
Short Note: Additional Data on Giving Out the Line in English

NORMAN CAMPBELL

Some further information is here provided on the “lining-out” worship practice, whose Scottish Highland and Canadian usage (the latter in Prince Edward Island) was described by the writer in the article “Giving out the Line in English”, published in *SRSHJ*, Vol. 1, 2011.¹ Attention was drawn to its warrant in the *Directory for Public Worship* of 1644, as well as to its utility. Retention of the “line” was linked to wider conservatism in doctrine, worship and practice but it was conceded that it was not essential to the maintenance of Exclusive Psalmody.

The Line in the Scottish Reformation era

The churches of the Reformation placed a great deal of emphasis on the singing of the Psalms. The Psalter has also been described as an important aid to the preaching of the Scottish reformation era, as its contents could be quickly learned. Margo Todd has pointed out that the giving out of the line would greatly help the memorisation of this part of the Bible without any need for literacy. This was a process given extra depth by singing at family worship.²

¹ “Giving out the Line: A Cross-Atlantic Comparison of Two Presbyterian Cultures”, Norman Campbell, *Scottish Reformation Society Historical Journal*, Vol. 1, 2011, pp. 241-265.

² *The Culture of Protestantism in Early Modern Scotland*, Margo Todd; Yale University Press, 2002, pp. 70-73. The writer acknowledges the kindness of Rev David Campbell, North Tolsta, Isle of Lewis, in drawing his attention to this point.

The end of the “line” among the last Anti-Burghers

The *SRSHJ* 2011 article described the last known indigenous usage of the line among indigenous Lowlanders (as opposed to Highland diaspora Free Presbyterian congregations in the Central Belt) as having ceased in 1912 in Edinburgh. This was among a group of worshippers gathering at a small meeting-house behind South Clerk Street. This grouping was descended from a section of the Infirmary St congregation of the Original Secession Church which had refused to join that denomination’s union of 1842 with the remnant Burgher Synod.³

The South Clerk Street congregation maintained a meeting-house in the yard behind 52 South Clerk St. (formerly No. 36). The building was 42 feet long and 20 feet broad and could sit 150 people.



Several illustrations of the strict stance taken by these “Last Anti-Burghers” with regard to Reformation principles were highlighted in a sketch published in *The Christian Leader* periodical in late December,

³ *SRSHJ*, Vol. 1, 2011, p. 247. The group’s history is traced in “The Last Anti-Burghers. A Footnote to Secession History”, Archibald McWhirter, *Records of the Scottish Church History Society*, Vol. 8, 1944, pp. 254-291.

1884. First, the lining out of the psalm and its effects were described. Hymns were “utterly excluded”, it was noted. The minister, the Rev William Scott, had announced a Psalm after which each line was read out by the precentor before the congregation sang it. “This causes a somewhat awkward break in the singing at the end of each line. . . . Although so different to what one is accustomed hearing now-a-days (sic), we could not help but being rather impressed by the gravity secured by the reading of the line, as it of courses imposes an effectual barrier to the too rapid singing which prevails in many of our churches – to the hindrance, we fear, of the congregation taking its proper share in the service of praise.”⁴

On enquiring about their continued use of the line, the sketch’s author was told that this was “not done as a matter of principle, but simply because it is deemed inexpedient and undesirable to change in the meantime, especially as so many changes are now being made among ecclesiastical bodies, and that it is their desire to cleave fast to the Covenanted Reformation, as attained to at the second period of the Scottish Reformation, and adopted by the first Seceders in 1733”.⁵

Again, the visitor to Mr Scott’s church noted that his prayer asked for the Lord’s blessing on the Queen, royal family and “all in places of power and trust” and asked that they experience conversion; but the sketch writer also noted that he went on to petition the Most High that these “might in their several stations be impressed with a sense of their responsibility with regard to the reformation with which these lands had been favoured, and that they and all ranks and classes might be led to see and to repent of their apostacies from national covenant engagements”.⁶

Preaching on Galatians 4:10, Mr Scott had criticised the recent celebrations marking the anniversary of the publication of Luther’s Bible. Anniversary days for Protestant heroes had no Scripture warrant, Mr Scott warned, and his text condemned these as much as Christmas, Lent and Easter celebrations. The sketch writer pointed out that on the previous Sabbath, the minister had emphasised the duty of “keeping in remembrance those whom God had honoured to do Him special service; that the way in which Scripture required this duty to be performed was by following the example of such men in so far as they

⁴ *The Christian Leader*, 27th December 1884, p. 726. This was kindly provided to the writer by Mrs Morag Hymers, Edinburgh.

⁵ *The Christian Leader*, 27th December 1884, p. 726.

⁶ *The Christian Leader*, 27th December 1884, p. 726.

had followed Christ; and that if this duty were not so discharged the mere acts of outward commemoration would only tend to the greater condemnation of the commemorators". It was a bad sign, Mr Scott said, that the generation promoting the Luther and similar anniversary events was the same which was "doing so much to set aside the proper observation of the Lord's day, and those sacramental fast days and preparation days . . .". The services associated with a communion season were not condemned by the text as they were but "opportunities for the proper discharge of the commanded duties of fasting and preparation".⁷

It is clear from the foregoing that the retention of lined-out psalmody until 1912 in the Edinburgh congregation (of the tiny Original Secession grouping which separated in 1842) was rooted in a wider desire to hold to their view of the Second Reformation and a strict interpretation for their own day of how these principles should be applied as new situations arose.

The Isle of Skye

The use of the "line" in English at funerals in the Free Presbyterian (FP) Church of Scotland on the island of Skye was described as lasting until the 1960s.⁸ Sporadic instances have occurred more recently. There may have been very occasional later instances of it during funerals at the Flashadder FP church: one person told the writer this occurred at least once around 1990. Services ceased there around 1993. A funeral held in April 2008 in the Staffin congregation, that of Rhoda Matheson, included an English singing with the line given out by a non-Gaelic-speaking elder who belonged to Oban. As with the rest of the Highlands, lining-out in English remains in use at communion Sabbath morning services in the FP Church on Skye.⁹

Strathy 2010 funeral

The *SRSHJ* Vol. 1 article pointed out that the practice had continued sporadically into the twenty-first century in Strathy Associated Presbyterian Churches (APC) congregation in Sutherland. This was on some of

⁷ *The Christian Leader*, 27th December 1884, p. 726.

⁸ *SRSHJ*, Vol. 1, 2011, p. 250.

⁹ The writer acknowledges Rev Dr Iain D. Campbell, Lewis, as the source for the Flashadder funeral and John M. Macleod for congregational history. For the note of the 2008 Staffin funeral, I thank Miss Marion Ross of Staffin and the minister, Rev Wilfred Weale.



Strathy FP church, Sutherland-shire, was the last where the line was given out in public worship on Sabbaths; the APC congregation there have, as recently as 2010, made very occasional use of the technique.

[Picture courtesy of the late Dr G. Sutton]

the occasions when the lay-preacher Bill Byers would take services.¹⁰ As recently as October 2010, Mr Byers gave out the line in English there, at the funeral of Mrs Mimie Mackay. The Psalm lined out was 121 and the tune taken was French. The service was led by their interim-moderator Rev Dr Wayne Pearce, then pastor of Lairg-Rogart APC congregation. He had recalled hearing that Mrs Mackay had enjoyed singing the psalms with the line given out and it was agreed that it would be appropriate to do so at the funeral service if Mr Byers was present.¹¹

APC communions

While communion seasons in the Associated Presbyterian Churches do not seem to have continued the Free Presbyterian use of the English line on the Sabbath morning, it has happened at least once. In the early 1990s, Rev Alex Murray of Lairg assisted at the Poolewe communion season in Wester Ross and asked elder Kenneth Maclean (Gairloch) to give out the line in English.¹²

¹⁰ *SRSJ*, Vol. 1, 2011, p. 248.

¹¹ Email from Rev Dr Wayne Pearce, 14th April 2011.

¹² Mr Maclean told the writer this in 2006.

Plymouth Brethren

In the late 1980s the line was given out in English at a funeral held under the auspices of a Brethren meeting near Buckie in the north-east of Scotland. Jethro Anderson of Bristol, an adult grand-child of the deceased, was surprised at this usage: the practice in his youth at that Brethren assembly had been for a pump organ to accompany the singing of the hymns. He wrote subsequently: "I well remember the stark beauty of the sound which must actually be a comparatively recent practice dating from the early seventies when the sect was riven by a number of schisms."¹³

Appalachian, USA practices

One of the many branches of the Old-Time Baptists in the United States' Appalachian area is that known as the United Baptists. One of their elders, author John Sparks, advised that the practice of lined-out a cappella hymnody is still extant among them in the southeastern United States: "The frequency of the practice depends on individual congregations' preference for it; in some churches lining out a hymn is infrequent, while in others it occurs in most services."¹⁴

Gaelic lined-out Psalmody

The line continues to be given out in Gaelic psalm-singing every Sabbath at a slowly-decreasing number of congregations in the various Presbyterian denominations. The Free Church of Scotland retains a key role in maintaining Gaelic services. One Gaelic singing has been reintroduced in the Tuesday prayer meeting at Achmore, Lewis FP church. The winter of 2010-2011 saw that denomination's St Jude's congregation recommence a monthly Gaelic prayer meeting. Gaelic psalm-singing would provide a rich field for social, religious and cultural scholarship.¹⁵ Research into its genesis in the Highlands, as the Scottish Reformation took root in the region, remains patchy.

¹³ Jethro Anderson; Letters page, Musical Traditions website. www.mustrad.org.uk/let_02.htm, posted 19.10.98; website accessed 2nd February 2004.

¹⁴ E-mail to the writer, 2006.

¹⁵ One recent survey in North Uist, Grimsay and Berneray suggests that in early 2010 about 25 people (in all denominations) could present in Gaelic. This kind of survey is very rare. See "Salmadaireachd Uibhist a Tuath", Ailean Boyd, *Free Presbyterian Magazine Gaelic Supplement*, Earrach 2010.