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Helena M. Shire  
*Cambridge University*

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HELENA M. SHIRE

**Alexander Montgomerie:**

**The opposition of the court to conscience.  
"Court and Conscience walis not weill."<sup>1</sup>**

In July of the year 1597 Captain Alexander Montgomerie, poet, soldier and former favourite of King James of Scotland, was denounced by the Privy Council of the realm for complicity in a plot to take the island of Ailsa Craig for the Spanish; he had failed to appear in answer to the charge and was "put to the horn."<sup>2</sup> As an outlaw, every man's hand was against him and his life was forfeit in the realm. Thereafter he disappeared from record.

In the same year his major poem *The Cherrie and the Slae* issued twice from the press of Waldegrave, the King's printer in Edinburgh, in a text of sixty-seven stanzas, manifestly incomplete in content and in form.<sup>3</sup>

Recently interesting new light has been cast on the last phase of the poet's life by the discovery, made by the Reverend Mark Dilworth, O.S.B., of five poems in Latin that were recorded probably about the year 1619 in the papers of a Scots monk, Thomas Duff, a member of the house of Scots Benedictines in Würzburg in Franconia. The poems are probably by Duff himself and their obvious link with the presence of the Scots Benedictine brotherhood in Würzburg dates them as "1595-1619." They are all funeral pieces, recording the manner of life of the poet and the circumstances of his burial. Montgomerie, they reveal, had wished to become a Benedictine monk at Würzburg but death intervened. The place and year of his death are not specified. The Latin texts were printed and discussed by the finder in "New light on Alexander Montgomerie," *The Bibliothek* (1965), 230-235.

Here is a close prose translation of the poems, which differs at

<sup>1</sup>*The Poems of Alexander Montgomerie*, ed. James Cranstoun, Scottish Text Soc. (Edinburgh and London, 1887), p. 128.

<sup>2</sup>*Poems of Alexander Montgomerie, Supplementary Volume*, ed. George Stevenson, Scottish Text Soc. (Edinburgh and London, 1910), Appendix D.XI.

<sup>3</sup>Waldegrave I in Stevenson, with variants from Waldegrave II.

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points from that that can be inferred from the summary and discussion of them in *The Bibliothek*.<sup>4</sup>

### I. A funeral song (16 lines).

Scotland bore me, of noble line—that land abundant in men mighty in war and in peace. As a boy, when I should have been taught the liberal arts, I drank the bitter poison of Calvinist doctrine. But when I had attained man's estate I sickened of passing all my days in darkness. As a professional soldier I saw many different lands, gaining the rewards of military service and attaining the rank of Captain (*strategus*). But I, ignorant of the Faith, was taught by learned Spain how to live according to the laws of true religion. I held a place of honour in the circles of King Philip and so was pleasing to you, King James! (*or* I won favour in the circles of King Philip and was at the same time rewarded by you, King James!) I was a determined and vigorous enemy of heretical teachings. I always detested falsehood and strongly attacked the "Picards" (Protestants) both with force of arms and with a song. At the end the Fates decreed that I should die untimely: my mind is fixed on Heaven.

### II. Another of the same (12 lines).

I lie enclosed within this stone who was the poet Montgomerie, formerly a soldier, taught to love the Apostolic faith. I was noble, being gently born, noble also in my impulses, in the excellence of my character and in my gifts. Because I never regarded as truly mine my race and my ancestors, I had to seek out for myself what part of the world my fortune should lie in. Great Benedict prevailed upon me to seek Artaunum (Würzburg) where he nourished the Scottish brotherhood, at the time when Father Julius was restoring and rehousing the

<sup>4</sup> This translation was made with substantial help from Dr. Robert Bolgar, King's College, Cambridge.

Dilworth states that Duff first appears in Würzburg in 1614-1615, the volume was begun in 1619 and none of the dated poems in it are earlier than 1615. I suggest that the circumstance that inspired Duff to compose these poems about Montgomerie and his connection with Würzburg was the appearance in 1615, in print for the first time, of *The Cherrie and the Slae* in its revised and completed version made not long before the poet's death. (That phrasing on the title-page did not mean that the poet's *death* was recent.) This edition, printed by Andro Hart in Edinburgh, is now lost but was described by Cranstoun, p. li. In the revised and completed version the tenor of the poem as "against Calvinist teachings" was for the first time clearly revealed.

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monkish community there (i.e., 1595, according to Dilworth). Therefore, O wayfarer pause a while and say a prayer on my grave. And fare you well; may you enjoy a fate happier than mine.

### III. Another of the same: epigram (10 lines).

While the poet Montgomerie, passionate in his devotion to the Roman faith, was dying—and love of holy religion was dying [with him], a furious rage possessed the Calvinist (or Picard) curs and they do not suffer him to be buried in hallowed ground. The earls wish him to be so buried; relatives bring gifts [for the burial]; the citizens plead for it and it is the wish of the King himself. No consideration of right moved the Calvinist curs (O criminals, monsters, hateful to God) until at length with a royal escort armed force saw him buried to the point where [funeral] prayers fell silent.

### IV. His way of life and devotion to religion (6 lines).

Saint Benedict is calling to Artaunum his disciple Montgomerie, a man famed for his devotion to religion. But death—too, too untimely—reaps with her sickle the devoted life in its prime and tries to render vain the blessed intention. But what did cruel Fate achieve by this furious act? You might say that against her intention Fate for this monk opened the way to the stars.

### V. Against the Calvinist ministers (14 lines).

Why do these champions of a spurious Assembly, the lowest of the low, not allow the servant of the faith to be buried? They shut the churches; an evil mob, mad dogs, they forbid the bells to be rung in the time-honoured manner. The Catholic Earls do not suffer this and the citizens seek the royal palace with earnest protests. One and all curse the unspeakable outrage and hate it, for [such] deprivation of the last honours makes them sore afraid. The common people, roused to an unusual state of riot, make for the churches and climb the towers, man and boy. The bells are rung and the common-bell is carried through the town, the bell that summons to arms or to funeral.

Thus in fitting manner were the barking Furies checked. This much of glory was owed to Montgomerie.

The importance of these poems is threefold. They tell us something new about the nature of Montgomerie's Catholicism, its passionate and paramount nature culminating in his desire to be a monk of St. Benedict. They say that he wrote a song (*carmen*) against the

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Protestants ("Picards"). They help us to discern the year and place of his death.

Westcott and Stevenson, writing in the same twelve month, 1910-1911, did not envisage the poet as an ardent Catholic himself. They saw him as "envoy and intelligencer," "associated with members of the Catholic party"; "the records are still too scanty to enable us to determine how far Montgomerie was mixed up in the Catholic intrigues of this time."<sup>5</sup> Study of Montgomerie's life and works made his convinced Catholicism clear to me: "To hold the favour of King James and at the same time to further Catholicism would seem to have been Montgomerie's aim, his eye perhaps on the mirage of James's conversion or his reigning together with his mother 'in association.' Duplicity there may well have been . . ."<sup>6</sup> I did not imagine that he was a convert with a convert's zeal; nor was there evidence of a direct link with the Spanish King.

If the phases of the poet's life are described in Poem I in chronological order, as they appear to be, it was after years of widely ranging military service that he was converted, either in Spain or by the Jesuits elsewhere. Activities of his already known had suggested a link with the Jesuits in 1580.<sup>7</sup> The dual nature of his loyalty, affinity with the Catholic activism of King Philip and service with or favour with King James, is expressed in a Latin couplet imperfect in grammar, construction or punctuation:

Regis et exstabam pergratus in arce Philippi,  
Semper honoratus Rex Jacobe tibi. (I, 11-12).

The dative *tibi* is governed by *pergratus* and the comma may be there by monkish transcriber's error. Both readings, however, infer that King James exploited Montgomerie's value as envoy and intelligencer, conscious of his Spanish affinities. The paramount nature of his Catholic devotion and activism was probably for a time not known to King James. When Montgomerie in 1579 joined the court in Scotland the King was a boy and the poet was "servitor" to the Frenchman Aubigny, the royal favourite. James may still not have known in 1584 when he took his poet-friend into royal service, Aubigny being dead. But soon afterwards, either before he was sent as envoy

<sup>5</sup> *New Poems by James I of England*, ed. with Introduction by Allan F. Westcott (New York, 1911), p. xxvi, p. xxxi; and Stevenson, Introduction § 5.

<sup>6</sup> *Alexander Montgomerie: a selection from his songs and poems*, ed. Helena M. Shire (Edinburgh, 1960), p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> Stevenson, Appendix D. III and pp. 264-265.

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to Spain in 1586 or after that mission had miscarried, both poet and King must each have known the other for what he was—the poet an ardent Catholic activist and the King politically guileful and, in the matter of his practice with Catholic powers in Europe and the “not-impossibility” of his eventual conversion, disingenuous.

The poet's pleas, on his return to Scotland, for the King to salvage his royal pension from the law-courts, his protests that he loved the King and had unjustly been “barred the court,” now appear not as squeals of a double-agent unmasked but as the cry of single-minded Catholic activism at the mercy of the veering policies of King James.<sup>8</sup> The King's only singleminded aim was to secure that, by one means or another, the King of Scotland should be, in time, monarch of Britain. “Court and conscience are not easy to reconcile,” the poet wrote.

It may have been the miscarrying of the mission that revealed the paramount nature of the poet's Catholic devotion; or this may have been manifested in the “song” he made against the “Protestants” and their creed. This song, I maintain, was *The Cherrie and the Slae*, which had music. It is first heard of in 1584, when the King quoted from it in his “Tretis” included in his *Essayes of a Prentise*. It can be shown that the poem was a dream-allegory that bodied forth in covert terms a “choice” in earthly/heavenly love for the dreamer, a contest between the (eucharistic) cherry, delectable and difficult of access on its Tree (the rood) on the rock (of true faith) beyond the water (of change, baptism) and the bitter fruit of the “poyson'd Slae” available on its bush on the near bank. (c.f. *amara venena Calvinistarum*).<sup>9</sup> The bush, the “burning bush” (*nec tamen consumebatur*) was chosen in 1583 as the seal-device of the Reformed Church of France.<sup>10</sup> This poem, known at least as “work in progress” in 1584, may have been interrupted or silenced when its drift became apparent—or became inapposite to current royal policy.

Montgomerie assailed the “Picards” or their doctrines “in arms and with a song”: *Picarditas carmine Marte premens*. The Picards and their doctrines (I, 14; III, 3) could be literally the Picards: there was

<sup>8</sup> Cranstoun, Sonnets XIV-XVII, XXV-XXIX; lawsuits, see Stevenson, Appendix B.

<sup>9</sup> This reading of the poem and of its later completed version is Chapter VI of my *Song, Dance and Poetry of the Court of Scotland under King James VI* (publication pending) which has a biography of the poet in Chap. IV.

<sup>10</sup> G. D. Henderson, *The Burning Bush* (Edinburgh, 1957), p. 4.

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religious warfare in Picardy and Montgomerie may have written invective against them, verses now lost. His grave, too, may be in Picardy—on the way to Artaunum? But "Picard" meant "heretic" to Villon. And I think it much more likely that the "striving in arms" refers to the Ailsa conspiracy, the poet's last desperate endeavour in Catholic activism after he had finally broken with the King or the King with him. (The last hopes of salvaging his royal pension in the law-courts shipwrecked in 1593: he would not attest Protestantism.)<sup>11</sup>

This "taking of the island of Ailsa for the Spanish" turns out to have been of greater potential danger than had been thought.<sup>12</sup> It was linked with the Tyrone rebellion. It was a last cast of King Philip's militant Catholicism; "love of holy religion was dying." A letter from Bowes in the Scottish court to Burghley describing the conspiracy and Spottiswoode's account of that year of crises, alarm and riots in Scotland make this time and place a very likely context indeed for the scenes attending the death and funeral of the poet. Montgomerie was expected at Ailsa but did not come. (The Privy Council denouncing him in July evidently believed him to be still alive.) He may have been on his way to the rendez-vous at Ailsa and, warned of the plot's discovery, have escaped to hiding. He may have been ill and prevented from coming—dying soon after; he suffered sorely from "the gravel." But the mainland opposite the Isle of Ailsa, the westland region where he spent some years of "exile" from the court (witness his late sonnets), seems the most likely site of his death and burial.<sup>13</sup> "Certain Montgomeries, Murrays and Stewarts, being papists" were those concerned in the conspiracy. Here are the *affines*, relatives or associates, who brought gifts. The Catholic Earls had power in those regions. The outrage to the dead poet, well known there and perhaps loved and honoured outlaw and papist though he was, might credibly have aroused the citizens (of Beath? Kilburnie? Paisley?) to riot at the forbidden rites.

The King was told, and wished him fittingly buried. The King's own epitaph for his one-time favourite called on the "Castalian"

<sup>11</sup> Stevenson, Appendix D.X.

<sup>12</sup> Stevenson Introduction § 4 and § 5 and Appendix D. XI. Also *Calendar of State Papers relating to Scotland*, Vol. 1595-1597, Letter 454, and John Spottiswoode, *History of the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1851), Vol. III, p. 61.

<sup>13</sup> Cranstoun, Sonnets LXVI-LXIX.

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court poets of Scotland, Montgomerie's brothers in poetry, to mourn his death, "the Prince of Poets in our land." It concludes

Though to his buriall was refused the bell  
The bell of fame shall aye his praises knell.<sup>14</sup>

The phrasing of this poem, obviously by the King of Scotland, persuaded Westcott to date the poet's death as "before 1603." I think that the content of the Latin poems shows that it is likely to have occurred soon after the Ailsa conspiracy. Montgomerie's latest credible date of birth is 1550-1552, for poems of his are in the Bannatyne Manuscript of 1568. At the age of forty-five he could still be reckoned as "in the prime of life" in lines where the untimeliness of his death—his unfulfilled desire to take religious vows—is the main issue. This is patently the case in the Benedictine verses.

It is strange that the scenes of riot described by the Benedictine brother went otherwise unrecorded. Search in the westland region may yet bring the date and place of the poet's burial to light.

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY

<sup>14</sup> Westcott, No. XXXIV, and Introduction, Chap. II.