

*The Lord God is my pastor gude,  
Aboundantlie me for to feid:  
Then how can I be destitute  
Of ony gude thing in my neid?  
He feidis me in feildis fair  
To Reueris sweet, pure and preclair,  
He dryuis me but ony dreid.*

In modern English spelling (but retaining the robust Scottish idiom) this would be:

*The Lord God is my pastor good,  
Abundantly me for to feed:  
Then how can I be destitute  
Of any good thing in my need?  
He feeds me in fields fair  
To rivers sweet, pure and preclair,  
He drives me but any dread.*

### ***The First Scottish Psalter - 1564***

Let us turn now to the Reformation in Scotland, which took place in 1560. Due to the strong popular influence of Lutheran ballads in circulation up to that time, it might be thought that Scotland was likely to

follow Lutheran doctrine and Lutheran practice. However, with the thorough-going Reformation under Knox and his colleagues, the Regulative Principle was applied to the public worship of God, namely that there should be exclusive psalmody according to scriptural precept. For this reason it was decided that the Church of Scotland would produce a new metrical psalm-book, which would exclude hymns. Hence we have the first Scottish Psalter appearing in 1564, four years after the Reformation.

The pedigree of the first Scottish Psalter is very closely linked to John Knox. So I will digress for a little into Knox's personal history. As you know, he was called to the ministry in St Andrews in 1547. Shortly afterwards he was captured when St Andrews Castle fell to the French fleet and for nineteen months he toiled as a slave in atrocious conditions aboard French galleys. After he was released in 1549 he was exiled to England: he was not allowed back into Scotland.

At that time of Knox's exile in England the godly young Edward VI (1537-1553) was King of England, the third ruler of the Tudor dynasty. During his reign the country was governed by a Regency Council, as Edward became King aged nine and died aged fifteen, and so never reached the age of majority. During his brief reign he abolished the Mass and clerical celibacy, and made services in English (rather than Latin) compulsory. After Edward's death he was succeeded by his half-sister, Mary Tudor – Mary I. She reversed his Protestant reforms and instituted the brutal persecution of Protestants which earned her the name 'Bloody Mary'. She remained Queen until 1558 when she was succeeded by her younger half-sister Elizabeth I.

During the period of Mary's bloodthirsty persecution, Knox and other like-minded Protestants fled from England to seek refuge on the Continent. He went first to Geneva in 1553 and then went to Frankfurt-am-Main in Germany to be minister of the English refugee Church there. However the congregation in Frankfurt was divided on liturgical lines between those who favoured the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* and the more Reformed group led by John Knox. The tensions heightened and eventually the Anglican faction under Cox forced Knox's removal over liturgical issues. They did so on the basis of his views on the need for thorough reformation which he had promulgated in England. The civic authorities of Frankfurt decided to expel Knox and he returned to Geneva in 1555, accompanied by William Whittingham and others. Knox remained two months in Geneva before returning to Scotland in August 1555, whereupon he toured the country promoting the doctrines and worship of the Reformation. He accepted a call to be the minister of the English-speaking congregation in Geneva and so returned to Geneva from 1556 to 1559. The congregation of around 200 people met in a building known as Calvin's Auditory, adjacent to St Peter's Cathedral where Calvin was minister. Knox left Geneva in January 1559 to return to Scotland but his journey was prolonged as Elizabeth I refused him a passport to travel back through England.

Geneva's French-speaking congregation used the French Psalter which Calvin had first encountered during his time in Strasbourg (1538-1541). Twelve Psalms had been versified by a French poet, Clément Marot, who died in 1544. Calvin brought these Psalms back with him when he returned to Geneva as pastor in 1541

and Marot added a further nineteen once he arrived as a refugee in Geneva the following year. Further French psalms were added by Calvin and Louis Bourgeois and in 1562 the Psalter was completed by Theodore Beza, who became Calvin's successor in Geneva on his death in 1564. Bourgeois wrote most of the music for the Genevan Psalter and in passing we note that two of his tunes are in our own Psalter – The Old Hundredth which we use for the long metre version of Psalm 100, and The Old 124<sup>th</sup> which we sing to the second version of Psalm 124. Hence, when Knox was in Geneva from 1556 to 1559, he was well aware of the Genevan Psalter used for singing exclusive psalmody in the French-speaking churches.

Knox's English-speaking congregation developed their own English-language Psalter. This is known as *The Anglo-Genevan Psalter*, published initially as a collection of 51 Psalms in 1556. The Psalter was expanded in 1558 and completed in 1561. The first edition of *The Anglo-Genevan Psalter* in 1556 consisted of Psalms composed in England by Thomas Sternhold and John Hopkins. The majority were written by Sternhold, a courtier with the title 'Groom of the King's Robes'. Initially Sternhold had versified Psalms for his own edification and sang them as he went about his courtly duties. The teenage King Edward VI heard him singing and encouraged him to proceed in his work of versifying Psalms. Besides personal edification, Sternhold had another aim in singing the Psalms, namely to introduce his fellow-courtiers to ballads with godly language, and thereby divert them from their own obscene songs and ballads. With this in view Sternhold wrote 44 Psalms in the familiar ballad metre, utilising the melodies of ballads. The other contributor to the first edition of *The Anglo-Genevan Psalter* was John Hopkins, a clergyman and schoolmaster in Suffolk, whose seven psalms augmented the Psalter to 51 Psalms. He was a skilled rhymers but the quality of his poetry was less than that of Sternhold.

As time went on in Geneva, further Psalms were added to *The Anglo-Genevan Psalter*, principally by William Whittingham who had been with Knox in Frankfurt and accompanied him to exile in Geneva. Whittingham was Knox's successor in the English congregation and was one of the translators of the Geneva Bible – the English translation made in Geneva. He wrote the words of the second version of Psalm 124 (the 'peculiar metre' version). Whittingham remained in Geneva to complete translating the Bible after many of the other exiles returned home. He married Calvin's sister and ended up back in England as Dean of Durham. John Pullain, formerly a preacher in Cornhill, London, was another exile in Geneva, and also one of the translators of the Genevan Bible. Pullain contributed two metrical Psalms and on return to England in 1561 became prebendary of St Paul's Cathedral. With the contributions of Whittingham and Pullain added to those of Sternhold and Hopkins there were 62 Psalms in *The Anglo-Genevan Psalter* in 1558. Subsequent contributions by William Kethe (possibly a Scotsman) brought the total to 87 Psalms by 1561. Kethe was another translator of the Genevan Bible and was well known as a negotiator between disparate groups of Marian exiles on the Continent. He was the author of the words of the second version of Psalm 100 (the long metre version).

As the metre of psalms now begins to feature more strongly in this address, I will make a small digression to

explain this, using well known Psalms. I have mentioned Psalms being composed in what the early Reformers knew as ballad metre, so that people could sing to known (and simple) melodies. Ballad metre is now known as common metre in the Psalms. We shall look at the first verse of Psalm 23 ('The Lord's my shepherd, I'll not want') as an example of common metre. Each stanza consists of four lines, with eight syllables in the first and third lines, and six syllables in the second and fourth lines. Another way of describing common metre is to write it as the number of syllables in each line – hence 8686 is the numerical notation for common metre. In common metre Psalms, the final syllable of the second line rhymes with the final syllable of the fourth line. The second version of Psalm 100 ('All people that on earth do dwell') is an example of long metre – eight syllables in each line, and hence 8888. For short metre we will use as an example the first version of Psalm 67 ('Lord, bless and pity us') – six syllables in the first and second lines, eight syllables in the third line, and six syllables in the fourth line, and hence 6686.

Returning now to the first Scottish Psalter of 1564, its pedigree included the Psalms of Sternhold and Hopkins, *The Anglo-Genevan Psalter* and also *The English Psalter* of 1561 which was developed by people returning to England from Continental exile (including Geneva). John Knox and two others – Robert Pont and John Craig – revised the source Psalms and they published the Psalter on the authority of the General Assembly in 1564. Robert Pont (1524-1606) was a Minister, first in Dunblane and then in Dunkeld, and later in Edinburgh, where he became a Senator of the College of Justice whilst remaining a Minister. He was a very learned man and contributed six metrical Psalms to the Psalter. However, it has been noted that he translated the Psalms from French to English and the resulting versions defy the efforts of even skilled singers to fit them to their designated melodies. John Craig (c. 1512-1600) was a Dominican monk in Italy. He was converted after reading Calvin's *Institutes* in his monastery. Craig was incarcerated in a Papal prison in Rome on account of his Protestant views. On escaping from prison in 1559 he had various adventures on the Continent before reaching Scotland in 1560. Craig conducted services in Magdalen Chapel in the Cowgate, Edinburgh, and subsequently became Knox's assistant at St Giles. He contributed fifteen Psalms, notably the second version (long metre version) of Psalm 145 which we still use ('O Lord, thou art my God and King'). His versions of Psalms 136 and 143 were considerably modified for the second Scottish Psalter, and we still have them in our own Psalter as the second versions of these two Psalms.

In 1562 the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland set aside £200 to an Edinburgh printer to buy printing irons, paper and ink, and for him to fee craftsmen to produce the Psalter. It was disseminated widely. The General Assembly insisted that every Minister, every Exhorter, and every Reader should have his own copy. The office of Reader included reading aloud from the Bible before the services began (usually for half an hour) and the Reader was frequently the Precentor. In 1579 an Act of Parliament ordained that 'all Gentlemen with 300 merks of yearlie rent, and all substantial yeomen, etc., worth 500 pounds in land or goods, be holden to have ane bible and psalme booke' under specified penalties. In Edinburgh compliance with the Act was enforced by ordaining that the people liable under the Act 'bring their biblylls and psalm buiks, to have their names writtin and subscryvit be the clerk.'

The 1564 Scottish Psalter was disseminated widely. Six editions were produced from Geneva and 64 editions subsequently saw the light of day – 70 editions in all between 1562 until 1644. Many of these editions were printed outside Scotland – at Middelburg and Dordt in Holland, and at Geneva and London – because of the better quality of paper, print and bindings. And despite transportation charges, the English and Continental editions were cheaper than the Scottish ones.

Having earlier looked at the first stanza of Psalm 23 in *The Gude and Godlie Ballatis*, let us now look at the equivalent stanza in the 1564 Psalter:

*The Lord is only my support,  
and hee that doth me feede :  
How can I then lacke anie thing  
whereof I stand in need?  
Hee doth me fold in coates most safe,  
the tender grasse fast by:  
And after driv' th me to the streames  
which run most pleasantly.*

The versification is an improvement on what appeared in *The Gude and Godlie Ballatis*. It runs more smoothly. This is a stanza of eight lines, in double common metre – that is, 86868686 – to be sung to a tune which was equivalent to two stanzas of common metre. In passing, the prevalence of double-length ballad metre tunes at that time meant that many common metre Psalms were sung in couplets of two stanzas. It is for this reason that common metre Psalms appeared on the printed page in groups of two stanzas – a practice that persists till the present day even though double common metre tunes are practically never used in churches.

### ***Moves to improve the 1564 Psalter***

The 1564 Psalter was an improvement on *The Gude and Godlie Ballatis*, but nevertheless there were problems with the Psalter. I have already mentioned the difficulties caused by Pont's clumsy versification and similarly rough poetry was seen in many other Psalms. This is perhaps unsurprising as poetry had been largely neglected since the days of Chaucer and poetic skills were not well developed.

In the second place, the music was largely unfamiliar. The Psalter used the music of Louis Bourgeois imported from the French Genevan Psalter. That was not an insurmountable problem, as the music of Geneva was successfully introduced to other countries and still exists to this present day, not only in the French Psalter, but also in the Dutch and German metrical Psalters. In these countries, however, the praise is not led by precentors, it is led by musicians using organs. The problem actually lay with the number of melodies –

so many metres were in use that the new 1564 Psalter contained 105 melodies for 150 Psalms. In other words, the majority of Psalms had a unique melody which could not be transferred to any other Psalm. This meant that either precentors needed to master a pretty wide range of melodies, or else the congregations could only sing a limited number of Psalms. The Psalters were often printed without music, so there were even fewer opportunities for people to learn the melodies.

A further difficulty arose in connection with the Genevan metres that were used. They were not particularly suited to the rhythms and emphases of the English and Scots languages, whereas they were suitable for the other languages I have mentioned.

And a final problem was that the printers began to include other material, either because they personally – or their sponsors – wanted to include unauthorised items such as hymns or paraphrases. This made it look as if the Scots were drifting from the principle of exclusive psalmody toward the lax position of including hymns of human composition, an observation which was not lost on Episcopalian adversaries of Presbyterianism.

Even by the end of the sixteenth century it was fairly obvious that the 1564 Psalter, good as it was, was nevertheless not completely suitable. However, quite a period of time had to elapse before the second Scottish Psalter saw the light of day in 1650. We shall now look at the slow progress towards the vastly improved 1650 version.

King James VI of Scotland (*alias* King James I of England) is known as the driving force behind the translation of the 1611 Authorised Version of the Bible (the ‘King James Version’). However, he was substantially responsible for the delay in improving the Psalter. King James had quite high opinions of his own abilities and he decided that he would start to versify the Psalms, publishing them in 1591 as *His Majesties Poeticall Exercises at Vacant Hours*. The title indicates that he devoted his time to writing metrical Psalms when not occupied with the affairs of State. When he produced the first few Psalms he asked if people wanted him to continue the work. And of course people acquiesced. In other words, people flattered His Majesty, even though they did not necessarily share his unwarrantably high opinions of his own poetic skills.

In 1601 the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland met at Burntisland in Fife. A proposal was made to have a revision of the Psalms in metre and King James recited verses of the 1564 Psalter, highlighting the faults in the metre and the ways in which the metrical Psalms diverged from the prose version. The Assembly cautiously proceeded by nominating Robert Pont to revise the Psalms. However, Pont and the Assembly had no real intention of embarking on the work, and so King James continued his own work of revision. This was time-consuming and by the time of his death in 1625 James had completed only 31 Psalms. Even before his death people realised that the King James versions were not entirely his own work: they were modified (with the King’s acquiescence) by Sir William Alexander of Menstrie and thus became known as *The Menstrie*

*Psalms*. Alexander (c. 1567-1640) later became Secretary of State for Scotland and was ennobled as Earl of Stirling. Charles I (1600-1649) was the second son of James VI and succeeded his father as King in 1625. Charles instructed Sir William Alexander to continue James' work and in 1631, five years after the death of James VI, this Psalter was issued as *The Psalmes of King David translated by King James*. The front of the book displayed an engraving of King David on one page and King James on the opposite page.

Sir William Alexander managed to improve King James' versification to a certain extent. Once the Psalms were published, Charles I did not initially insist that the Church should use them. Rather he said he would "**allow** them to be sung in all the churches of our dominions". There were many objections to this version, not only from Scotland but also from the Puritans in England. They all made quite valid criticisms and objections to *The Psalmes of King David translated by King James*. Such opposition riled Charles I and he responded by imposing this Psalter on the church in 1634. That did not stifle the opponents, however. Charles must have realised the strength of feeling and so, quietly and without fuss, this version was revised and reissued two years later in 1636. The revision was equally unpopular. When it was published, the Church of Scotland would shortly shake off the shackles of Stuart dynasty meddling and reassert its spiritual independence: this happened decisively with the signing of the National Covenant two years later in 1638, when the Liturgy and the Royal Psalter were swept away.

King James had not been the only person who was moved to improve on the 1564 Psalter. However, due to the circumstances of the age and the vanity of the King, it was not expedient that any other poet should appear to challenge James. One of the men attempting to improve the Psalter wrote to William Alexander with a sample of his own versification. Alexander wrote back to the poet, (William Drummond of Hawthornden) expressing surprisingly frank views on the inadequacy of his royal master's abilities:

'Brother, I received your last letter, with the Psalm you sent, which I think very well done. I had done the same long before it came; but He [King James] prefers his own to all else; tho perchance when you see it, you will think it the worst of the Three. No man must meddle with that Subject, and therefore I advise you to take no more Pains therein.'

Such was the almost audaciously outspoken opinion of the man appointed to revise King James' Psalms! But it contained a fairly obvious warning to the poet to desist from his work.

There were others besides Drummond of Hawthornden who were producing their own personal versions of the metrical Psalms around this time, such as Sir William Mure of Rowallan (a noted Ayrshire Covenanter), Zachary Boyd (a Minister in Glasgow), and Francis Rous, the Provost of Eton.

Rous is a fascinating individual, who moved matters along at the time of the Westminster Assembly of Divines. He hailed from the southwest of England, he was a Puritan, he became Provost of Eton, he eventually became the Speaker of the English Parliament, he became a member of Oliver Cromwell's Council of State, and eventually he was elevated to the peerage. Around the start of the 1640s Rous

completed his versification of the Psalms and he got them printed in Rotterdam for private circulation among Members of Parliament, around the time that the Westminster Assembly was mooted. The first edition did not include his name. But when they gained a favourable acceptance, Rous republished his Psalter in England, this time bearing his name, and submitted it to the Assembly: it was widely welcomed.

The aim of the Westminster Assembly was not only to agree doctrinal and practical matters within Britain, but also to introduce uniformity of worship. The Westminster Assembly met from 1643 to 1649. Whilst engaged in their work they revised Rous' Psalms. Every month, the Commissioners from Scotland (such as Samuel Rutherford and George Gillespie) sent instalments to Scotland for what were called 'animadversions' – the word means 'critical comments'. The Assembly valued the Scottish criticisms as part of the revision process, and in November 1645 the Divines declared that the work was complete: 'the Psalmes are perfyted'. But by that stage what we may term The Westminster Psalter was completely different from Rous' version and so Rous' preface to the book disappeared.

At this stage of history the Lords were increasingly jealous of the Commons assuming leadership in various matters. Around this time a rival translation by William Barton was gaining favour, particularly in London. Barton's version was not particularly good, but The House of Lords challenged the Westminster Assembly to provide reasons why Barton's version should not be sung, as well as other versions – each church choosing whichever version it wished. In practice, this would have destroyed the possibility of uniformity in worship. The House of Commons forced the issue and ordered that the Westminster version should be printed in 1646. The Commons also commanded that 'no other version should be sung in all Churches and Chapels within the Kingdom of England, Dominion of Wales, and Toune of Berwick-upon-Tweede' after 1 January 1647. However, reception of the Westminster version in England was uniformly unfavourable, one reason for its unpopularity being that the Scots had set too distinctive a mark on it. Equally, north of the Border, despite Gillespie's and Rutherford's satisfaction with the new version, the General Assembly refused to endorse the Westminster version and decided to subject it to further revision.

The Scottish revision process went through six stages and lasted two years and four months. Firstly, in July 1647 the General Assembly asked Principal John Adamson of Edinburgh University (a Minister and Philosopher) to revise the Westminster version. The second stage began in August that year, when the Assembly then asked a Committee of Adamson and three other men to revise the version more thoroughly. Adamson's collaborators in this project were Thomas Crawford (Professor of Mathematics and Regent in Philosophy at Edinburgh University), John Row (an Aberdeen Minister), and John Nevey (a zealous Covenanter, who was Minister of Newmills in the Parish of Loudon: he eventually had to seek refuge in Holland after the persecution of the Church by Charles II). This group of four able men drew upon at least ten other versions besides the First Scottish Psalter and the Westminster version and presented their work to the Commission of Assembly in April 1648. The third stage began when the Commission of Assembly proceeded to appoint the Edinburgh Ministers to revise the work of the Adamson group. For reasons that are

not clear, six days later another Committee of seven ministers was appointed in their place – and eleven days later these seven Ministers were replaced by another Committee of six members. The process was becoming complex! However, by July their report was ready and submitted to the Assembly. The fourth stage of the process saw the Assembly sending the latest revision to Presbyteries for further changes and then the Presbyteries' changes were sent to Adamson who sent a report to the Assembly. Next, the Assembly sent Adamson's report to a Committee of six members. The sixth and final stage saw the Commission meeting in November 1649 to make yet further revisions to the work of the Committee which had looked at Adamson's report. If there was ever a demonstration of how complicated Church procedure could get, this was surely it! But the end result was to fulfil the four aims of the compilers of the 1650 Psalter, namely to have an accurate version, one that was simple, one in which there was uniformity of language throughout, and would be suitable for long term usage. It was envisaged that millions of people would sing this new version of the metrical Psalms, and there is no doubt that that has indeed taken place over the succeeding centuries.

If we look at the composition of the 1650 Psalter, comparing it with source material, we see that new material, produced within Scotland during the review process, accounted for 44% of the Psalter. Original material from the Westminster version accounted for 18%, and Rous' version only accounted for 10% of the Psalter, about the same as the contribution from Zachary Boyd (9%). Material from other authors was much less – 6% from King James, 4% from the 1564 Psalter, and 3% each from Henry Dod and William Barton. It is interesting that 3% of the material is derived from the 1640 Bay Psalm Book which originated from Massachusetts in America. That Psalter was the first book printed in British North America, and a copy was available to the revisers of the Scottish Psalter.

When Samuel Rutherford and George Gillespie commended the Westminster version to the General Assembly in 1646, they stated: '[It] has come through the hands of more examiners ... [Its accuracy] is good compensation to make up the want of poetical liberty and sweet pleasant running which some may desire.' However the subsequent revision process in Scotland improved considerably on what even Rutherford and Gillespie had thought was good. At last the Second Scottish Psalter was ready for publication in 1650, with the authority of the Assembly. The full title was *The Psalms of David in Meeter, Newly translated, and diligently compared with the originall Text, and former Translations: More plaine, smooth and agreeable to the Text, than any heretofore.*

Turning once more to Psalm 23, we see the accuracy of these assertions in the familiar words of the 1650 version:

*The Lord's my shepherd, I'll not want.  
He makes me down to lie  
In pastures green: he leadeth me  
the quiet waters by.*

Comparison with the Authorised Version demonstrates how close the 1650 metrical version is to the prose

version – it is indeed ‘more plaine, smooth, and agreeable to the Text, than any heretofore’: ‘The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.’

John Row, one of the Scottish Ministers involved in the revision process, concluded in 1650: ‘We have, through the rich blessing of God upon the long labours of many faithful and careful brethren, expert in Hebrew and poetry, the most exact, near, and smooth metrical version of the psalms (a part of the intended uniformity) that ever the Christian world did afford.’ And thirty years further on, in 1680, here is the judgment of a number of worthy men in England about the Scottish Psalter when they introduced it to their own congregations, even though some of the terms and language were distinctively Scottish: ‘The translation which is now put into your hands comes nearest to the Original of any that we have seen, and runs with such a fluent sweetness, that we thought fit to recommend it to your Christian acceptance; some of us have used it already, with great comfort and satisfaction.’ Who said that? This was in a letter written by Thomas Manton, John Owen, William Jenkyn, Thomas Watson, Matthew Poole, Nathanael Vincent, Edmund Calamy, and nineteen others. I just mentioned those seven men by name as they are so well known to us through the reprints of Puritan works. These were men whose judgment was no doubt very sound. In fact it is hard to think of any stronger recommendation. Richard Baxter also commended the Psalter. Baxter was known for being quite argumentative. In fact, one of the jibes which his contemporaries made about him was that if Richard Baxter were the only man in the world, Richard would argue with Baxter, and Baxter would argue with Richard. There were no acerbic remarks from Richard Baxter about the 1650 Psalter, however. He simply commended it succinctly as ‘The best which we have seen.’

Finally we come to the opinion of John Edgar, a Professor of the Presbyterian Church of Ireland in 1878. An article about him is in the new edition of *The Bulwark*. ‘The Scottish version of the Psalms is not perfect, nor is the English version of the Bible; but both are so near perfection, and so interwoven with Christian faith and feeling, that it is a question of the gravest character whether either of them should be changed.’

I will end with some remarks about the times when the 1650 Psalter was issued, for it appeared at a very difficult stage in Scotland’s history. The country had moved from the Stuart Monarchy (with its unshakeable belief in the Divine Right of Kings) to the Commonwealth period. Cromwell and his general, George Monck, were in Scotland. These were unsettled times – so much so, in fact, that Communion was not celebrated in Edinburgh until 1655, some five years later. And in many places, though the new Psalter appeared in 1650, no Psalms at all were sung in church till 1653 at the earliest – and in some places it was not till 1658 that Psalms were sung in church morning and night.

The old 1564 Scottish Psalter lingered on for some time in the Church of Scotland congregations on the Continent, possibly as many editions had been printed there. In fact, the Session of the Scots Church in Rotterdam did not introduce the new 1650 version until 1660. That caused all sorts of commotion in the

Rotterdam congregation as people were unhappy that their familiar 1564 version was being supplanted by the new 1650 version.

To begin with, no music was printed with the new Psalter. Eventually in 1666, some sixteen years later, one edition of the Psalter was issued with twelve common metre melodies. Some of these melodies remain in common use to the present day – Dundee, Dunfermline, French, London New, Martyrs, and Stilt (York). Although the Psalter contained thirteen psalms with alternative versions (long metre and short metre versions, and irregular or ‘peculiar’ metre versions) no melodies were printed for these metrical versions and so these other versions fell into almost complete disuse for the next 60 years. You will know from Covenanting history the account of the two Wigtown martyrs, Margaret McLachlan and Margaret Wilson, who were drowned in the Solway Firth in 1685 for upholding Reformation principles. As they were tied to the stake, shortly to be drowned by the incoming tide, the older of the two, Margaret McLachlan, sang the short metre version of Psalm 25 from verse 7:

*My sins and faults of youth  
do thou, O Lord, forget:  
After thy mercy think on me,  
and for thy goodness great.*

She had remembered the melody from older times, from the 1564 Psalter, as no short metre melody had been used publicly for the past 35 years. Similarly, the long metre and peculiar metre versions of the Psalms remained unused. The Covenanters worshipping in the open and in great danger had only twelve common metre Psalm tunes which they could sing. All the music which has been subsequently associated with the Covenanters is of much later composition, of course. There were simply twelve common metre melodies for singing to all the Psalter. In a sense, that is the beauty of the 1650 Scottish Psalter. It was written using a uniform metre, and so all Psalms could be sung to any common metre tune, which was convenient when precentors or heads of households had a restricted repertoire of tunes.

In conclusion, it took over a hundred years to develop the Scottish metrical version of the Psalms that we possess. Metrical psalmody began in 1542 with *The Gude and Godlie Ballatis*. The work proceeded with the introduction of the first Scottish Psalter in 1564, and it was brought to completion in 1650 with the second Scottish Psalter, the one which has remained in use to the present. The 1650 Psalter is the one which has united all the Scottish churches, despite all the denominational divisions over the years. It has united congregations down through the centuries, not only in Scotland but also overseas where there were expatriate congregations and missions. Ladies and gentlemen, these remarks conclude a brief history of how we came to have the Psalter in the form that we know it and love it.

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