

## **FROM THE ARCHIVES**

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### **The Psalmody of Covenanting Times**

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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 it 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 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 the 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 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 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 edge of extinction.

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