

The History of the Scottish Psalter

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The Beginning of the Process in England

DESPITE its customary name, the origins of the Scottish Psalter are in England where, on 1st June 1642, the Long Parliament passed a bill calling for “an Assembly of Divines” or theologians. Initially, the purpose of this Assembly was simply to revise the Articles of the Church of England. As a result, however, of the “Solemn League and Covenant” of 1643 between England and Scotland (brought on by the English need of help in the Civil War), the remit of the Assembly was greatly enlarged to seek fulfilment of the Covenant’s commitment to “uniformity in religion, confession of faith, form of church government, directory for worship and catechising...” in the three kingdoms of England, Scotland and Ireland.

The result was the production of the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, the Form of Presbyterial Church-Government and the Directory for the Publick Worship of God. In addition to all this, they also went to great lengths to produce a metrical Psalter that was to be part of the uniformity they sought. In so doing, they wanted to produce a Psalter that was not only more accurate and more smoothly running than those in existence, but also simpler in metre so as to be more easily used by all. Francis Rous, who was not a minister but a member of both Parliament and the Westminster Assembly, had produced a version of the Psalter in 1643 and this was to form the basic starting point for the Assembly.

The Doxology Question

The Assembly had considered the practice of

appending a Trinitarian doxology at the end of the singing of a Psalm, e.g.

To Father, Son and Holy Ghost
The God whom we adore
Be glory as it was, is now
And shall be evermore.

This practice was a matter of some dispute in Scotland and it must be acknowledged that Robert Baillie, one of the Scottish commissioners to the Assembly, was initially a strong defender of the practice, notwithstanding objections from within his own congregation. The Assembly as a whole, however, rejected the practice, and Baillie himself evidently changed his view, ultimately writing: “But in the new translation of the Psalms, resolving to keep punctually to the original text, without any addition, we and they were content to omit that [i.e. the doxology] whereupon we saw both the popish and prelatical party did so much dote, as to put it to the end of most of their lessons, and all their Psalms.”

Later Scottish Covenanters, like John Brown of Wamphray and Richard McWard (contending with Bishop Burnett) opposed the sung doxology, not because they deemed its content doctrinally unsound, but because of the regulative principle of worship and the absence of Scriptural warrant to add anything to the 150 Psalms given by God. From the deliberate exclusion of the doxology we learn that the Westminster Confession means by the “singing of psalms” (in ch. xxi, para. v) simply the use of the Biblical Psalms.

The Procedure with the Westminster Assembly

The Assembly was divided into three committees,

each responsible for the scrutiny of 50 Psalms. All 150 were subsequently read line by line before the whole Assembly. The Assembly included some excellent Hebrew scholars, such as John Lightfoot, famous for his knowledge of oriental languages and rabbinical writings. The revised versions were sent in batches to Scotland for further examination by the Scottish church. Baillie writes, “The Psalter is a great part of our uniformity, which we cannot let pass till our church be well advised with it.”

The Work of the Scottish General Assembly

The General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1647 appointed four men to take an initial look at the version sent north by the Westminster Assembly, the first three of them taking forty Psalms each and the last man taking thirty. These were John Adamson, Thomas Crawford, John Row and John Neavy. John Row is of particular interest as his grandfather, also John Row, was one of the “six Johns” (John Knox being one of them) who drew up the Scots Confession. Evidently, the family had a particular gift for languages and the first John taught his son John to read Hebrew by the time he was seven years old. He likewise taught his son, the John mentioned above as one of the four initial examiners of the Psalter, in similar fashion. Neavy, as a Covenanter, was later banished to Holland and died there.

The General Assembly of 1648 appointed that the version should be examined first by the Edinburgh ministers, than by seven more ministers with them (including James Guthrie, the Covenanter martyr). A Commission of Assembly (of which Samuel Rutherford and Hugh McKail were members) appointed another Committee (of which George Gillespie was a member) to have yet another look at the draft. The draft version was sent to the presbyteries of the Church in 1648 with instructions from the General Assembly to send any suggested corrections to the Committee of Public Affairs.

In June 1649 an Assembly Commission appointed

certain members to go over the material. This included George Hutcheson, an early opponent of the doxology and therefore, we may assume, a man committed to singing only that which was appointed by God in his own worship.

Another Commission in November of the same year (which included Hutcheson, Rutherford, and James Guthrie) spent five sessions seeking to improve the version. This Commission also included John Livingstone – a name known to many on account of his famous sermon on Ezekiel 36:25-26 in 1630 at Kirk O’Shotts which was the means of the conversion of many souls to Christ. Livingstone was particularly able in Hebrew, Greek and Syriac, but also studied Arabic, French, Italian, two forms of Dutch, and Spanish. When in Holland at one time, he went through a Latin version of the Old Testament correcting it from the Hebrew.

In 1650, the General Assembly finally approved the Psalter in the form it has come down to us today. The men who worked on it were not only noted for their abilities, but also for their godliness and humility.

John Anderson (1748?-1830): “As to the versification, it is only a circumstance used for the conveniency of singing; and by no means incompatible with a due care to retain the words of the Holy Ghost, or the form as now described. Take the first Psalm in the version authorised by the church of Scotland for an example. The first line of that version is a more adequate representation of the emphasis of the two first words of the original; it is a more strictly literal translation of them, than that which we have in prose. Whatever faults may be charged upon that translation, they are not such as arise from a designed neglect of the phraseology of the sacred original: a religious regard to the principles now laid down is manifest through the whole of it.” — *A Discourse on the Divine Ordinance*

of Singing Psalms (Philadelphia: William Young, 1791), p. 32

D. Douglas Bannerman (1842-1903): “But, among all the metrical renderings of the Psalter which became current in the Reformed Churches, the foremost place must undoubtedly be given to the Scottish version. It was published in its present form about two years after the close of the Westminster Assembly, after long and careful adjustment and revision by a well-chosen committee of ministers and elders appointed by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. . . .

“No version of the Psalms in any country has ever obtained a greater hold of the national mind and heart than the Scottish; none, probably, has so powerful an influence in the present day, and none better deserves it. Its faults lie on the surface. It is not unfrequently rough and uncouth to modern ears. Some of its phrases and rhymes quoted in an isolated way may easily raise a smile. But, as a whole, it has surpassing merits, which are seen and felt the more carefully it is studied. In respect of faithfulness to the inspired original, in a certain high and grave simplicity, in strength and dignity, the Scottish Metrical Psalter is not unworthy of the name, given it by competent judges, of ‘the prince of versions.’ Rugged as its verses sometimes are, they are never weak. Along with its simple ballad metres, it has the noble directness, the unsought felicities of expression which mark the best of our Scottish ballads. Passages meet you on almost every page which are fully equal in this respect to the one fine passage in the version of Sternhold and Hopkins, ‘The Lord descended from above, and bowed the heavens high.’ And it has been often remarked how, when the theme of the Psalm is the loftiest and most fitted for worship, the Scottish version seems to rise in power and beauty along with it.” —*The Worship of the Presbyterian Church, with Special Reference to*

the Question of Liturgies (Edinburgh: Andrew Elliot, 1884), pp. 34-37

James Boswell (1740-1795): “Some allowance must no doubt be made for early pre-possession. But at a maturer period of life, after looking at various metrical versions of the Psalms, I am well satisfied that the version used in Scotland is, upon the whole, the best; and that it is vain to think of having a better. It has in general a simplicity and unction of sacred Poesy; and in many parts its transfusion is admirable.” —*The Life of Samuel Johnson* (London: Henry Baldwin, 1793), 2:367, 368

Thomas Houston (1803-1882): “What we contend for in a metrical version of the psalms, to be used in the church’s worship, is, that it should express the utterances of inspiration, as near as possible, without addition or dilution. We do not maintain that our venerable Scottish version is perfect, though as a close translation and transcript of the original, it is vastly superior to any other metrical version of the psalms, with which we are acquainted. . . . Some of the most distinguished divines and scholars have declared the Scottish metre version to be an accurate rendering of the original, and to be eminently fitted for the purpose of public praise.” —*Divine Psalms against Human Paraphrases and Hymns* (Belfast: James Johnston, 1861), p. 15

Many Puritans (Thomas Manton, John Owen, William Jenkyn, Thomas Watson, Thomas Lye, Matthew Poole, Matthew Mead, Thomas Doolittle, Thomas Vincent, Nathanael Vincent, William Carslake, James Janeway, Richard Mayo, et al.): “The translation which is now put into thy hands cometh nearest to the Original of any that we have seen, and runneth with such a fluent sweetness, that we thought fit to recommend it to thy Christian acceptance; Some of us having used it already, with great comfort and satisfaction.” — “To the Reader,”

in *The Psalms of David in Meeter* (London: Company of Stationers, 1673)

Robert Murray M'Cheyne (1813-1843): "The metrical version of the Psalms should be read or sung through at least once in the year. It is truly an admirable translation from the Hebrew, and is frequently more correct than the prose version." —*Andrew Bonar, ed., Memoir and Remains of the Rev. Robert Murray M'Cheyne* (Dundee: William Middleton, 1845), p. 574

William Romaine (1714-1795): "Moreover the version [Sternhold and Hopkins] comes nearer to the original than any I have ever seen, except the Scotch, which I have made use of, when it appeared to me better expressed than the English. You may find fault with the manner of ekeing out a verse for the sake of rhyme; but what of that? Here is everything great, and noble, and divine, although not in Dr. Watts's way or stile." —*An Essay on Psalmody, in Works of the Late Reverend William Romaine* (London: T. Chapman, 1796), 8:493

Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832): "The expression of the old metrical translation, though homely, is plain, forcible, and intelligible, and very often possesses a rude sort of majesty, which perhaps would be ill exchanged for mere elegance. Their antiquity is also a circumstance striking to the imagination, and possessing a corresponding influence upon the feelings. They are the very words and accents of our early reformers—sung by them in woe and gratitude, in the fields, in the churches, and on the scaffold. The parting with this very association of ideas is a serious loss to the cause of devotion, and scarce to be incurred without the certainty of corresponding advantages. . . . I have an old-fashioned taste in sacred as well as profane poetry: I cannot help preferring even Sternhold and Hopkins to Tate and Brady, and our own metrical version of the Psalms to both. I hope, therefore, they will be touched with a lenient

hand." —*As quoted in The New Scots Magazine, Vol. 2, No. 11* (September 30, 1829), pp. 150, 151

"I have had some consideration about the renewal or re-translation of the Psalmody. I had peculiar views adverse to such an undertaking. . . . At any rate, the wiser class think that our fathers were holier and better men than we, and that to abandon their old hymns of devotion, in order to grace them with newer and more modish expression, would be a kind of sacrilege. Even the best informed, who think on the subject, must be of opinion that even the somewhat bald and rude language and versification of the Psalmody gives them an antique and venerable air, and their want of the popular graces of modish poetry shows they belong to a style where ornaments are not required. They contain, besides, the very words which were spoken and sung by the fathers of the Reformation, sometimes in the wilderness, sometimes in fetters, sometimes at the stake. If a Church possessed the vessels out of which the original Reformers partook of the Eucharist, it would be surely bad taste to melt them down and exchange them for more modern. No, no. Let them write hymns and paraphrases if they will, but let us have still 'All people that on earth do dwell.'" — *The Journal of Sir Walter Scott* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1890), 2:290, 291

"Mr. Lockhart tells us, in his affecting account of Sir Walter's illness, that his love for the old metrical version of the Psalms continued unabated to the end. A story has been told, on the authority of the nurse in attendance, that on the morning of the day on which he died, viz., on the 21st Sept. 1832, he opened his eyes once more, quite conscious, and calmly asked her to read him a psalm. She proceeded to do so, when he gently interposed, saying, 'No! no! the Scotch Psalms.' After reading to him a little while, he expressed a wish to be moved nearer the window, through which he looked long and earnestly up and down the valley and towards the sky, and then on the woman's face, saying: 'I'll know it all before

night.” —*The Journal of Sir Walter Scott* (New York: Harper & Brothers), 2:291

William K. Tweedie (1803-1863): “A closing sentence may not be out of place respecting our metrical version, now so venerable for its age, and surrounded by so many endearing associations. That its versification is not seldom rugged—that it has little of the mellifluous flow of some modern hymns—is readily conceded. But, assuredly, what it lacks sometimes in smoothness it more than gains in a wonderfully close adherence to the very words of inspiration. It is, as it professes to be, a version of the Psalms, not a paraphrase. It bears internal marks

of having been rendered directly from the Hebrew original. And in some places where the reading differs slightly from that of our prose version, the metrical one would seem to be the more exact of the two. It may be added, that the occasional ruggedness is only felt in reading the Psalms—in singing them it becomes a matter very unimportant.” —*The Psalms of David in Metre: According to the Version Approved by the Kirk of Scotland, and Appointed to be Used in Worship. With Introductory and Marginal Notes by the Late W. K. Tweedie, D.D.* (London: T. Nelson and Sons, 1865), “Preface,” pp. v, vi.