

# 1650 Scottish Psalter

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## 1650 Scottish Psalter

Also known as the *1650 Psalter*, the *Psalms of David in Metre*, and the *Scottish Metrical Version* (SMV). It is widely available both for free online and for sale in various formats (words-only or with music). Some recommended versions are *The Comprehensive Psalter*, if it can still be found, or *The Scottish Psalmody* from the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing). Also available in the back of one of the words-only books of *Sing Psalms* is an excellent version (my preferred version if I just want the words). It is available from the Free Church of Scotland.

How does one write a review about what many consider to be *the* psalter? The most famous and widely used psalter in English history, sung by Presbyterians (and others) almost exclusively for over two centuries and still possibly the most widely sold psalter today? Opinions on this psalter, much like the Authorized (King James) Version of the Bible, are largely polarized. Regardless of what I write I am sure to offend someone. Nevertheless, I have looked at and used this psalter considerably and would like to offer my take on it.

## Background

There is a good history of psalters and psalm singing to be found in Henry Glass' 1888 book *The Story of the Psalters*, available on Google Books. David Silversides also has an article and lecture which can be [readily found](#), though it should be noted that he is really opposed to the use of any other psalter.

The SMV has a rich history of psalm singing that preceded it, most notably the *Sternhold and Hopkins* version. This version had several composers, primarily Thomas Sternhold and John Hopkins, and was partially

under the commission of both Edward VI and Queen Elizabeth I. This version was finally completed and published in 1564. The psalter endured long but some of the verses suffered from poor poetry. For example, Hopkins composed the following for inclusion in the psalter—

Why doost withdrawe Thy hand aback,  
And hide it in Thy lappe?  
O plucke it out, and be not slack  
To give Thy foes a rappe!

And another contributor, William Whittingham, also composed this versification of the Athanasian Creed—

The Father God is, God the Son,  
God Holy Spirit also,  
Yet there are not three Gods in all,  
But one God, and no mo.

Clearly, godliness and good poetry do not necessarily go hand in hand. There were many, many versions thereafter that individuals tried to produce and none really met with success. It was not until 1643 when the Westminster Assembly was looking at a recent versification by Francis Rous that the story really picks up again. The assembly saw the need for a unified psalter and suggested starting with Rous'. After much revision and discussion, the psalter was approved in 1646, yet this is still not the version we have today. The Scots took the psalter back to Scotland where it again underwent review and scrutiny, was sent out to the churches and was rewritten and revised until less than 10 percent of Rous' original work remained. It was finally published in 1650. The end result was indeed well-worth the labor and time and it is still arguable that the level of accuracy mixed with verse has never been matched. The end result was something which the men who worked on it believed to be "more plaine, smooth and agreeable to the Text than any heretofore."

In many ways the SMV was the culmination and polishing of the previous psalters. No psalter is perfect but this psalter was examined by some of the godliest and most knowledgeable men of the day and surpassed all that preceded it. Men expert in Hebrew who might not necessarily be the best at poetry, but were definitely some of the best biblical scholars labored to make certain it was faithful to the original. I also greatly appreciate that it was sent to review to churches, because it is the congregation that will be using it and it usually is not until it is put into practice that the real

strengths and weaknesses become evident. The SMV was the best psalter seen up to that point and was to remain the dominant psalter for at least the next two hundred years, perhaps continuing even today.

## Translation

David Silversides gives some examples of where “padding” actually captures more of the meaning of the original than perhaps is even present in our Bibles. This is true, but there are also places where the padding seems to be just to fill up the meter, but that is a problem with any non-prosaic translation of the psalms.

One of the biggest features of this psalter is that it is not just a versification, it is a translation into verse—that is, it does not start with the English text, it starts with the Hebrew text. For this reason, some of the language is stilted, but rarely does it depart from the text. Even so, sometimes it does depart (notable examples are usually in alternate versions of the psalm included perhaps for historical reasons).

There are a few places where the translation or versification is either unclear or misleading. One famous example is—

Pure to the pure, thou froward kyth'st  
unto the froward wight.

Though I believe this to be unfair since this is by far the worst offender. Another place where it is misleading is where the line breaks over stanzas, such as Psalm 96 between verses 12 and 13—

Let fields rejoice, and ev'ry thing  
that springeth of the earth:  
Then woods and ev'ry tree shall sing  
with gladness and with mirth  
Before the Lord; because he comes,  
to judge the earth comes he:

Since musically the tune ends at “mirth”, to the ear (which cannot hear punctuation), it makes it sound as though “he” is coming before the Lord to judge the earth. It is at least potentially confusing. Verses which rely on punctuation to make the meaning clear can be sources for confusion.

Another place I find strange is Psalm 136, where in the first version each stanza translates the same Hebrew phrase both as “for mercy hath he ever” and “for his grace faileth never”. I just wonder why they chose to translate

the same word in both the positive and the negative and the only reason I can think of is for variety, but that seems almost like it is an attempt to improve God’s word. The second version of Psalm 136 is also a bit loose. For example, verse 10 is given as—

To him that Egypt smote,  
Who did his message scorn;  
And in his anger hot  
Did kill all their first-born

Which if it is compared to Scripture, adds quite a bit to what is given in the AV as “To him that smote Egypt in their firstborn.”

But these examples are limited. In general the translation is very accurate and can be relied upon and learned from. In general, the language is very outdated (no one speaks like this today) and much of the grammar is convoluted (e.g. “makes me down to lie”) but can still be understood if one takes the time.

## Music

There is no music proper to this psalter, but the entire psalter was designed around the 8.6.8.6 meter and each psalm has at least one selection in this meter. This is also called *Common* or *Ballad* meter because it was the meter to which popular or common ballads of the day were sung. The translators wanted the common people to be able to sing the psalms readily to the tunes they already knew.

This feature of the psalter is in my mind one of its great strengths, and also one of its great weaknesses. It is a strength because you need only learn one tune and can then make use of the entire psalter (note that this is strongly advised against). This can be great for people who know only a few tunes and are unable to learn more.

It is also a weak feature because it gives something of a sameness to the psalms though, the introduction of some CMD tunes can help mitigate this. It also forces the translation into a certain rhythm and one gets the impression that only having eight and six syllables alternating is what contributed to some of the words feeling like they were shoehorned into the reversed-grammar pattern we see in the psalter—some of the longer meter compositions allow for more accuracy and singability just because there is more leeway with the words. Lastly and possibly most importantly, unless one is very careful the tunes can become confused and misused. It is not appropriate to sing a battle march to Psalm 13 for example, nor a dirge to

Psalm 1. This has been dealt with in various ways, including offering suggestions for tunes (as *The Scottish Psalms* does) or tying a tune down to a specific page (as *The Comprehensive Psalter* does). It is still my impression that the variety of CM tunes is limited.

To me it is also important to have tunes “married” to psalms, as it both helps many with memorization and also helps to set the mood and tone.

In my opinion, the benefit of having all the psalms in CM has largely been eclipsed by the amount of tools available to an individual today. We can readily learn new songs from a plethora of recordings and have no need of being tied to just one meter. Nevertheless, this may certainly still be a strong point for some people only comfortable or confident in learning a few tunes.

## Conclusion

Has the SMV stood up to the test of time? There are many things to commend it. Many of the commissioners from the Westminster Assembly worked on it and approved it as faithful. Perhaps more importantly to me, it was approved by the entire Scottish Church and was not just the work of a single individual. It has a long and faithful history and has been well-loved by the church.

The Scottish church was approached around 1880 as part of the United Presbyterian movement to update the psalter and while they acknowledged that the psalter was old, the language was outdated, and that it had some defects, yet they also said that it had been ingrained in the minds and hearts of the Scottish people for so long as to be almost a part of their being and they chose not to revise it. Sadly there are very few Scottish psalm-singers left, and perhaps the revised *Sing Psalms* version was one of psalm-singing’s last gasps in Scotland. We can only pray that it will prove to be the case.

So here is where I become controversial and I am sure will stir up many disagreements. I have sung this psalter a lot and love it, but despite all it has to offer I cannot recommend its continued use simply because of the language barrier.

Let me clarify: I cannot *personally* recommend its use for *congregations*. I can definitely see using it in a family, for private devotions, for 1650 psalter gatherings, for Reformation Day, or quite a few other events. But for general singing in the congregation, I feel that to continue using it is rather introspective. I say that because if the psalter is used for historical reasons, for continuity reasons, or even for accuracy to the AV reasons, the focus seems to be on the existing members of the congregation, and that is a dangerous

place to be. No, I am not advocating being seeker-friendly but I do feel that the only person who will be impressed with the use of the SMV and AV when they visit a congregation are people who are already looking for that, or are perhaps literature majors. The rest will probably think it is some kind of cult or dead church. I interact with my co-workers regularly and invite them over for supper and family worship. I cannot in good conscience hand them a 1650 psalter and say “here, now you have God’s word in your own language so you can sing to him. Enjoy.” Or my Jewish co-worker, who though we share the psalms, would look at this as completely Scottish and arcane.

Any objection, any difficulty can be surmounted. Some will say the language is more accurate so we should use it but I honestly think there are modern psalters that one will not suffer or lack anything from using so that claim seems empty to me. If we truly wanted to be accurate we should just go straight to the text. It is clear that the language is archaic, obsolete, and is not the tongue of the common people. The Scottish commissioners rejoiced in the fact that their version was more fluid than any preceding it, and readily accessible. If it is not so today, do you think they would have revised it? It can be learned, it can be loved, but again it seems introspective to do so. Perhaps the objection is that there are no suitable alternatives. I disagree but respect that.

Perhaps your congregation is different but we have on occasion a good many students in ours. We have foreign visitors, and recently one person who had never been to church before. We welcome these kinds of interactions. Introducing psalm singing to brand new Christians is a joy. We are not trying to please them but at the same time we try to make no attempt to please ourselves at their cost. It has been said that this psalter has been blessed so much that we should seriously consider before moving to something else. I would also like to add that with something so vitally important to the lifeblood of the common Christian, putting up artificial barriers is something that should be seriously considered. At least consider bearing with the weaker brother who would find this an unnecessary obstacle.

So once again, I love this psalter, I use it regularly. I have no problem with the language personally and know my children would not either. But I am also glad that our congregation does not use it in worship and that there are very suitable alternatives which give us God’s words accurately and in our own tongue. And if while traveling I come across brothers and sisters who are still using this excellent psalter, I will gladly join them in praising God using it.