

Judge Not Lest Ye Be Judged?

By James Robertson

'Là a' Bhreitheanais'

AM FEADH ta chuid as mò de n t-saogh l
Gun ghaol do Chrìosd, gun sgoinn d a reachd,
Gun chreideamh ac gu n tig e rìs
Thoirt breith na firinn air gach neach. An cadal peacaidh taid nan suain
A bruadar pailteis de gach nì,
Gun umhail ac n uair thig am bàs,
Nach meal iad Pàrras o n ard Rìgh.



'The Day o Judgment'

MAIST FOWK hae, while in this world,
Nae luv for Christ, nae lug for his law;
Mair, they misdout he will return
Tae judge them truly yin an aw. Dozent in sinnin sleep they dream,
Their heids ram-fou wi wealth an vice;
Nae thocht that at the world s ootgang
They ll be debarred frae Paradise.

Not surprisingly, given Scotland's uneasy but intense relationship with Calvinism, ministers rear their sometimes saintly, often compromised heads all over the place in the country's literature. In fiction, think of Scott's stickit minister Dominie Sampson – he of the long, sallow visage, the goggle eyes, the huge under-jaw, which appeared not to open and shut by an act of volition, but to be dropped and hoisted up again by some complicated machinery within the inner man; Lockhart's Adam Blair; the Reverend Mr Wringhim, who makes such a fatal impression on Hogg's Justified Sinner; Stevenson's Murdoch Soulis in *Thrawn Janet*; Barrie's Gavin Dishart in *Under the Greenwood Tree* or his Adam Yestreen, the haunted minister in the novella *The House of the Dead*; John Buchan's David Sempill, caught between faith, justice and devil-worship in *The Quest for Beowulf*; Grassie Gibbon's Robert Colquhoun, torn between faith and socialism, in *The Man of the Mountains*; Robin Jenkins's man of doubtful principle at the Disruption, George Darroch. My own novels to date are stuffed full of ministers, so many that I have declared the next one a minister-free zone – but it's a political tale so I suspect dog-collars will not be entirely absent.

The above list doesn't venture into either poetry or Gaelic literature, but the rest of this article does. All of the fictional ministers I've mentioned undergo crises of one kind or another: which leads me to think that the notion of a religious conviction never quite able to rid itself of human scepticism has a perennial appeal for writers. I think this is what drew me, a Presbyterian agnostic, to the writings of Dùghall Bochanan, or Dugald Buchanan. In particular, I became engrossed about twelve years ago in his longest poem, *Là a Bhreitheanais*, which so intrigued me that I translated it into Scots as *The Day o Judgment*.

Buchanan (1716-68) was born in Strathyre, the son of a miller. He left there at the age of fourteen and lived in Stirling and Edinburgh before being apprenticed to a carpenter, first in Kippen and later in Dumbarton. But he was restless and did not complete his training. After much spiritual anguish and self-doubt, he was born again in 1744, influenced by the evangelical preaching of George Whitefield on his second visit to Scotland two years earlier.

Buchanan married in 1749 and returned to Strathyre, where he became an itinerant teacher, travelling widely through the country of Lochearnside and Breadalbane. In 1753 he was appointed to be in charge of a school established at Kinloch Rannoch by the Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge, and was licensed as a preacher. The estate of Struan at Kinloch Rannoch had

been forfeited after the Forty-five, and Buchanan's role as a teacher and catechist was specifically intended to help civilise the district and establish Presbyterianism there.

Those poems of his which survive, eight spiritual songs, were published in 1767, the year before his death from a fever. Their recurring themes are of God's majesty and Christ's suffering, the comparatively fleeting nature of human earthly existence, the urgent need for repentance before judgment, and the virtuous and heroic life of the true Christian. It is likely that Buchanan had written, and destroyed, earlier secular verse.

Buchanan pondered long and hard as to the nature of God and God's relationship with mankind. He was disturbed as a child and young man by visions of the cosmic struggle between good and evil, and of the coming day of reckoning. His diary, written in English, reveals some of his anguish: Then the Lord began to visit me with terrible visions, dreams in the night, which greatly frightened me: I always dreamed that the day of judgment was come; that Christ appeared in the clouds to judge the world, that all people were gathered together before his throne; that he separated them into two companies the one on his right hand and the other on his left; and that I saw myself along with others, sentenced to the everlasting burnings. I always saw myself entering the flames, and so would instantly awake in great fear and trembling.

If there is nothing remarkable about such intense religious anxieties, there is something special in the way Buchanan illuminates them through his poetry, particularly in *Là a Bhreitheanais*. Comprising 127 four-line stanzas, it is an astonishingly well-sustained description of the apocalypse. Derick Thomson, in his *James Buchanan*, writes that the obsession of Buchanan's youth became in this poem a permanent sickness of the imagination. But, Thomson says, if we set aside questions of humanity or Christianity, the exercise is brilliantly conducted.

When I first looked at the poem I had just enough Gaelic to see the poetic imagery if not to grasp the full-strength theology, but the late Victorian English version I had to resort to seemed altogether too dull and insipid to do either justice and so I began to toy with the idea of recasting it in Scots. At the rate of a couple of stanzas a day I worked away at it during the winter of 1996-97, and gradually the whole poem assumed a Scots shape and tone. Inevitably the richness of the

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Derick Thomson concludes that Buchanan makes a freer, more imaginative use of imagery than most of his contemporaries do, and he has a fine feeling for language. Despite the religious obsession one can sense a keen, orderly and even a hard intellect behind some of the poetry.

This is very true. The subject-matter would not in itself be enough to make this poem still readable 250 years after its composition. But Buchanan's startling display of linguistic fireworks and his concession to the possibility that the condemned sinner might just have a point in thinking perpetual torture a somewhat disproportionate response on God's part keeps the reader engaged. For no fewer than 22 stanzas the sinner cries out to God, acknowledging where he has gone wrong but also (effectively in my view but presumably this was not Buchanan's intention) reducing God to the status of a vindictive tyrant:

An yet are thy qualities no tae be
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Buchanan's epic attempt to imagine the eternal damnation of the vast majority of humankind seems to me to exhibit simultaneously the power of Scottish Calvinism and its fatal flaw. All those fictional ministers I mentioned at the start of this article wrestle with the same issue, even if it is not so dramatically depicted: how do you love a God who seems to hate the overwhelming mass of the very creatures he has made in his own image? Buchanan's poem still speaks to us about our deepest fears and hopes, and hence of a second life that might not necessarily take place after death: in spite of its grimness, it speaks about renewal, redemption, and the possibility of being better human beings.

Thus the deep-seated pulse of our Calvinist inheritance throbs all the way through our literature, right down to contemporary writing. We may think that all that auld-time religion is irrelevant, but I suspect it still has the power to make even

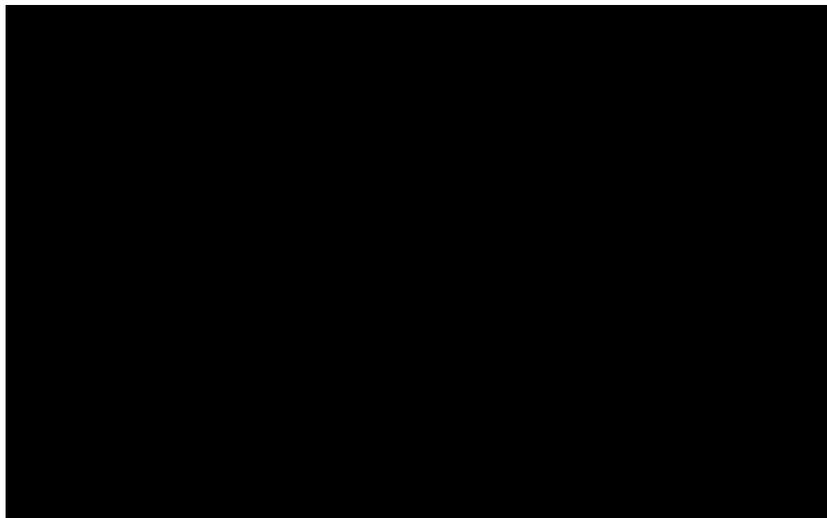
the most avowedly rational of us examine our consciences.

References & Further Information

Be sure to visit the **New Publications** page for details of Dr Robertson's latest novel,

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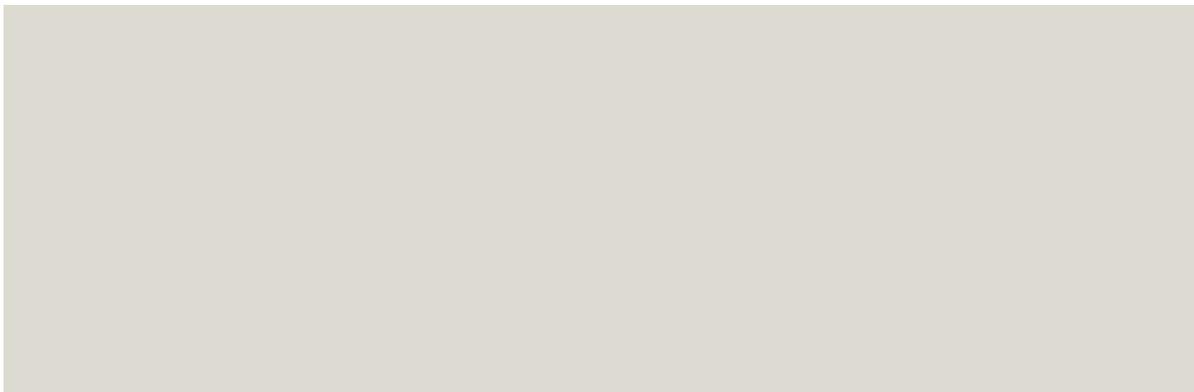
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There is no doubt, and no real surprise, that Buchanan is much more interested in the fate of the sinners than he is in that of the saints. Approximately one-fifth of the poem is given over to descriptions of heaven, where God invites the saved like mavis among the green to tune up yer tungs in praise o me, but the remaining 400-odd lines are devoted to a detailed inventory of the tortures the damned can anticipate:



is that there's naethin like it if ye want a guid greit. Worth remembering too that Buchanan visited Edinburgh and engaged in philosophical discussions with none other than David Hume: how one would love to know the content of that conversation!

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