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

W. Murison

Frontmatter

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to the forsovaig lord

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in Scotland*

BY

W. MURISON



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¹ Reproduced from an engraving in Chalmers' *Lyndsay*. The original is in the first edition of Bullein's *Dialogue* (see below, p. xi). The signature, also reproduced from Chalmers, is from the Antwerp letter (see below, pp. ix note, 10).

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P R E F A C E

I SHOULD like to make clear at the outset what precisely is my aim in this book. For there are several points which have been intentionally omitted or merely glanced at. For example, I have not discussed how far Lyndsay departed from the Roman faith and progressed towards Lutheran or Genevan doctrines. In this connexion it is interesting to learn that a list of his belongings, drawn up after his death, includes both a rosary of silver with “gaudees” of gold and a bible in English. Again, I have not tried to analyse the language of his works. To do this satisfactorily would lay on one the hard preliminary task of settling how much of the language—vocabulary, accidence, syntax—belonged to Lyndsay himself, how much to his editors or printers. I have also left unexplored the question why he escaped punishment for his utterances against the clergy while Buchanan was imprisoned and had to flee the country. Did Lyndsay owe his safety to the jester’s cap and bells? Nor have I attempted an estimate of his influence in promoting the Reformation. Material for this is difficult to lay hold of. We are not greatly helped by such stories as that recorded by Row sixty odd years after the event—the story of hundreds of Perth schoolboys stirred by *The Monarche* to hiss a friar denouncing “heretical” preachers.

What, then, is my aim? After some account of Lyndsay and his poems, I set forth in detail his charges

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against the Scottish clergy, and then I produce evidence to prove that the charges rest on a solid foundation of truth. The evidence comes, not from sources hostile to the Roman Church, but from official records of the Church, from state documents, and from writers loyal to the Church.

It was Professor A. A. Jack, of the Chalmers Chair of English in the University of Aberdeen, who suggested that the material I had gathered about Lyndsay should be put into book form. To him and to Professor J. B. Black, of the Burnett-Fletcher Chair of History, I am deeply indebted for advice and encouragement. I wish also to record my sincere thanks to the Carnegie Trustees for their promise of financial assistance towards publication; to Mr J. F. Walker, of the Aberdeen Grammar School, for great patience and ceaseless care in reading proofs; and to the University Press readers for their unremitting vigilance.

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ABERDEEN

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IN the story of the events leading to the collapse of the old Scottish Church in 1560, one outstanding figure is that of Sir David Lyndsay, whose name is now to the majority of his countrymen either quite unknown or known only in the haziest way. And yet for many years after the Reformation the name of Lyndsay was among the most familiar in Scotland. His poetry was very popular, and was used, we are told, in schools, alongside of Blind Harry's *Wallace*. "Out o' Davie Lyndsay into *Wallace*" denoted a pupil's promotion.¹ Portions were committed to memory. Describing an evening in a country cottage, Pennecuik writes:

My Aunt, whom nane dare say has no Grace,
Was reading on the *Pilgrim's Progress*:
The meikle Tasker, Davie Dallas,
Was telling Blads of *William Wallace*:
My Mither bad her second Son say,
What he'd by heart of Davie Lindsay.²

Robert Heron, in his *Observations made in a Journey...in the Autumn of MDCCXCII*, says:

Almost within my remembrance, Davie Lindsay was esteemed little less necessary in every family than the Bible. It is common to have, by memory, great part of his poetry.

¹ Kelly's *Proverbs* (1721). One would like fuller and more precise information (dates and localities) for the use of Lyndsay in schools.

² *Streams from Helicon*, p. 75 (1720). Pennecuik's spelling "Lindsay" is one of several variants. The signature of the Antwerp letter (see below, p. 10), the only autograph we possess, is "Lyndsay".

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Sir Walter Scott makes frequent use of this popularity. The Baron of Bradwardine in *Waverley* reads Barbour's *Bruce*, Blind Harry's *Wallace*, and Lyndsay's *Works*. Monkbarns in *The Antiquary* would listen a whole day to tales of Bruce, Wallace and Lyndsay. In *Rob Roy* Andrew Fairservice disposes of Frank Osbaldistone's claim to be a poet by exclaiming, "Gude help him! Two lines o' Davie Lindsay wad ding a' he ever clerkit." Lyndsay, however, is more than a criterion of poetic excellence to Andrew. When rebuked for finding fault with the Union of 1707, he protests, "What wad Sir William Wallace, or auld David Lindsay, hae said to the Union, or them that made it?" In *The Monastery* Dame Glendinning wonders why the Lady of Avenel is always reading a book of devotion. "An it were about Robin Hood, or some o' David Lindsay's ballants, ane wad ken better what to say to it." But it is *Redgauntlet* that has the most famous reference to Lyndsay in Scott's novels—in the blind fiddler's weird story. The night before the funeral of the Laird who had fiercely persecuted the Covenanters, two of his servants, Dougal and Hutcheon, were watching, with brandy to fortify their courage; for on the previous nights the Laird's silver whistle had blown exactly as when he was alive:

So down the carles sat ower a stoup of brandy, and Hutcheon, who was something of a clerk, would have read a chapter of the Bible; but Dougal wad hear naething but a blaud of Davie Lindsay, whilk was the waur preparation.

Scott was here remembering the story of a man on his death-bed to whom a neighbour was reading from the Bible. "Hoot awa with your daft non-

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sense," said the dying man. "Gie me a blaud o' Davie Lyndsay."¹

In *Marmion* Scott paints a fine portrait of Lyndsay, whom he apostrophizes:

Still is thy name in high account
And still thy verse has charms.

That was in 1808; but even then Lyndsay's popularity had been waning for a considerable time.² The records of printing throw light on the waning. Up to 1800 editions of his works were far more numerous than those of the greater poets, Henryson and Dunbar. They were most numerous in the century and a half after his death in 1555. Since the date of *Marmion* there have been only four editions of Lyndsay: two by the same editor, David Laing; and two for Societies—the Early English Text Society and the Scottish Text Society.

Lyndsay's reputation in London shortly after his death is manifest from Bullein's *Dialogue*, 1564. The narrator names several poets, and then proceeds:

Nexste them in a blacke chaire of Gette stone, in a coat of armes, sate an aunciente knight in Orange Tawnie as one forsaken, bearyng upon his breast a white Lion, with a Croune of riche golde on his hedde. His name was sir Dauie

¹ Prynne, in *Histriomastix*, speaking of Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*, tells of a dying woman who, instead of seeking the consolations of religion, cried "Hieronimo! Hieronimo! O let me see Hieronimo acted!"

² In 1793 Malcolm Laing (Henry's *History of Great Britain*, vi 609) called Lyndsay "a Scottish poet, whose laurels are faded". Tennant's lines in *Anster Fair*, ii lxxv 1 sq.—

"Others upon the green, in open air,
Enact the best of Davie Lindsay's plays"—

are no proof of Lyndsay's popularity in 1812; for the events of *Anster Fair* belong to James V's reign.

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Linse vppon the mounte, with a hammer of strong steele in his hande, breakyng a sonder the counterfeicte crosse kaies of Rome, forged by Antichriste. And thus this good knight of Scotlande saied to England the elder brother and Scotlande the younger:

Habitare fratres in unum
Is a blesfull thing,
One God, one faith, one baptisme pure,
One lawe, one lande, and one kyng.
Clappe handes together, brethren dere,
Unfained truce together make,
And like frendes dooe euer acorde,
But French and Romaine doe first forsake.
You are without the continent,
A sole lande of auncient fame,
Ab origine a people olde
Bolde Britaines ecleped by name.

Sicut erat in principio.
Graunt, oh God, it maie bee
In saecula saeculorum,
That we maie have peace in thee.
Then we shall feare no forein power
That againste vs shall advaunce,
The Tartre cruell, the curse of Rome,
Ne yet the power of Fraunce, etc.

These verses do not occur in Lyndsay's works, though his last poem prophesies no peace between Scotland and England till both are under one king. Bullein's verses are part of the English propaganda which had been going on for years.¹

A recent writer places Lyndsay second only to Knox in bringing about the Reformation. An earlier writer is bolder:

¹ See Murray's Introduction to *The Complaynt of Scotlande*, pp. xv, xxxviii (E.E.T.S.).

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Sir David Lindsay was more the Reformer of Scotland than John Knox; for he prepared the ground, and John only sowed the seed.

Similarly, Allan Ramsay:

Sir David's satires helped our nation
To carry on the reformation,
And gave the scarlet dame a box
Mair snell than all the pelts of Knox.¹

The following pages are an attempt to tell something about Lyndsay and his works, and also to indicate and justify his attitude to the old Scottish Church.

¹ Compare what Melchior Adam said of Erasmus: "Pontifici Romano plus nocuit jocando quam Lutherus stomachando."