



The Tercentenary of the Scottish Psalter

Treasure No 14: The Tercentenary of the Scottish Psalter: An article from Bulletin 53, October 1950 Celebrations in Great Britain and America. (Contributed)

In Scotland.

The celebration of the 300th birthday of the metrical Psalter still in use in Scotland is now at an end. Circumstances suggested that it should be devised in a modest form. There are people to whom the survival of the old Psalter is quite frankly a matter for regret—people with a scanty equipment, or none, of the historic sense and historical knowledge, who therefore are devoid of sentiment bred by remembrance of the past; and others who think the day for metrical psalmody should end as it has done in England, and give place to chanting the psalms in prose. These classes together represent a minority of the Scottish people. The majority may not be able to whip up much enthusiasm about so familiar a phase of their national tradition; but they retain a settled reverence for what has played a vital part in their country's worship, and love to maintain the best of the metrical psalms in the Church's use.

At the same time there was no call for celebrating the Tercentenary on any ambitious scale. The Psalter is in universal use in the Presbyterian churches. One of the unhappily still disunited sections which did not enter the great union of 1929 proclaimed that it had no need for any commemoration; its people commemorate it every Sunday by still using nothing but the 1650 Psalter as its manual of praise. But the vast majority of Scottish Church people, though long since won over to the Christianising of their praise by a generous use of expressly Christian hymns, still regard their worship as incomplete if there is not in it at least one metrical psalm to link it with its past. It was therefore felt that the best method of commemoration must be congregational, in the ordinary worship of the "gathered church" as near as possible to the commemoration date.

Sunday, April 30th was therefore fixed as the day for a united act of remembrance, thanksgiving, and worship. Ministers were given timely notice of what was intended, and the General Assembly's Committee of Public Worship and Aids to Devotion prepared and issued two services for the day—the first envisaging the story of the evolution of the Psalter itself, a subject on which there was a generally admitted need for enlightenment, and the second giving an account of the various types of musical usage employed throughout the three centuries.

For the first purpose Dr. Millar Patrick's *Four Centuries of Scottish Psalmody* was the mainstay of ministers in the preparation of their addresses. For the second a list of tunes was carefully selected to illustrate the vicissitudes of psalmodic musical history, from the beginning to the present day. Full notes were furnished—so full indeed that not uncommonly ministers simply used the notes as an address illustrated by the tune from stage to stage. Probably the most interesting illustration was THE OLD COMMON TUNE,¹ written when it was recognised that many congregations would not be able to sing at all, and to give beginners help in learning how to use their voices in the common praise. The melody alone was sung, without harmony or accompaniment. The effect would have been enhanced if it had been possible to

¹ This tune is printed on page 67 of Dr. Millar Patrick's book. (Editor).

reproduce the quavering uncertain vocalisation with which at first it was sung; but even as it was, the impression produced by it was by many felt to be profound.

The entire selections of praise for the day were taken from the Psalms. The purely Scottish tunes were of course given the preeminence, but due recognition was made of the changes of style produced by influences prevailing south of the Border, and of the many tunes derived from the same sources.

Where choirs were small, combinations of them were formed to give the illustrations effectively at some central spot in their district. The cumulative effect was good, and abundant evidence was given that, strong as is the hold which hymnody has taken upon Scottish worship, the historical value of the old Psalms is now better understood, and, among the older people especially, affection remains unabated for this distinctive part of the national way of offering its sacrifice of praise.

In England¹

The celebrations in England were, for obvious reasons, not conducted on a national scale. But it is worth recording that the B.B.C. broadcast a Service of Praise on Sunday, May 7th, consisting entirely of Scottish Psalms with commentary, in the Home Service, and that the “Sunday Half-Hour” period on April 30th was given to singing of Psalms from the Glasgow studios (broadcasting the Light Programme). A lecture on the subject was broadcast on the Third Programme during the intervening week.

In America.

The Hymn Society of America, under the enthusiastic leadership of Mr. George Litch Knight, made elaborate arrangements for participation in this commemoration. It did so on a scale and with a wealth of detail with which Scotland itself could not compete.

In New York there were three celebrations—on 29th January in Fort George Presbyterian Church, on 23rd April in the great Riverside Church, and on 26th April in Union Theological Seminary. At the first the preacher was the distinguished President Emeritus of Union Seminary, Dr. Henry Sloane Coffin, who delivered a most fitting and memorable sermon: at the second, Dr. R. J. McCracken, the Scottish minister of the church, who gave what one who heard it described as “one of the finest short addresses I have ever heard”. At the third there was no address, but only praise, prayer, and Scripture lessons; the one blemish here in an otherwise well-ordered service was the singing of the 23rd Psalm version which is in the 1650 Psalter to the lamentable BROTHER JAMES’S AIR, which, especially in this connexion, Scotsmen regard with something sterner than disapproval.

At the Fort George service the “Scottish clans” of New York formed part of a large attendance. In Riverside Church, 1,500 people attended, and in the massed choirs and church groups there were nearly 750, including in the second balcony 220 children, who acted as the antiphonal chorus. In this case the chief complaint was, “Why were there no bagpipes?”—these unaccustomed instruments having been assigned a part in the proceedings at Fort George.

The commemoration in the United States is not yet at an end. “America has caught the imagination of the Anniversary”, says one correspondent, “and we shall have a rush of services in the Fall on Reformation Sunday. You have no idea what a magnificent response has come from our people to this celebration. It has been heart-warming to us.”

¹ This paragraph is an editorial interpolation.