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978-1-107-50534-6 - Sir David Lyndsay: Poet, and Satirist of the Old Church in Scotland

W. Murison

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

*LYNDSAY'S LIFE*¹

SIR DAVID LYNDSAY was the eldest son of David Lyndsay of the Mount. "The Mount is a conspicuous hill. . . on the north side of the Howe of Fife, in the Vale of Eden, about three miles from Cupar. . . the old mansion stood on the south side of the hill, and overlooked a great part of the valley of the Eden."² In addition, this branch of the Lyndsays possessed Garmylton (now Garleton) in East Lothian, two miles north of Haddington. It is not known where David Lyndsay was born—whether in Fife or in East Lothian; nor if he attended the Grammar School of Cupar or the Grammar School of Haddington. We may assume that his father obeyed the injunctions of the Act of Parliament, 1496, that all barons and substantial free-holders should send their eldest sons and heirs to the Grammar Schools from the age of eight or nine, there to remain till they were competently grounded and had "perfect" Latin. The youths had then to study in the schools of arts and law for three years so as to be able to administer the law in their districts. Following up the tradition that Lyndsay studied at St Andrews, Chalmers discovered in the list of incorporated students in St Salvator's College, 1508–9, the name "Da. Lindesay".³

¹ See *Lives of the Lindsays*, vol. 1; D.N.B. article by Aeneas J. G. Mackay; T. F. Henderson, *Scottish Vernacular History*, and *The Cambridge History of English Literature*, vol. III; editions of Lyndsay by Chalmers, Laing and Hamer.

² Laing, *The Poetical Works of Sir David Lyndsay*, 1 liii (1879). Referred to as Laing.

³ See *The Early Records of the University of St Andrews* (Scottish History Society, 1926).

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An “incorporatus” was one who had been three years in residence; and “Da. Lindsay” would thus have matriculated in 1505. Chalmers accordingly concluded that this was the poet and inferred that he was born about 1490.¹

Mr Douglas Hamer refuses to accept this date, and says that Lyndsay “seems to have been born a little before October 19, 1486, for on that date twenty-one years later he received a grant . . . of the lands of Garmilton-Alexander, Haddingtonshire, as eldest son of David Lindsay of the Mount, Fifeshire. He must then have been of legal age.”² Mr Hamer also calls it “sentiment” to regard “Da. Lindsay” of the St Andrews list as the poet, and thinks it “very probable” that the poet is to be identified with “one called Lyndesay” mentioned in the Exchequer Rolls for 1508,³ as holding a post in the stable of the late prince, the baby who died in February 1508, just about twelve months old. Naturally the St Andrews “incorporatus” and the equerry (or groom of the stable) could not be one and the same person in 1508.

“Who shall decide, when Doctors disagree?” We can only keep an open mind, for “The truth is, that of the youth of Lyndsay nothing is known”.⁴

When and in what capacity Lyndsay entered James IV’s Court must remain undecided. The Treasurer’s Accounts from August 1508 to September 1511 are lost.

¹ Chalmers, *The Poetical Works of Sir David Lyndsay*, I 3 sq. (1806). Referred to as Chalmers.

² Hamer, *The Works of Sir David Lindsay*, IV ix (Scottish Text Society, 1931–36). Referred to as Hamer. The charter is quoted by Laing, I ix and by Hamer, IV 245 sq.

³ Exchequer Rolls, xiii 127; Hamer, IV ix sq. and 246.

⁴ Tytler, *Scottish Worthies*, III 192.

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But from the Accounts for 1511–12 we learn that Lyndsay had some office, for one entry records payment to him of forty pounds “fee and pension for Alhallowmes, Candilmes, Rudmes and Lammes bypast”.¹ On 21 October 1511 he was provided with two and a half ells of blue taffeta and six quarters of yellow taffeta “to be a play coat for the play played in the king and queen’s presence in the Abbey of Holyrood”.² James IV was a merry monarch and his Court was thronged with makers of mirth.³

But it was not all merry-making. Some twenty years earlier Scotland had become of special importance in the politics of Europe; and strenuous efforts had been made to detach her from the French alliance and bring her into the league by which Spain hoped to crush the power of France.⁴ Marriage with a Spanish princess had been a bait dangled before the eyes of James. The offer of Margaret Tudor came later. James’s marriage with her, however, did not break the French alliance; and in 1513 he was seriously bent on war with England. It was at this time that he received the oft-described warning against the projected campaign. Few ghost-stories are better vouched for than this. Pitscottie and Buchanan tell it—both on the authority of David Lyndsay.

The King, says Pitscottie, was worshipping in the Church of Linlithgow and praying for success in his campaign when there entered a man about fifty years of age, with a pikestaff in his hand. He wore a blue gown belted with a roll of linen, high boots to the calf of his leg, and

¹ Treasurer’s Accounts, iv 269. ² Treasurer’s Accounts, iv 313.

³ Buchanan, *Historia*, xiii xxi.

⁴ Gregory Smith, *The Days of James IV*. See also P. F. Tytler, J. Hill Burton and P. Hume Brown.

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other clothes in keeping. He had nothing on his head but long reddish-yellow hair falling to his shoulders, with forehead bald and bare. He pushed quickly through the lords, asking for the King, whom he approached with little reverence. Leaning on the King's desk, he said:

Sir King, my mother¹ has sent me to thee, desiring thee not to pass at this time where thou art purposed, for if thou dost thou wilt not fare well in thy journey nor none that passes with thee; further she bade thee not meddle with no women nor use their counsel...for an thou do it thou wilt be confounded and brought to shame.

By this time evensong was nearly done, and while the King was considering what answer to give to the message, the man, before the King's face and in the presence of the lords, disappeared. He could not be seen or laid hold of, but vanished like a blink of the sun or a whip of the whirlwind. Pitscottie adds:

I heard tell that Sir David Lyndsay, Lyon Herald, and John Inglis, Marshal, at that time young men and special servants of the King, were standing near and thought to seize the man and question him. But in vain; they could not touch him, for he vanished between them and was no more seen.²

Buchanan's account is shorter. He says that he would have omitted the story as a myth spread abroad by empty rumours had he not received it from David Lyndsay of the Mount, who was present, a man of proved trustworthiness and integrity, a man of letters, a life-long speaker of the truth.³

¹ The Virgin Mary.

² Robert Lindesay of Pitscottie, *Historie*, I 258 sq. (Scottish Text Society). Sir Walter Scott skilfully wove the story into *Marmion*, iv xv–xvii.

³ *Historia*, XIII xxxi.

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A ghost-like figure, representing the Apostle John, certainly entered the Church; but it was not supernatural. The peace-party contrived the affair to influence the superstitious King; and, if Lyndsay had a hand in the device, no wonder the figure disappeared so easily when it came near him. This apparition did not influence James; neither did that other attempt when, from the Market Cross of Edinburgh at midnight a herald from "Plotcock" (Pluto, or the Devil) summoned, in legal form, King, nobles, gentry and burgesses to appear before his master within forty days.¹ Soon after the army set out for Flodden.

Lyndsay did not go with the army. Eighteen months earlier, when on 12 April 1512 the prince was born, afterwards James V, Lyndsay had been appointed the baby's usher, an office involving close personal attendance. The curiously intimate relations of Prince and usher may be gathered from what Lyndsay wrote years later:

Quhen thow wes young, I bure thee in myne arme
 Full tenderlie, tyll thow begouth to gang;
 And in thy bed oft happit thee full warme,
 With lute in hand, syne, sweitlie to thee sang:
 Sumtyme, in dansing, feiralie I flang;
 And sumtyme, playand farsis on the flure;
 And sumtyme, on myne office takkand cure:
 And sumtyme, lyke ane feind, transfigure,
 And sumtyme, lyke the greislie gaist of Gye;
 In divers formis oft tymes disfigure,
 And sumtyme, dissagyist full plesandlye,
 So, sen thy birth, I have continewalye
 Bene occupyit, and aye to thy plesoure,
 And sumtyme, Seware, Coppare, and Carvoure;

¹ Pitscottie, I 260 sq. Scott, *Marmion*, v xxv, xxvi.

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Thy purs maister and secreit Thesaurare,
 Thy Yschare, aye sen thy natyvitie,
 And of thy chalmer cheiffe Cubicularare.

The Dreme, 8 sqq.¹

Quhow, as ane chapman beris his pak,
 I bure thy Grace upon my bak,
 And sumtymes, strydlingis on my nek,
 Dansand with mony bend and bek.
 The first sillabis that thow did mute
 Was PA, DA LYN.² Upon the lute
 Than playit I twenty spryngis, perqueir,
 Quhilk wes gret piete for to heir.
 Fra play thow leit me never rest,
 Bot Gynkartoun thow lufit ay best;
 And ay, quhen thow come frome the scule
 Than I behuffit to play the fule;
 As I at lenth, in to my Dreme,
 My sindry servyce did expreme.

The Complaynt, 87 sqq.

When James grew older and was keen to hear of ancient days and warlike deeds, Lyndsay told him about Hector, Alexander of Macedon, Pompey the Great, Julius Caesar, King Arthur, Jason and Medea, Hercules, Samson. He related stories of true lovers, as well as the joy and sorrow of Troilus, and also the sieges of Tyre, Thebes and Troy. He narrated the prophecies of Thomas the Rhymer, of Bede and of Merlin; and such fables as those of the Red Etin and the Gyre Carlin.³ Lyndsay continued in attendance upon James for twelve years. He was not James's tutor. In 1516 Gawain Dunbar, Dean of Moray (later Archbishop of Glasgow), was appointed the King's Master or chief instructor, with John Bellenden (later Archdeacon of Moray) as his assistant.

¹ For quotations and references the text of Laing's three-volume edition (1869) is used, unless otherwise stated.

² Play, Davie Lyndsay.

³ *The Dreme*, 29 sqq.

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About 1522 Lyndsay married Janet Douglas. No record of the marriage exists, but the Treasurer's Accounts name Janet Douglas as Lyndsay's wife and state her position in the King's household. She was the King's "semestair" and received a yearly fee of ten pounds, with the usual "livery" clothing. The earliest mention is to be found in the Accounts, 5 June 1522 to 15 April 1524:

Item, to Jenet Dowglas, spous to David Lindsay maister Ischare to the King for sewing of the Kingis lynnyng claithis de mandato domini gubernatoris: xxiiii li.¹

Here are two from the 1527 accounts:

Item, to Jonet Dowglas, semestair of the Kingis lynnyng claithis for this instant yer, and for the yer bypast, be the Kingis precept, X ellis Parys blak, price el 15; summa xxv li.²

Item, to Jonet Dowglas, takand yeirlic for hir fe X li., summa for this yeir and the yeir precedand, wantand unpayit in Maister Johne Cambellis tyme, and now payit be the Kingis precept: XX li.³

Numerous entries record supplies to Janet of holland cloth for sheets, shirts, pillow slips—one entry is cloth for a night "courchye"—ounces of sewing silk, hanks of gold and silver thread, ribbons for shirts.⁴ The last time Janet Douglas is mentioned in the Accounts is June 1540, when she and her husband received £666. 13s. 4d.⁵

In 1524 Lyndsay ceased to have charge of James.⁶ The Queen Mother and the Earl of Arran, Governor, had contrived the "Erection" of the boy, that is, his proclamation as *de facto* King of Scots. Margaret, however, was

¹ v 196.² v 314.³ v 329.⁴ See Indexes to volumes v, vi, vii of Treasurer's Accounts.⁵ vii 315. She was alive in 1542. See charters quoted by Hamer, iv xiii and 265 sq.⁶ Dunbar and Bellenden were also dismissed.

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unable to keep her son in her power. In a few months her husband, the Earl of Angus, whom she now hated, with the Douglasses had full control of James. Lyndsay thus describes the revolution:

The Kyng was bot twelf yeris of aige
 Quhen new rewaris come, in thair raige,
 For Commonweill makand no cair,
 Bot for thair proffeit singular.
 Imprudentlie, lyk wyttles fuillis,
 Thay tuke that young Prince frome the scuilis,
 Quhare he, under obedience,
 Was lernand vertew and science,
 And haistelie platt in his hand
 The governance of all Scotland;

I gyf thame to the Devyll of Hell
 Quhilk first devysit that counsell
 I wyll nocht say that it was treassoun.
 I pray God, lat me never se ryng,
 In to this realme, so young ane Kyng.

The Complaynt, 127 sqq.

For four years, 1524–28, Lyndsay was debarred from the Court; but he received his pension. James insisted on that, though Lyndsay was slandered by his enemies.¹ He retired to Garmylton, there to lament that James was being led into vices by flatterers; to meditate on the sad welter in Church and State; to read and to write. In July 1528 the King escaped from the hands of Angus, and set about crushing the power of the Douglasses. In November Angus had to flee to England:

Thay culde nocht keip thair feit from slyding;
 Bot of thair lyffis thay had sic dreid,
 That thay war faine tyll trott ouer Tueid.

The Complaynt, 370 sqq.

¹ *The Complaynt*, 263 sqq.

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Lyndsay was recalled to Court and was soon busy with official duties. At this point we meet another obscurity in Lyndsay's life. When did he become Lyon King of Arms?

Chalmers admitted that he had searched the records in vain for Lyndsay's appointment as Lyon King, but nevertheless he stated that Lyndsay's inauguration to this office and his knighthood both belonged to 1530.¹ Chalmers was also indignant because Irving made 1542 the date of installation.² According to Laing, Lyndsay became "Chief Herald, or as it was called, Lyon King of Arms" in 1529.³

Mr Douglas Hamer, however, has amassed evidence⁴ which shows clearly that Lyndsay, while acting from about 1530 as Lyon King (and several times so designated in English and French documents), is in Scottish documents, till eight years later, styled either simply herald, or chief herald, or Snowdon herald.⁵ It is in the Treasurer's Accounts for 1538 that he is first called Lyon in Scottish records; and then in the *Register of the Privy Seal*, 3 October 1542, we read: "David Lindesay of the Mont, knyght, alias Lyoun King of Armes." Hamer also points out that from 1529 to 1542 there was a Lyon King by name Thomas Pettigrew. During that period, then, David Lyndsay was what we should call Lyon Depute, while, as doing the work of the Lyon King, he was naturally called Lyon King outside Scotland. His formal in-

¹ I 11 sq.² *The Lives of the Scottish Poets*, II 79 (1804).³ I xxii.⁴ IV 288 sqq.⁵ For example, James V's letter (25 May 1531) to the Emperor Charles V has "cum fedeli nostro heraldo, et eius ordinis primo, dauide Lyndesayo, snawdon vocato". Quoted by Hamer, IV 254.

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auguration and his knighthood came in the autumn of 1542.

Let us now go back about a dozen years. We find Lyndsay beginning then a series of embassies to Flanders, France, Denmark and England.¹ In 1531 Sir John Campbell of Lundy, accompanied by David Lyndsay and David Panter, crossed to Flanders to renew the century-old commercial treaty. They were welcomed with great splendour in Brussels by the Governess of the Netherlands, the Queen of Hungary, and her brother, the Emperor Charles V. In a letter from Antwerp,² 23 August, Lyndsay announces the success of the mission and refers to the “triumphs”—

that is to say the triwmphand justynis, the terribill turnements, the feychtyn on fut in barras, the naymis of lords and knychts that war hurt the day of the gret townament; quhais circumstans I haiff writtin at length, in articles, to schaw the Kingis grace at my haym cumin.

What Lyndsay wrote for the King’s eyes has disappeared.

Spain and England were again eager to detach Scotland from France. Within the space of a few years, James received the Order of the Garter from Henry VIII and the Order of the Golden Fleece from Charles V, while as a counterpoise came from Francis I the French Order of St Michael. Charles also suggested one relative of his

¹ From two passages, one in *Syde Taillis*, 37 sqq., the other in *The Monarchie*, 5417 sqq., some have inferred that Lyndsay had visited Italy. *The Monarchie* passage refers to the year 1510:

“I saw Pape Julius manfullye
Passe to the feild tryumphantlye,
With ane rycht auffle ordinance,
Contrar Lowis, the kyng of France.”

² Given in facsimile by Laing, i xxiv. It is interesting as the only example extant of Lyndsay’s handwriting.