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# 'Upon the Decaying Kirk': A Footnote to Ane Dialogue

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**“UPON THE DECAYING KIRK”:  
A FOOTNOTE TO ANE DIALOGUE**

*Jamie Reid Baxter*

In David Laing's *Various Pieces of Fugitive Scottish Poetry* (1853), the first of the “Fugitive Pieces 1632-1638” adds an interesting postscript to the portrayal of church conflicts in *Ane Dialogue* (1619), discussed and printed from manuscript in *SSL* 43:1.<sup>1</sup> The verse from Laing’s collection reads:

Upon the Decaying Kirk

Ryse Rollocke, ryse, relate and Bruce returne,  
Deplore the mischeifs of this uncouth change,  
In the prime Kirk, which as a lamp did burne,  
Our Teachers hath set up a worship strange:  
Strutheris spyc'd sermons now prove true indeed,  
It is become the tail that was the heid.<sup>2</sup>

This epigram, signed simply "L", makes clear its sympathies in recent church disputes by beginning with a reference to the much-loved Edinburgh presbyterian ministers Robert Rollock (c.1555-1598) and Robert Bruce (1554-1631; deposed from his charge by James VI in 1600).

The verse calls on Rollock and Bruce, two dead ministers of the capital, to rise and deplore the changes in worship in the kingdom's 'prime Kirk' of St Giles. In this it is distinctly reminiscent of the ghostly apparitions of James Melville and Walter Balcanquhall in *Ane Dialogue*, deploring the strange preaching of Mr William Struthers (c. 1578-1633). *Ane Dialogue* several times alludes to Struthers's contention from the pulpit on January 5, 1619, that the clergy would from henceforth no longer be the tail wagged

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<sup>1</sup> See Jamie Reid Baxter, “Posthumous Preaching: James Melville’s Ghostly Advice in *Ane Dialogue* (1619), with an Edition from the Manuscript,” *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 43:1 (Spring 2017): 71-101: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol43/iss1/9/>.

<sup>2</sup> David Laing's *Various Pieces of Fugitive Scottish Poetry, Principally of the XVIIth Century, Second Series* (Edinburgh: s.n., 1853), unpaginated, item 10.

by the secular 'heid' (the merchant classes of Edinburgh), but that he was the head and they the tail. Struthers's sermon, by casting up the events of December 17, 1596, had shown that the royalist-loyalist party had never forgotten that supposed attack on the Crown by the burgh in cahoots with the Kirk.

In the same way, this little verse "Upon the Decaying Kirk," whether or not its author was familiar with *Ane Dialogue*, indicates that the *édim-bourgeoisie* had never forgotten Struthers's attack on them. Here, of course, Struthers's image of the head and the tail in his 1619 sermon is applied to Charles I's transformation of St Giles—"the Zion of our Jerusalem"—into a cathedral as the seat of the king's newly-created Bishop of Edinburgh. St Giles itself, once the burning lamp of truthful preaching, has now become a tail wagged by the Crown's episcopal clergy ("our Teachers") and their innovative, alien ("strange") forms of worship.

Charles I appointed William Struthers to the post of Dean of Edinburgh in 1633, and had the new-made dean not died later that same year, he might very well have been the capital's first bishop. The "worship strange" is presumably Charles and Laud's Scottish Book of Common Prayer (1637). At its first reading in St Giles, on Sunday 23 July 1637, the congregation rioted, and subsequent developments led to the signing of the National Covenant at Greyfriars in February 1638 and then to the abolition of the episcopate by the Glasgow General Assembly of November that same year.

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