
Short Note: Joseph Robertson and and the Scottish Reformation

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The purpose of this note is to draw attention to the puzzle of Joseph Robertson's views on the Scottish Reformation, and to give some suggestions towards resolving it.

1. Joseph Robertson

Joseph Robertson (1810-1866) was a native of Aberdeen and was eminent both as a medieval historian and as a founder, with John Stuart, of the Spalding Club in 1839.¹ He worked as a journalist for much of his life but in 1853 he finally attained his desire of a job superintending records in Register House, Edinburgh. He edited numerous works for the Spalding, Maitland, and Bannatyne Clubs and contributed articles to the *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*. W. D. Simpson described him as “perhaps the foremost historian, and certainly the greatest record scholar that Scotland has so far produced”.²

Robertson's knowledge of history and literature was, indeed, truly astonishing, and his works, especially his later ones, are a mine of information. Unfortunately, however, there is a vein of flippancy and superficiality running through them – particularly in his treatment of those whom he disliked – which rather reduces their value. Probably his

¹ There is no major biography of Robertson. Most of the significant published material on him will be mentioned in the references below. A few other items are listed in his entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* by Tristram Clarke, and to these might be added an obituary in the *Aberdeen Journal* for 19th December 1866.

² W. D. Simpson, “The three Spalding Clubs: a century in retrospect”, *Miscellany of the Third Spalding Club*, Vol. 2 (Aberdeen, 1940), p. xv.



Joseph Robertson.

involvement with journalism did not help. He cut his teeth writing for the *Aberdeen Observer* in the 1830s and was then editor successively of the *Aberdeen Constitutional* from 1839 to 1842, of the *Glasgow Constitutional* from 1843 to 1849, and of the *Edinburgh Evening Courant* from 1849 to 1853.³ The journalism of the period frequently strikes the modern reader as abusive; and Robertson, though far from the worst in this respect, carried something of its habits over into his scholarly work.⁴ One of the tricks, which recurs in his writings, is that of deliberately slightly misunderstanding an

opponent in order to represent him in a worse light.

As far as religion was concerned, Robertson was, in the words of his friend George Grub, a “zealous member of the Episcopal Church”.⁵ Latterly, at least, his Episcopalianism was “high” and he was a close friend of the Puseyite Alexander Penrose Forbes, Bishop of Brechin, who attended him during his last illness.⁶ In a letter written in December

³ The list of members of the Spalding Club for 1st December 1842 gives William Duncan as the editor of the *Aberdeen Constitutional*, so Robertson’s position had ceased by then. None of his biographers state why this was.

⁴ For an example of the sort of abuse that people, especially ministers of religion, had to endure from the local newspapers, see James Bruce, *The Aberdeen Pulpit: a series of sketches of the Aberdeen clergy* (Aberdeen, 1840). This consisted of articles originally contributed to the *Aberdeen Monthly Circular*. An example from Robertson, which takes the form of an attack on Abercromby Lockhart Gordon, minister of Greyfriars, Aberdeen, can be found in the *Aberdeen Constitutional*, 20th March 1840. In his journalistic writings, Robertson routinely referred to the Evangelical party in the Church of Scotland as the “wild party”.

⁵ G. Grub (ed.), *Illustrations of the Topography and Antiquities of the Shires of Aberdeen and Banff*, Vol. 1 (Aberdeen, 1869), p. xvii. Grub (1812-92) was an even more zealous member of the same communion. Born in Old Aberdeen, he became lecturer in Scots Law at Marischal College and Professor of Law at Aberdeen University. Of Jacobite sympathies, he is best known for his *Ecclesiastical History of Scotland*, published in 1861.

⁶ “Biographical Memoir” in J. Robertson, *Scottish Abbeys and Cathedrals* (Aberdeen, 1891), pp. v-xxxix (see p. xxxviii). The memoir was by William Watt; see Simpson, “The three Spalding Clubs”, p. xv.

1865 Robertson distanced himself from “Evangelical Episcopalians”, and in his writings certainly he showed little interest in doctrinal and practical Christianity.⁷ His pre-occupation was very much with the externals: with charters, statutes, ecclesiastical organisation, architecture, ritual, and liturgy.

Generally speaking, high Episcopalians have been lukewarm in their Protestantism and closer to Romanism than to evangelical Presbyterianism. They have tended to view the Scottish Reformation with an unsympathetic eye. Robertson’s own position is somewhat elusive. He deplored the destruction of the friaries in 1559-60 as “insane violence and fanaticism”;⁸ and he detested Knox (a “vain-glorious, arrogant, sanguinary divine”) and attacked him relentlessly;⁹ but what his exact position in later life was on the religious change between 1559 and 1560, we are not sure. His notes in *Concilia Scotiae* show that he regarded the pre-Reformation Church as deeply corrupt and in need of reform.¹⁰ To what extent he endorsed the reform that occurred is another matter. One Roman Catholic writer asserts that he regarded the Scottish Reformation as destructive and negative, but the evidence presented does not seem to prove the claim:

This “Episcopalian” outlook [of Robertson] implies, among other things, a particular view of the Reformation as a destructive and negative series of events. In his correspondence with Kyle, Robertson speaks of it as “the ecclesiastical revolution of the year 1560” and, in the more restricted context of the University of Glasgow, as the revolution “which all but extinguished its life”.¹¹

In his final publication Robertson has an attack on the elder Thomas M’Crie which gives an illustration of his journalistic “hit-and-

⁷ J. N. Miner, “Joseph Robertson and the Scottish Middle Ages”, *Innes Review*, Vol. 32 (1981), pp. 34-54 (see p. 51).

⁸ J. Robertson, *Book of Bon-Accord* (Aberdeen, 1839), p.44. His friend George Grub found it difficult to think of Presbyterians without the word “fanaticism” coming into his mind, *An Ecclesiastical History of Scotland* (4 vols., Edinburgh, 1861), Vol. 2, pp. 205, 340, 370; Vol. 3, pp. 98, 100, 150, 256, 261, 262, 294.

⁹ See J. Robertson, *Inventaires de la Royne Descosse Douairiere de France* (Bannatyne Club, Edinburgh, 1863), pp. cxxii-iii; J. Robertson, *Concilia Scotiae* (2 vols. with continuous pagination, Bannatyne Club, Edinburgh, 1866), pp. cxxxii, cxxxix, clxi, clxii, 309.

¹⁰ Robertson, *Concilia Scotiae*, pp. 285-309.

¹¹ Miner, p. 48.

run” approach.¹² The charge, made in a footnote, is that M’Crie in his *Life of Knox* not only failed to condemn but “piously” concealed that it was on pain of death that the Act of Parliament of 24th August 1560 prohibited the mass. M’Crie, it seems, was trying to hide the persecuting spirit of the reformers, but Robertson had caught him out. On turning up M’Crie, however, one sees that the charge is based on nothing more than a trifle, which Robertson has uncharitably misinterpreted and magnified. The Act of Parliament was quite a long one, with pain of death being appointed only for the third transgression (and never, in fact, inflicted), and M’Crie was summarising at that stage. Later on, however, M’Crie twice takes up the subject of capital punishment for idolatry, and plainly indicates his disapproval; but Robertson had missed this.¹³

Cosmo Innes says that Robertson had “not much sympathy with the Covenanters and Puritans in church matters”, which is confirmed by an extraordinary comment on James Gordon of Rothiemay.¹⁴ This occurs in his joint preface with George Grub to Gordon’s *History of Scots Affairs from 1637 to 1641*, which they edited for the Spalding Club in 1841. Their comment is that Gordon “will be found, on a candid examination, to possess the . . . qualities of correctness and impartiality”.¹⁵ How they can claim “impartiality” for someone with such a glaring dislike for the Covenanters is astonishing. David Laing is far more accurate when he says, presumably in response to Grub and Robertson, that Gordon “sets everything connected with the Covenanters in an odious and ridiculous light”.¹⁶ One uncompleted project of Robertson’s life was to write a history of the “Aberdeen Doctors” of the first part of the seventeenth century;¹⁷

¹² Robertson, *Concilia Scotiae*, p. clxiv n.

¹³ See T. M’Crie, *Life of John Knox* (Edinburgh, 1855), pp. 162, 175-8, 226-7. See also D. Hay Fleming, *Reformation in Scotland* (London, 1910), chapter 12, pp. 429-476 for numerous pertinent considerations. For other attacks in the same style by Robertson – on Robert Wodrow, Sabbatarians, Calvin, and David Calderwood – see *Concilia Scotiae*, p. xii and *Inventaires*, pp. lxxix, cxli, cxxvi.

¹⁴ [G. Grub and C. Innes], “Concilia Scotiae”, *North British Review*, New series, Vol. 8, No. 93 (1867), pp. 63-93 (see p. 68). For the authorship of this review, see Miner, p. 52 fn 5, and *Illustrations*, p. xxvi.

¹⁵ J. Gordon, *History of Scots Affairs from 1637 to 1641*, J. Robertson and G. Grub (eds.), (3 vols., Spalding Club, Aberdeen, 1841), Vol. 1, p. 44. This was the first publication issued by the Spalding Club. The same extraordinary claim about Gordon is repeated by Grub in *Illustrations*, p. ix. From the account of his friend William Walker, Grub was besotted with Charles 1, *Three Churchmen: Sketches and Reminiscences* (Edinburgh, 1893), p. 268.

¹⁶ J. Forbes, *Certain Records Touching the Estate of the Kirk in the Years 1605 and 1606*, D. Laing (ed.), (Wodrow Society, Edinburgh, 1846), p. liii.

¹⁷ Watt, “Biographical Memoir”, p. xxxvi.

but this would have necessitated a discussion of the Covenanters, and it is hard to see, going by Robertson's other writings, how he could have given any account of them but a parody.¹⁸

2. The Puzzle

The puzzle with Joseph Robertson is to reconcile his views just mentioned with some unsigned articles that he wrote for the *Aberdeen Observer* in 1837 on the subject of the reformation in Aberdeen.¹⁹ These articles were ardently Protestant and supportive of the Reformation, and had nothing of a high Episcopal flavour about them. Indeed, in the absence of any other information, one would probably have thought that their author was a Presbyterian. When they were republished in book form fifty years later, the editor of the *Scottish Notes and Queries*, himself a Presbyterian, wondered at their unlikely authorship and described it as "an occasion of surprise to find an old friend [Robertson] play a new role". Robertson, he said approvingly, "fairly revels in 'that memorable and blessed event' – the Reformation. He is so dazzled with the blaze of a reform achieved, as to get out of touch and out of temper with all who will not adopt his notion of its finality."²⁰

The Protestantism of the articles can be seen in their opening words:

The subtle policy of the Church of Rome disdains no means, however crooked, by which it may work out its pernicious ends. It courts equally the favour of despotic governments and the alliance of turbulent demagogues. At the same moment that, in other kingdoms, it lends itself to strengthen the power of arbitrary rulers, in this country it makes common cause with those who seek the overthrow of ancient institutions. By its very essence, the most intolerant and persecuting of all churches, it comes forward

¹⁸ See, for example, his piece on Andrew Cant in J. Robertson, *Deliciae Literariae: a new volume of table-talk* (London, 1840), pp. 17-27; and the references to the Covenanters in *Book of Bon-Accord*, pp. 58, 60, 61, etc.

¹⁹ The articles were four in number and appeared between April and June 1837. They were reprinted posthumously with the title *The Reformation in Aberdeen* (Aberdeen, 1887). The *Aberdeen Observer* ran from March 1829 until September 1837, when it was succeeded by the *Aberdeen Constitutional*. The religious outlook of the *Observer* was that of Church of Scotland Moderatism.

²⁰ *Scottish Notes and Queries*, 1st Series, Vol. 1 (1887-8), p. 125. The editor was Alex. M. Munro, who was a member at Gilcomston Free Church of Scotland.

as the champion of religious freedom; and such is the infatuation of certain classes of Protestant Dissenters, that its hollow and ill-disguised professions have met an implicit belief.²¹

What is in mind here is the Voluntary Controversy of the late 1830s. The Voluntaries, according to Robertson, were so besotted in their opposition to the establishment of the Church of Scotland that they were regretting even the Reformation itself, because it had resulted in the Church of Scotland being in that position; and the Romanists were taking full advantage of the situation.²² The Voluntaries were abandoning Protestantism; and the great need for Protestants was to be remembering or learning afresh what a blessing the Reformation was.

It is in the same deluded spirit . . . that, in a Protestant country, and by Protestant writers, those who abjure the errors of Popery, to embrace a purer faith, are branded as “apostates” and “renegades”. There wants but another step to apply these epithets to Luther, Zuinglius, Calvin, Latimer, Knox, and the other fathers of the Reformation. With a certain class, indeed, that memorable and blessed event is no longer an object of love or admiration; they first abandoned the principles of its great authors when they leagued themselves for the destruction of a national church, and they would almost seem content to whistle the remainder to the wind, if by so doing their ultimate object could be obtained. But if hence the Voluntaries seek to veil the enormities of the Church of Rome, assuredly it is the urgent duty of the friends of Protestant Establishments in these kingdoms to tear off the cloak which hides her iniquity, and to cherish the principles, the virtues, and the memory of those venerable men by whom we were emancipated from her intolerable yoke, and corrupt doctrines.

The History of the Reformation should, at all times, indeed, but especially at the present juncture, be in the hands of every Protestant, that, by familiar intercourse with its pages, his knowledge of its tenets may be purified and extended, and his faith in his principles strengthened and supported.²³

²¹ *Reformation in Aberdeen*, pp. 1-2.

²² The similarity of position between the Voluntaries and the Romanists was widely observed; see, for example, “A few features of resemblance between the Papist and the Voluntary Seceder”, *The Church of Scotland Magazine*, Vol. 3 (1836), pp. 130-5.

²³ *Reformation in Aberdeen*, pp. 2-4.

This vigorous Protestantism continues throughout the book. Pre-Reformation relics and miracles are mocked; the immorality of the priests is exposed; a series of public lectures on Protestantism which were being delivered by Glasgow ministers is heartily commended; Knox and M'Crie are praised; George Chalmers is dismissed, and his dislike for the Reformation declared to be "one of his many absurd prejudices"; and Thomas Chalmers' evangelical views on Church Extension are quoted with approval. The whole final article is devoted to an exposure of Rinuccini's "life" of Archangel Leslie.²⁴

The entire series is highly puzzling, because it seems to be so much at variance with Robertson's outlook at other periods of his life. There is no doubt that he wrote the articles, notwithstanding their anonymity, because there was no one else in 1837 who knew half the things that they mention.²⁵ Nor can the Protestantism in them be attributed to changes made by an editor because so often it is supported by erudite references which no one else could have supplied. In vain one turns for help to his biographers, but not one of them even mentions the articles. Biographical material for Robertson is scanty at the best, and particularly for the years 1833 to 1839. It is not even clear where he was living in 1837. His other biographers place him in Edinburgh from 1833 to 1839; but Aeneas J. G. Mackay in *Dictionary of National Biography*, relying on "personal knowledge", corrects Watts' 1891 "Biographical Memoir" and has Robertson, after a short and unremunerative visit to Edinburgh in 1833, supporting himself in Aberdeen by writing for the *Aberdeen Observer* (which he mistakenly calls the *Aberdeen Courier*). Why, then, did Robertson write these articles in 1837?

3. Suggestions towards a resolution

It is evident that Robertson's religious views changed in the years after 1837. George Grub had known him since about 1830, and his memoir of him does not mention any change, but nevertheless something must have occurred.²⁶ There was no change in his Episcopalianism or in his anti-Evangelicalism. From his pre-1837 writings, he appears to have had a distaste for Evangelicalism all his life, and presumably he was an Episcopalian from his childhood. He was certainly one by the early

²⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 8-15, 16-21, 26, 46, 50, 55-6, 62, 70-2, 73-86.

²⁵ For another proof, see "Note" prefixed to *Reformation in Aberdeen*.

²⁶ *Illustrations*, pp. iv, xxx.

1830s. Among his earliest published writings is a piece on Bishop John Skinner in which he describes Skinner's transition from Presbyterianism to Episcopalianism:

The severe austerity of the Presbyterians could not fail to disgust one of his jocose temperament. Nor could the apostolical purity and simplicity, the fierce and ardent zeal, the martyr-like persecutions of the Episcopal Church fail to excite the sympathy and admiration of a romantic and poetry-sick youth like Skinner.²⁷

The change, therefore, was not in his general position but in his opposition to Romanism, which declined markedly in the years after 1837. For this, we would suggest three factors. The first of these was the foundation of the Spalding Club in December 1839 which brought him into contact with Roman Catholic antiquaries such as Bishop James Kyle, Father George Griffin, W. B. D. D. Turnbull, and a man called Mitchell.²⁸ It is highly likely that these contacts modified his views on the evils and dangers of Romanism. In December 1839 he was still a foe of Rome and was warning readers of the *Aberdeen Constitutional* against Bishop James Kyle:

Let the *Herald* remember that there is a dignitary of the Roman Church at this hour, exercising Episcopal power and influence in this and the neighbouring shires, on no other ground than this, that he is the deputy . . . of the chief of a continental state.²⁹

Within less than two years, he was quoting in a scholarly footnote from a manuscript in the possession of Kyle.³⁰ By February 1844, Griffin could write to Turnbull, "I am half-tempted to think you are acquainted with . . . my worthy friend Mr Joseph Robertson. . . . If so let me entreat you to infuse into him your own love of Catholicity." A month later Griffin wrote:

Engrained Episcopalian tho' Robertson be, yet his ingenuousness causes him to make concessions of the utmost moment. Once he

²⁷ "Aberdonian Worthies: IV. Bishop John Skinner", *Aberdeen Magazine*, Vol. 2 (1832), pp. 171-7 (see p. 172). Robertson's contributions to the *Aberdeen Magazine* in 1831-2 are listed in *Illustrations*, p. v.

²⁸ Miner, pp. 43-47; Timothy Duffy, "George A. Griffin: a priest among antiquaries", *Innes Review*, Vol. 27 (1976), pp. 127-161 (especially pp. 139, 147).

²⁹ *Aberdeen Constitutional*, 10th December 1839.

³⁰ Gordon, *History of Scots Affairs*, Vol. 1, p. 45n.

astonished me by saying, that if he were in France, he would go to his Confession viz where he was not known, he meantime remaining an Episcopalian. I replied, I hoped he would screw up his courage to try the experiment in this Country, & I had no doubt but that like the Lutheran Queen Ann of Denmark . . . he would rise from his knees a Catholic.³¹

By 1849, and probably long before, Robertson regarded the sort of Protestant views that he had expressed in 1837 as “shockingly illiberal”. Thomas Babington Macaulay’s *History of England* had been published at the end of 1848, and Robertson had reviewed it unfavourably in the *Glasgow Constitutional*. Discussing this review in a letter to his boyhood friend John Hill Burton, he said:

I can easily understand how Macaulay’s book should be extremely popular with a large class of Tories – perhaps the largest class of all – those namely who share his shocking illiberality in judging of the church of Rome, and partake more or less of his Puritannical leanings, and his leaven of old Orange bigotry.³²

By 1851, the Roman Catholic priest George Griffin was hopeful that Robertson would convert to Romanism, but nothing came of it.³³ In 1854 he described Robertson as a “Puseyite”: “Robertson introduc[ed] me to his wife and daughter in his usual Puseyite fashion as a Priest of the Church of Rome.”³⁴

Griffin’s description of Robertson as a Puseyite identifies a second factor which seems to have modified Robertson’s views of Romanism. It was an era when many people were taking the same route as Pusey and were moving from hostility to the Church of Rome to a position of tolerance and sympathy with much of her teaching. Puseyism came flooding into the Scottish Episcopal Church in the late 1830s.³⁵ Robertson did not immediately embrace it, and in July 1840 he was still equating it with Romanism, but he may have changed his mind soon

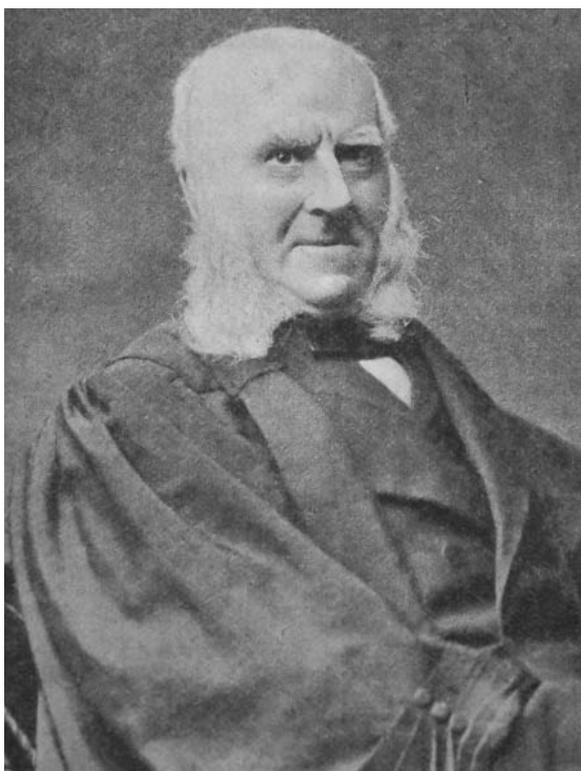
³¹ Duffy, p. 148.

³² Miner, p. 41.

³³ Duffy, p. 148.

³⁴ *ibid.*, p. 149.

³⁵ See, e.g., Stewart J. Brown, “Scotland and the Oxford Movement”, in S. J. Brown and P. B. Nockles, *The Oxford Movement: Europe and the Wider World, 1830-1930* (Cambridge, 2012), pp. 56-77.



George Grub.

afterwards.³⁶ The case of the evangelical D. T. K. Drummond in 1842 had a polarizing effect in the Scottish Episcopal Church, and there is no doubt which side Robertson would have been on.³⁷ His friend George Grub, with whom he was in close contact all his life, was an enthusiastic Puseyite, and possibly it was his influence that won Robertson over.³⁸

A third factor, however, was that Robertson was an “ardent Tory”,³⁹ and that following “Catholic Emancipation” in 1829, the more extreme Tories were anti-Roman Catholic for political reasons.⁴⁰ There

is little doubt that it was this that was driving Robertson’s Protestantism in the period 1837-39.⁴¹ Soon after he became editor of the *Aberdeen Constitutional*, fourteen of the Aberdeen ministers organised a series of lectures against Romanism, a step that was bitterly opposed by the liberal (or infidel) *Aberdeen Herald* but zealously defended by Robertson.⁴² He and James Adam, the editor of the *Herald*, held weekly sparring matches in their editorials on the subject of Romanism; and it is evident that political considerations weighed strongly with both of

³⁶ *Aberdeen Constitutional*, 24th July 1840.

³⁷ The Drummond case was essentially between the evangelical Drummond and Puseyites who wanted to get rid of him, see D. Ford, “D. T. K. Drummond and the foundation of St Thomas’s Church”, *Book of the Old Edinburgh Club*, New Series, Vol. 4 (1997), pp. 51-67 (especially p. 53); P. Meldrum, *Conscience and Compromise: Forgotten Evangelicals of Nineteenth-century Scotland* (Paternoster, 2006), chapter 8.

³⁸ Walker, *Three Churchmen*, pp. 205, 222, 268-9.

³⁹ *Illustrations*, p. iv.

⁴⁰ See John Wolfe, *The Protestant Crusade in Great Britain, 1829-1860* (Oxford, 1991), chapter 3.

⁴¹ Protestantism was the very “watchword” of the *Aberdeen Constitutional*, according to *Fraser’s Magazine*, Vol. 18, September 1838, p. 335.

⁴² For some of the background to this, see John Smith, “Defending the Reformation in Aberdeen, 1829-1840”, *The Bulwark*, April-June 2011, pp. 15-21.

them. As Adam said on one occasion, Romanism was the one religious subject on which Robertson felt free to write. His *Constitutional* readership consisted largely of Church of Scotland conservatives who were deeply divided on matters like Patronage and the Veto Act, so he did not dare to touch these things. The one thing that they agreed on was their opposition to Romanism.⁴³ From January 1840, the Marnoch case and the deposing of the Presbytery of Strathbogie completely overshadowed the issue of Romanism in Aberdeen, and both the *Herald* and the *Constitutional* turned their guns unsparingly on the Evangelical party in the Church of Scotland. Thereafter, Robertson's opposition to Romanism dwindled away.

4. Conclusion

We have seen that Robertson's views on Romanism and the Reformation changed radically during the course of his life, and that what he wrote in 1837 he would have denounced as a reviewer in 1849. We have suggested that the cause of this change was partly increased contact with Roman Catholics through his historical research, but also partly changing religious fashion (Puseyism) and partly politics (Toryism). No doubt Robertson regarded himself as an objective historian, and yet he was subject to the influences, political and religious of his time, and these had a striking effect on his historical judgement. The same influences are at work today, and modern historians are more swayed by movements such as political correctness and secularization than some of them seem to realise or admit. The evangelical Christian is subject to these influences as well, but he has the advantage that he is trying to measure all periods of history by the same unchanging Word of God rather than by the fickle opinions of his generation.

⁴³ *Aberdeen Herald*, 14th December 1839.

Short Note: Lining out the Psalm in Tìree

ALAN M. BOYD

*“Tha cuimhn’ am air an loidhn a bhith air a togail an Eaglais na
Mòinteach mar a bha mi òg”*

“I remember the line being given out in Hylipol Church when I was young”

Mrs. Seònaid Brown (Seònaid Sheumais Ealasdair),
Balephuìl, Tìree; born 1934

The practice of putting out of the line in Gaelic psalmody ceased surprisingly early in Tìree, in comparison with the islands further north where it is still practised.¹ In this note we endeavour to look at some of the factors which may have led to this early demise.

1. The demise of the line in Tìree

The traditional form of Gaelic psalmody in which the precentor chants out each line (with the exception of the first two lines of the first verse which have already been read out by the minister) before it is sung collectively by the congregation, has long since died out in Tìree. The last natives of the island to have been exponents of this style of predominantly Presbyterian worship were Neil Mackinnon (*Niall Eòghainn*), Moss; Hugh Macintyre (*Eòghann a’ Ghobhainn*), Gott; Archibald MacEachern (*An Gobhainn Beag/Gilleasbaig Beag*), Cornaigbeg; John Munn, Heanish; and Hector Campbell (*Eachann Dhòmhnail Eachainn*),

¹ For background information, see Norman Campbell, *Reading the Line* (Stornoway, 2005); Norman Campbell, “Giving out the line: a cross-Atlantic comparison of two Presbyterian cultures”, *Scottish Reformation Society Historical Journal*, Vol. 1 (2011), pp. 241-265.

Cornaigbeg. These were the last Tìree Gaelic precentors in the full sense of the word.²

The regular putting out of the line came to an end in Tìree in the mid-to-late 1930s.³ The practice may have lingered on at funeral occasions⁴ but, unlike in some areas, it does not appear to have been maintained subsequently at family worship or in private devotions. In the 1950s and 1960s, however, the late Allan MacDougall (*An Dùghallach*), headmaster of Cornaig School, and himself a competent Gaelic precentor, kept the lined-out practice “limping along” in the Tìree Church of Scotland congregations. MacDougall was, however, a native of Oban, where he had been brought up in the Free Church tradition, and it was with a degree of difficulty that he sustained the practice of lined Gaelic psalmody in Tìree as he was unable to get the necessary vocal support from the pew.⁵

By the 1950s, traditional lined Gaelic psalmody was a thing of the past within the native Tìree community; indeed, to the present day in Tìree, traditional Gaelic psalmody tends to be exclusively associated with “Lewis Free Church” tradition, despite the fact that Gaelic congregations of the Church of Scotland in the Western Isles and Skye also line-out their psalms. In the Church of Scotland, United Free (UF), and Baptist congregations in Tìree, Gaelic singing from the time of the Second World War at least, was unaccompanied (i.e. with no instrumental back-up) and was led at a slow “traditional” pace by a precentor, but without the line being given out. The men that precented seem not to have learned the art of traditional Gaelic psalmody which, in the main, passed away with their fathers’ generation. Such individuals included Donald Macintyre (*Dòmhnall a’ Ghobhainn*), Gott (born 1920); Alex Hector MacPhail, Cornaigmore (died 1984); Duncan Mackinnon (*Donuchadh Ealastair*), Balephuill (died 1954); John (*Check*) Sinclair, Balemartine; Hugh MacEachern (*Eòghann a’ Ghobhainn*), Cornaigbeg (died c. 1981); John MacFadyen (*Iain Ruadh*), Barrapol (died 2004); and, on occasions, Hector Campbell (*Eachann Lachainn*),

² Information by courtesy of Mr. Alex Maclean (*mac Iain Ealastair Iain*), Cornaigbeg/Oban, and Mr. Donald Macintyre, Gott.

³ Information by courtesy of Prof. Donald E. Meek, Caolas, and Mr. Donald Macintyre, Gott.

⁴ Information by courtesy of Mrs. Mary Ann MacDonald, Heanish/Gott.

⁵ Information by courtesy of John MacDonald (*Seonaidh Mhurchaidh*), Locheport, North Uist, who lived and worked in Tìree during the 1960s.

Cornaigbeg (died *c.* 1993) and Iain Johnston, Heanish (died *c.* 2003). These were the last generation of native Tiree precentors in unaccompanied Gaelic public worship, but with the psalm being sung “straight through”.

It may be added, however, that these men kept to the traditional repertoire of common-metre psalm tunes used in lined-out psalmody, as they would have heard from their fathers’ and grandfathers’ generation. The following common-metre psalm tunes were used in the latter “straight-through” style of Gaelic precenting in Tiree: *Ballerma, Bangor, Coleshill, Dundee, Evan, French, Kilmarnock, Martyrdom, London New, Montrose, Moravia, St. David, St. Paul, Stroudwater, Torwood, Walsall*. Incidentally, the *tune* in Tiree was known as the *sèist* as opposed to the more usual word *fonn*. And also of note is the use of the form *Didòmhnaich* in Tiree in lieu of *Là na Sàbaid/An t-Sàbaid* as heard in the Presbyterian north west. Although not traditionally a Roman Catholic island, could the habitual use of *Didòmhnaich* in Tiree be seen as a remnant from pre-Reformation times?

It would appear that it was in 1963 that Gaelic hymns were introduced on a formal basis into public worship in the Tiree Church of Scotland, with the Glasgow Highland Mission’s “red” *Gaelic Hymnbook* being employed for the purpose.⁶ This coincided with the commencement of the Rev. William J. MacLeod’s (of Breakish, Skye) eight-year incumbency in Tiree. This use of Gaelic hymns was unheard of in Presbyterian congregations in the Western Isles and Skye, where exclusive psalmody was the norm in the Gaelic medium (and indeed still is in the majority of denominations in which Gaelic worship still takes place). Before this time, it would appear that the Church of Scotland in Tiree principally used psalms and paraphrases in the services, but that Gaelic hymns were sung frequently at fellowship meetings and “socials”, and perhaps more so within Tiree’s Baptist congregation. Such innovations also witnessed the utilization of secular Gaelic tunes like *An Eala Bhàn, An t-Eilean Muileach*, and *Hi horo ’s na horo eile*. These, again, were unheard of in public and family worship in the Presbyterian congregations of the North West. No doubt these newer tunes came in when lined-out psalmody was already on the wane in Tiree, but their general influence was hardly conducive to the survival of traditional Gaelic psalmody in the island.

⁶ Information by courtesy of Mr. Alex MacArthur (*Ailig a’ Chiobair*), Heylipol.

Gaelic worship itself effectively came to an end in the Tiree Baptist Church in 1965.⁷ It was kept going for another decade or so in the Church of Scotland congregations, with the Sabbath evening worship normally being kept in Gaelic until 1971 when the Rev. William MacLeod left Tiree for Kirkintilloch. For a number of years following, Gaelic services were maintained on a less regular basis with resident and itinerant Church of Scotland missionaries filling the breach at various times, along with the occasional visiting Gaelic-speaking minister who was able to give pulpit supply. There was also a short hiccup of revival in regular Gaelic worship in the Tiree Church of Scotland congregation in the early 1990s during the incumbency of the Rev. Neil Mackinnon from North Uist, albeit with hymns and organ accompaniment.

2. The influence of Tiree's bardic heritage

One aspect which may, ironically, have contributed to the demise of the giving out of the line in Tiree was the island's prolific bardic tradition. In addition to the celebrated compositions of Peter Grant and Dugald Buchanan were the Gaelic hymns of Duncan MacDougall, a native of the Ross of Mull and brother of the Mull bardess Mary MacDonald who composed the well-known Gaelic hymn *Leanabh an Àigh* – "Child in a Manger", sung to the tune *Bunessan*. MacDougall, a schoolmaster and later resident pastor in the Baptist Church, laboured in Tiree from 1824 to around 1850, following on from the pioneering work of Dugald Sinclair from Mid-Argyll who first visited the island in 1814. MacDougall published a collection of his own hymns in 1841.

Roughly contemporary with MacDougall and also living in Tiree was Archibald Farquharson from Strathardle in Perthshire. Farquharson, a Congregationalist minister, composed a number of Gaelic hymns which were published in 1866. A further collection was published in 1868, followed by combined editions under the title *Laoidhean Shioin* in 1870 and 1924. Many of Farquharson's compositions were set to popular Scots and Gaelic melodies, and used during his own time in Tiree which lasted from 1832 to 1878.⁸ Again, unlike Tiree, such secular tunes were not used when singing Gaelic hymns in the Presbyterian

⁷ See Donald E. Meek, *Island Harvest: A History of Tiree Baptist Church, 1838-1988* (Edinburgh, 1988), p. 49.

⁸ Margaret A. Mackay, "Brothers in Mission: Alexander Farquharson of Cape Breton and Archibald Farquharson of Tiree", *Records of the Scottish Church History Society*, Vol. 37 (2007), pp. 145-81 (see pp. 165-71).

districts of the North West. The church that Farquharson used in Cornaigbeg, now a ruin, was known in Tiree until recently as *Eaglais MhicFhearchair*.⁹

The compositions of MacDougall and Farquharson were followed in the late nineteenth and earlier twentieth century by a proliferation of hymns with choruses composed locally by a number of natives of Tiree such as Donald Sinclair (*Dòmhnall mac Iain 'ic Chaluim*), Barrapol; Neil MacDonald (*Niall Iain*), Kilmoluag; Angus and Dugald Maclean (*Ionghas is Dùghall Iain Bhàin*), Balephuill; Hugh Henderson, Balemartine; Archibald MacDonald (*Eàirdsidh Ailein*), Balephuill; and Rev. Allan MacDougall, Caolas. MacDougall had a number of his Gaelic hymns published around 1928 under the title of *Laoidhean Molaidh*. And, within living memory, we have even more recent compositions such as, among others, the late Alex Hector MacPhail's *Togaibh fonn air Ìosa Crìosd*.

As highlighted by Professor Donald Meek, the island's strong bardic tradition, where "poetry was on the lips of the people", lent itself most readily to the composition of verse pertaining to spiritual matters, with women also being adept at doing so.¹⁰ And with such a rich pool of locally composed hymns at hand, coupled with a post-1900 lack of Free Church restraint, there was likely to have been, in the ecclesiastical context of Tiree at any rate, a considerable "parochial" element at large, with a strong temptation to abandon exclusive psalmody (and its associated lining-out) in favour of these more modern "home-grown" lyrical works.

The changes, however, were not without opposition, even at a local level. As early as the "revival" of 1874, centered round Tiree's Balemartine Baptist Church, an hostility to innovations in public worship appears in the poetry of John Maclean, the Balemartine bard (1827-95). Maclean vented his feelings in the satire entitled *An Creideamh Dubh* ("The Dark Faith"); among other things, he took a dim view of the new forms of verse composed under the influence of the Moody and Sankey campaigns which had been conducted throughout mainland Scotland shortly beforehand. These campaigns were regarded by many at the time as being under a heavy Arminian influence, and the bard's poetry shows that a break was taking place with the past when lined exclusive psalmody was the norm in public worship.¹¹

⁹ Information from the late William MacNeill (*Uilleam an Tàilleir*), Barrapol.

¹⁰ Meek, p. 24.

¹¹ Rev. Hector Cameron, *Na Bàird Thirisdeach* (Stirling, 1932), pp. 178-180.

It is of note that Tiree's most famous bard, another John Maclean (*Iain mac Ailein/Bàrd Thighearna Chola*), composed many hymns after emigrating to Nova Scotia in 1819, and these were published in 1835 and again posthumously in 1880. Maclean was a Presbyterian and came out with the Free Church in 1843 shortly before his death in 1848, but in exile from his native Tiree.

Perhaps the best known hymn from the latter era of hymn composition in Tiree was *Ged tha mi bochd san fhàsach seo*, composed by Donald Sinclair of Barrapol, and no doubt based on the nineteenth century hymn *The Old, Old Story*. Sinclair's composition remained popular, being invariably sung at funeral occasions right through to the late 1980s, and usually led unaccompanied by the late John MacFadyen of Baile Mhic Bheotha, Barrapol. Locally, this hymn was always sung as "S toigh leam an t-seann t-seann sgeul sin", even when read out from the literary form contained in the Glasgow Highland Mission's hymnary, which has the standard grammatical rendering of "S toigh leam an seann seann sgeul sin". It should, however, be added that when the funeral was from the home (as was customary), it was the norm in Tiree to sing just the one psalm "straight through", and in Gaelic. As was the case generally everywhere, the funeral occasion was traditionally regarded as being an act of family worship which necessitated only the one singing. The present writer remembers the late Alex Hector MacPhail leading Psalm 121 in Gaelic to the tune *French* at the "home" funeral of Donald Sinclair (*Dòmhnall Chalum Bàin*) in West Hynish in April 1975. Donald Macintyre similarly led the singing of Psalm 23 to *Coleshill* at the funeral of Ella Donald (*bean Ghòrdain*) in Vault in April 1986. But at the funeral of Ellen MacDonald (*Eilidh Sheumais Bhàin*), Balephuill, which took place in Balemartine Baptist Church in April 1972, Psalm 23 (in Gaelic) was, later on in the proceedings, followed by a "solo" of Tiree's traditional hymn, *Ged tha mi bochd san fhàsach seo*, sung by the late Hugh MacEachern, Cornaigbeg.

3. The ecclesiastical set-up in Tiree

Being in the main Baptists, the local composers of Gaelic hymnody did not necessarily embrace the Regulative Principle in the public worship of God (with its insistence on exclusive psalmody, whether in Gaelic or in English). The same, however, was equally true of the Congregationalist and United Free congregations in Tiree, together with the Parish Church

itself. Indeed, throughout the nineteenth century, the Church of Scotland congregations in Tiree were served by Moderate ministers such as Rev. Neil Maclean (*Maighistir Niall* – served 1817-1859) and the renowned folklorist Rev. J. Gregorson Campbell (served 1861-1891).¹² Such men were unlikely to be zealous for purity of worship.

In the Free Church of Scotland, the well-known Rev. Donald T. Mackay (*MacAidh Thiridhe*) took the Tiree congregation of the Free Church into the Union of 1900, and continued there under the banner of the newly-formed United Free Church until 1911, when he left Tiree for Plockton in his own native district of Lochalsh.¹³ That Mackay did not hold to the Regulative Principle is borne out by a visit to the Uig district of Lewis sometime in the early twentieth century, at which Mackay asked a man in a prayer meeting to lead the praise by singing a (non-inspired) hymn. Not surprisingly, this caused no small consternation to all present, and was never repeated.¹⁴ Presumably the same was going on in his own home congregation in Tiree at that time, with hymns probably being the norm in the prayer-meeting at least. And if such was the practice within the UF fold, it was highly likely to have been the same in the other Tiree denominations of the day, and no more so than in the Baptist congregation. At the Union of 1929, the TireeUF congregation remained in the separate United Free Church instead of joining the Church of Scotland and continued in its places of worship in Kirkapol and Scarinish until around 1966. Since 1900 at least, the island was thus bereft of a conservative Presbyterian witness to act as a restraint on the introduction of more liberal modes of public worship.

The effect of all this was to produce in the island a certain degree of autonomous “Tirisdeach” ecumenism across a total of four denominations which may, in itself, have paved the way for an increased laxity in modes of public worship. The influence of the Faith Mission cannot be discounted, with itinerant “pilgrims” (often young women) being accorded a preaching role within the Tiree Baptist Church and elsewhere. In the Church of Scotland congregation, women were also given a relatively early and free access to the pulpit, leading up to a resident “deaconess” being stationed in the island during the 1970s.

¹² Meek, pp. 5-6.

¹³ An t-Urr Tormod Dòmhnallach, *MacAidh Thiridhe* (Sruighlea, n.d.), p. 6.

¹⁴ Information by courtesy of Miss Seonag MacLennan, Bhaltois, Lewis.

Another significant influence in Tìree must surely be the strong links that the island has had from time immemorial with the city of Glasgow, and especially with St. Columba Gaelic Church of Scotland in St. Vincent Street. A number of Tìree men were ministers there, including the scholarly Rev. Dr. John Maclean, D.D. (*mac Ailein Mhòir a bh' anns a' Chlachan*) and Rev. Alexander Mackinnon, B.D., Ph.D. (*Ealastair Seònaid*). St. Columba's was uniquely liberal among the various Gaelic congregations in Glasgow in its mode of worship, which included hymn-singing with organ accompaniment, complete with a Gaelic choir. In tandem with the secular-based Tìree Association founded in 1900, St. Columba's acted as a social gathering place for many of the Tìree exiles resident in and around Glasgow, and this may have had a pervasive liberalising influence on the home parish church, in both Hylipol and Kirkapol. Not for nothing has St. Columba's described itself as being "An Comunn Gàidhealach at prayer".¹⁵

4. Epilogue

It is known that Gaelic psalmody classes were held throughout Tìree during the latter part of the nineteenth century and possibly into the early twentieth century. Donald Mackechnie (*Dòmhnall Bàn mac Iain 'ic Eòghainn*, 1846-1923) of Kenovay was for a number of years "employed by the Church of Scotland in teaching psalmody at Balemartin, Heylipol, Cornaig and Kirkapol. His classes were well attended, and his enthusiasm made little of the many weary miles he trudged, often on stormy nights, to distant parts of the island."¹⁶ Although not actually stated, these classes were presumably conducted in the full sense, i.e. with the line being given out. The evidence points, therefore, to a solid tradition of Gaelic psalmody in Tìree. Indeed, Tìree even "exported" the practice elsewhere, and one of the few exponents of lined-out Gaelic psalmody in the island of Barra was a Donald MacFadyen from Tìree who was married in Borve, and who died there around the 1930s.¹⁷ Given this well established tradition, it is all the more surprising that the giving-out of the line died out so early in Tìree in comparison to the other Gaelic-speaking islands and mainland districts further north.

¹⁵ Ian R. MacDonald, *Glasgow's Gaelic Churches* (Edinburgh, 1995), p. 66.

¹⁶ Cameron, p. 209.

¹⁷ Information from the late Mr. Angus MacDonald, Scolpaig, North Uist.

A similar early demise occurred in the Portnahaven district of Islay where lining-out in Gaelic worship was again abandoned in the late 1930s in both the Free Church and Church of Scotland congregations. George Anderson and Duncan Ferguson, respectively, were the last surviving traditional Gaelic precentors there.¹⁸

Ironically, Gaelic lined-out psalmody survived much longer in neighbouring Coll, which was always considered as more anglicised than Tiree. There the Free Church remained intact in 1900, unlike in Tiree where the congregation went in with the United Free Church. Until the early 1970s, Mr. Hector Mackinnon (*Eachann Nèill Iain*, one of the twins) of Sòrasdail, Coll continued to precent in the traditional manner. His repertoire consisted of the two tunes, *Kilmarnock* and *Coleshill*, which sufficed for the usual service in which three psalms are sung.¹⁹

Needless to say, the “giving out of the line” died out in Tiree before the advent of the tape-recorder, so there are no recordings in existence of this now extinct aspect of the island’s culture. There is, however, at least one recording of unaccompanied “straight-through” Gaelic psalmody which is preserved in the archives of the School of Scottish Studies. This was recorded during a Gaelic service in Hylipol Church during the 1970s. The tune is *St. David* and the late Alex Hector MacPhail, Clachan, is leading the praise.

Although, as highlighted by Norman Campbell, the mode of “lined-out” psalmody has no robust scriptural warrant as such, it, however, cannot be denied that the practice of abandoning the line can be considered as being symptomatic of a general spiritual declension in Highland society at large during the early twentieth century.²⁰ Neither can the early abandonment of the line in Tiree, as in other districts of Argyllshire, be divorced from the general, but albeit very gradual, moving away from the Gaelic-medium in public worship. It is surely no mere coincidence that anglicisation has, throughout the decades, invariably been witnessed by a general secularisation, which, in turn, has been accompanied by a dwindling away of customs and traditions which also include the practice of lined-out psalmody. And, to the present day, this process continues throughout our Highlands and Islands.

¹⁸ Information from Mrs. Flora McAllister, Port an Rèidhle, Portnahaven, Islay.

¹⁹ Information by courtesy of Capt. Niall MacFarlane, Coll and Edinburgh.

²⁰ Campbell, “Giving out the line”, p. 265.

ADDENDA AND CORRIGENDA

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p. 77. The Doctorate of Divinity awarded to Alexander Dyce Davidson in 1854 was not connected with his *Lectures Expository and Practical on the Book of Esther* because these were not published until 1859.

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pp. 21-2, f.n. 93. The 1958 official guide book did not mention the possibility that the tombstone was that of James I and Joan Beaufort either; see W. D. Simpson, *A Short History of Saint John's Kirk of Perth* (n.p., 1958), p. 42.

p. 114. The word "There" is missing at the beginning of line 1.

p. 141, 2nd para., line 9. The words "they way" should read "the way".

p. 254, 2nd para. Rev. Malcolm MacSween continued in the Oban charge until his death in 1978.

p. 281, f.n. 12. The third volume of Dabney's *Discussions* was not published by the Banner of Truth Trust until 1982.

We are grateful to those that have made these observations

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