

GEORGE BUCHANAN AND JAMES MACGREGOR

GEORGE PATTERSON*

TO one who proposed writing a Life of John Wesley the candid friend replied, "You have nothing to draw with and the well is deep." The advice might well be given to me when I set out to write of George Buchanan, or enter into comparisons between him and my great grandfather Rev. Dr. James MacGregor. For a number of years one of my treasured possessions has been a copy of George Buchanan's *Paraphrasis of the Psalms* Edition of 1790. It had belonged to Dr. MacGregor and bore almost on every page in the Doctor's beautifully neat and clear handwriting suggested changes which, no doubt, the Doctor regarded as improvements. Some of the Psalms are entirely rewritten; in which case he follows Buchanan's metre and shows he had a thorough knowledge of the Latin measures.

George Buchanan was born of an old and poor but respectable family in Killearn, Stirlingshire, Scotland in 1506. His maternal uncle undertook to educate him, but died very shortly after, and the nephew was reduced to such poverty that he enlisted as a common soldier in the Duke of Albany's army "for the duration". The war ended, he resumed his studies and took a Master's degree in 1528. Between this period and 1539-41 he was employed as a classical teacher, and was residing with the Earl of Cassilis, when his unlucky wit and the Lutheran principles he had imbibed led to his imprisonment. He was fortunate enough to escape from St. Andrew's Castle and, finding his way beyond seas, lived some twenty years in exile, undergoing much prosecution even to confinement in the prisons of the Inquisition, varied at times by collegiate work in the Universities at Bordeaux and Coimbra. One of the penalties imposed on him while in confinement was to translate the Psalms into Latin verse. About the year 1562 he is known to have been residing in Scotland again, superintending the studies of her who afterwards was Mary Queen of Scots, with whom he read Livy and to whom on her first nuptials he dedicated his beautiful marriage song, *The Epithalamium*. He had the good fortune a few years later to have as a pupil the young Prince, afterwards James VI of Scotland—I of England

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—whom he made a “pedant”, “because”, as he said, “he could make nothing better of him.” Whether at home or abroad his industry never flagged, and few men have received more praise from the Learned than he, especially for his beautiful paraphrase of the Psalms. His *History* is too onesided; the shades are all too dark. The conduct of the Scottish Court as he knew it was not impressive. His last book *De Jus Regno Apud Scotos* was really a vindication of the democratic control of princes. “He ran great hazard of his life” “if”—as a quaint writer of the period put it—“if the Lord had not freed him from the miseries of this world betwixt the Citation and the day of Compearance.” His life, thus curiously saved, ended on September 28, 1581, and as he left no property he was buried at the expense of the City of Edinburgh.

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In the year of Burns' birth, as the anniversary of the day of which the Herald Angels sang approached, an humble weaver and his wife in a little village of Scotland gave thanks to God for the gift of a son. The parents were both members of the Clan MacGregor, but that name was still proscribed. The son was called James Drummond, and under that name was educated at the University of Edinburgh. Nova Scotia, and Pictou County more particularly, knows him only as James MacGregor, the first Presbyterian clergyman in Pictou and Eastern Nova Scotia. He came to Pictou in 1786 in answer to what after some hesitation he recognized to be a call from God. He did not confine himself to Pictou, but took the Maritime Provinces for his Parish and regularly visited every part of them. He laboured alone for nine years; and when in 1795 in response to his fervent appeals for assistance two others joined him, it did not lessen his labours but changed their direction. His appeals to the Mother Church at home were not confined to pleading for men to work in this vineyard, but for books as well. These appeals met with generous response both in books and money to buy them. Two books deserve separate and special mention: one is a copy of Johnson's *Dictionary*,* first edition, in original binding, and came from a Lady Maxwell, whose name in large masculine handwriting appears on the fly leaf; the other is the *Paraphrasis Psalmorum, Davidis*

*This book, with a number of others chiefly Gaelic (including Ossian in three volumes *A Gaelic Dictionary* in two, *The Dean of Lismore's Book* and *An Anthology of Gaelic Poetry* that includes four poems by Dr. MacGregor), has recently been given to Dalhousie College Library by Dr. MacGregor's great-grandchildren.

Poetica edition of 1790. Never was a book more prized than the latter, or its contents more diligently studied. It is well known that Buchanan took especial pains with the 137th Psalm "By Babel's streams we sat and wept." Dr. MacGregor does not alter a word of it, though it is worthy of note he alters the beautiful Shepherds' Psalm in six places.

To compare and illustrate I take two of the Psalms that Dr. MacGregor has entirely rewritten, the 17th and the 121st. Buchanan's version of the former reads:

Omnes ubique generis humani
Quos solis ambit orbitaque calor,
Rerum parentis optimi libenter
Pangite laudes.

Blandus est ille semper et indulgens
Fovet benigne commodis nos vitae
Fidus et constans reddere promissa
Piis et justis.

Dr. MacGregor's is as follows:

Omnes ubique gentium
Quos solis ambit orbita,
Rerum parentis optimi
Laudes libenter pangite.
Agnoscite indulgentiam
Benignius nos in dies
Foventis, et constantiam
Promissa certam reddere.

The 121st "I to the hills will lift mine eyes" Buchanan renders as follows—remember he is writing a paraphrase:

Dum ferox armis inimicus instat,
Ad montes vaga lumina
Proximos circumfero, si quid illinc
Forte appareat auxili.
At mihi coeli Dominus solique
Certam solus opem feret.
Ille (quid vano trepidans tumultu
Cor pulsas mihi pectora?)
Ille sanctorum, mihi crede, custos
Noctes excubat et dies:
Victa nec blandi illecebris soporis
Unquam lumina dimovet:
Leniter passis tibi semper alis
Umbræ more supervolat;
Ne eutem solis violentioris
Urant spicula de die,

Nocte ne lunae nebulosioris
 Artus degravet halitus.
 Seu domi clausus lateas, latentem
 Clausis servat in aedibus:
 Seu foris pacis obeas amicae,
 Seu belli fera munera,
 Sospitem e cunctis Dominus periculis
 Semper te bonus eruet.

Dr. MacGregor's version does not greatly differ:

Dum ferox armis inimicus instat,
 Ad vaga montes lumina nequaquam
 Proximos circumfero, si quid illinc
 Veniat opis.

At mihi coeli Dominus solique
 Auxilium e jus feret tempestive.
 Ille (quid pulsas trepidans tumultu
 Cor mihi pectus?)

Ille sanctorum, mihi crede, custos
 Noctes excubat vigil atque dies:
 Victa illecebris lumina soporis
 Numquam dimovet.

Leniter passis tibi semper alis
 Umbrae tegentis more supervolat;
 Ne die solis violentioris
 Te jubar urat,

Nocte ne lunae nebulosioris
 Artus degravat halitus acutus,
 Seu domi clausus lateas, latentem
 Aedibus servat:

Seu foris pacis obeas amicae
 Seu feri belli munera inquieta,
 Sospitem e cunctis Deus te periculis
 Eruet semper.

Of which the following is a fair translation:

While the enemy, fierce in his armour threatens, I cast my wandering eyes around to the hills which are not at all near, (to see) if any help will come thence.

But the Lord of heaven and earth will bring me His help in due time. He—(why my heart, trembling with agitation do you beat against my breast?)

He, believe me, stands guard night and day over the just, He never turns away His eyes (though) overcome by the lure of sleep.

Softly with spread wings He always hovers over thee like a protecting shadow, lest the violent brightness of the sun (brightness of the rather violent sun) should burn thee by day.

Lest by night the sharp exhalations of the cloudy moon should press down on thy joints, whether you lie hidden shut up at home, He will protect you (hidden) in your house.

Or whether, out of doors, you engage in the friendly tasks of peace, or the restless duties of war, God will always deliver you safe from all dangers.

It will be noticed by those who remember their Latin that the Doctor differs from Buchanan as to the nearness of the hills: *nequaquam proximos* he says, probably with a twinkle in his eye.
