The Psalmody of Covenanting Times.

In dealing with this subject it is right to say at the outset that the materials that throw light upon it are of the scantiest, and most of them are fragmentary and difficult to find. You look for high lights upon it in vain. It does not appear to have attracted any attention even from scholars who have made a special study of the period; enquiries made of several elicited the confession that they could say nothing about it at all. This need not surprise us. The subject has not engaged the interest of enquirers because it occupied a very subsidiary and indeed insignificant place in the minds of the people of Scotland throughout the whole period in question, and for a full century afterwards. It is no exaggeration to say that except for the very first years of Presbyterianism, when in the mother Church at Geneva there was no singing whatever in public worship—for the very good reason that, as yet, neither in words nor in music was there anything to sing—there can have been few periods of the Church's history when sacred song was allowed a more meagre part in the services of the House of God. The reasons for this were complex. Let me indicate a few.

Partly they were political. The great debate then proceeding in the nation absorbed the public mind. The fortunes of the Church were so inextricably implicated in the issues that were at stake, that the pulpit became a chief forum of the controversy; polemical preaching became the rule, and worship itself took its tone from the fierce passions of the time. In such circumstances singing in church was little accounted of; the part it played in public worship became almost negligible.

This would not have happened if music generally in Scotland had not fallen on evil days. The degree in which this is true may seem almost incredible, for the simple fact is that before the Covenanting period ended, knowledge of music had well-nigh perished from the land. The blame for this decline is commonly laid to the charge of the Reformation. It is impossible to do this, however, without either

An address (with additions) given in Greyfriars Kirk, Edinburgh, on Covenant Sunday, February, 1934.

ignoring or falsifying the facts. The music which came in with the Reformation was, of its own kind, of a very high order. Most of it came from Geneva, and much of it was admirably designed for the purpose it had to serve; at its best it furnished a perfect model, in simplicity, tunefulness, and massive strength, for the congregational song which in the judgment of the Reformers, best beseemed the worship of God. I need name only *Old 100th*, *Old 124th*, and *Old 134th*, to indicate its superlatively fine quality. Other such tunes, long lost to our use, some of them now restored to us in the *Revised Church Hymnary*, were of the same royal grandeur. They imparted to Scottish psalmody a solemn dignity which it has often since been in danger of losing, but has never yet quite lost.

It is significant of the extent to which knowledge of music was diffused in Reformation times in Scotland, that from the first no psalm-book was issued without the tunes. Let that be remembered to the credit of the Reformers; they did their best to foster congregational praise. Let it stand also to the credit of the people, that their leaders felt themselves justified in assuming a capacity of reading music so generally spread as to require the placing of the tunes in everybody's hands along with the words to which they were to be sung. In the main this wide diffusion of knowledge was due to the work of the Song Schools which had long been established in every considerable town, for the training of singers to give an adequate rendering of the difficult music of the pre-Reformation Church. Through these schools musical culture became sufficiently common to make the singing of the new tunes not unduly difficult.

With the passing away, however, of the generation that had received such instruction, the knowledge of music rapidly declined. The Song Schools began early to fall into disuse. Their specific function largely ceased, of course, when plainsong and the elaborate polyphonic compositions which had previously been in use were no longer required. Quite soon it became evident that as a consequence musical disaster was imminent. In 1579 an Act was passed enjoining municipal authorities throughout the country "to erect and sett up ane sang scuill . . . . for instruction of the youth in the art of musik and singing, quhilk is almost decayit, and sall schortly decay, without tymous remeid be providit." Such an endeavour, however, to galvanise into activity the failing energies of the schools could not succeed. Galvanise is the right word to use, not vitalise;

for what the Act produced was only an artificial energy, not the vigour of real life. Lacking life, the revival could not last. And indeed only nine years had passed, when the Town Council of Glasgow showed that they had already ceased to feel that the obligation laid on them by the Act required to be respected, for they appropriated that part of the Common Good which had been devoted to the upkeep of "the Scuile sumtyme callit the Sang Scuile," to defray the expenses incurred in connection with a heavy visitation of the plague. The decline must already have been again in rapid process, when such a flagrant alienation of money from its traditional purpose could take place without a protest.

The progress of the decline was greatly accelerated by the invasion of Scotland, from south of the Border, by a pestilent type of Puritanism, inconceivably arrogant and intolerant, which, in the name of a supposedly superior piety, sought to cast discredit on every form of art in association with worship. It was inevitable that music should suffer, as it did desperately, from the blight which that grievous heresy cast over the whole of Scottish religion. The seventeenth century was but begun when it became evident that a generation was arising which could not learn the old Psalter tunes. Of these, there were 105. Because of the great variety in the metres most of them were associated with but one, or at most two psalms. Many of them were heavy, and otherwise not easy to sing. With the decline of musical knowledge the task of mastering them became for most people impossible. A new kind of tune had therefore to be written. It was thus that the distinctively Scottish psalm-tune had its birth. Prepared as it was for a people who had lost all skill in music, it had necessarily to be simple, straightforward, easy to memorise, while preserving the reverent dignity of which the older tunes had given the example. In the Psalter of 1615 twelve such tunes appeared, "to which all psalms of eight syllables in the first line and six in the next may be sung." "Common Tunes" they were called, because they were not identified like the others with particular psalms, but might be used in common for any of the psalms which were written in that metre. To distinguish them names had to be given them: thus the practice of giving place-names to tunes arose. It is clear that they won favour, for in successive Psalters the number went on increasing until in that of 1635, the last edition of the old version to be published, there were

thirty-one. The need for them was growing. The editor of the Psalter just named did his best to preserve the older tunes in use, by publishing them with contrapuntal settings by various skilled hands; but it is to be feared that his success was small. The tide was ebbing from them, and it was too late then to turn it.

Fifteen years later, in 1650, when our present metrical Psalter came into use, it is deplorably significant that no music whatever was published with it. There was nobody in authority in the Church with sufficient interest in the matter to see that even the barest minimum of tunes was provided; nor was there any force of public opinion to bring pressure to bear upon those to whom the responsibility belonged, to induce them to make good the omission. That is a startling measure of public apathy and official indifference to the people's part in the offering of worship. Some restiveness, it is true, there must have been. In 1653, owing to the discontent of the people in Edinburgh, because "there was no reading of chapters nor singing of Psalms on the Sabbath Day, the ministers thought it good to restore the wonted custom of singing of Psalms." And five years later the Synod of Lothian appointed a Committee "to consider whether or not in every congregation when the people are gathered, there shall be singing of psalms and reading of chapters both before and after noon on the Sabbath Day." These decisions were doubtless due to the public dissatisfaction caused by the disappearance of the reader's service, in which most of the singing of psalms had until then been done. No place was given to it in the new *Directory of Public Worship* published in 1645. In that book, which officially set the norm of public services, only two psalm-portions were prescribed for use. Could the allowance have been smaller? Yet even so one of these was optional; it was to be sung only "if with conveniency it may be done," and in point of fact, after two long discourses and two long prayers it was too often found that conveniency made it appear necessary to omit it. In such conditions the use of singing in the public worship of God approached the very verge of extinction.

This happened, let it be noted, right in the heart of the Covenanting period. The sunken fortunes of musical culture in Scotland at that time may be further illustrated by the extraordinary plight into which it had fallen in Glasgow. The Town Council there had given a monoply of music teaching to one official teacher, "discharging all other

sangsters within the Burgh to teach musik in tyme coming during their will allenarlie" (only). In 1668 they found themselves with a vacancy in this office on their hands, and not a man was to be discovered anywhere to fill it. Twenty years later they were still searching vainly for one. Not till 1691 were they in a position to make an appointment. The man they chose then was "Mr Lewis de France, musitian." He appears to have been the only man in Scotland capable of doing the work. A Frenchman, as his name shows, he is credited with having been the first teacher who brought to Scotland "some inkling of the modern ideas of vocal melody as opposed to plain chant." He carried on his profession first of all in Edinburgh, and gained such a reputation that in 1675 Aberdeen set its heart on securing him to take charge of the still surviving song school there. He was persuaded to go north, increased fees being allowed him, and shorter teaching hours, "in respect he is ane stranger, and as is informed weell expert in Musick." Aberdeen, however, did not succeed in keeping him. He returned south about 1682, and it is said that the final decay of the Aberdeen school began with his departure. In 1684 he was again teaching in Edinburgh. Then in 1691 Glasgow, doubtless by offering attractive terms, acquired his services. Nothing could more clearly show the almost complete neglect into which music had fallen, than the fact that only one man, and he a foreigner, was to be found in the whole country with qualifications for teaching that almost lost art.

In such circumstances is it to be wondered at that at the height of the Covenanting period very few tunes were known? After 1650 the old Scottish Psalter became obsolete; it had almost certainly been obsolescent for a considerable time before that, except for the Common Tunes. Even of these, it would seem, only a small number were in general use. It is possible to judge in such matters only by inference, but this conclusion seems to be justified by the eloquent fact that when the first collection of tunes for use with the new Psalter of 1650 was published unofficially by an Aberdeen printer in 1666, it contained only twelve tunes. These were: *Common Tune* (of a quite inexpressible dulness); *King's Tune, Duke's Tune, English Tune, French, London* (*New London*), *Stilt* (*York*), *Dunfermline, Dundee, Abbey, Martyrs, Elgin,* and *Bon-Accord* (in reports). By the end of the century these twelve were canonised as embodying the accepted and

inexpansible musical tradition of the Church of Scotland. At that point the canon was closed, and it remained closed for a long time subsequently. It will be observed that these are all common metre tunes. Even the finest of the old tunes in other metres were forgotten. *Old 100th* fell out of use ; *Old 124th* was sung no more. Some may have lingered on in people's memories. It is difficult to guess, otherwise, what the tune was to which Margaret Wilson sang Psalm 25 if it was not *Old 134th*, for there is no other short metre tune in the older Psalter, and in the canon given above for use with the new one, there is none.

In view of these facts the conclusion is irresistible, that the true Covenanters' Tunes are to be found only within the narrowly restricted number named above. The probability is that only a few even of these were actually much used. Two observations about them it is not inappropriate to make. First : one has only to listen to these tunes to realise how impossible it is that certain other tunes which, in our own time, have gathered round them something of the glamour properly belonging to those which it may be supposed the Covenanters sang, could ever have been used by men whose conceptions of what was fitting for the worship of God are revealed in these grave, dignified, and for the most part plaintive melodies. And second : while from one point of view it may be said that these tunes are memorials of the extremity of the depth to which Church music in Scotland had gone down, it is sounder, from another point of view, to regard them with gratitude, as the means by which Scottish psalmody was saved from utter extinction. They made it possible for singing in public worship, in some sort, to go on.

In these circumstances congregational singing can hardly have been exhilarating. So narrow a range of tunes must have deprived it completely of musical interest. Probably it is here that we find the explanation of the well-nigh total absence from the records of the period, of allusions to this aspect of public worship ; it had become so destitute of variety and therefore so trite and dull, that it made no impression on anyone's mind that seemed to be worth recording. The life had gone out of it.

To what extent singing was practised in the worship of the conventicles it is impossible to say. So far as the historical documents go, it would appear that not much attention was paid to it. In many instances, of course, considerations of safety must have been decisive against any use being made of it. Renwick's first public meeting,

for example, was "in the remotest recess they could find, most convenient for safety and secrecy, for fear of the enemies." In the silence of moors, mosses, and hills, sound carries far, and singing in such conditions must have meant serious danger of betrayal. Simpson, in his *Traditions of the Covenanters*, gives one incident that supports this. At a conventicle at Darngavel in Cambusnethan, while the people were "raising aloft the voice of praise, the melody wafted by the breeze was heard at Blackhall at the moment a trooper happened to call in passing." The farmer there was friendly to the Covenanters, and anxious to avert danger from them. He set the trooper's suspicions at rest by saying to him, "Whenever my neighbour at Darngavel shears ane o' his sheep or taks aff ony twa o' his lambs, he sets the hale flock a-bleating." If the sound heard bore, as it seems to have done, such close resemblance to the cries of sheep in distress, as to persuade a suspicious man that it was that and nothing else, not much could be said of its musical quality. But indeed what else could be expected at a time when even in the most favourable conditions no canons of quality evoked the most casual respect? As a general rule, it may be taken for granted, the perilous circumstances in which conventicles were held made it imperative to omit singing from their worship.

The publication of the new Psalter in 1650 was unquestionably a great public boon. Apart from any other difficulties that made a new version desirable, the number of metres employed in the earlier one made the use of many of the psalms impossible when musical knowledge declined. The people needed simplicity in the verse as well as in the music, and while to us the excessive use of common metre in the new version (our present one) seems a thing to regret, not least because it banished from use the most splendid of the Reformation melodies, there can be no doubt that that constituted one of its chief attractions to the people for whose use it was first intended. The psalms in that simple metre were easy to memorise, and it became possible to use a wider range of them because the tunes used were few and could be sung to the great majority of them. Probably for that reason the new Psalter—produced, remember, right in the heart of the Covenanting period—passed straight into the affections of the people. It was a Godsend, coming just then, when the Killing Times were not far distant; for when the sufferings of those times arrived, it had won its place in the people's hearts, and its lines were

so deeply imprinted upon their memories that it is always the language it gave them in which to express their emotions, which in the great hours we find upon their lips.

You can imagine what it would be to them. Books in those days were few. The Bible came first. The Psalm-book stood next in honour. It was their constant companion, their book of private devotion, as well as their manual of Church worship. In godly households it was the custom to sing through it in family worship. Thus, in the story of John Goodall we are told that in certain lines of a psalm, used as " his ordinary in his family worship," he discerned what he took to be the finger of God pointing to the impending fate of his enemies. " His ordinary " means the portion which fell to be sung on that particular day, as he pursued his custom of singing straight through the Psalter in the devotions of his household. The new version was only eighteen years old when the Killing Times began, yet nowhere in those times do you hear any echo of the old one; invariably it is from the new that those who resort to the Psalms to sustain their souls in hours of anxiety and peril, draw the language of strength and consolation: it was there that they found a voice for the faith, the patience, the courage, and the hope, that bore them through those dark and cruel years. Recall just a few examples.

It was in the new version that they found language for their dismay and desolation when defeat came crushingly upon them. In the whole heroic story there is no more epic incident than the last stand of the " honest and zealous handful," as Patrick Walker calls them, who had taken part in the Pentland Rising in November, 1666. It was at Rullion Green that the end came. They knew that it was coming, for they were hopelessly outnumbered. In Psalm 74 they found the fit words for their feeling of dereliction:

> O God, why hast thou cast us off?
> Is it for evermore?
> Against Thy pasture-sheep why doth
> Thine anger smoke so sore?

Yet even while they sang of their mystified conviction that God had forsaken them, they met with resolute courage and repulsed a charge of the enemy's horse, and fought on until against impossible odds they could fight no more.

It was in a Psalm too that they found the fit words to hearten them with the anticipation of victory. Who can forget what is said to have happened at Drumclog? It was on a Sabbath morning on June 1st, 1679, that a con-

venticle there was surprised by a strong body of troops under Claverhouse. A shot from a sentry gave warning of his approach. Immediately the fighting men separated themselves from the rest of the worshippers, and, setting themselves in order, marched down the hill to join issue with the enemy, singing, as they went, Psalm 76 to the tune *Martyrs* :

In Judah's land God is well known,
His name's in Isr'el great :
In Salem is his tabernacle,
In Sion is his seat.
There arrows of the bow he brake,
The shield, the sword, the war.
More glorious thou than hills of prey,
More excellent art far.

That was their victory song, for soon Clavers and his men were discomfited and in flight. Ten years later, no doubt with that incident in mind, Alexander Shields, the author of *The Hind let loose*, along with other Covenanters, sang this psalm with exultant triumphancy at the Market Cross of Douglas, to celebrate the Revolution.

The tune *Martyrs* has other and more poignant associations. When in January, 1681, Isabel Alison and Marion Harvie, " two honest worthy lassies," as Peden called them—one only 17 and the other but 20 years of age—were hanged in the Grassmarket of Edinburgh, they sang together on the scaffold Psalm 84 to that tune ; and when the Bishop, standing by and taunting them, called on a curate to offer prayer, " Come, Isabel," said Marion, " let us sing the 23rd Psalm," and together they sang it, drowning the voice of the obnoxious cleric who was forcing his unwanted ministrations upon them.

The 118th Psalm has touching associations. There was no fouler or more wanton murder perpetrated in those years than that of the boy, Andrew Hislop, 17 years old. He had done no wrong, but had provoked the venom of the persecutors by being steadfast in his refusal to betray his friends. Even Claverhouse protested against proceeding to extremity against him ; but Johnstone of Westerhall persisted, to the everlasting disgrace of what should have been an honourable name. The boy was given a few minutes for prayer before the end. He sang a few verses of this Psalm :

The mighty Lord is on my side,
I will not be afraid ;
For any thing that man can do
I shall not be dismay'd.

Brave lad, when ordered to draw his bonnet over his eyes, he would not. Confronting his slayers, Bible in hand, he said, "I can look you in the face; I have done nothing of which I need to be ashamed. But how will you look in that day when you shall be judged by what is written in this Book?"

Richard Cameron was a singer; as a young man he was precentor in the church at Falkland. When he fell, Donald Cargill undertook the leadership of the Covenanters. In time he suffered death on the scaffold in the Grassmarket. As he went up the ladder he said, "The Lord knows I go on this ladder with less fear and perturbation than I have sometimes entered the pulpit to preach." Then he began to sing the 118th Psalm. He was able to finish only three verses when his voice was drowned by the beating of drums. But those verses had been often upon his lips in perilous circumstance, and they made a perfect close to a heroic life:

The right hand of the mighty Lord
  Exalted is on high;
The right hand of the mighty Lord
  Doth ever valiantly.
I shall not die, but live, and shall
  The works of God discover.
The Lord hath me chastised sore,
  But not to death giv'n over.

Seven years later, when William of Orange, bringing deliverance, landed at Torbay, this was the psalm William Carstares chose to be sung, when the Prince asked him to conduct worship with the army. All the troops along the beach, it is said, joined in the singing with deeply moving effect.

Other stories crowd on the memory. One recalls, for example, the immortal story of how Margaret Wilson, a girl of 18, and Margaret Lachlison, an elderly widow of 60, were tied to stakes within the floodmark in the Water of Bladnoch, near Wigtown, there to be drowned, if they refused to recant, when the Solway tide flowed full. The girl, with her fresh young voice, sang the 25th Psalm:

My sins and faults of youth
  Do thou, O Lord, forget:
After thy mercy think on me,
  And for thy goodness great.

And so she continued singing till the waters rose and choked her.

One calls to mind Hugh Mackail, the prototype of Scott's Ephriam MacBriar. When he was martyred after Rullion

Green, Psalm 16 was the last Scripture he read the night before the end, and at the last he sang on the scaffold :

Into thy hands I do commit
My spirit ; for thou art he,
O thou, Jehovah, God of truth,
That hast redeemed me.

Or one thinks of James Renwick, last of the martyrs of the Covenant, a young man of singularly beautiful and attractive spirit, who died with a transfigured countenance, as if he had mounted the scaffold to his triumph. As Dr John Ker says, there is a plaintive tone in the words with which he began :

Such pity as a father hath
Unto his children dear ;
Like pity shews the Lord to such
As worship him in fear.

But then, " as if he felt the breath of the coming deliverance to himself and his country already blowing on his dying cheek, came the words of joyful trust : "

But unto them that do him fear
God's mercy never ends ;
And to their children's children still
His righteousness extends.

I need quote no more examples of how the spiritual life of the heroic men and women who testified and suffered in that never-to-be-forgotten period of Scottish religious history, found unfailing comfort and support in this version of the Psalms. Do not listen to those who talk contemptuously of the crudeness of its versification. There is a far finer beauty in its rugged strength than any poetic finish could ever impart to it ; and an elevation and dignity in those passages that are suitable for modern worship make them incomparable for congregational singing. But in addition, these Psalms gather round them sentiments which will always endear them to Scottish folk who know anything of the history of their race. They are steeped in that history. They are stained with the blood of the martyrs. They are bedewed with the tears of many of the most heroic of our forebears, who counted not their lives dear to them, that by suffering and sacrifice they might keep faith with conscience and with God. In many of these simple strains we catch the echo of their triumph. For though defeat and disaster overwhelmed many of them in their own day, it was no lost cause for which they fought ; it was to triumph that they came. And it is an obligation upon us

to share the pride and glory of the victory they won, for we are sharers of its fruits. They purchased freedom for us ; it is in large measure to them that we owe the civil and religious liberties which we hold so lightly to-day. When we thank God for these heroes of the faith and for what they bequeathed to us, we should thank Him too for the Scottish Psalms, in which, in the very words they used and to the tunes which in their day they sang, we also in our day may celebrate His praise.

MILLAR PATRICK.