

THE VOCABULARY OF THE KIRK (*continued*)

Part II

The Kirk and the Queir

When we come to the church itself in the eighteenth century, the Reformation had made such drastic changes in the fabrics and furnishings, doing away with orientation, the cruciform plan, the altar and so on, that it is difficult, if not well-nigh impossible, to see any continuity in the tradition of building, and this of course is reflected in the vocabulary. It is, however, worth noting the survival of the word *queir* (choir), always applied to a pre-Reformation cruciform church whether still in use or in ruins; there is also the term *reenge* or range, a small platform with a seat or seats, frequently enclosed, in front of the pulpit, where the elders sat at Communion, where children were brought for baptism and where now in many churches the choir sits. This was sometimes also called, with less reverence, the *bunker*, and no doubt it represents all that remains of the old chancel. In this general confounding of choir and chancel and the replacement of the altar by the pulpit, the chief chorister takes his place in a kind of sub-pulpit or *dask* or *lettern* below the minister. This was of course the precentor or, informally, the *lettergae*, the one who 'lets go' or strikes up the tune of the praise. Earlier there had been a *reader*, especially in larger churches, whose business it was to read passages from Scripture till the Minister was ready to commence the service proper, and his desk was properly the *lettern* (lectern) in its strict etymological sense. In smaller churches, the reader and the precentor were one and the same person, and when the readership fell into disuse in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the precentor in any case took over his duties of reading, where the minister did not do this himself, and after 1700 the precentor is often called the reader, whether he read or not. He was, often as not, the parish schoolmaster who might well be chosen as much for his high doh as for his skill at Latin and the three R's. In the eighteenth century especially when church services were much more leisurely and not very orderly affairs he began the proceedings, while the bell was still tolling, with the *gathering psalm* which he kept going while the congregation continued to straggle in and until the minister entered the pulpit to take over. In the earlier part of the century his repertoire was limited to the metrical psalms and these only to the

twelve or kirk tunes, listed by Millar Patrick (p. 111), of which Burns names three in *The Cotter's Saturday Night*. But by the middle of the century the twelve tunes were being considerably added to (Burns mentions the new 'Bangor' in 'The Ordination'), and somewhat later the *paraphrases*, as a kind of half-way house between a psalm and a hymn, extended the range of the praise even further, and no doubt taxed the abilities of the ordinary precentor to the uttermost, though to his ultimate good. The practice of *lining* or *running the line*, i.e. singing each line separately with the congregation repeating it, a practice derived from seventeenth century Puritanism, became ingrained in Scottish Presbyterian worship and died out only with the coming of organs. In the smaller Presbyterian bodies in the Highlands where organs are still taboo, the practice is as lively as ever and has produced the unique and quite magnificent modern Gaelic psalm, which is a kind of spiritual pibroch. The development of psalmody obviously involved more musical training of precentors, choirs where there were such, and congregations, and this has been traced by Millar Patrick in his book (chap. xiv). The curious habit of using secular verses at choir practices (*practice psalms* or *singing lines*) also arose as a further consequence. The best of these rather resembled and no doubt paved the way for the paraphrases (one or two did in fact become paraphrases).

Otherwise the service was conducted very much as it is today. One feature, however, has gone, though I can remember a minister some fifty years ago who cultivated it. This was the *souch*, not quite what is commonly understood by 'the pulpit wail', but a curious kind of *false alto bravura*, used especially in prayers, which came from Puritan influence, and may indeed be a vestigial legacy from pre-Reformation intoning. The sermon itself would accord with the minister's own enthusiasms or idiosyncrasies but it would usually follow a fairly general pattern of recapitulating the chief heads of Calvin's view of the Christian faith (I wonder if it is fully appreciated how thoroughly the Scots were drilled week after week in the fundamentals) to which were appended the *uses* or practical applications of the principles to daily living. At the end of the sermon the collection was taken in the *ladles* wielded by the elders at the end of long poles reaching to the ends of the pews, and the service ended with a prayer and a psalm and the *skailing* of the congregation.

Nowadays some churches put on a light snack of bread and cheese or the like for those who wish to stay on and discuss matters with their fellow-members. This is by no means a novelty. That rather small but attractive sect, the Glasites, founded in 1728 by the Rev. John Glas and much supported in Angus, followed their services with a regular midday meal, a *Love-feast*, on the argument that the Last Supper was itself an ordinary meal. Broth being a regular dish

at such a table, the church came to be nicknamed the *Kail Kirk*, occasionally the *broth Kirk*. It was indeed the matter of the ingredients of the broth which caused a serious schism in the sect and one that was never reconciled.

So much has been written on Presbyterian church discipline, that any description of the *pillar*, the *stool of repentance*, the *pawns* and so forth must be superfluous. That the elders were closely involved in this is plain from such works as Burns's *Holy Willie's Prayer* or Allan Ramsay's *Elegy on John Cowper, the Kirk Treasurer*. The parish, especially if an urban one, was divided into four *quarters* and two or more elders were allocated to each, for most church purposes, the collection of funds, the distribution of tokens and the disbursement of money for the poor and the needy. But the elders also acted as a kind of ecclesiastical police force. As *searchers*, a few of them would patrol the parish during divine service or in the late evenings to notice and report on absentees, disorderly behaviour and the like, for the Kirk Session to take the appropriate action. Hence the expression *elders' hours*, i.e. 10 p.m., when the elders were on the go and when respectable citizens were expected to be indoors for the night. Edgar suggests that their chief business was to empty the alehouses of their over-devoted customers, in default of a modern style Licensing Act; there is, alas, some reason to think that the limit was imposed to get the elders out themselves and show their drouthy cronies a good example.

When finally they got home, it was their duty as professing Christians to engage in an *exercise*, not of course in its specialized sense of an exegesis of a passage of scripture, usually delivered by a minister or a student in his trials before a presbytery, but in the commoner sense, as used from the middle of the seventeenth century when literacy became widespread in Scotland, of family worship, the reading of the Bible and the offering up of prayer, read or extempore. And so with this Presbyterian version of compline, the Christian day came to its close.

As one reviews the whole vocabulary of Scots, the impression, alluded to above, grows of how deeply the teachings and attitudes of the Kirk permeated the lives and outlook and language of the Scottish people. One thinks for instance of the phrase 'The Land o' the Leal', most familiar from Lady Nairne's song, though the expression is recorded from the middle of the seventeenth century, and there in five words we have the poetical equivalent of justification by faith.

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