SCOTTISH WORSHIP IN SCOTTISH LITERATURE

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In this article I will explore the ways in which ministers and the worship they conduct have been portrayed in Scottish literature. I will begin by tracing trends in older works portraying the church of the past before turning my attention to contemporary novels which portray the church of the present. I will focus my attention on texts depicting worship in the time period in which they were written, rather than on historical novels reflecting on the past.

Historical Portrayals

Depictions of worship in Scottish churches in Scottish literature have been as varied as actual ministers and the churches they served, and might also be used to promote the narrative thrust of the particular novel. From John Galt's 1821 novel *Annals of the Parish* we get an insight into how a minister in the Church of Scotland might have thought about and conducted worship in the 1700s. In this period, before the adoption of the use of a lectionary, Galt portrays the minister Micah Balwidder preaching sixteen times on the text 'render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's' in the midst of the height of the smuggling trade in the west coast of Scotland. However, the repeated sermons land on deaf ears. His parishioners continue their involvement in the smuggling trade. This is reflective of the general relationship between Balwidder and his congregation, Balwidder throughout the novel is depicted by Galt as being out of touch with his congregation.

Disruption

While it is important to note that the 1843 Disruption was a division over Church-State relations rather than worship, it did result in literary attention being paid to the church. Lydia Miller (wife of the Free Church journalist Hugh Miller) and Margaret Oliphant both wrote novels portraying the foundation of the Free Church in the immediate aftermath of the Disruption. However, their focus is largely on the political events, and their portrayal of worship is scarce. The main reference to worship in the post-disruption Free Church in Oliphant's 1849 novel *Passages in the life of Mrs Margaret Maitland of Sunnyside* is Margaret Maitland's comment 'that my brother, the minister, was away early to a neighbouring parish, to preach for one of the brethren, it being the Fast-day before his Sacrament.' (p284) Here, the collegiality of worship in the post-disruption Free Church is emphasised.

Later novels depicting the Disruption pay more attention to worship in that time period. These include William Alexander's *Johnny Gibb of Gushetneuk* (1871) and Free Church minister James Dodds' *The Lily of the Lammermoor* (1876). Alexander in *Johnny Gibb of Gushetneuk* in his depiction of worship emphasises the novelty of the formal ceremonial services, including the induction of the new Free Church minister Mr. MacCassock to the charge of Pyketillim. Alexander notes 'It is needless to say how impressive the ordination services were; how closely, for three long hours, they were listened to by a crowded congregation; and how the psalmody swelled up beyond its wonted volume.' (p200) Although Dodds is similar in portraying the large crowds that gathered for worship in the early post-Disruption Free Church, his portrayal of worship in *The Lily of the Lammermoor* is one which harks back to Covenanting era times. The Free Church congregation of Hunterton meet in the ravine of Hunterton Dean, and a very emotive service of worship takes place. The Bible passage the minister preaches on is Isaiah 49:13, which is very appropriate for both the outdoor setting of the worship and the trials the congregation are undergoing in the year immediately following the 1843 Disruption.

Kailyard

Writing in 1880-1900, the Kailyarders were the next group of writers to take seriously the task of portraying acts of worship in the Scottish churches. 'Kailyard' literally refers to a kitchen garden where kail (cabbage) and other vegetables were grown. It later came to be used to

describe a particular school of writing in Scottish literature which was pastoral in nature, sentimentally portraying life in a rural Scottish village.1 The writers most commonly associated with the Kailyard school are J M Barrie, Ian Maclaren and J R Crockett. These three writers all published under the editorial guidance of William Roberson Nicoll (Free Church minister and editor of *The British Weekly)*. Like their portrayal of Scottish rural village life their portrayal of worship was also highly sentimental. In perhaps one of the most stereotypical

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1. 'Scots Word of the Season: "Kailyard"', *The Bottle Imp* (blog), 1 November 2008, https://www.thebottleimp.org.uk/2008/11/scots-word-of-the-season-kailyard/.

Kailyard novels, *Kate Carnegie and Those Ministers* (1896), Ian Maclaren compares the purity of the formality of the Sunday morning service in the Free Kirk and the informal services held in distant parts of the parish in the summer evenings. For Carmichael, the Free Kirk minister of Drumtochty, those informal services are what bring him joy. Maclaren describes how these services typically took place in a parishioner's barn or farm building, and the sentimentality of the portrayal extends to the animals who wandered in during the service. Even 'The collies, most sociable of animals, would saunter in and make friendly advances to Carmichael reading a chapter; then, catching their master's eye and detecting no encouragement, would suddenly realise that they were at kirk, and compose themselves to sleep—'juist like ony Christian,' (p. 143). The final comment cuts the sentimentality with a critique of preaching and worship leading by suggesting that typically parishioners slept through the service.

A novelist who offers a depiction of worship in both the mainstream Presbyterian churches and the charismatic evangelical worship meetings in the nineteenth century is Jane Findlater in her 1899 novel *Rachel*. Traditional mainstream Church of Scotland worship is represented by the preaching of the titular Rachel's father Mr Chesney, the devoted but aging minister of Easter Hithe, whose sermons are described as 'essays'. Meanwhile, the worship which takes place in evangelical worship meetings is represented by the preaching of Michael Fletcher to the Foreseers Meeting in Edinburgh. This preaching is entirely extemporaneous, with Michael preaching as God moves him. The worship as a whole is very emotionally driven and the congregation are described as 'listening breathlessly to hear what would follow next'(p181). Douglas Gifford suggests that Fletcher bears many resemblances to the charismatic premillennialist preacher Edward Irving (1792-1834) (p294). However, the style of worship Fletcher conducts also has much in common with the revival preaching of the later nineteenth century, although there were no hymns sung.

Wartime preaching

Written in 1917 though reflecting on experiences of growing up in the Free Church manse in the Gorbals, Glasgow in the 1880s and 1890s, Anna Buchan's second novel *The Setons* portrays the changes to worship which take place in the late nineteenth century. Buchan particularly highlights the changes to worship music in this period, observing:

At one time psalms alone had been sung, not even a paraphrase being allowed, and when 'human' hymns were introduced it well-nigh broke the hearts of some of the old people. One old man, in the seat before the Setons, delighted Elizabeth's heart by chanting the words of a psalm when a hymn was given out, his efforts to make the words fit the tune being truly heroic. (p134)

Here, it seems that even in a very traditionalist congregation the transition to hymn singing in worship was almost complete. However, earlier in the same passage it is noted that there was no instrument, 'not even a harmonium' in the Seton's church. Anna Buchan offers an insight into the sort of preaching which was conducted in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In *The Setons*, short twenty-minute sermons delivered without notes seem to have been prized at this time, especially in working class parishes like the Gorbals where Anna Buchan's father ministered. In the closing chapters of *The Setons*, Anna Buchan offers readers an insight into the

range of different approaches to preaching which existed following the outbreak of war. These ranged from the 'mailed fist' sermons of Mr Christie to Mr Hamilton's sermon on 'Thou hast given a banner to them that fear thee' (Psalm 60:4) on his final Sunday before leaving to fight in the war as a private soldier (p275). The former are similar to the sort of preaching conducted by the minister Mister Gibbon in Lewis Grassic Gibbon's *Sunset Song* (1932). In the early days of the war, Gibbon preached that 'Kaiser was the Antichrist, and that until this foul evil had been swept from the earth there could be neither peace nor progress again' (p149). The patriotism found in both Buchan and Grassic Gibbon's portrayals of early wartime preaching reflects the state of preaching in those times. In the early days of the war ministers took an active role in the recruitment of soldiers, encouraging their parishioners to go and fight as well as serving as chaplains themselves.

Gaelic Worship

Of all the novels written in the twentieth century, Fionn MacColla's *The Ministers*, published posthumously in 1979, focuses most closely on the widest spectrum of ministry styles. MacColla depicts a meeting of a highland presbytery to examine the actions of one of its members, the minister of Mellonudrigill, Mr MacRury. The meeting opens with a discussion about the introduction of English language services in parishes which had only had Gaelic services. This is how Mr MacRury describes the difficulties he experienced introducing English services to his rural parish:

> The trouble is a good part of the congregation want to stick to the familiar order of things in these services. I don't gather there is any opposition to the English services as such. What they object to is the standing for the hymns and sitting for the prayers. They persist in standing for the prayers and sitting for the hymns, as they have always done in the Gaelic service. (p44)

The other ministers of less rural parishes did not experience the same difficulties, only minor teething issues in the first couple of services. As the novel progresses it becomes apparent that their opposition to his innovations in worship is emblematic of the opposition Mr MacRury faces from his parishioners. This negative portrayal of a transition in worship practices is revealing of the differences between English and Gaelic services in the mid-twentieth century. The Gaelic services continued the old patterns of Presbyterian worship while the English services reflected changes which were the norm in English language services in less remote parts of Scotland by the time MacColla wrote *The Ministers*.

Church and worship in contemporary literature

The main two contemporary novels which portray worship in the Church of Scotland are James Robertson's *The Testament of Gideon Mack* (2006) and Merryn Glover's *Of Stone and Sky* (2021). The former contains the most extensive description of worship services, including funerals, in contemporary Scottish literature. In the latter, a female minister refuses to bow to church law which ultimately leads to her leaving the ministry and becoming the owner of the pub in the village where she served.

The most memorable worship service in Robertson's *The Testament of Gideon Mack* is the funeral of Catherine Craigie, an agnostic parishioner in Gideon Mack's parish, which took place after Gideon's meeting with the Devil. There are no hymns, no Bible readings and only a very short eulogy justifying the unconventional nature of the funeral. Instead of the traditional pattern for a funeral, Catherine Cragie had requested a celebration of life inspired by the Mexican festival *el Dìa de los Muertos*, the Day of the Dead which was celebrated by throwing a carnival party with balloons, streamers and kites. The climax of the service was the procession out of the church to the lively Mexican folk song *La Cucaracha* (The Cockroach). This was met with much scorn and derision from the staunch church goers who attended the funeral and is one of the accusations against Mack which they bring before the Presbytery. His conduct of an 'unchristian' funeral was apparently a more serious problem than his lack of faith.

Female Ministers

While the Church of Scotland opened ordination to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament to women in 1968, this does not seem to have filtered down into the popular imagination until fairly recently. The first novel in the Scottish literary canon to feature a female minister is Robertson's *The Testament of Gideon Mack* (2006) which portrays Lorna Sprott as the minister of a neighbouring parish to the titular Gideon Mack's. She is depicted by Robertson as an unconfident but devoted minister who largely plays by the Church of Scotland's rules. The only exception to this is the fact that she routinely brings her labrador dog Jasper to worship. However, her role as a preacher is significant in terms of the narrative of the novel. While preaching in Monimaskit church following Gideon Mack's brush with the Devil, she betrays him in her sermon by denying his meeting with the Devil and framing it as a meeting with God:

> 'But Gideon didn't die, as you all know. He's here among us today. Why? Because God sent him back to us. He gave him a glimpse of heaven but Gideon still has work to do here on earth. So God sent him back. He sent him to tell us the good news, that there really is a light at the end of the tunnel, that there really is a life to come, better than anything we might experience on earth, better than anything we can imagine. (p328)

Lorna's words in her sermon are a misguided lie to protect Gideon from his own story. Gideon interprets them as a betrayal, a misappropriation of his story. It ultimately ends their friendship. Robertson does not give the reader any insight into how Lorna's sermon was taken by the congregation.

In contrast the other, more recent, portrayal of a female minister is of the rebellious Maurabella (Mo) Smith in Glover's novel *Of Stone and Sky*. Mo Smith is in the early chapters of the novel the minister of the Highland parish church of Briachan. Glover portrays her as completely ignoring the Church of Scotland's rules – particularly those about Kirk Session governance and leadership of worship. Mo's Presbytery Clerk rebukes her for having 'allowed – nay, *encouraged* – lay people without any training to lead worship and even to *preach* in Briachan church.' (p132) Instead Mo focuses her attention on the needs of her parishioners. Glover, in a passage rich with biblical imagery, describes Mo as having 'a growing sense that I belonged with the sheep outside the fold. And, Briachan, you see, had left the church.' (p126) Later in the same passage she describes Mo's attempt to start up a new worship service:

> New wine, new wineskins. I prayed hard and started an evening service, instead, in the village hall. I persuaded a local musician to play guitar, found a Quaker and some former Baptists and a family of charismatics who somehow got along together. (p126)

This sort of very ecumenical gathering in a rural parish reminds me of many stories I have heard while serving on the Church of Scotland's Ecumenical Relations committee of similar worship gatherings in rural parishes. The initial praise by 'Church HQ' and then the disapproval of Presbytery reflects the vacillating attitudes towards ecumenical working in the Church of Scotland at present. It also reflects trends in what sort of ecumenical working is most disapproved of by local church officials. At present the Church of Scotland seems to be tending towards being more supportive of relationships with the Scottish Episcopal Church, the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church. There is little support or encouragement to engage with those Churches which are on the more charismatic or evangelical end of the ecclesiological spectrum which are the people Mo is portrayed as gathering in the evening service.

This is just a very brief snapshot of the ways in which worship has been portrayed in Scottish novels. It has not included the many works which reflect on the church and worship in the decades and centuries before the texts were written. However, I have shown the diversity of portrayals of worship in Scottish literature from the sentimental portrayal of worship in the Kailyard tradition to the more critical portrayals found in contemporary literature. Worship in many of the novels I have discussed often is used to develop character or plot at the expense of portraying worship in any given time period accurately. This does not detract from the insights

we can glean from literature about how worship has been thought about in the past and present Church.

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