

BEFORE 1865

In a publicity leaflet produced about 40 years ago, the Society, referring to the conditions that led to its foundation in 1865, claimed that “just over a century ago worship was bare, verbose, and often completely lacking in dignity”. The first of the items printed below provides support for that claim. Writing in the middle years of the 19th century, the author, Elizabeth Grant of Rothiemurchus, describes the services she attended as a 15 or 16 year old in 1812-13 in the parish of Duthil, where her father was Laird.

“The stir consequent on our entrance was soon hushed, and the minister gave out the psalm; he put a very small dirty volume up to one eye ... and read as many lines of the old version of the rhythmical paraphrase (we may call it) of the Psalms of David as he thought fit, drawing them out in a sort of sing song that was very strange. He stooped over the pulpit to hand his little book to the precentor, who then rose and calling out aloud the tune began himself a recitative of the first line on the key note, then taken up and repeated by the congregation; line by line he continued in the same fashion, thus doubling the length of the *exercise*, for really to some it was no play – serious severe screaming quite beyond the natural pitch of the voice, a wandering search after the air by many who never caught it, a flourish really, of difficult execution and plenty of the *tremolo* lately come into fashion with the tenor singers in particular. The dogs seized this occasion to bark, for they always came to the kirk with the rest of the family, and the babies to cry. When the minister could bear the din no longer he popt up again, leaned over, touched the precentor’s head, and instantly all sound ceased. Everybody stood up while the minister asked for us such blessings as he thought best. ... The prayer over, the sermon began...

The sermon over, the concluding prayer, a thanksgiving, brought us all to our feet again. Another psalm, then the blessing and a general bow to the pulpit ended the whole. After a pause we all dispersed – but I am forgetting the Collection. This was made just after the second psalm when everyone, excepting such as were to receive an alms, put in an alms however small the amount – halfpence was the coin most frequently dropt into the oblong box with half a lid and a long handle carried round to every individual.”

(*Memoirs of a Highland Lady*, Canongate Classics 1988, pp. 249-51)

The Editor came across the verses which provide the second item in a little volume published in Aberdeen in 1872. The author, John Davidson (1804 -71) received a University education in Aberdeen and was apprenticed to a local lawyer but preferred to spend his life in less remunerative literary and archival pursuits. His verses are unlikely to attract praise as poetry but they have some interest for the light they cast on one educated man's appreciative experience of worship at a time only a little later than that of Elizabeth Grant.

The Church

I love to hear the tolling bell
That bids me to repair
On sacred days, to worship God,
Within the "house of pray'r."

The high, the low, the rich, the poor,
The young, the old are there;
And no "respect of persons" is
Within the "house of pray'r."

Assembl'd now, the song of praise
Ascends with solemn air;
Delightful 'tis therein to join
Within the "house of pray'r."

The pastor to the Throne of Grace
Draws nigh with pious care;
And for his flock he supplicates'
Within the "house of pray'r."

This done, he next with gravity
The Bible opens, where
"A word in season" he may give
Within the "house of pray'r"

Again, pray'r follows, and in praise
The congregation share;
The blessing is pronounc'd, and then
All leave the "house of pray'r."

(Selections from *The Literary Remains of John Davidson*, Lewis Smith, Aberdeen, 1872, p.7)