

‘A LITURGICAL CURIOSITY’

What follows is an edited and updated version of an article which appeared in February 1980 in ‘Continuo’, the former magazine of the Glasgow Society of Organists. The writer was the Revd James Hay Hamilton.

THE USE OF COLMONELL

In 1980 an advertisement was still appearing each May or June in the church advertisement columns of the national newspapers intimating that in a certain church on the following Sunday divine service would be conducted ‘according to the Use of Colmonell’.

These annual services appear to have gone into abeyance but even when they occurred, they gave rise, as occasional references still give rise, to questions about the origins and structure of the ‘Use’. These, unsurprisingly, were never matters of common knowledge for it is a liturgical curiosity, the creation of one man, Robert Finnie McEwen.

Born in 1860, the son of an Ayrshire minister, he was for a time a successful advocate but ceased practicing to devote himself to his musical interests, serving on the Council of the Royal College of Music from 1906 to 1926, the year of his death. A man of considerable means, he became laird Bardrochat in the parish of Colmonell, South Ayrshire, and, as well as being a patron of music and other arts and himself an executant on the piano and organ, he was an ardent churchman. Although he had a town house in Edinburgh and purchased Marchmont in Berwickshire in 1913, he spent most of his time at Bardrochat, high above the Stinchar valley and commanding magnificent views inland to the Galloway hills and seaward to Arran and Ailsa Craig.

His great love was for his parish church and he made many gifts to it, including a splendid stained glass window, a reredos and pulpit designed by a then unknown and promising architect named Robert Lorimer, and an organ built by Norman and Beard to his own specification particularly designed to display to advantage the music of Bach, his favourite composer. The organ in its richly-carved oak case was housed in a new choir loft (also designed by Lorimer) at the rear of the Church.

He was a student of liturgy and he brought to this a Cambridge education and a cultured classical mind. He formed the idea that the Presbyterian and Anglican traditions of worship could be combined, and long before scholarly Scottish ministers such as W.M. McMillan and W.D. Maxwell had conducted their research, this Scots elder had devised an order of service which would get away from the “hymn sandwich” and would represent something more sublime, more satisfying and more catholic.

Around the year 1920 he produced his ‘Divine Service according to the Use of Colmonell.’ Let it be said at once, that it was not in accord with later liturgical thinking which turned for its pattern towards the structure of the communion service – a so-called *missa sicca*. But it was pioneering work from an unexpected quarter and for that reason not undeserving of recollection.

The service begins with versicles (scripture sentences) sung by the choir. Thereafter in order a metrical psalm with doxology; prayer; canticle; the first reading of scripture, concluded by an ascription sung by the precentor (a solo male voice in the choir) – ‘May God bless to us the reading of his Holy Word’ – with choral response – ‘And to his Name be all Praise’; a prose psalm or anthem; the second lesson with ascription and response (‘Glory’ replacing ‘Praise’); the Nicene Creed to Merbecke’s setting; the Lord’s Prayer (said); a hymn; sermon with ascription (...‘the preaching of the Word’) and response (...‘Praise’); the offerings; prayers of dedication and intercession; a Scottish paraphrase; the Benediction. To all the prayers and to the Benediction there are sung ‘amen’s, slightly varying one from the others and composed by McEwen himself, as are also the ascriptions and responses.

It will be seen at once that to sustain regularly a service of this kind is far beyond the resources of the average village choir. McEwen overcame this by bringing to Colmonell at regular intervals and at his own expense professional singers of the highest standing who entertained his guests and himself in the Bardrochat music room on the Saturday evening and then augmented the choir in church on the Sunday morning.

But he visualised a much wider scope for his creation. He encompassed this by inserting a clause in his will whereby this service was to be observed once a year on a Sunday near to the General Assembly in a parish church in Scotland. The church (which obviously had to be one with considerable

Three Ascriptions of Praise and Glory to Almighty God

These Three Ascriptions of Praise and Glory to Almighty God (according to the form commonly used at Public Worship by the Presbyterian Churches in Scotland) may be sung by Choir (S.A.T.B.) and People as follows—

No I. *After the Reading of the Word of God as it is contained in the Scriptures of the Old Testament—*

And to His Name be all Praise A - men.

And to His Name be all Praise A - men. *dim.*

MAY GOD BLESS to us the READ-ing of His Ho - ly Word And to His Name be all Praise A - men.

No II. *After the Reading of the Word of God as it is contained in the Scriptures of the New Testament—*

And to His Name be Glo - ry A - men.

And to His Name be Glo - ry A - men. *dim.*

MAY GOD BLESS to us the READ-ing of His Ho - ly Word And to His Name be Glo - ry A - men.

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No III. *After the Sermon—*

And to His Name be all Praise A - men.

And to all Praise A - men.

MAY GOD { BLESS to us } of the Word And to His Name be all Praise A - men.
 { the PREACH-ing }

Four Settings of "Amen."

According to the Use of Colmonell.

After the first Prayer— *After all subsequent Prayers—* *After the Benediction—* *Or this—*

A - men. A - men. A - - men. A - - men.

[R. F. Mc E.]

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musical resources) was to be selected by three trustees – the minister of St Andrew's Parish Church, Edinburgh, the professor of music in Edinburgh and the lawyer for the McEwen family, and their successors in office. On agreeing to the nomination the church was required to print an order of service 'conforming as nearly as possible' to the Use of Colmonell, incorporating the responses to McEwen's own settings (copyrighted by Stainer and Bell in 1916 and 1920) and sending a 'voucher copy' to the legal agent. In return a donation was sent with the intention that it should be devoted to the advancement and encouragement of the music of the congregation. The bequest became operative in 1927 when the service was held in St George's Parish Church in Edinburgh.

The successors in office of the first two trustees have indicated that they are unaware of their trusteeship and the legal agent has not presently been identified so it has not been possible to establish when the peripatetic annual services ceased. In Colmonell itself, where R.F. McEwen once played the organ and conducted the choir practice, the main sequence of the service long continued, with a doxology to the metrical psalms, the ascriptions of praise, and the varied amens but otherwise, of necessity, in limited form. There too, according to the present minister of the (now linked) parish, McEwen's work has ceased to be of discernible influence.

Copies of the music, and of the Order of Service when it was used, gather dust in at least one Aberdeen choir library and, no doubt in other places also. If the 'Use' is never likely to influence regular usage, it may be hoped that it will be allowed to gather yet more dust until a future generation rediscovers it as the curiosity which it is.