The Gude and Godlie Ballatis

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The Gude and Godlie Ballatis. As a title it has everything. Alliterative, certainly, but also nicely ambiguous. *Gude*, morally wholesome but also suggesting contents sound and well-made; *godlie*, something here about the bigger questions, the spiritual, a hint of mystery, of deeper meaning; then *ballatis* - not a treatise or sermonising but a lighter touch, the suggestion of entertainment, a bit of fun, but also wrapped up in that the connotations of 'ballad', which customarily told stories of life and death and love and loss.

Since its recovery in the eighteenth century the *Compendious Book of Godlie and Spiritual Sangis*, to use its fuller title, has been recognised as an important document in the religious and cultural history of Scotland but also as something of a literary classic. The earliest extant edition dates from 1565, which came to light only in the third quarter of last century. It is this that Professor Alasdair MacDonald of the University of Gronengen has edited for the Scottish Text Society, published in time for the 500th anniversary celebrations.[1] Yet internal evidence suggests the likelihood of earlier editions, and that before that too there would be ballads printed or passed by word of mouth, since a great deal of the material drawn on, including the music that is noted or implied, dates from at least the 1530s.

The Ballads are a good illustration of the suggestion by such scholars as Stephen Holmes, formerly of St John's Princes Street and New College, that the Scottish Reformation is best approached not as a date fixed in time but as a movement within the church, developing at different paces in different centres, particularly Aberdeen and St Andrews. The *Ballatis* not only predated the date of the 1560 'Reformation Parliament' but continued to be published until 1621.

1 Ed. Alasdair A. MacDonald, *The Gude and Godlie Ballatis* (The Scottish Text Society, 2015); 978-1-89797-641-8.

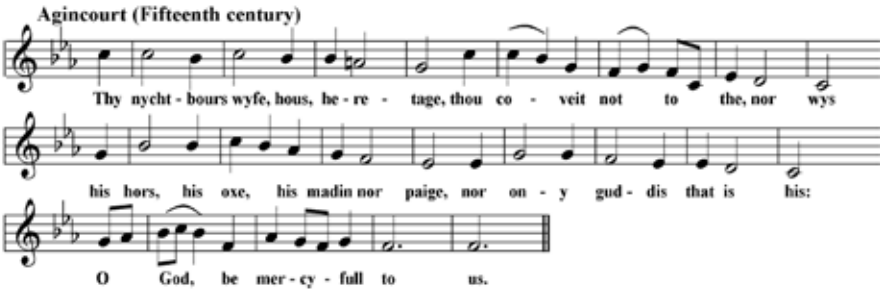
The first of the four main sections opens with a handful of prose items, contrasting with the bulk of the metrical material which follows. These are core texts: the Ten Commandments, a Catechism which takes the format of Luther's own Shorter Catechism, an Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, as well as key passages of Scripture – on Baptism (Matthew 28), Holy Communion (1 Corinthians 11), Forgiveness of Sins. The whole book is written in Scots, in contrast to nearly all of the Psalters / 'Common Orders' that dated from 1564. It is interesting also to note that, insofar as many are translations of originals in Germanic languages, they are by no means slavish imitations or direct translations; the editor, for example, notes in the metrical version of the Ten Commandments, which comes immediately after the prose texts, an interesting contextualisation in that no fewer than four stanzas have specific reference to aspects of the the Scottish legal system – like the obligation to answer a judge and a reference to jury trial, which are neither in the original nor in Luther's version which it resembles. And what you covet is a horse not an ass. In later pieces, he detects a veiled reference or two to contemporary historical events, like the marriage of Mary Queen of Scots and Darnley.

At the head of the metrical version of the Commandments referred to there is the instruction 'to sing with the tones' (tunes) and it seems intended that from this point onwards the contents are to be sung. In a collection with a remarkable range of metres, this first item is in five lines of eight syllables, 14 verses. Interestingly, each stanza ends with a version of the Kyrie Eleison, Lord have mercy, an ancient prayer that was shunned by later Reformed worship as 'vain repetition'.

What tune? As in the case of many, if not most, of the texts that follow, we have no idea. No edition has music, although a known tune may be noted or, more likely, implied. So that we can try this out, I've used a tune that was in currency at the time, English in origin but so are many of the others. It is the victory song after Agincourt in 1415 [this may be found in *Church Hymnary: Fourth Edition* at no. 330, where its harsh and taunt-like character superbly fits Iain Cunningham's hymn about the slaughter of the innocents]. The problem is that it has only four lines. However, Chappell's *Popular Music of the Olden Time* (1855ff) preserves an earlier version which has a 'burden' or refrain, 'Deo Gratias', which the petition 'Lord, have mercy on us' fits perfectly.

The Ten Commandis 1.10 *is sung by those present*[2]*. (The audience or congregation were invited to participate in all the examples used.)*

Example 1



Wyrk na euyll worke on haly day,
flee frome all synfull luste and sleuth,
walk and be sober, fast and pray,
heir him that preche the worde of treuth;
O God, be mercyfull to us.

Thy nychtbours wyfe, hous, heretage,
thou coueit not to the, nor wys
his hors, his oxe, his madin nor paige,
nor ony guddis that is his:
O God, be mercyfull to us.

Gude and Godlie Ballatis 1565/2015 i.10

Where did these lyrics come from? How did they get here? This and much other material in the collection are derived from or directly translated into Scots from Lutheran originals, with some deriving from versions in Low German, Flemish or Danish, plus a few in English from Coverdale.[3] Dundee and Leith were the main ports for the continent where ideas were as likely to be imported as produce. Many Scottish merchants and craftspeople settled round the North Sea and the Baltic and it was known that Lutheran ideas and indeed hymns were popular in these locations. (Billy Kay in his book on the Scottish Diaspora[4] gives an interesting later example of that continuing tradition of mercantile Scot, in that the famous Norwegian composer Edvard Greig was of a Scottish family. His great-grandfather, Alexander Greig, arrived in Bergen in 1770 and began to export fish and lobster back to Scotland. And twice each year he would sail back to his parish of Rathens in Cairnbulg for Communion). There was

2 The references that follow each title are to the divisions and the ballad number in the original.

3 Myles Coverdale, *Goostly Psalmes and Spirituall Songs.*

4 *The Scottish World: a Journey into the Scottish Diaspora* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 2008, 2012), 27-31.

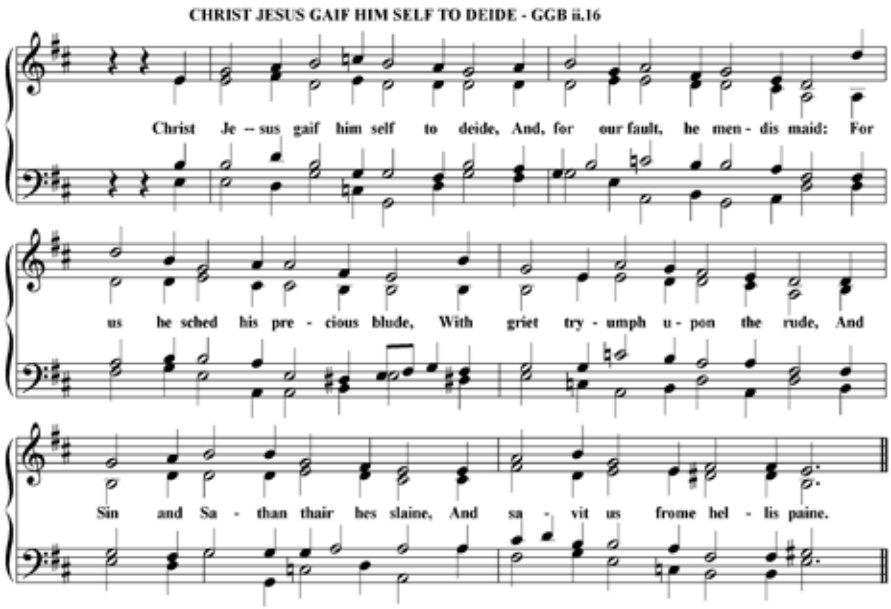
also the well-attested traffic between Scotland and the continental universities in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Robert Carvor, the notable Scottish composer and a canon at the Augustinian foundation at Scone, is thought to have attended Louvain, for example, in obedience to the monastic reforms of Pope Benedict XII which required that monasteries of 20 plus members keep about 5% in university study.

Tradition has credited three Dundee brothers with editorship, even authorship, at least of parts of the collection, and this has led to it being referred to as the Dundie Psalms. However, these Wedderburn brothers were on different sides of the debate. The editor identifies two of them as possible, in particular the middle one, John. Like the others, he studied at St Andrews, became a priest at Dundee but came under suspicion of heresy, escaping to Wittenberg during the period of his trial. Trained in theology, one who had 'drunk of St Leonard's Well' perhaps[5], he also knew Latin and German. However, the matter of editorship or authorship remains rather a murky area.

The **second section** is headed: 'Followis Spirituall Sangis.' The first sixteen are translations of Lutheran hymns. The one we sing now started life in Latin, 'Christus pro nobis passus est', and was by Herman Bonn, who also made the German translation. The Scots version fits the original tune.

5 Referring to students in the sixteenth century at St Andrews University, a synonym for their being influenced by continental Protestant ideas.

Example 2



The songs include:

'We wratcheit synnaris pure: ane sang of our corrupit nature, and the only remedy thareof' ii.2.

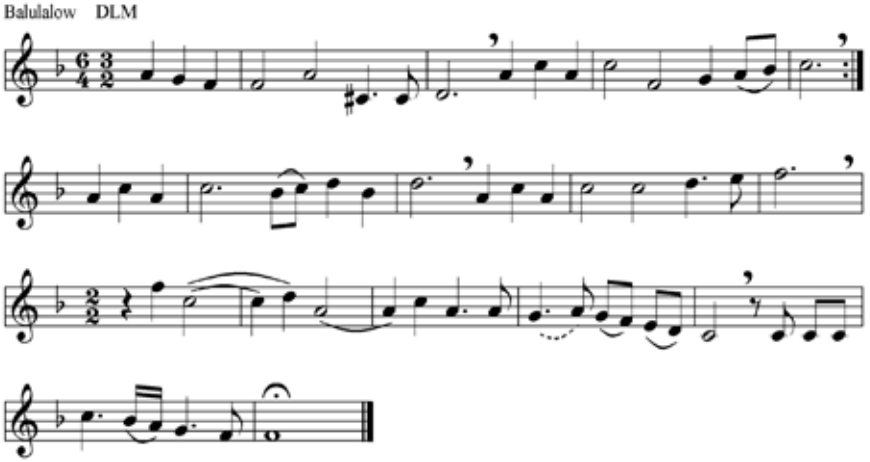
'Al Christin men, tak tent and leir' ii.3. ('Tent' means notice, 'leir' means learn *or* teach – and puts one in mind that there is still a widespread local Scottish use where the two are interchangeable, albeit corrected by teachers of 'proper English' as in the threat 'If ye do that again Ah'll learn ye!') It is a dialogue between 'the fleshe' and and 'the spreit', a version of the late medieval debate poem, of which an example is Henryson's 'The ressoning btuix Deth and Man'.

In another is told in 18 verses the story of the Gospel of Luke's 'Forlorne Sonne' ii.6, aka the Prodigal Son. This might even be a better title in that it places the focus not on his spending habits but the outcome and the need for forgiveness. And there is also 'ane sang of the riche gluttoun and pure Lazarus' in Luke 16 ii.7.

But the tenth lyric in this section, in the view of the Editor, 'must be pronounced

one of the most successful translations in the whole of the Ballatis'. It is certainly one of the most beautiful combinations of word and melody. It translates Luther's famous 'Von himmel hoch', 'I come fra heauin [heich] to tell', and is described as 'ane sang of the Byrith of Christ, with the tone of Baw lula low' (a rare example of a named tune). The editor comments that the tune is not known, observing that the title implies a lullaby. However, the tune is indeed known and has been in the repertory of the church for some 12 years, and is in the current hymnary where the ballad is printed in Scots and English.[6] The melody contains features characteristic of Scottish popular song, as in the long fall of the melody, and the modulation to which it leads, together with an unusual ambiguity between time schemes from six-four to three-two, ending with a section of two minims per bar.

Example 3



I come from hevin (heich) to tell
the best nouellis that euer befell.
To you thir thythingis trew I bryng
and I wyll of thaim saye and syng.
This day to you is borne ane chyld
of Marie meik, and virgene myld.
That blyssit bairn benyng and kynd,
(benyng and kynd,)
sall you reioyse, baith hart and mynd.

O my deir hart, young Iesus sweit,
prepare thy creddyll in my spreit,
and I sall rok thee in my hart,
and neuer more fra the depart.
Bot I sall prayse the euermore
with sangis sweit vnto thy glore;
the kneis of my hart sall (I) bow
(sall I bow)
and sing that rycht Balulalow.

Gude and Godlie Ballatis ii.10, as in Church Hymnary 4, no. 297

6 *Church Hymnary 4* nos. 297, 298.

The material in the **third section**, however, does not have its origin in Lutheran works. It is headed, 'Followis Certane Ballattis of the Scripturs', devotional and reflective in character and including some graces to be sung before meals. The ballads are based not on stories but on general themes. The first and fourth verses of the ''carrell contrar Ydolatrie' run:

> We sulde beleue in God abufe,
> And in nane vther thyng;
> Quha traistis in him, he wyl thaim luf,
> And grant thaim thair askyng. …
>
> The apostlis, that wryt the veritie,
> Expreslie dois conclude
> That ydolis sulde detestit be,
> And contrar to Christis blude.

The **fourth** main section begins with a substantial body of psalms in Scots, some based on Latin prose versions but the majority on German versifications. Surprisingly, these do not seem to have been referred to when the church began establishing its official psalter, except for Psalm 83 which Robert Pont used as his template for one of his contributions to the new collection. (Pont, an Advocate, was the father of the famous Rev. Timothy Pont, the pioneering cartophographer, the first to produce a detailed map of Scotland.) Why should this be? One practical reason no doubt was that the new Psalter was not in Scots, like the *Ballatis* (although there were two later editions that were).

However, after the nineteenth version, the psalms are interrupted and then overtaken by an unusual body of songs which we would class as *contrafacta*. Luther himself made great use of contrafacta, the word suggesting the borrowing of an existing song and making it over into another, in this case a secular song takes on a religious purpose. To do this is not only to find a handy tune but often to allow the flavours of the original to 'drive' the new text. For example, we know 'Innsbruck' as a hymn tune *Innsbruck is demonstrated* but it is borrowed from a song in which the singer laments his pending departure from the haunts of his youth and of his first love as well. 'O Innsbruck I must forsake you' in Luther's hands became, 'O world I must forsake you'. But the contrafacta in the *Ballatis* are something else again in which, as well as in court and concert, we linger on street corners and taverns and lurk in lovers' lanes.

The first lines generally help us identify the original tune that was in mind. These are some:

> Rych sorely musin in my mynd
> Allace that sam sweit face
> In tyll ane myrthfull May morning
> My lufe murnis for me
> Doun by yon river i ran
> With hountis vp, with hountis upe
> The wynde blawis cauld, rycht furious and bauld
> Hay, now the day dallis (dawns)

Many of these contrafacta had satirical, indeed polemical content, like so many of the broadsheet ballads of the time, with lines like:

> God send euery prest ane wyfe and every nunne a man …
> The bishop of hely [Ely] braik his neck …
> The paip, that pagane full of pryde …

But in the main their aim was to tell a story or teach a doctrine, a frequent one being justification by faith alone. In our concluding example we meet 'Johne cum kys me noo' iv.24. The song is built on the original plot line and, surprisingly, its refrain is retained for the new song.

> Johne, cum kys me now, [probably pronounced 'noo']
> Johne, cum kys me now,
> Johne, cum kys me by and by,
> and mak nae mair adow. ['ado']

Thus the passionate, if exasperated, maiden, becomes a passionate God appealing to humankind. 'Johne representit man', as the song is careful to explain, and the 'kys', as a later verse laboriously makes clear, is the kiss of faith by which alone we are restored to a relationship with God. This version of the tune was extracted from a set of variations by William Byrd for virginals. These are typical of its twenty-four verses:

> The Lord thy God I am
> that Johne dois the call;
> Johne representit man
> be grace celestiall. …

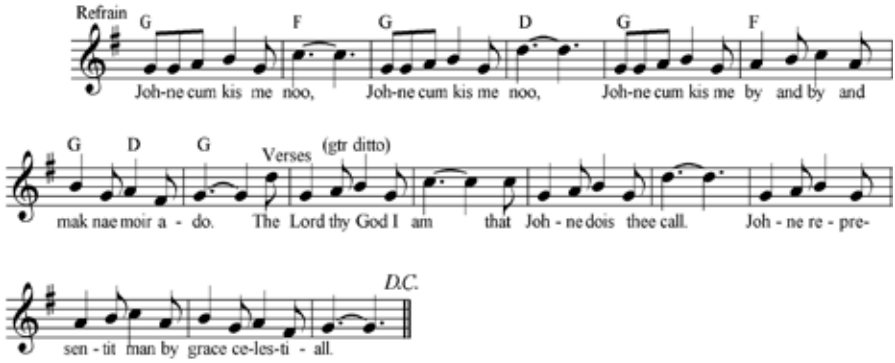
This walde thow nocht obey
nor yet follow to my will,[7]
bot did caste thy self away
and thy posteritie spyll. …

Bot the abhominatioun of disolatioun
thou settis in the haly place
be Antechristis fals perswasioun
my Sonnes passioun to deface. …

Repent thy syn unfenyeitlie,
belieue my promeis in Christis deith,
this kys of faith wyll iustified the,
as my scripture planelie sayith. …

Of all that cum I wyll non reiect,
no creature gret nor small;
for Christis saik I wyll thaim accept,
and geue thaim lyfe eternall.

Example 4



We end by returning to the title page and the prologue, and raise the question of the purpose and destination of the collection. The prologue refers to

7 Adjusted to make meaning clear.

Colossians 3 and the role of psalms, hymns and spiritual songs in teaching and admonishing, and suggests that singing in verse helps memorise, (quote) 'speciallie amangis young personis and sick as ar nocht excersit in the scripturs, for they wyll soner consaue (i.e. conceive, or understand) the trew worde nor quen (than when) thay heir it soung in Latyne, the quhilks thay wat nocht (know not) quhat it is.' (Luckily there is a glossary at the end of this edition). Now it may well be that these might be sung in the schools, which often were Sang Scuils, by younger people. But this may be a cover, insurance for the printer against banning, as is the reference in the title page to Latin originals, which were actually very few in number. Giving the collection such high purpose might protect what could be a more seditious purpose.

Another 'reason' given in the preface is that the 'sundry uther Ballatis changeit out of prophaine sangis' would have the laudable purpose of supplanting 'bauldry sangis and unclene'. This kind of preface was not uncommon at the time, as in the earlier Franciscan *Red Book of Ossory* which suggests that the reason was to prevent monks (quote) 'polluting their throats with lascivious song'. Again perhaps, a smokescreen. Much more likely is that this striking collection was a sustained attempt to celebrate the excitement of newly-opened Scripture, the promotion of the new liberating doctrines, and to do this with a little enjoyment in the bygoing!