

Scottish Paraphrases: a Forgotten Episode.

IN the early decades of last century the General Assembly had a Committee at work upon an effort to improve the Psalmody of the Church by "enlarging the Collection of Translations and Paraphrases from sacred Scripture." Within the twenty years from 1807 onwards, five reports upon the Committee's activities and three drafts of the result of their labours were submitted, and one draft—that of 1814—was sent down to Presbyteries for their consideration. So far were the results from proving satisfactory, however, that in 1827 a new Committee, though with the same Convener, was appointed. The members were, as the Assembly minute names them:— "Dr Baird, Dr A. Brown, Dr David Ritchie, Mr Lundie (at Kelso), Mr Charles McCombie at Lumphanan, Dr A. Thomson, Professor Ferrie, Dr Chalmers, Robert Paul, Esq.; Dr Baird, Convener."⁽¹⁾ A year later, Dr Stevenson Macgill, then Moderator, Dr Wilson, and Mr Gibbon were added. "The former Committee," wrote McCombie after his appointment, "have reported that they have been able to do nothing. Unless those who can forward the measure bestir themselves, the present Committee will draw out a sleepy life and die an inglorious death." The latter part at least of his fear was, in the event, to be fulfilled.

Recently the National Library acquired an interesting set of letters which throw welcome light upon the proceedings. The first in time belongs to 1818. It is a reply by Sir Walter Scott to an appeal by Dr Baird to assist in the enterprise. Whether mistakenly or not, Sir Walter appears to have taken the Committee's purpose at that time to include some fresh handling of the existing metrical Psalms, as well as the addition of new Paraphrases to the 1781 collection. This supposition gives the keynote to his reply. While pleading incapacity for the task proposed to him, because of his lack of acquaintance with "the original language of Scripture," he said: "Besides, after all, I am not sure whether the old-fashioned version of the Psalms does not suit the purposes of public worship better than smoother versification and greater terseness of expression. The ornaments of poetry are not perhaps required in devotional exercises. Nay, I do not know whether, unless used very sparingly and with great taste, they are altogether inconsistent with them. 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 more elegance. Their antiquity is also a corresponding influence upon the feelings. They are the very words and accents of our early reformers,⁽²⁾ sung by them in woe 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. But if these recollections are valuable to persons of education, they are almost indispensable to the edification of

⁽¹⁾ Dr George H. Baird was minister of the High Church and Principal of the University of Edinburgh. Described as a "plodding, persevering, well-mannered man," he had a great reputation as a linguist. Appointed to the Chair of Oriental Languages in 1792, he was advanced a year later, at the age of thirty-two, to the Principalship in succession to the redoubtable Robertson, the historian. Mr Lundie was the father of Mary Lundie Duncan, who wrote "Jesus, tender Shepherd, hear me," and of the wife of Horatius Bonar. Charles McCombie in later years succeeded to the estate of Tillyfour in Aberdeenshire. He was the last recipient, in 1860, of the degree of LL.D. from Marischal College, Aberdeen, before it ceased to be a University. Dr A. Thomson was, of course, the famous Dr Andrew Thomson of St George's, Edinburgh (church and tune). Professor Ferrie combined the parochial charge of Kilconquhar with the exiguous duties of the Chair of Civil History at St Andrews. No record of Dr Chalmers's interest in the proceedings remains, beyond a brief note to Dr Baird in 1829 expressing gratification "that the matter of the Psalmody is still alive." Mr Paul is commended by Dr Baird as "the first among the Committee in zeal and willingness to labour in this good cause." Dr Andrew Brown was minister of the Old Kirk (First Charge) and Professor of Rhetoric and Belles-Lettres in the University, Edinburgh, and had been Moderator of the General Assembly in 1813. Dr David Ritchie was minister of St Andrews (Second Charge) and Professor of Logic, Edinburgh, and had been Moderator in 1814. Dr James Wilson was minister of Falkirk, and had published *A Defence of Public or Social Worship and Prayers for the Use of Families and Individuals*. Mr Charles Gibbon was minister of Lonmay.

⁽²⁾ Sir Walter is here mistaken. The Reformation Psalter was superseded in 1650.

the lower ranks, whose prejudices do not permit them to consider as the words of the inspired poetry the versions of living or modern poets, but persist, however absurdly, in identifying the original with the ancient translation."

"I would not have you suppose, my dear Sir, that I by any means disapprove of the late very well chosen Paraphrases. But I have an old-fashioned taste in sacred as well as prophane 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."⁽¹⁾

If Sir Walter was right in the supposition which determined the tenor of this letter, his argument carried conviction with it, for from this time no suggestion of altering the metrical Psalms appears in the official programme. On the contrary, in 1824, Dr Baird writes thus to Joanna Baillie: "The present copy of the Psalms is meant to be left entirely untouched and will stand as it is. It would not indeed be proper to touch it. The feelings of the people would, too, revolt against any change as unhallowed and impious. The new Collection, like the former one, is merely intended to give a greater opportunity to an officiating Clergyman of selecting subjects of Psalms more suited often to the subject of his Discourse than he can at present command. At the same time, when the old version of the Psalms seems to admit of improvement, much improvement might be made by a new version which would take its place among the other new Translations and Paraphrases." The idea now, therefore, was that which is carried out in modern hymnbooks, where many noble alternative metrical versions of Psalms appear as hymns.

In the letter just quoted from, Dr Baird was soliciting for his scheme the aid of what he called Joanna Baillie's "very powerful and popular Talents." This was no flattery. She was a potent figure then in the literary world. Her *Plays on the Passions*, though unsuited to the stage, retain an honourable place in literature among English classical dramas. She had a genuine lyrical gift as well; do we not owe to her, for instance, "Wooded an' married an' a"? Sir Walter's description of her as "the immortal Joanna" may now seem much overstrained; but Dr Baird was undoubtedly right in thinking, at that time, that the influence of her name and the character of her compositions would go far, as he said, "both to give success to the plan" ("My Plan" he called it), and to "enhance the value of the work in view." His proposal, he told her, was to form "an Association of Living Scottish Poets who might be willing to unite their Genius and Taste" in furthering the plan; he could not "conceive any Work more calculated to do honour to even the most eminent of them, than a Work which was to embalm and perpetuate their Poetry in the Worship of their country." Each Associate was to be asked to favour the Church with "from 5 to 10 short translations or paraphrases of such passages of Scripture as they respectively chose to select—the separate compositions extending to from 16 to 20 lines or thereby, and in such kinds of versification as are used in our Copy of the Psalms."

Thomas Campbell, Mrs Grant of Laggan, and James Montgomery were the other Scottish poets to whom approach was made. But invitations were extended also to two Irishmen, Tom Moore and Dr George Croly; and to several English poets: Wordsworth, Southey, William Sotheby, Dean (then Mr) Milman, Mrs Hemans, and Mrs A. J. Niven, who, though then resident in Kirkcudbright, was English and an Episcopalian. No evidence remains of any correspondence with Milman, but there are records of the reactions of the rest.

The women were the most forward to assist. Joanna Baillie, as became a daughter of the manse (of Bothwell), wrote: "I shall think myself highly honoured in being

⁽¹⁾ See also Scott's letter to Charles McCombie, of May 28, 1829, in which he says: "No, No. Let them write hymns and paraphrases if they will, but let us have still 'All people that on earth do dwell.' Law and devotion must lose some of their dignity as often as they adopt new fashions." David Douglas, in his edition of the *Letters*, adds to this letter a note: "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 21st September, 1832, he opened his eyes once more, quite conscious, and calmly asked her to read to 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, and then on the woman's face, saying: 'I'll know it all before night.'"

in the slightest degree useful to the psalmody of my native country and to that Church to which I belong and for which I feel the most perfect and grateful respect." She confesses, however, to great misgivings, for, she says, "to alter any of the venerable and simple expressions of Scripture for the sake of rhyme and measure has always been against my feelings, and this strong impression will stand like a Lion in the path and make me afraid to proceed."⁽¹⁾ In the result, she contributed eleven pieces.

Mrs (Anne) Grant, styled "of Laggan" because her husband had been minister there, "had long been in the habit of composing short poems in the artificial style of the day." At this time she was, on De Quincey's witness, "an established wit, receiving incense from all quarters." She must have been a formidable person, to intimidate even Sir Walter, who said, "I should be afraid to be very intimate with a woman whose tongue and pen are rather overpowering." Baird's scheme appealed to her. While protesting that her "whole strength lies in an easy command of poetical language, a thing quite distinct from Genius," to which she makes no pretension, she wrote: "This humble Talent I would gladly consecrate to the sacred purpose in question, and be satisfied to lay a Turtle Dove on the altar when I could not afford a Lamb. Yet the objection which I have always strongly felt when solicited to write on religious subjects I find almost insuperable. It is not modesty with regard to my performance entirely. But chiefly a conscientious scruple lest the worldly life which I lead, partly from circumstances over which I have no control (and partly no doubt from inclination not sufficiently resisted) should be incompatible with any composition of this nature. To make myself clearly understood, I feel conscious of a blameable presumption in the performance of which I am conscious of being deficient. May I not comfort myself with the hope that the more I am familiar with such themes I shall be the less liable to the intrusions of vain and worldly imaginations? Under this consciousness I touch the harp of Zion with a trembling hand, though in this manner most willing to redeem some minutes now and then from the Stream of time that is fast escaping and cannot flow much longer with me." Her contributions were five.

Mrs Hemans, then at the height of a fame about which she herself had no illusions, was very willing also to summon her muse to the service.⁽²⁾ "I ought to thank you for inviting me to a task which so many feelings will concur to render one of delight, and whatever powers I may be able to offer so sacred a cause shall be cheerfully and without delay brought to its furtherance." From her three poems came.

Mrs Anna Jane (Vardill) Niven, daughter of an Anglican clergyman, was the wife of a writer and bank agent in Kirkcudbright. In earlier years she had moved in literary circles in London⁽³⁾ and published two volumes of verse. No letters from her have been preserved, but she supplied four poems.

The men whose aid was sought were less responsive. Southey excused himself, saying: "Sacred poetry is what I have ever been afraid to touch, even when I was more in the habit of composing verses and had more confidence in my ability and skill." Campbell also was self-distrustful: "I can assure you with sincerity that it is not in my power to embark on the most difficult of all practical undertakings—

⁽¹⁾ In a later letter Joanna betrays her whereabouts in the matter of Church praise. "I am almost afraid," she says, "to hear that you have got assistant bands of singers in your Churches. Our bands of singers in this country sing so many difficult, foolish, insipid Psalm tunes or hymns into the service that they prevent the congregation from joining, and what is all the scientific music *sung by the book* which they can possibly execute, compared with the voices of a great multitude praising God? I hope you will see well to this, for I seldom sit in an English church without regretting that taught and hired singers should ever have had anything to do with public worship."

⁽²⁾ Scott, writing to Joanna Baillie, said: "Mrs Hemans is somewhat too poetical for my taste, too many flowers, I mean, and too little fruit—but that may be the cynical criticism of an elderly gentleman." On the other hand it should be remembered that Wordsworth described her as

". . . . that holy spirit,
Sweet as the Spring, as ocean deep."

⁽³⁾ Hearing Coleridge's *Christabel* read one day in manuscript by Crabb Robinson, in Flaxman the sculptor's, she wrote a sequel to it and in 1815 published it in *The European Magazine* under the title *Christobell, a Gothic Tale*. Coleridge's poem did not appear till the following year.

that of the composition of religious poetry." And Tom Moore, also with a just appreciation of his own limitations, simply declared the task to be "far above his powers." Scott, again appealed to, asked Dr Baird to specify the passages of Scripture which he wished him to versify; but it does not appear that the direction asked for was ever given him.

Wordsworth, while saying that he would willingly have helped if he could have entertained the least hope of success, wrote: "I assure you, Sir, with frankness and sincerity, that I am unequal to the task. My own devotional feelings have never taken in verse a shape that has connected them with the Scripture in a degree that would encourage me to an effort of the kind. The sacred writings have a majesty, a beauty, a simplicity, an ardour, a sublimity, that awes and overpowers the spirit of Poetry in uninspired men: at least this is my feeling; and if it has deterred me in respect to compositions that might have been entered upon without any view of them seeing the light, how much more probable is it that I should be restrained were I to make the endeavour under a consciousness that I was working for a national purpose. Indeed, Sir, I dare not attempt it."

Sotheby's appearance among potential contributors was due to the recommendation of Joanna Baillie, who described him as "a man of an elevated pious mind, with a good ear for verse and a great facility in writing it." Christopher North, whom Baird had in consultation about his project, declared Sotheby to be "the best translator in Christendom." Jeffrey, too, gave him enthusiastic praise in *The Edinburgh Review*, pronouncing his translation of Virgil's *Georgics* to be "capable of being advanced to the high distinction of being the most perfect translation of a classic poet now extant in our language." He was ready enough to help, but it may be that his good intentions did not overcome the disadvantage of his unfamiliarity with the Scottish situation, for none of his eight offered contributions came within sight of being serviceable.

The names with most promise of usefulness were those of Croly and Montgomery. The former supplied several sets of verses, but among them there was nothing of the very fine quality of "Spirit of God, descend upon my heart" (195 in *The Church Hymnary*), which is one of the best hymns of the Spirit we possess. Montgomery, as might be expected, was eager "with heart and hand to take a share in contributing towards so holy and patriotic a plan of benefiting Scotland in her best interests." He offered freely the contents of his two notable hymn collections, *The Christian Psalmist* and *The Songs of Zion*, the former containing about 100 hymns of his own.

Here was the clue to what the Church was really in need of—an ample provision of Christian hymns. But of this the Committee appear to have been unaware. Some members were totally unprogressive and unhelpful. Dr Andrew Brown, for example, wrote Baird a curious letter in excuse for his failure to offer any sort of contribution. "I am not quite prepared," he protested, "for being accused by you of having formed a sullen purpose to travel from Dan to Beersheba, crying, Naught, naught. Yet true it is that every stage of the journey has led through a land parched and desolate, without fountains of water, or cooling fruits to supply their place." Then he goes on: "In my opinion it would be a serious evil to offer to the People of Scotland an additional Psalmody inferior to that which they received with reluctance from the Piety of our Fathers. It is far better to leave them for their devotional exercises the sweet and simple strains of the Old Psalm book which expressed the religious breathings of their forefathers in the days of their pilgrimage, than present the tawdry and Mawkish Rhymes of the day passing over our head, whose melliflence is not compensated by soundness of thought or depth of feeling." This last phrase suggests a perception of the deficiencies of the verses Dr Baird had so far succeeded in procuring, but the general attitude is reactionary, and if it was typical of the feeling of the Principal's colleagues, it ceases to surprise us that his project made slow and difficult headway.

In point of fact, only one member of the 1827 Committee appears to have had any glimmering of a perception of what ought to have been their aim. This was the young Aberdonian, Charles McCombie. Not only did he realise that many of the Psalms were never meant to be sung; he pointed to a clear exemplar of what

the Church was needing. "The pieces I would have," he wrote, "should, breathing the Spirit, be informed by the simple yet sublime language of Scripture. I know of no volume compiled in modern times that approaches so near as Bishop Heber's . . . Many of Heber's hymns are exquisitely beautiful. They are fitted more than any devotional poetry with which I am acquainted, to gratify the taste of a refined, and to inflame the piety of a Christian, mind. I do hope our Church will adopt a part of them." The levy he was fain to make upon the Bishop's stock was, however, too extravagant. He wanted 25 of the hymns to be taken over without alteration; 4—including "Bread of the world"—to be subjected to some adaptation; and 36, in metres unsuited for the tunes then in use, to be printed as to be sung only when music suitable for them became available.

Even McCombie, however, was hypnotised by the idea that what was needed was "devotional poetry," and that at any cost the leading poets of the day should be induced to supply it. Writing to Scott in 1827, he said: "It may amuse you to state that when the names of Lord Byron and Sir Walter Scott were mentioned in the affair in the Assembly, certain very well-meaning but superlatively unimaginative members got up and vilipended these poets in a very orthodox style. I have a most chivalrous regard for the reputation of writers of imagination; and had I been 33 instead of 23, I would have read the reverend gentlemen a lecture on the subject. If Byron had lived, he would have been not only almost but altogether a Christian. About Sir Walter's faith, as I know nothing, I shall say nothing. . . ."

This shows unmistakably how it was that Dr Baird's project miscarried. He and his Committee were altogether on the wrong track. It is understood that the 1745 Paraphrases were rejected by the Assembly because the Moderates thought them too evangelical. The same influence blinded the 1827 Committee to the real requirements of the Church. They set themselves to compile a collection of sacred poetry, when what was needed was a book of Christian hymns for the people to sing in their worship. The material they got together consisted entirely of mediocre religious verse quite unsuitable for singing. Much of it was of the same character as the dullest of the existing Paraphrases, and while the best of it might have been found mildly edifying by a spiritually minded reader, it was as little fitted for use in public worship as most of the Paraphrases are recognised to be to-day. The Committee's wrong point of view was clearly shown by their shaping their course straight for contributors who had none but their poetic talents to qualify them for what they were expected to do, and who themselves exposed this fundamental blunder by protesting their spiritual unfitness for the task.

The Committee were turning their faces the wrong way. With Heber's, Montgomery's, Croly's, and doubtless also Milman's fine hymns before them, the right course should have been clear. Moreover, one of the smaller disjoined branches of the Scottish Church—the Relief—had so early as 1794 published a hymnbook—the first Church in Scotland to do it; and even at this very time, when the Church of Scotland Committee were fumbling ineffectually with their business, it had in preparation a new collection which, for its time, was of real excellence. But the plain fact is that the 1781 Paraphrases, which ought to have served as a stepping-stone towards the Church's adoption of Christian hymns, were now operating as a barrier in the way of any movement in that direction; for the non-evangelical part of them—the dead part now—was set up as the model to be followed, and as a consequence the whole enterprise was doomed. Owing to this fatal error, the long-drawn-out labour of Dr Baird and his coadjutors came to nothing; it ended not only without any positive result, but even without any explicit record of its failure.

Not till 1852 was the right course perceived and taken. In that year a Committee was appointed to initiate the preparation of "an authorised collection of sacred hymns," and this new and better devised endeavour resulted in 1870, after the waste of nearly half-a-century, in putting *The Scottish Hymnal* at the service of the Church.

MILLAR PATRICK.