



## **Museum Musings**

**Prepared for distribution at the General Assembly of The Presbyterian Church in Canada.  
Issue of Saturday, May 31, 2014**

### **The Precentor's Desk and its Part in Presbyterian Praise, Singing the Psalms Solely**



#### **Precentor's Desk**

**The precentor's desk pictured above is a rare piece of furniture which was once as much a part of a Presbyterian Church as its pulpit. It was discovered in July, 2013, as the congregation of Wychwood-Davenport Presbyterian Church, Toronto, was preparing to leave its building after having sold it to a developer.**

Every museum committee or board usually maintains a "wish list" (either written or imagined) of items that they would love to acquire for their collection. For the Museum Advisory Committee of the National Presbyterian Museum, one of those items was a precentor's desk. As a piece of furniture in an historic Presbyterian Church, it was second in importance only to the pulpit.

The wish of the Museum Advisory Committee was granted this past year – from a very unexpected source. The congregation of Wychwood-Davenport Presbyterian Church, Toronto had made the decision to sell their building

to a developer. The congregation's building, the former Wychwood Presbyterian Church, had been constructed in 1937.<sup>1</sup> Beginning May, 2014, the congregation will conduct regular worship services at a nearby seniors' residence.

A volunteer with the Museum Advisory Committee had arranged with Margaret Millar, Wychwood-Davenport Church's Clerk of Session, to photograph the church for the Museum's collection of photographs of Presbyterian buildings.<sup>2</sup> Within the last few years, the pulpit had been removed from its location in the chancel and a lectern used in its place. The museum volunteer asked if the pulpit could be put back in its original location for the sake of a photograph. After the "pulpit" had been located in the narthex where it was being used as a guest book stand, it was manoeuvred into place in the chancel. Margaret observed, "that's not the original pulpit". (The church's original 1937 pulpit was subsequently found in the basement.) The first "pulpit" required a closer inspection!

That closer inspection revealed a piece of furniture that more closely resembled a lectern. There was not the depth to its sides that a pulpit normally has. There was no shelf underneath to place a Bible, a Psalter, notes, etc. More importantly, the detailing of the Gothic arches and columns was hand-carved. Here was an item of furniture that would have been crafted in the 1860s or 1870s – not the late 1930s when Wychwood Church was opened. All of a sudden, the revelation – this is an historic precentor's desk!

The desk was to the precentor what the pulpit was to the minister. The precentor was the person who was second in importance to the minister in leading the worship service in a Presbyterian Church. A typical Presbyterian Church service in Canada prior to 1875 would have included praise music that consisted of the singing of Psalms – that is, the Psalms alone and by voice alone. No instruments of any kind were permitted to be played within the church and neither were any hymns or choral pieces. An organ of any kind (melodeon or pipe) was considered abhorrent. At best, derided as a "kist 'o whistles" (Scottish dialect for "a chest of whistles"), at worst it was considered an instrument of the devil. Within the Canada Presbyterian Church, the use of organs in worship was not permitted until the denomination's 1872 General Assembly cautiously did not forbid them.

The precentor acted as the Psalm leader. The minister would announce the Psalm. The precentor would be the one who decided and announced the tune. The precentor would strike a **tuning fork**, or sound a pitch pipe, in order to set the tune. The entire congregation would then sing the Psalm in four-part harmony.

Gradually, the office of precentor was replaced with the introduction of organs and choirs. Organists and choirmasters expanded the order of worship to include postludes, preludes, offertories, hymns, anthems, cantatas, etc.

Unfortunately, the background as to how a mid-19<sup>th</sup> century precentor's desk came to be a part of the chattels of a 1937-built church has been lost. Perhaps a meticulous search of the congregation's records *might possibly* reveal how the congregation acquired a piece of furniture that pre-dated its own building by at least seven decades.



**Tuning fork, ca. 1870-75**  
**From the historical collection of Knox's**  
**Presbyterian Church, Galt (Cambridge, Ont.)**

A *possible* explanation is offered. When Church Union occurred in 1925, the majority of St. Columba's Presbyterian congregation would have secured both church and manse. Conversely, the Presbyterian minority (that is, Wychwood Church) found itself without a church home. As the Presbyterian congregation moved from one rented facility to another, they would have had no furnishings of their own – not even a pulpit. Other Presbyterian churches would have known of their circumstances. It is possible that a large historic Presbyterian Church in the city found a relic among its discarded treasures – namely, a precentor's desk. This piece of furniture, probably not used for several decades by the older congregation, would have been offered to the homeless congregation to use as their "travelling pulpit" until their new church was built.

## Psalm Singing in the Presbyterian Church

The precentor was the one who decided the tune for each Psalm sung. The word “precentor” originates from the Latin ‘prae’ “before” and ‘canere’ “sing” – simply, “someone who sings before”.

If the tune was not familiar to the congregation, a practice had developed known as lining the Psalm. Norman Campbell notes that “giving out the line” is the term common in the Scottish Highlands in the English language. The literal translation of the Gaelic, *cuir a-mach na loidhne*, would be “putting out the line”. (Campbell, pg. 241-242).

From the precentor’s desk or precentor’s box which stood at the foot of the pulpit on an elevated platform, the precentor would either read or sing a line of the Psalm and the congregation would respond by singing it back to him. Presbyterian churches were known for their love of singing the Psalms and their ability to sing in four-part harmony. At their best, Presbyterian Churches were known for their singing rich with vocal flourishes freely added by individual members. It was reported that when they sang, it was from the depths of their souls. Rev. John Sprott frequently refers to the manner in which the Presbyterians sang the Psalms as “the storm of music”. He commented that when the Nova Scotian Presbyterians sang, “it was loud as the sound of many waters” because they enjoyed sacred music with “a passion”. (Sprott, p. 62)

As the congregation begins to take up the tune, their initial vocal response is imitative of the drone of bagpipes as the wind is filling the bags of the instruments.

At their worst, Presbyterian congregations were characterized by slow, dirge-like singing. Unfortunately, churches in rural areas where musically trained precentors were in short supply were noted for their very limited range – 10 to 15 tunes – to which they sang all 150 Psalms. It was reported that when a Psalm was lined by the precentor and repeated by the congregation that a single Psalm with many lines could require as much as thirty minutes to sing. (Moir, p. 45)

The calibre of the praise often depended on the musical abilities of the precentor. It was not enough for the precentor to be musically adept in knowing and singing the tunes which were favoured by his congregation. The precentor was impacted by the tension that existed among the generations between “singing the songs of Zion in a foreign land” and the desire to “sing a new song to the Lord”. The “songs of Zion” were, of course, the Scottish metrical versions of the Psalms set to music that had been sung in their native country. This stress is revealed in several examples cited by Thomas and Bruce Harding in the chapter concerning church music in their book, *Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregational Worship in Canada to 1925*. One such example follows.

As early as 1825, the Presbyterian Secessionist congregation in York, Upper Canada (the predecessor of Knox Presbyterian Church, Spadina Avenue, Toronto) was experiencing tension in the selection of praise music. William Lyon MacKenzie published this comment in the *Colonial Advocate* in its issue of Dec. 22, 1825. At issue was the “Scots version of the Psalms and Paraphrases” versus the “Psalms of Dr. [Isaac] Watts”. He wrote:

We could wish, as this is the only Presbyterian Church in or near York, that the Scots version of the Psalms and Paraphrases were used during one part of the day and the Psalms of Dr. Watts' on the other. The Americans and English prefer the latter, the Scotch, and perhaps the Protestants from the north of Ireland the former.... As we are met here from various parts of the globe we respectfully submit to our elders whether it would not be advisable to introduce not only the versions but also the tunes which the presbyterian in America as well as in Scotland and Ireland are best accustomed to. (Harding)

Any divergence from the Scottish metrical version of *The Psalms of David* would not be regarded lightly. The form which precenting followed in Zorra Township, Ontario and the way in which it was rooted in the Presbyterian psyche and soul was meticulously described by the Rev. Dr. W. A. MacKay in his book, *Pioneer Life in Zorra*:

It may be stated that the work of the old Gaelic precentor was not so easy as many to-day may suppose. He had not. . . the help of organ or choir, and even the tuning-fork was regarded with suspicion. He was religiously required to “line” the Psalm, that is, to repeat or

chant each line before singing it. . . . the habit has come down from one generation to another . . . The minister announces the Psalm, and reads over the stanzas he wishes to be sung. He repeats the first two lines, and the precentor sings them, and so far all is easy. But now the precentor has to chant or repeat the next two lines, and here is where the difficulty begins. He has to keep in mind the note with which he concluded his second line, and he also has to keep in view the note with which to begin his third line, and begin and end his chant accordingly. And it was just here that many an *oganach*, a youngster, who had aspirations for the precentor's chair came to grief.

To those who do not understand the true poetic sentiment in the Highland nature, this singing may have seemed a strange combination of weird, meaningless sounds, but to the warm-hearted Highlander, they were the "Songs of Zion". The swaying motion of the precentor, the movements of the hand, foot and the Psalm book, the uplifting of the eyes to heaven, and the hearty responsiveness of the congregation, were an inspiration to preacher and people. (MacKay, pgs. 80-81)

The precentor was a layperson, not an ordained clergyman. In both Scotland and Canada, the vocation which the precentors held in common was that of school teacher. I am indebted to Rev. Angus Sutherland for noting how the Scottish and Canadian settings might make a difference in determining which of the school teachers would serve as precentors. Angus writes:

The book, *The Culture of Protestantism in Early Modern Scotland*, has a few notes about precentors. It says that parishes often provided for school teachers and that sometimes the school teacher would take on the role of precentor as well, if he were decent at singing. I have noted that in early Canadian history the minister and school teacher were often the same man, but seldom that the minister was also precentor. As a matter of fact, the precentor in several cases was responsible for keeping the congregation in church and singing as the minister might well be late in arriving. Rev. Dr. John Bayne of Knox's Presbyterian Church, Galt, Upper Canada [now Cambridge, Ont.] was notorious for arriving twenty minutes into the service time which typically lasted three hours.

## **The Psalms of David in Metre**

The version of the Psalms that precentors would have used exclusively was the Scottish Psalter of 1650. Arguably the best website for the study of the various Psalter versions is the *Music for the Church of God* website.

The website has a phenomenal collection of Psalms, with text and music, throughout eight versions published from 1562 to 1999. It asserts the following about the *Scottish Psalter of 1650*:

The text of the 1650 Psalter was originally the work of Francis Rous, who completed his text around 1644. But before the text was finally approved for use in the Scottish Church, it was subjected to six years of scrutiny and revision by two different groups of highly learned and devout leaders of the church. Literally every word and phrase was carefully weighed for faithfulness to the original Hebrew texts.

If one's goal is the closest possible representation of the original Hebrew, then this may well be the best Psalter, even though its language and poetry sometimes seem awkward and contrived.

In spite of its age and sometimes quaint wording, the *Scottish Psalter* still retains great power.

## **The Music of the Psalms**

Commonly used tunes were those which had been composed in the 16<sup>th</sup> century with names such as: Dundee; St. Flavian; and Winchester Old. The *Genevan Psalter of 1551* provided the praise music which Presbyterians sang regularly for the next four centuries. Besides the defining tune, Old Hundredth, there was Old 124<sup>th</sup> and St. Michael. Tunes which can trace their origin to the *Scottish Psalter* of 1615 include: Abbey; Dunfermline; French; and



York. Several well-beloved tunes as found in the *Scottish Psalter* of 1635 were: Caithness; Elgin; Glasgow; London New; Newton; and Wigtown. The *Scottish Psalter* of 1635 is the earliest known surviving example of printed music which Scotland possesses and its only known collection of sacred music of the Reformation period. (Livingston, Preface, pg. 1)

The fact that there were numerous tunes did not necessarily mean that individual congregations would have regularly used them. This explanation is offered in the *Harvard University Hymn Book*:

The first *Scottish Psalter* of 1564 followed the Genevan and English custom of associating a particular tune with each text. As in England, however, the fact that most paraphrases were in common meter permitted the use of interchangeable tunes. In a musical edition of 1615, twelve "Common Tunes" were appended, to be sung with any paraphrase. Nineteen more appeared in the Psalters of 1625 and 1635. The old proper tunes, and indeed many of the common ones, gradually disappeared from use, and some twelve tunes... remained the only melodies used in the Church of Scotland until late in the eighteenth century. (*Harvard*, pg. 317)

Tunes of the 17<sup>th</sup> century which were composed for the Psalms and seemed to have gained favour honoured the names of saints: St. David; St. Leonard; and St. Magnus. New tunes of the 18<sup>th</sup> century were fondly adopted, namely: Coleshill; Dublin (or Irish); Martyrdom; Melcombe; St. Anne; St. Paul; and Stroudwater.

In Cape Breton, the congregations sang the Psalms in Gaelic to favourite tunes such as: Bangor; Coleshill; Dundee; Elgin; Evan; Kilmarnock; and Martyrdom. (MacKinnon, pg. 192)

In the Church of Scotland congregation at Orwell, Prince Edward Island, "the tunes were six in number. They were chosen according to the mood of the Psalm: Coleshill – apprehension; Bangor – intercession; Walsall – confession; St. David – acknowledgement; a tune unnamed – thanksgiving; Martyrdom – praise. The first three were in the minor mode and Gregorian style; the last were major, and all for common metre." (Macphail, pg. 128)

Entrusted to the precentor was the challenge of engaging the members in raising heart-felt and passionate praise to the Lord. Consequently, the congregation relied heavily on his own musical education and abilities to assist them in this responsibility.

Sir Andrew Macphail reflects on the intensity of passion with which the congregation of his boyhood "attacked" the Psalms. He recollects:

These Psalms were sung with great fervour, possibly with more interest in the sound than in the sense. Each line was boldly declaimed by a precentor. He pitched the tune. The elders made the attack and the congregation fell in as they could. As only six tunes were used [Coleshill, Bangor, Walsall, St. David, Martyrdom, and an unnamed one], all much alike, no one was ever far astray. That spiritual experience which justified a man for ordination to the eldership was held to confer upon him a skill in music sufficient for his function. When the precentor and the men found the "tune get too high for them", the women would bear it aloft into a region of amazing shrillness and beauty. (Macphail, pg. 128)

Not all congregations were constrained to singing a limited selection of tunes. Some precentors knew a treasury of tunes as evidenced by this account recalled by Rev. Angus Sutherland, Chair of the Museum Advisory Committee:

A man from Central Presbyterian Church, Cambridge, Ontario, when I was pastoring there, told me that his grandfather had been a precentor. He remembered, as a child, sitting and listening while his grandfather and another precentor or two sat at the house singing Psalms. He said it was like a competition; they would take turns singing until one of them had run out of tunes.

On occasion, the congregation afforded the medium greater attention than the message. Macphail continues:

One day the precentor was disturbed in his [Psalm precenting] ecstasy by the sight of a dog; and as it was not seemly "that the children's bread be cast before dogs", he called to his son,

whose name was Archie, to expel the dog. But he neglected to put off the quality of precentor, and the command to his son was uttered in the full rhythm and ceremonial of his office: *Archie, eirich, agus curamach an cu*. The whole congregation in unison reinforced the injunction as if it were a divine command contained in the Psalm. (Macphail, pg. 128)

Responding to a precentor who is leading a sung Psalm of praise can fully engross a worshipper by engaging them in offering their own unique song. In a BBC interview with Mr. Calum Martin who produced a cd which recorded precentor-led singing in the Back Free Church on the Isle of Lewis, Scotland on Oct. 20-21, 2003, he commented on how this unique practice allows the tunes to bloom:

“What Gaelic Psalm singing does is it takes the melodic line and each individual person in the congregation is singing it as an act of worship. They know the tune and they basically sing it in their own way. [For] musicologists, it drives them nuts because it shouldn’t really work harmonically. Yet, it does.” (BBC interview)

The recording notes indicate that the character of the music, other than the tunes themselves which originated in Europe, England and the Scottish Lowlands, was reflective of the traditional Gaelic singing style, itself influenced by the pibroch style of free ornamentation in playing the bagpipes. This combination culminated in the distinct and emotive swell of voices each one uniquely joining together in praise of God. The musical term “free heterophony” appropriately provides the categorization, yet inadequately conveys the spiritual sensation. (*Salm*, Vol. II. Notes)

### **The Decline of the Role of Precentor**

As Scriptural paraphrases and hymns become more widely circulated, Presbyterian congregations began to tentatively introduce them into their worship services. Music accompaniment began to be accepted into some congregations, even while most others refused to consider anything but Psalm singing led by a precentor.

In some instances, it may very well have been the precentor himself who would be responsible for relaxing attitudes to the use of exclusive Psalmody. I am indebted to the Rev. Dr. Jack Whytock, Director of Haddington House (College), Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, for information about a remarkable and forward-thinking precentor. Mr. William McPhail (1830-1905) was an elder and the precentor for the Church of Scotland congregation of Orwell, PEI. His son, Sir Andrew Macphail, chronicled his father’s life in the book, *The Master’s Wife*. William’s career began with farming and teaching and his vocations later included 9 years as a school inspector and 21 years as the Supervisor of the Prince Edward Island Hospital for the Insane. William was an example of a precentor who attempted to bridge the exclusive Psalmody worship and the combined Psalm and hymn liturgy. He was considered the pre-eminent precentor in the province for several decades.

Dr. Whytock writes:

I believe that William McPhail was perhaps one of our most accomplished precentors in Canadian church history. He was a schoolmaster and a school visitor on Prince Edward Island and as such his passion for music was conveyed to all the children and adults whom he taught. He developed a unique system for teaching music in all the schools by using the backs of wallpaper rolls to transcribe by hand both music and words<sup>3</sup>. He then took with him a bundle of these to the schools and used these to teach the children. Moreover, from what I can discern, he also was using some of these for thematic singing schools with adults. (Whytock, Jack. Email to Ian Mason. June 16, 2014)

In their article, Dr. Jack and Nancy Whytock note that some of the tunes transcribed on the backs of the wallpaper rolls were predictably those tunes traditionally and popularly associated with the Psalms from the time of their origin in the 16<sup>th</sup> through the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. What is intriguing is that the wallpaper rolls also contained *hymns* whose origin could be traced to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Tunes developed by Lowell Mason, America’s most famous 19<sup>th</sup> century hymn writer and composer, were interspersed with those with irregular metre indicative of the latter 19<sup>th</sup> century Gospel song tradition. (*The Master’s Wife, The Book and the Place*, pg. 109)

Several of the hymns could be traced to local composers in Orwell, PEI and area. Dr. Whytock comments that William McPhail was “the real tune master on the Island for the Gaelic and English hymns which were being composed here”. Sir Andrew Maphail records the fact that his father fulfilled the role of “composer-in-chief” for those elders of the church “who had skill in the use of words and [their own] pre-requisite religious experience” who felt sufficiently inspired to write text for new hymns. (Macphail, pg. 134) The son further elucidates the responsibility of his father:

In this choice of hymns, the Master [McPhail, senior] had great authority. The authors would bring their verses, and he would fit them with suitable tunes. They would then be circulated in manuscript form for general criticism. Few survived the poetical and doctrinal tests. (Macphail, pg. 135)

The hymns which did survive were granted the honour of being published in the local hymn book which bore the stern imprint, or, perhaps more properly, the injunction: “to be used for practice only”.

Across the denomination, the desire of church members to sing Psalms and hymns accompanied by musical instruments would not be assuaged. It would become clear as the 19<sup>th</sup> century progressed that Presbyterian Churches which used vocal Psalmody exclusively were losing the younger generation to their neighbouring churches. Congregational, Methodist and Anglican Churches had welcomed instrumental accompaniment in their worship services. By the 1860s and 1870s, city churches were beginning to install large pipe organs to replace their pump organs or melodeons. “By mid-century, rapid technological advances made possible the production of low-cost reed organs.” (Harding) Thus, by the 1870s, it would not have been uncommon for a village church, or even a rural one, to sing accompanied with a pump organ or melodeon.

The first challenge to the old order of precentor-led singing came in 1855 when First Church, Brockville, Canada West (the Canada Presbyterian Church congregation) installed a pipe organ – the first one in that denomination to do so. (Moir, pg. 124) This action was condemned swiftly by the Synod through its resolution:

...that the introduction of instrumental music in public worship is not approved or permitted by this Church.... All Presbyteries [should] take order that no such innovation be introduced in any of the congregations within their bounds; but to take steps, so far as practicable, to encourage and cultivate the harmonious exercise of vocal praise. (*Digest*, pg. 63)

The desire of Presbyterians to keep the traditional order of the worship service pure (i.e. without instrumental accompaniment) sometimes ran contrary to their own convictions. The editor of *The Presbyterian* noted this ironic phenomenon:

They are those who professing the utmost horror for an instrument of music in the Presbyterian Church, whose doctrine and discipline they profess to maintain and uphold as those most consonant with Scripture, yet believe it to be their duty to leave that church on the *one ground* of the introduction of a musical instrument, while agreeing with her on all *other grounds*, and sit calmly down as attendants in an Episcopal church where may be found an organ, which is opposed to Scripture among the Presbyterians, but in strict accordance with it in their new place of worship. ... It is unfortunate that so many Episcopalian Congregations should be made up of renegade Scotch Presbyterians. (*The Presbyterian*, Mar. 1866, pg. 67)

The Presbyterian Church of Canada in Connection with the Church of Scotland (i.e. the Kirk) acquiesced to the demand for organ accompaniment when it permitted the use of the organ in the denomination in 1862. A little more than a decade later, The Canada Presbyterian Church (i.e. the Free Church), through resolution of its General Assembly in 1872, allowed congregations to make the decision for or against the use of the organ in worship. Although it was still a contentious issue, the first General Assembly of The Presbyterian Church in Canada in 1875 permitted what had once been anathema to an order of worship – namely, organ music. (Moir, pgs. 132-133)

Organ music was only one element of the revolution gathering momentum to bombard the precentor-led worship services. As members of the Scottish Presbyterian churches were introduced to hymns, there arose a desire to have the hymns in a format accessible for the use of the Sabbath Schools, young people’s societies – and,

ultimately – worship services. Just as this desire grew in Scotland, so too was its influence felt in British North America. Two of the colony's provinces responded. In Canada East, *Songs of Praise for Sabbath Schools and Families* was published in Montreal in 1861 by the Presbyterian Church of Canada in Connection with the Church of Scotland. Two years later, the Kirk published in Montreal *Hymns for the Worship of God*. In Canada West, *Hymns for the Use of Sabbath Schools in Connection with the Canada Presbyterian Church* was published in Toronto in 1862. (Harding)

By 1880, what had been unthinkable a generation earlier was being utilized, albeit with great discretion, in Presbyterian worship services – that is, hymns. When the Canadian Presbyterian *Hymnal* was published by the newly forged denomination in 1880, it was intended that the hymns were to be used in Sunday School and young people's services. But, the hymnal was quickly welcomed into the congregational worship services. Within 17 years, the publication of the denomination's first *Book of Praise*, was widely accepted. The Psalms were still there represented in 122 Psalm selections, but the inaugural *Book of Praise* revealed that it was first and foremost a hymnary, to which its 621 hymns attested.

Another innovation which was even more slowly adopted, but just as universally accepted in later years, was the introduction of choirs. Choirs were proffered as a means to improve congregational singing. In some churches, uneducated and uninspired musical leadership had produced praise which could be considered anything but. Compared to the rigorous, passionate singing of an astounding repertoire of singable tunes for which a typical Methodist Church would be known, the praise selection of ten to fifteen tunes by which only the Psalms would be sung in a typical Presbyterian Church would pale in comparison. Undoubtedly, the sentiment of the comment below would have been expressed – or, at the very least, maintained – by many members when the concept of a choir, or the choir itself, was introduced. Here follows an assessment by the editor of *The Presbyterian*, the periodical of the Kirk:

If the organ will remedy this state of things [those who sit dumb and silent and do not allow their voices to be heard in God's house singing His praise], by all means let us have it.... If, on the contrary, an organ, or a choir, is to usurp the place of the congregation, is to be made a means of showing off how elaborately and artistically the Psalms or Hymns of our Church can be trilled forth in the ears of the people, listening to voices from an organ loft as they would to an opera, then banish both. Better, ten thousand times better, the rudest accents of praise from the lips of the most uncultivated than this pretence. (*The Presbyterian*, Mar. 1866, pg. 67)

The role of the choir in improving congregational singing would be debated throughout the rest of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. There remained the tension between whether the choir strengthened or undermined congregational singing. On the one hand, the choir could assist members in learning new hymns and tunes. On the other hand, the selection of complicated choral works which only the musically trained members could tackle would sometimes bring the accusation of subverting a worship setting to that of a concert hall. It was only when Presbyterian church architecture of the 1870s and 1880s began to include choir lofts rather than precentor's desks (or precentor's boxes) that it became evident that the choir had achieved acceptance in the role to lead praise.

Hymnals and organs and choirs, oh my! It was time for the precentor to retire.

### **The Revival of Precenting?!**

Precenting is not completely a lost art. In his 2005 publication, Norman Campbell notes that a Gaelic Psalmody group from Lewis has travelled to cultural festivals in England, France and the U.S. in recent years. He notes that "a great deal of activity has gone into efforts to interpret and preserve Gaelic Psalm-singing in the last ten years" within the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland. (Campbell, *Reading the Line*)

In Canada as well, there has been an effort to preserve precenting, albeit initiated and sponsored by a forum other than the Presbyterian Church. On Sat. Oct. 12, 2013, a workshop about precenting was offered as part of the Celtic Colours International Festival at the community hall in South Haven, Nova Scotia. The following day, the Gaelic choir was invited to participate in the worship service at Ephraim Scott Memorial Presbyterian Church, St. Ann's (South Haven) near Baddeck, Nova Scotia. The festival rightly observed that no consideration of the renewal of the Gaelic language and culture in Nova Scotia is complete without considering the worship services of the early Presbyterian pioneers. The workshop description notes that: "The metrical versions of the Psalms of David in Gaelic

are sung to tunes which the Precentor lines out and the congregation picks up line by line. The musical effect can be quite extraordinary as the multiple voices swell with added intermediary notes between notes of the actual tunes.” (“Precenting of the Gaelic Psalms”)

Prepared by Ian Mason, member of the Museum Advisory Committee

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> The congregation dates back to 1890 when it was established as a mission by Bloor Street Presbyterian (now United) Church. In 1903, the fledgling congregation built its first church at the northeast corner of St. Clair Avenue West and Vaughan Road. It was known as Wychwood Park Presbyterian Church. The church’s membership exploded. By 1911, it was necessary to demolish the 8-year old building and replace it with one that dwarfed it. The very large Wychwood Park Presbyterian Church was renamed St. Columba in 1918. By 1925, a majority of the members voted for the congregation to enter Church Union. (St. Columba’s United Church closed in 1966 and amalgamated with St. Clair Avenue United Church to form St. Matthew’s United Church. St. Columba’s became St. Alphonsus Roman Catholic Church.) The sizeable Presbyterian minority desired to continue its ministry in the neighbourhood. The congregation met in rented space until the new Wychwood Church was constructed in 1937. Davenport Presbyterian Church closed in 1972 and amalgamated with Wychwood Church in the Wychwood building. Beginning May 4, 2014, Wychwood-Davenport Presbyterian Church continued its weekly worship services at St. Matthew’s Bracondale House, a seniors’ residence, located a couple of blocks away from their church.

<sup>2</sup> One of the Museum’s future projects is to recruit one or more volunteers who would create a website to exhibit at least one image of every one of the Presbyterian Churches which were ever built in Canada. The objective would be to obtain a minimum of one external image and one internal image (if one exists). In the decade before Church Union, near the apex of the predominance of The Presbyterian Church in Canada and the brief period when it was the largest Protestant denomination in Canada, there were between 4,200 and 4,600 preaching stations.<sup>A</sup> (The great majority of preaching stations would have had a church building. A minority of preaching stations would not have had a church and would have met in a public building such as a schoolhouse or community hall.) Given the fact that historic churches would have been housed in an average of 3 buildings throughout their history, this could potentially comprise a collection of between 10,000 to 15,000 photographs.

<sup>A</sup> Number of Preaching Stations in The Presbyterian Church in Canada

1910 ---4,215 1911 A+P  
1911 ---4,349 - 1912 A+P, pg. 546  
1912 ---4,389 - 1913 A+P, pg. 525  
1913 ---4,314 - 1914 A+P, pg. 629  
1914 ---4,535 - 1915 A+P, pg. 585  
1915 ---4,603 - 1916 A+P, pg. 511  
1916 ---4,478 - 1917 A+P, pg. 495  
1917 ---4,239 - 1918 A+P, pg. 485  
1918 ---4,291 - 1919 A+P, pg. 513  
1919 ---4,080 - 1920 A+P, pg. 531  
1920 ---4,272 - 1921 A+P, pg. 483  
1921 ---4,247 - 1922 A+P, pg. 497  
1922 ---4,429 - 1923 A+P, pg. 571  
1923 ---4,509 - deductions  
1924 ---4,512 - 1925 A+P pg. 471 (*Part 1*)  
(*Acts and Proceedings*)

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Macphail provides insight into his father’s creation of the wallpaper sheet music. “He transcribed the scores on sheets large enough to be read by a class of forty persons. These sheets were rolls of wallpaper. He ruled the staves on the reverse side, and marked the notes with a piece of cork dipped in black ink; the sharps, flats, and clefs were done in red with a quill pen”. (Macphail, pg. 211)



## Video Clips

### Precentor-led Psalm singing in Gaelic in the Back Free Church, Isle of Lewis, Scotland



From the cd, *Salm*, Vol. II

Recorded on Oct. 20-21, 2003

By permission of Bethesda Hospice, Stornoway, Isle of Lewis

### Two popular Psalm tunes used in Presbyterian Churches of Prince Edward Island during the 19<sup>th</sup> century



Soloists: Rev. Dr. Jack and Nancy Whytock, Haddington House, Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island

Recorded July 5, 2014

Used with permission

## 1. Psalm 122

verses 1-4. *Scottish Psalter, 1650*

Tune: "St. Andrew", Common Metre in D major

Composer: *William Tans' ur's New Harmony of Zion, 1764*

- 1 I joyed when to the house of God,  
Go up, they said to me.
- 2 Jerusalem, within thy gates  
our feet shall standing be.
- 3 Jerus'lem, as a city, is  
compactly built together:
- 4 Unto that place the tribes go up,  
the tribes of God go thither:

("This tune version of Psalm 122 was typical of Island precentors. Precentors typically interpreted a tune to add or remove some notes." --- Dr. Jack Whytock)

## 2. Psalm 125

verses 1, 2 & 4. *Scottish Psalter, 1650*

Tune: "Kilmarnock", Common Metre in C major

Composer: Neil Dougall, 1776-1862

- 1 They in the Lord that firmly trust  
shall be like Zion hill,  
Which at no time can be removed,  
but standeth ever still.
- 2 As round about Jerusalem  
the mountains stand alway,  
The Lord his folk doth compass so,  
from henceforth and for aye.
- 4 Do thou to all those that be good  
thy goodness, Lord, impart;  
And do thou good to those that are  
upright within their heart.

## Acknowledgements

Grateful appreciation is extended to the following:

Rev. Dr. Jack Whytock, Director of Haddington House (College), Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island;

Rev. Angus J. Sutherland, retired minister of The Presbyterian Church in Canada and Chair of the Museum Advisory Committee, National Presbyterian Museum; and

Bethesda Hospice, Stornoway, Isle of Lewis, Scotland, Mr. Calum Martin, producer, and Eyeline Media Limited, Aberdeen, Scotland (<http://www.eyeline-media.co.uk> ).

Music cds recorded at the Back Free Church in the Isle of Lewis are available for purchase. Volumes I and II preserve the precentor-led singing of the congregation that was recorded on Oct. 20-21, 2003. Volume III, entitled *Salm and Soul*, explores the relationship of lined Psalm singing of the Scottish Presbyterian Church with the lined hymn singing of the African-American Protestant Church in a combined concert in Glasgow Cathedral that united members of each tradition.

The purchase of these cds supports the Bethesda Hospice, a medical facility in Stornoway, Isle of Lewis. Bethesda Hospice was established as a non-denominational facility by the Free Church of Scotland to provide medical assistance and chronic care to its entire community.

For more information about the Hospice, or to order the cds contact:

Bethesda Hospice  
Springfield Road  
Stornoway  
Isle of Lewis  
United Kingdom  
HS1 2PS

44 (0) 1851 706222

Email: [bethesdahospice@hotmail.com](mailto:bethesdahospice@hotmail.com); or, [bethesdahospice@nhs.net](mailto:bethesdahospice@nhs.net)

Website: [www.bethesdahospice.co.uk](http://www.bethesdahospice.co.uk)

## Sources:

*Acts and Proceedings of the General Assembly of The Presbyterian Church in Canada.*

BBC interview with Calum Martin. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w62TN2iCP1g>. Uploaded Aug. 1, 2010. Accessed June 22, 2014.

Campbell, Norman. " 'Giving Out the Line': A Cross-Atlantic Comparison of Two Presbyterian Cultures" in *Scottish Reformation Society Historical Journal*. Vol. 1 (2011), pgs. 241-265. *Biblical Studies. org.uk* website. [http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/srshj/01\\_241.pdf](http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/srshj/01_241.pdf). Accessed Apr. 29, 2014.

Campbell, Norman. *Reading the Line: an English-Language Lined-Out Psalmody Tradition in Presbyterian Scotland*. [s.l.]: Author, 2005.

*Digest of the Minutes of the Synod of the Presbyterian Church of Canada* (Montreal: John Lovell, 1861) 63. Alexander Kemp, editor. Montreal: John Lovell, 1861, pg. 63. (Referenced in Harding)

Harding, Thomas and Bruce Reginald Harding. "Canadian Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregational Church Music Prior to 1925" in *Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregational Worship in Canada to 1925*. Toronto: Evensong, 1995. [http://www.hymnology.ca/Canada\\_pre-1925.htm](http://www.hymnology.ca/Canada_pre-1925.htm). Accessed Apr. 29, 2014

*Harvard University Hymn Book*. [s.l.]: President and Fellows of Harvard University, 1964, 5<sup>th</sup> printing, 1997. *Google Books* website, pg. 317. [http://books.google.ca/books?id=VKyewTv\\_V04C&pg=PA316&lpg=PA316&dq=%22Scottish+Psalter+of+1615%22+tunes&source=bl&ots=PaU7VK15OB&sig=1aQ9js0p2cIFydVjaR6xNG6UJig&hl=en&sa=X&ei=1edrU93XF6HyASg-YKwCg&ved=0CCoQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=%22Scottish%20Psalter%20of%201615%22%20tunes&f=false](http://books.google.ca/books?id=VKyewTv_V04C&pg=PA316&lpg=PA316&dq=%22Scottish+Psalter+of+1615%22+tunes&source=bl&ots=PaU7VK15OB&sig=1aQ9js0p2cIFydVjaR6xNG6UJig&hl=en&sa=X&ei=1edrU93XF6HyASg-YKwCg&ved=0CCoQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=%22Scottish%20Psalter%20of%201615%22%20tunes&f=false). Accessed May 8, 2014.

Livingston, Rev. Neil. *The Scottish Metrical Psalter of A. D. 1635, Reprinted in Full from the Original Work; The Additional Matter and Various Readings Found in the Editions of 1565, etc. Being Appended, and the Whole Illustrated by Dissertations, Notes and Fac-Similes*. Glasgow: MaClure and MacDonald, 1864. Archive.org website. <https://archive.org/stream/scottishmetrical00livi#page/n97/mode/2up> Accessed May 8, 2014.

MacKay, Rev. Dr. W. A. *Pioneer Life in Zorra*. Toronto: William Briggs, 1899.

MacKinnon, Rev. Archibald D. *The History of The Presbyterian Church in Cape Breton*. Centennial Observance of Union. Sydney, Nova Scotia: The Presbytery of Cape Breton, 1975.

Macphail, Andrew. *The Master's Wife*. Montreal: Jeffrey Macphail and Dorothy Lindsay, 1939. On *HathiTrust Digital Library* website. [http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.\\$b471623;view=1up;seq=11](http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.$b471623;view=1up;seq=11) Accessed June 17, 2014.

Moir, John S. *Enduring Witness, A History of the Presbyterian Church in Canada*. [s.l.]: General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, Committee on History, 1975.

*Music for the Church of God* website. [www.cgmusic.org](http://www.cgmusic.org) Accessed Apr. 29, 2014

"Precenting of the Gaelic Psalms" on *Celtic Colours International Festival* website. <http://www.celtic-colours.com/workshops/precenting-of-the-gaelic-psalms/> Accessed Apr. 29, 2014

*The Presbyterian*. Vol. 19 No. 3 (Mar. 1866) Montreal: J. Lovell, 1866. [http://eco.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.8\\_04969\\_221/4?r=0&s=1](http://eco.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.8_04969_221/4?r=0&s=1) "Early Canadiana Online" database. *Canadiana.org* website. Accessed May 8, 2014. Periodical of the Presbyterian Church of Canada in Connection with the Church of Scotland.

"The Scottish Metrical Psalter" on *Music for the Church of God* website. [http://www.cgmusic.org/workshop/smp\\_frame.htm](http://www.cgmusic.org/workshop/smp_frame.htm). Accessed May 6, 2014.

Sprott, George W. *Memorials of the Rev. John Sprott*. Edinburgh: George A. Morton, 1906.

Whytock, Jack and Nancy. "Singing – Off the Wall" in *The Master's Wife: The Book and the Place, Essays on Sir Andrew Macphail's 'Masterpiece'*. John Flood, editor. Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island: Penumbra, 2013, pgs. 105-120.

***National Presbyterian Museum***

*415 Broadview Avenue*

*Toronto, Ont. M4K 2M9*

*Located in St. John's Presbyterian Church,  
corner of Broadview Ave. and Simpson Ave.*

*416-469-1345*

*presbyterianmuseum@presbyterian.ca*

*www.presbyterianmuseum.ca*