

12-15-2015

## 'Singing of psalms of which I could never get enough': labouring class religion and poetry in the Cambuslang revival of 1741

Elspeth Jajdelska  
*University of Strathclyde*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>



Part of the [History of Christianity Commons](#), and the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Jajdelska, Elspeth (2016) "Singing of psalms of which I could never get enough': labouring class religion and poetry in the Cambuslang revival of 1741," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 41: Iss. 1, 88–107.  
Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol41/iss1/11>

This Article is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in Scottish Literature by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [digres@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:digres@mailbox.sc.edu).

**“SINGING OF PSALMS OF WHICH I COULD  
NEVER GET ENOUGH”:  
LABOURING CLASS RELIGION AND POETRY  
IN THE CAMBUSLANG REVIVAL OF 1741**

*Elsbeth Jajdelska*

This article introduces two previously unstudied labouring class poems, and one example of labouring class poetry reading, from eighteenth-century Scotland. Alexander Bilsland, George Tassie and Ann Wylie were participants in the Cambuslang revival of 1741. In the revival's archive of spiritual narratives, compiled by the minister of Cambuslang, there is one poem by Bilsland, one by Tassie and an account of poetry reading by Wylie.<sup>1</sup> In what follows, I situate these in the culture of popular religious reading and psalm singing at Cambuslang, to argue in favour of the case made by Crawford Gribben: that Scottish literary culture and Scottish religious culture were not necessarily in conflict and could be mutually supportive.<sup>2</sup> This case has been successfully advanced in discussions of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writing by Gribben and other contributors to *Literature and the Scottish Reformation*.<sup>3</sup> I aim to extend to eighteenth-century Scotland the case for Calvinism as a force that could, at least sometimes, nourish literature.

For Bilsland, Tassie and Wylie, saturation in the psalms, repudiation of worldly status, and an intensely emotional self-scrutiny for signs of inward grace were not necessarily obstacles to literary expression. Nor

---

<sup>1</sup> Edinburgh University, New College Library, MS MCC 6.1, 2 vols.; quotations referenced in the text as “McCulloch,” with volume and page number from Keith Edward Beebe, ed., *The McCulloch Examinations of the Cambuslang Revival (1742): a Critical Edition*, 2 vols. (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Scottish History Society in association with Boydell Press, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Crawford Gribben, “The literary cultures of the Scottish reformation,” *Review of English Studies*, 57: 228 (2006): 64-82.

<sup>3</sup> Crawford Gribben and David George Mullan, eds., *Literature and the Scottish Reformation* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).

was their experience of reading and writing in relation to religion just a stepping stone to more authentic literary experiences.<sup>4</sup> Recent scholarship on eighteenth-century labouring-class poetry has confirmed that labouring class poets were not naïve “heaven taught” geniuses but craftsmen and women, closely engaged with elite literary discourse. This gave them a choice between emulating the norms of superiors or subverting them.<sup>5</sup> The Cambuslang emphasis on a personal conviction of grace and salvation meant that the Cambuslang poets and readers could escape this dilemma and engage with poetry in God’s kingdom as much as in man’s.

### **Religion, revival and social hierarchy**

A “wark”, or work, of the Lord swept the parish of Cambuslang, five miles from Glasgow, between January and August of 1741. Weekly lectures by the minister, given at the request of a prayer society, had expanded to include psalm singing, prayer and consultations in the manse. There were also intense experiences of divine grace, sometimes with physical symptoms such as fainting. Meetings moved outdoors to cope with visitors. The revival climaxed on Cambuslang Brae where

---

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Rose suggests that religious reading and writing could enable working class readers to be more critical of religion and other “received ideologies”: “Literature and dogma,” in *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 29-38.

<sup>5</sup> For examples of labouring class poetry, see the three volume edition of *Eighteenth-century English Labouring-Class Poets*, general editor John Goodridge, volume editors Tim Burke, William Christmas and Bridget Keegan (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2003). For analyses of labouring class poetry in relation to elite eighteenth-century poetic cultures, see Bridget Keegan’s and Donna Landry’s reviews of works by and about female and labouring class poets: Bridget Keegan, “Georgic transformations and Stephen Duck’s ‘The Thresher’s Labour,’” *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 41 (3, 2001): 545-562; Donna Landry, “‘But were they any good?’: milkmaids on Parnassus, or, political aesthetics,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 38 (3, 2005): 535-538. Nigel Leask has illustrated the special case of Scottish labouring class poets in relation to elite literary discourse and the vernacular: Leask, *Robert Burns and Pastoral: Poetry and Improvement in Late Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1-14; Leask, “Burns, Wordsworth and the politics of vernacular poetry,” in Peter de Bolla, Nigel Leask and David Simpson, eds. *Land, Nation and Culture, 1740-1840: Thinking the Republic of Taste* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005), 202-222.

thousands gathered on two separate days to hear the great English evangelical preacher, George Whitefield.<sup>6</sup>

Intense, emotional experiences of divine grace were central to the revival, connecting it to the Calvinist foundations of reformed religion in Scotland, and to revivalist movements in England and North America. The relevant Calvinist principles were: the necessity of God's grace, or unmerited mercy, rather than man's works, in achieving salvation; and the evidence that this grace was assured, that the sinner was, in fact saved, evidence that could be found in the sinner's inner state, and in outward signs, such as success in converting other sinners, or narrow escapes from physical danger.<sup>7</sup> The godly man or woman was expected to experience swings between despair, at his or her own unworthiness of salvation, and rejoicing, when they experienced grace working within them, softening their sinful hearts and giving them some assurance that they were, despite their lack of merit, saved.

---

<sup>6</sup> This account of the Cambuslang wark draws on a variety of sources. The McCulloch manuscript is the most important primary source (see n. 1 above, and also p. 91 below), and Beebe's introduction to his edition is the most up to date discussion (also n. 1). A clear and full narrative of events is given by Arthur Fawcett in *The Cambuslang Revival: the Scottish Evangelical Revival of the Eighteenth Century* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1971). Accounts by Hindmarsh and Smout retell the story with emphases on the religious and socioeconomic elements respectively: D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative: Spiritual Autobiography in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); T.C. Smout, "Born again at Cambuslang: new evidence on popular religion and literacy in eighteenth-century Scotland," *Past and Present*, 97 (1982): 114-127.

<sup>7</sup> See Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion: 1541 French Edition*, trans. Elsie Anne McKee (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2009): "Of justification by faith and by the merits of works," 318-384; "Of God's predestination and providence," 414-457; and "Of Faith, where the Apostles' Creed is explained," 176-270, especially p. 181. For examples of outward "experiences" of grace among godly Englishmen and women of the seventeenth century, see Elspeth Findlay (now Jajdelska), "Ralph Thoresby the diarist: the late seventeenth-century pious diary and its demise," *Seventeenth Century*, 17 (2002): 108-130. The most famous account of inward convictions of grace is John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, but there are many unpublished counterparts to Bunyan in Scotland: see, e.g., David Mullan on "Memoirs and confessions of justified sinners," in his *Narratives of the Religious Self in Early Modern Scotland* (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2010), 37 – 92.

It was this intensely emotional aspect of the work that led critics to call the revivalists “enthusiasts” and to claim that servants and labourers were neglecting their employment to attend meetings.<sup>8</sup> In response, the minister at Cambuslang, William McCulloch, and other sympathetic ministers, examined over one hundred participants in 1742 with standardised questions and recorded the answers in two manuscript volumes.<sup>9</sup> These narratives have been extensively analysed.<sup>10</sup> A landmark article by T.C. Smout in 1982 has had a lasting influence on studies of Scottish literacy, while D. Bruce Hindmarsh situates the archive in the history of conversion narratives.<sup>11</sup> The *Examinations* have not so far been used in the history of reading or of labouring class writing, and I know of no literary discussion of the three cases I present below.

In what follows I discuss the relationship between psalm singing and poetic sensibility in the revival at large. I then illustrate the relationship between psalm singing and poetry reading in the case of Ann Wylie. As an illustration of the potential for communal religious feeling to encourage trespass over the borders of social hierarchy, I go on to discuss the record of a conversation between Bilsland and Tassie and two Glasgow ministers. Finally I look at Bilsland’s and then Tassie’s poems in detail.

### Psalm singing and poetic sensibility

In his study of Scottish spiritual autobiography, David George Mullan observes how “Time and again, religious autobiographers resort to the book of Psalms, and in so doing follow in the steps of Augustine who opens his *Confessions* by citing Psalm 47:2 and Psalm 146:5.”<sup>12</sup> Several elite Scottish poets of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries translated and versified some or all of the psalms independently of the Church’s official psalter.<sup>13</sup> The labouring class poets and poetry reader discussed

---

<sup>8</sup> For examples of the range of views, see *A Short Account of the Remarkable Conversions at Cambuslang* (Glasgow: for Robert Smith, 1742), and John Currie, *A New Testimony Unto, and Further Vindication of the Extraordinary Work of God at Cambuslang* (Glasgow: Smith and Hutcheson, 1743). Cf. also Hindmarsh, *Conversion Narrative*, 198-200 (as in n. 5 above).

<sup>9</sup> Hindmarsh, 195-198.

<sup>10</sup> For a summary and discussion, see Hindmarsh, pp. 195-196, footnotes 7-10.

<sup>11</sup> Smout, 117; Hindmarsh, 196.

<sup>12</sup> Mullan, *Narratives*, 278.

<sup>13</sup> Mullan, *Narratives*, 279-281.

here were inspired by the psalms in worship and prayer rather than as objects of scholarly study. The Church of Scotland, like the other Calvinist churches of Europe, relied heavily on communal psalm singing for worship.<sup>14</sup> The Scots used metrical paraphrases in a version authorised by the Church in 1650.<sup>15</sup> Psalm paraphrases from that period have not always enjoyed a high reputation as verse; they sometimes resort to extreme syntactic manoeuvres to combine scriptural accuracy with metre.<sup>16</sup> But aligned with tunes learned in childhood, psalms such as “All people that on earth do dwell” have proved resilient and powerful even in present day secular settings.

Scottish congregational psalm singing used “lining out.”<sup>17</sup> The leader—often, but not necessarily, the minister—would sing a line and the congregation would sing it back, until the psalm, or extract, was complete: “a Min<sup>r</sup> at the Entry of Publick worship gave out these words again...Ps. 65.1. ‘Praise waits for thee in Zion Lord’” (McCulloch I:162; cf. I:148, 149). In a church that frowned on both liturgical formulae and hymns, communal psalms were an important part of communal worship.<sup>18</sup>

As the revival gathered pace, psalm singing spilled beyond the kirk and the manse into barns, fields and chambers, and the parishioners took more control. William Baillie, a married man of about thirty, spent a night of prayer and psalm singing “in company with a good many People

---

<sup>14</sup> Mullan, *Narratives*, 279-280; D.G. Hart *Calvinism: a history* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013), 19, 53-54.

<sup>15</sup> Timothy Charles Duguid, *Sing a New Song: English and Scottish metrical psalmody from 1549-1640* (PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2011), vol. 1, 18 and elsewhere.

<sup>16</sup> Hannibal Hamlin, *Psalm Culture and Early Modern English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 21-22, 81-82, and elsewhere.

<sup>17</sup> Nicholas Temperley, “The music of dissent,” in *Dissenting Praise: religious dissent and the hymn in England and Wales*, eds. Isabel Rivers and David L. Wykes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 197-228 (p. 199); Raymond Gillespie “Music and song in early eighteenth-century Belfast,” in *Irish Provincial Cultures in the Long Eighteenth Century: making the middle sort. Essays for Toby Barnard* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2012), 155-169, 158-160; Duguid, “Sing a new song,” 304-308, 249, 261, 271-272.

<sup>18</sup> Resistance to hymn singing persisted in some congregations well into the nineteenth century, as the celebrated hymn writer Horatio Bonar recounted in a talk on “How we got leave to sing hymns”: University of Edinburgh, New College Library, Special Collections, MSS box 14.2.3.

in a Barn, partly Strangers, and partly Acquaintances.” After “several had sung and prayed”, “the Company put it upon” Baillie “to be their Mouth to God” and line out the psalm (McCulloch I:6-7). Jean Robe, a servant woman of twenty, spent a night “in prayer, & praises, to God, partly by myself & partly with others, especially a Company of Young Persons in a House” (“praise” in these narratives often refers to psalm singing) (I:121). Jean Hay, a servant of twenty-six “continued with” her companions “till about one o’clock in the morning” when she heard “a very young person...give out the 80<sup>th</sup> Ps: 14 v to the close to be sung” (I:159). John Aiken, twenty-two, an unmarried weaver, reported that as a boy he “would sometimes have sung psalms in the fields being alone” (I:277).

Lined-out Scottish psalm singing is known today for its expressive musical character and extempore ornamentation. We cannot be sure what Cambuslang psalm singing sounded like, but it was certainly emotive. For forty-eight year old tenant William Causlam, psalm singing was like “the Multitude of the Heavenly host singing praises” (I:151). For a fifteen-year-old gentleman’s daughter, Catherine Cameron, it was “like the melody of Heaven.” (I:192).

The depth of engagement with psalms was manifested in other ways. Devout Calvinists had a very intimate relationship with Biblical texts, sometimes studying them so closely and frequently that they appeared in their minds unbidden throughout the day.<sup>19</sup> At Cambuslang, this experience was often realised through the metrical psalms. An eighteen-year-old tenant’s daughter, Mary Colquoroun, for example, woke one morning to find that the words of a psalm had been “brought into my mind, & impress’d on my heart with great Power” (II:157). Margaret Richie, twenty, and daughter of a Glasgow wright, had once loved “merry songs” but found during the revival that “several passages in the 102<sup>nd</sup> Psalm” were “impress’d on my heart with great sweetness, tho’ I did not know at the time they came into my mind, where they were to be found” (II:150, 154). Such experiences of Biblical texts coming “into the mind” in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were often interpreted in a very personal way, as direct communications from God.<sup>20</sup>

The revivalists also identified closely with the psalmist. Twenty-four year old James Jack, having sung Psalm 51 (“Yea wash thou me & then I

<sup>19</sup> Elspeth Jajdelska, *Silent Reading and the Birth of the Narrator* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 31.

<sup>20</sup> Findlay [Jajdelska], as in n. 7 above, 117-118.

shall/be whiter than The Snow”) at the end of a service reflected that “I got what the Psalmist there pray’d for” (McCulloch I:305). Eighteen-year-old Thomas Walker could “say with the Psalmist”, this time of a non-metrical psalm, “Thro’ grace, Whom have I in heaven O Lord but thee and there is none in Earth I desire besides thee” (I:330). The young servant Jean Dickison, was “made to say (as in Ps. 42.3) ‘My tears have unto me been Meat,/both in the night and day’”, and found it “somewhat easing” that “The Psalmist, ane Undoubted Saint had been in a like condition” (I:355). For one revivalist, the experience of inhabiting the psalmist’s voice anticipates later romantic tropes. Struggling one night with atheist thoughts, twenty-six year old Jean Hay looked up to the stars ‘twinkling in the Sky’ and then:

Down to the speires of grass about me, & wondered: and from these to my Own body; & was made, at the thought of the frame of it, to say with David, ‘I am fearfully and wonderfully made’: And within a little, I was made to cry out, ‘Where is the God of all consolation now gone?’ (McCulloch I:168).

Identification with the psalmist brings her to sublime experience through personal crisis. Calvinist devotion is not often associated with the later romantic movement. But Jon Mee has suggested that “enthusiasm” of the kind displayed here, and disparaged by critics at the time, was one source for the high value placed on the sublime by a later generation of poets. While Mee argues that these later poets took care to avoid the excesses associated with religious enthusiasm, Wylie’s nexus of sublime experience of nature, piety and poetry suggest that among the roots of romanticism there may have been other unknown labouring class poetry readers.<sup>21</sup>

### **Ann Wylie, psalms and poetry**

Anne Wylie, an unmarried servant of twenty-six, also found psalm singing deeply satisfying, asking a companion “to sing the 84<sup>th</sup> Psalm from the beginning to the 4<sup>th</sup> verse,” for example, while Wylie joined in with the line repeats (McCulloch I:31). She too had metrical psalm verses come to her mind unbidden and interpreted them as revelations:

Just as I was lying down, these words came into my Mind  
 (‘O Daughter hearken and regard  
 and do thine ear incline

---

<sup>21</sup> Jon Mee *Romanticism, Enthusiasm and Regulation: Poetics and the Policing of Culture in the Romantic Period* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).



Likewise forget thy Fathers house  
and people that are thine.’)

and were so sweet that I could not forbear immediatly crying out,  
and repeating them to such as were near me, who bade me ly  
down and meditate on them. But I said, I could not apply them for  
I was unworthy of them; and that sweet name of Daughter could  
not belong to such a sinner as I (McCulloch I:32).

This intimate relationship with the psalms, and the importance of the term  
“daughter,” closely resemble her reading of lyric poetry by the popular  
pietist poet, and Edinburgh minister, James Craig (1669-1731).<sup>22</sup>

Four ~~lines~~ verses of Craigs Poems (A Book called the Spiritual  
Life, which I had read about two months before) came into my  
Mind [repeats the poem; see below]. ...All these lines I had read  
before, but was not able to repeat them, ~~and~~ but now they came  
all flowing into my mind, and I repeated them very readily (I:32-  
33).

As with the psalms, the verses “came all flowing into my mind”  
unbidden. And although two months had passed since she read them, she  
“repeated them very readily”. This remembered version is subtly different  
from the original:

#### Craig’s original poem

A Begger, LORD, *knocks* at thy gate,  
A begger known to be  
As shameless, as importunate,  
In asking her supply.

LORD hear the begging voice of faith,  
Regard her looks and cries:  
For *she* will beg, while *she has* breath;  
Look up, while *she has* eyes.

Thou LORD of all art rich, be kind,  
Stretch forth *thine* hand, and say,  
The poor, *in me*, ne’er want a friend,  
Take this, and go thy way.

But, LORD, when *this I’ve got*, I want  
Straight a new alms from thee;

#### Wylie’s recollection

A Beggar Lord *stands* at thy gate,  
A Beggar known to be:  
As shameless as importunate,  
in asking her supply.

Lord hear the Begging voice of faith,  
regard her looks & cries:  
For *I* will beg while *I have* breath,  
look up while *I have* eyes

Thou Lord of all Art, rich, be kind,  
stretch forth *thy* Hand, and Say  
The Poor *of thee* ne’er wants a friend,<sup>23</sup>  
take this and go thy way.

But, LORD, when *this I got*, I want  
Streight a new alms from Thee;

<sup>22</sup> James Craig, *Spiritual Life. Poems on Several Divine subjects, Relating Both to the Inward Experience and Outward Practice of Christianity* (Edinburgh: printed by Mr. James Davidson, 1727).

<sup>23</sup> “Poor”: so MS (note 1 above), vol. 1, p. 49. Beebe reads “Door.”

*And* like the begger, I must haunt  
The door that's kind to me

Beg on, my faith, the good LORD hears,  
He *won't offended* be:  
Thy cries are musick, in his ears,  
His bowels *plead* for thee.

*for* like the Beggar, I must haunt  
the door that's kind to me

Beg On, my faith, The Good Lord hear,  
He *will not angry* be:  
Thy cries are Musick in his Ear:  
His bowels *yearn* for thee.

Wylie's changes merge her own voice with the poet's. Craig's beggar woman is referred to in the third person; in the fourth stanza, the poet speaks in the first person and compares himself to the beggar. In Wylie's version, the beggar woman's voice is first person in stanza two ("she will beg" versus "I will beg"). Where Craig compares himself to the beggar, Wylie *becomes* her. Although she had feared that "that sweet name of Daughter could not belong to such a sinner as I," "Beggar woman" is a role she can occupy in lieu, a role that recalls her own social status of servant (I:32). Yet this first person voice also elevates her, in worldly terms, to the role of lyric poet. Her abasement in God's kingdom (beggar, not daughter) is an elevation in this world (lyric poet, not servant).

McCulloch and his assistants marked up the first volume of narratives for publication, deleting passages which suggested that the converts were enthusiasts, or errant servants, or both. A substantial part of Wylie's narrative was marked for exclusion, including the verses by Craig, her accounts of faintness and divine voices, and her explanation that she was pleased to leave her mistress's service because she "would have the greater liberty to come to the Preachings at Cambuslang" (I:36). But there is little in her account to suggest that she thought of herself as subversive. Jonathan Rose has characterised the intellectual ambitions of labouring or working class readers as "the return of the repressed" rather than assimilation to elite norms.<sup>24</sup> But Wylie's poetic experiences do not fit either category. In the psalms and in Craig's poetry, religious experience blended with literary experience so that she was neither defiant nor diffident, standing as a daughter and a supplicant before God.

The literary historian and critic Gerard Carruthers has characterised Craig's poetry as a "maudlin and doom-laden genre" situated in "a warped mode of dominant religious poetry in eighteenth-century Scotland," and the result of "Calvinist hostility to poetry and profane

---

<sup>24</sup> Rose, *Intellectual Life*, 23.

literature.”<sup>25</sup> This verdict implies that verse embedded in Scotland’s distinctive religious culture is to some extent inauthentic or “warped,” and that its Calvinist emotional palate of “doom” makes it “maudlin” and inherently aesthetically unsatisfying. But as Gribben argues in reference to an earlier period, defining Scottish literature “in opposition to Calvinism” has contributed, among other difficulties, to the neglect of women writers, a problem which Mullan’s collection of *Women’s Life Writing in Early Modern Scotland* both illustrates and goes some way to correct.<sup>26</sup> The same could be said of women readers. Defusing the conflict between Calvinism and literature can let us see the literary experiences of this labouring class woman reader more clearly, and identify her seamless transition between scriptural poetry and lyric.

### **A disputation between two tradesmen and two ministers**

Alexander Bilsland, a married shoemaker of forty-seven, and George Tassie, a married man of forty-one, travelled from Glasgow to take part in the Cambuslang meetings. We can gain some sense of the revival’s potential to create social equality in intellectual life in a dialogue with two ministers which was recorded alongside their narratives. When they heard that two Glasgow ministers were preaching against the revival, Bilsland and Tassie called on the ministers and asked to talk. “A Conversation betwixt Two of the Subjects of the work at Cambuslang and Mess<sup>rs</sup> Eb: Erskine and James Fisher at Glasgow” is a record of the most “remarkable passages” from this meeting, transcribed by McCulloch.<sup>27</sup>

James Fisher and Ebenezer Erskine were leaders of the Secession Church, which had split from the Church of Scotland in 1740 over the role of patronage in appointing ministers.<sup>28</sup> Tassie and Bilsland claimed

---

<sup>25</sup> Gerard Carruthers, “James Thomson and eighteenth-century Scottish literary identity,” in Richard Terry, ed., *James Thomson: essays for the tercentenary* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), 165-190 (p. 176).

<sup>26</sup> Crawford Gribben, “Literary cultures,” *Review of English Studies*, 57: 228 (2006): 64-82 (p. 76-); David George Mullan, ed., *Women’s Life Writing in Early Modern Scotland: Writing the Evangelical Self, c.1670-1730* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

<sup>27</sup> For Bilsland’s narrative, including verse, see Beebe, *McCulloch Examinations*, I:76-90; for Tassie’s narrative, also including verse, I:91-96; for the record of the conversation, I:97-105.

<sup>28</sup> Erskine was one of the authors of *The Declaration of the True Presbyterians within the Kingdom of Scotland: concerning Mr George Whitefield, and the Work at Cambuslang* (Glasgow: 1742).

that Fisher and Erskine had attempted to draw “off a great dale of Common people like us” to join the new church—note their explicit self-identification as “Common people” (I:102-103). Because their account was filtered first through their verbal report to McCulloch, and second by McCulloch’s transcription, I assess it not as the faithful record of a historical event, but as evidence of Bilsland’s and Tassie’s self-presentation to McCulloch in relation to the higher ranks.

They portray themselves as socially confident in confronting higher ranking men on elite topics (theology and church governance). For example, they represent themselves controlling the topics of conversation: “we come here to speak of things concerning the present day”; “sir it was not for debate we came here but to converse with you on the present state of Religion at this day” (I:101, 102). They also present themselves as unabashed by their opponents’ superior learning. Asked if he has read one of Erskine’s works, Bilsland represents himself as replying, “No, but I have read the Scriptures, and Guthries tryal and very good books: but have not time to read every trifling book” (I:103). At some points, they show themselves judging the ministers morally as well as intellectually: “you have done little service to the interest of Christ in his Church in this land.” At others, they are provocative. When Erskine is shown as admitting that he “cannot say but I must in Charity owne, You as good people: And I desire you to join with us to fight the battles of the Lord,” Bilsland is recorded as replying, “Indeed, Sir, we never got any good word by you, and if we be good men Whatever good we got was not by you but elsewhere” (I:104). So firmly do they represent themselves as the intellectual opponents of these men of superior rank, that present day readers may have some sympathy with Erskine’s reported concluding cry: “God save me from Camb[u]s[lang]\_\_\_ Conversion and Mr Wh[itiefiel]ds Doctrine” (I:105).

But this is not a generalised rejection of social hierarchy. Bilsland and Tassie portray themselves as using “sir,” for example, while the ministers are shown using “you.” They do not record any denial of their opponents’ superior learning or their own lower status: “You have more time to read books about these things than we Tradesmen” (I:101). They even appear to take pride in their conversational propriety, reporting that the four men parted “After some more conversation had past with great Civility & calmness on both sides” (I:105). The impression is one of social confidence, but grounded in religious conviction rather than political defiance.

One possible source for this confident self-image is their experience of religious reading in community. McCulloch asked all the Cambuslang witnesses how well they could read, but he did not specifically ask them to identify what they had read. So the evidence for reading matter in the archive comes from chance references and does not lend itself to systematic numerical analysis. However, these chance references have been collated by the movement's chief historian, Arthur Fawcett, and they suggest a pattern of deeply engaged reading of a narrow range of texts.<sup>29</sup>

Two books were mentioned by a number of witnesses: William Guthrie's *The Christian's Great Interest* (1661) and Thomas Vincent's *Explicatory Catechism* (1674), both reprinted in Glasgow throughout the eighteenth century.<sup>30</sup> Guthrie (1620-1665), at one time a covenanter, lost his benefice in 1664 for opposing the episcopal party in Ayrshire.<sup>31</sup> Vincent (1634-1678) was an English nonconformist minister. That these seventeenth-century texts were continually reprinted in Glasgow suggests a local community of readers with deep roots, an impression reinforced by subscription evidence for another book by a seventeenth-century Scottish minister which was also republished in eighteenth-century Glasgow: William Geddes's *The Saint's Recreation upon the State of Grace*, a book length verse in several sections.<sup>32</sup>

When it was first printed, in 1683, Geddes dedicated this work to the women of an aristocratic Scottish family. It included verses for singing and a selection of religious "mementoes" which could be stuck or pinned to walls, doors and furnishings.<sup>33</sup> Alexander Bilsland was one of 284 tradesmen (56% of the total number of subscribers) who subscribed to the

---

<sup>29</sup> Fawcett, *Cambuslang Revival*, 75-93.

<sup>30</sup> Fawcett, 85.

<sup>31</sup> "William Guthrie (1620-1665)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

<sup>32</sup> James Geddes, *The Saints Recreation* (Edinburgh: David Lindsay, 1683). There are two variants of this edition, the first dedicated to the Dowager Countess of Wemyss, the second dedicated to Anna, Duchess of Hamilton, Dame Liliass Drummond and Dame Anna Sinclair. The subscription edition discussed here was printed by the prestigious Foulis press (Glasgow: Foulis, 1753).

<sup>33</sup> Cutting up texts to paste on walls and furniture was something both high and low ranks did in the seventeenth century, and this edition suggests the practice continued among Glasgow readers in the eighteenth: Edward Rainbow, *A Sermon Preached at the funeral of Anne, Countess of Pembroke* (London: 1677); Juliet Fleming, *Graffiti and the Writing Arts of Early Modern England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 43-45, 60.

1753 Glasgow edition, edited by a Glasgow school teacher).<sup>34</sup> The range of reading by the devout labouring class may in some cases have been narrow, but these texts had deep local roots, and were read intensely and in community.

### Bilsland as poet

Bilsland and Tassie reported that at the end of their conversation with Erskine and Fisher “Each of Us had repeated some lines composed by our selv’s & now published with our accounts.” These poems, one by each man, were included in the narratives they produced for McCulloch. While Bilsland and Tassie saw their verse recitals as part of taking leave with “great Civility & calmness,” McCulloch and his editors marked these comments, and the poems themselves, for omission (I:105). Bilsland’s poem concluded his narrative, and after it the editors remarked, “Here something should be added to connect this with *qt* goes before. Or ye whole left out O\_\_e” (I:89). But the contents of his narrative suggest that for Bilsland himself, verse composition was fully embedded in religious experience. His poetic inspiration was the spontaneous recollection of a psalm verse—“Lord open thou my closed lips” (Psalm 51.15)—which “came in” to his mind during meditation, and was “very refreshing” so that “After...I composed the following poem”:

Lord open thou my closed lips,  
and I’ll sing praise to Thee:  
And tell of all thy wond’rous works.<sup>35</sup>  
which thou hast done for me

And others will thy name adore,  
when they thy glory see:  
And stately goings of our ~~great~~ King  
in his sweet Sanctuarie.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> 1753 edition, ECCO image 4. The high number of weavers among the subscribers recalls findings by Jonathan Rose and others that working at a loom offered special opportunities to share books through oral reading: see Rose *Intellectual Life*, 16. Cf. also the account of weavers’ reading and study by the seventeenth-century non-conformist preacher, Richard Baxter, in *The Autobiography of Richard Baxter*, ed. J.M. Lloyd-Thomas (London: Dent, 1931), 76-84.

<sup>35</sup> Psalm 26, verse 6, in which the psalmist prepares to go to the Lord’s altar to “proclaim with the voice of thanksgiving.”

<sup>36</sup> This recalls verses such as Numbers 4: 10-20, which describe the preparation of the Hebrew sanctuary for sacrifice.

Untill the time that thou has set  
to gather into one  
All ~~the large race~~ Chosen Ones<sup>37</sup> of Adams seed  
who down to hell had Gone,

Unless that thou in thy great love  
had promis'd for to come<sup>38</sup>  
and [~~did~~]<sup>to39</sup> lay down thy Precious life  
to ransom and redeem,

Such lost and straying sheep as we;<sup>40</sup>  
that we again might sing  
With Moses & his Brethren all<sup>41</sup>  
To thee Eternal King

Whose grace I will forever seek,  
while I do travel here.  
O keep me for I trust in thee<sup>42</sup>  
Ill trust & will not fear.

In all my straits to thee I'll look,  
who can them all supply:  
And in that last & darkest [~~shade~~]<sup>43</sup> hour  
can safely be to me.

O bring me to thy holy hill<sup>44</sup>  
where I shall clearly see,  
and join with all about thy throne  
in their sweet melodie  
To him that sits upon the throne

---

<sup>37</sup> Correction in McCulloch's hand. The chosen ones could be the people of Israel, as in Chronicles 16: 13, but they could also be those predestined to salvation in Calvinist theology.

<sup>38</sup> For anticipation of the Messiah in the Old Testament, see e.g. Isaiah 9:6.

<sup>39</sup> Correction in McCulloch's hand.

<sup>40</sup> Again, recalling Isaiah's prophecy that the Messiah will come for lost sheep and lay down his life for them: Isaiah 53:6.

<sup>41</sup> Moses and the liberated Hebrews sang in triumph when Pharaoh's army were drowned in the Red Sea: Exodus 15: 1-6.

<sup>42</sup> Psalm 7:1.

<sup>43</sup> Correction in another hand than McCulloch's.

<sup>44</sup> Psalm 2:6 is an example of the "Holy hill of Zion." Moses is taken up a different mountain, and sees the promised land but does not reach it: Deuteronomy 34:1.

Thro' [Endless]<sup>45</sup> Eternity ^Vast G\_\_\_e<sup>46</sup>

The psalm provides Bilsland with his opening line, his meter, his first person voice (singular and plural at different points), and his topics: praise, and God's relationship with the people of Israel. He also uses the inverted syntax and latinate diction of the Scottish psalter. "Others" will not "adore thy name" but "thy name adore," and not "when they see thy glory" but "when they thy glory see". The great king's goings will be "stately" in a "sanctuary," and the poet will see "brethren."

As well as these themes, Bilsland emphasises the Christian doctrines of grace and redemption. The godly will be vindicated not in this world, but in the next, when they will see the "stately goings of our ~~great~~ King." The lost sheep of Israel will join "the ~~large race~~ Chosen Ones of Adams seed" who will be gathered to God through Christ's sacrifice, and all will sing together. These are familiar themes in English evangelical hymnody, as well as in the psalms.<sup>47</sup> But the prophetic role that Bilsland assigns himself is more distinctive. When God has opened the poet's (rather than "our") closed lips, he (the poet) will tell of all the "wond'rous works" done for him, and "others will thy name adore." God will give the gift of praise to the poet, whose example will inspire others. The poem is not an address by an aspirational tradesmen to a poetic elite. It is a proclamation from God's mouthpiece to the godly, irrespective of rank.

### Tassie as poet

George Tassie's poem also starts with the psalms, but then develops varied line lengths, rhymes and pious discourses. Again, Tassie's enthusiasm for verse is accompanied by an intense response to the Scottish metrical psalter:

And that word came in immediately after...  
 "Gods Law is perfect & Converts  
 The soul in sin that lies:  
 Gods testimony is most pure

---

<sup>45</sup> Correction in another hand than McCulloch's

<sup>46</sup> McCulloch I:89-90. The final lines allude to the vision of heaven in the book of Revelation.

<sup>47</sup> J.R. Watson discusses the importance in the hymnals of Isaac Watts and John Wesley of inward experiences of grace rather than the "pattern of the Christian year": see Watson, "The hymns of Isaac Watts and the tradition of dissent," in *Dissenting Praise: Religious Dissent and the Hymn in England and Wales*, ed. Isabel Rivers and David Wykes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 33-67 (pp. 60-61).



and makes the simple wise" (McCulloch I:92).

However, Tassie, unlike Bilsland, was moved to write verse for a specific end; he hoped it "might be of use & advantage, not only for myself, but for Others into whose hands it might come, to have some little account of what God had done for my Soul, put in writing" (I:95). He situates himself here in the tradition, found among late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century godly families, of circulating pious diaries and conversion narratives.<sup>48</sup> Nonetheless, he does not feel this to be secure generic ground: "but not Knowing how to commit it right to writing, I fell to composing a few lines, to give some short hint of it: which are as Follows" (I:95). The phrases "some little account" and "some Short hint" suggest consciousness that too much talk from the lower orders can be unwelcome.

This combination of traditional motive and unfamiliar form may explain why Tassie takes a *sui generis* approach to composition, borrowing from a range of different genres and voices:

Lord thou didst make the glittering skies so clear  
 Yet I've been here this 40 & near a year:  
 Yet did not see till that time came  
 That Thou didst shine at Cambuslang.  
 Where I did hear thy Servants Dear  
 Declare thy Name with lips Divine:  
 I there on trembling fell.  
 I did believe, as those that are in hell.  
 Yet did not see, it was in summer time  
 When Doves did mourn and birds did sing,  
 The first of June, when thou to me Thy Law let see  
 When I it saw I down did fall:  
 And looked to Thee who came from Heaven,  
 For to fulfill thy Fathers will,  
 And died on tree, that I might be bro't home to thee  
 Glory to Thee United Three (I:96).

The irregularities and biographical details look, at first blush, like naivety and clumsiness. On closer examination, the different meters and styles are less haphazard than might be thought, recalling a range of religious genres. Study of the poem section by section, in comparison with other texts, illustrates the ways in which Tassie moves easily between genres that would normally be separated from one another by the ranks of their authors, their status or their mode of use. Tassie's status as a labouring

---

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Jajdelska, *Silent Reading*, ch. 5, esp. pp. 144-145.

class revivalist give him freedom to innovate with poetic forms without reference to his social status.

The opening line of the poem expresses awe at the power of God the creator, recalling the psalms, as illustrated in quotation 1b:

**1a.** Lord thou didst make the glittering skies so clear (Tassie).

**1b.** The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork (Psalm 19, AV-KJV).

The next three lines, which specify dates and times of the speaker's conversion, move away from the psalms to the genre of spiritual autobiography, a form of composition which was not tied to any particular social rank, as in the quotation from 2b:

**2a.** Yet I've been here this 40 & near a year:

Yet did not see till that time came

That Thou didst shine at Cambuslang (Tassie).

**2b.** Att Edinburgh the first day of July this yeare, I doo this night most solemnly Restore and Renew all my former covenants and Ingadgements to be thine O mercifull and longsuffering Lord (Nasmyth).<sup>49</sup>

As with Wylie, Tassie's Calvinism may anticipate romanticism in the poetic transformation of religious experience here, in his case through the construction of the self through isolated points in time, rather than through the sublime. The record of his age at the time of conversion looks forward to Wordsworth as well as back to spiritual diary writing. In the next section, he adopts the poetic voice of elite religious verse, as the extract from James Craig's pietist verse, admired by Ann Wylie, suggests:

**3a.** Where I did hear thy Servants Dear

Declare thy Name with lips Divine:

I there on trembling fell.

I did believe, as those that are in hell (Tassie).

**3b.** ADMIR'D, my GOD, and much desir'd by me

The happiness shall ever be,

Thy sacred courts to tread, and join

The solemn sweet devotions there (Craig).<sup>50</sup>

Here Tassie concentrates not on the particular, but on the generic joys and sorrows of heaven or hell, and on his fellow "servants" preaching here on earth. Then there are two lines which use the poetic convention of

---

<sup>49</sup> James Nasmyth, diary entry commemorating the date of his experience of salvation: Edinburgh University Library MS Dc.7.81, f.11r.

<sup>50</sup> Craig, "Publick worship," *Spiritual Life*, 157 (as in note 22 above).

mourning doves and singing birds to indicate spring and summer, illustrated in 4b by Edward Bysshe's enduringly popular aid to eighteenth-century poets, *The Art of English Poetry*:

**4a** Yet did not see; it was in summer time  
When Doves did mourn and birds did sing (Tassie).

**4b** Now lavish Nature has adorn'd the Year;  
Now the pale Primrose, and blue Vi'let spring,  
And Birds essay their Throats, disus'd to sing...

...Hear how the Doves with pensive Notes complain,  
And in soft Murmurs tell the Trees their Pain (Bysshe).<sup>51</sup>

At first blush, Tassie uses the moaning doves and singing birds as hackneyed poetic tropes. Yet mourning doves and singing birds also have a Biblical resonance. In Ezekiel 7:16, for example, sinners will be "Like doves of the valleys, All of them mourning, Each for his iniquity." In Psalm 104: 10-12, the Lord sends springs of water into the valleys, and "By them the birds of the heavens have their home; They sing among the branches." Tassie's doves and birds, then, may be mourning for sin and rejoicing in God's goodness, as well as symbolising spring through poetic convention.

A brief return to the conventions of spiritual autobiography ("The first of June when thou to me") is followed by Tassie's experience of revelation in Biblical terms:

**5a.** Thy Law let see  
When I it saw I down did fall (Tassie).

**5b.** Behold a voice out of the cloud, which said, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him. And when the disciples heard it, they fell on their face, and were sore afraid (Matthew, 17: 5-6).

Just as the disciples "fell on their face" when God revealed Christ's divinity to them, Tassie falls down when God reveals his "Law" to him. These Gospel echoes, aligning Tassie with the disciples rather than with the psalmist, are followed by echoes of the Lord's prayer:

**6a.** And looked to Thee who came from Heaven,  
For to fulfill thy Fathers will (Tassie).

**6b.** Who art in Heaven  
Hallowed be thy name

---

<sup>51</sup> Extracts from Dryden, "The Cock and the Fox," and Pope, "January and May," in Edward Bysshe *The Art of English Poetry*, (London: for O. Lloyd and others, 1718), under "Spring" (ECCO image 206). Both extracts are adaptations of tales by Chaucer. Bysshe's guide, combining a rhyming dictionary with quotations organized by theme, was reprinted several times in the eighteenth century.

Thy will be done (Matt. 6: 9-10; Luke 11:2: the “Lord’s Prayer”). From here he moves to his final generic analogues, with lines that resemble both a hymn and a doxology, the short concluding prayer of praise which could be used to conclude a sermon and sometimes emphasised the Trinity:

- 7a.** And died on tree,  
that I might be  
bro’t home to thee  
Glory to thee  
United Three (Tassie).  
**7b.** We lift our Shouts, O God, to thee,  
And send them to thy Throne,  
All Glory to th’UNITED Three,  
The Undivided One (Isaac Watts).<sup>52</sup>  
**7c.** [I pray that we] at last meet together in the divine assembly  
above, to live in immortal friendship with one another, and in  
eternal communion with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen*  
(Leechman).<sup>53</sup>

Tassie’s verse stitches together genres associated with higher ranks, such as lyric verse, with domestic forms like family covenants. He blends the scriptural genres of psalms, gospel and prayers with liturgical ones like hymns and doxologies. The religious tradition which inspired his verse may have inhibited him from the kind of secular labouring class poetry which was formed in dialogue with literary elites. But this inhibition may have helped create a space to develop a poetic voice of his own, one which was more innovative and less dependent on his social rank than might otherwise have been the case.

### Conclusion

There is growing evidence that eighteenth-century readers of the lower ranks were gaining unprecedented access to books and journals, despite continued constraints on their time and income.<sup>54</sup> Susan Whyman has

---

<sup>52</sup> Isaac Watts, “Praise to God for Creation and Redemption,” in *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (London: by J. Humfreys, 1707), ECCO image 134.

<sup>53</sup> For this doxology, concluding a sermon by the professor of divinity at Glasgow, see William Leechman, *The Temper, Character, and Duty of a Minister of the Gospel: a Sermon*, 4th ed. (Glasgow: Robert Foulis, 1744).

<sup>54</sup> Jan Fergus has assessed evidence for the extent and nature of eighteenth-century servants’ reading in “Provincial servants’ reading in the eighteenth century,” in *The Practice and Representation of Reading in England*, eds. James

also shown that labouring class families could use writing in creative and dynamic ways.<sup>55</sup> On these issues the evidence from Cambuslang is mixed. Smout's analysis of the data indicates high rates of reading literacy in this sample of the Scottish lowland labouring classes.<sup>56</sup> Reading preferences however were, if the limited evidence available is representative, focussed exclusively on Calvinist prose and poetry with local roots.

Read in communities of shared rank and purpose, however, these texts could underpin their readers' intellectual and social confidence. Psalm singing, as well as being an act of worship, could be an education in reading and writing lyric poetry. The beliefs and culture of revival could be restrictive. But the evidence from Cambuslang suggests that equality of souls before God had the potential to support a labouring class poetic culture which was independent of elite poetic discourse.

*University of Strathclyde*

---

Raven, Helen Small and Naomi Tadmor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 202-205; Rose, *Intellectual Life*, 16-18, 59-60.

<sup>55</sup> Susan Whyman *The Pen and the People: English letter writers, 1660-1680* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 9-11 and *passim*.

<sup>56</sup> Smout, p.121. See also Alexander Murdoch, "Literacy," in *The Edinburgh History of the Book in Scotland: volume 2, Enlightenment and Expansion 1707-1800* eds. Stephen W. Brown and Warren McDougall (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 288-291.