NOTES AND QUERIES

BOOK OWNERS IN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY SCOTLAND: A NOTE ON SUBSCRIPTION LISTS IN BOOKS EDITED BY JOHN HOWIE

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In Local Population Studies No. 3 (Autumn 1969) Peter Laslett published a note on the discovery of two subscription lists, printed in mid-eighteenth century Scottish editions of theological works, which gave details of the subscribers’ occupations. His note was intended to encourage further discoveries of a similar type. However, nothing further seems to have appeared in print on the subject since that note, subsequent letters in LPS Nos 4 and 5, and Laslett’s comments in the second edition of The world we have lost (1971). Other lists have in fact come to light since then and it is the intention of this note to draw attention to a particularly interesting group of printed eighteenth century Scottish subscription lists recording names, occupations and places of residence.

It is not my intention in this note to give a full analysis of these subscription lists but rather to outline the background of the lists and the books containing them, and to indicate the broad conclusions that can be drawn from a superficial analysis of the information on subscribers given in them. The lists certainly merit a great deal more investigation and analysis than that given here.

The first important feature of this group of lists is that they can be firmly attributed to a single source and to one that enables a considerable amount of background information to be collected. The six lists considered here are all attached to books written or edited by John Howie of Lochgoin (near Fenwick, Ayrshire) between 1775 and 1793. The short titles — the full ones usually run to several dozen words — and dates of publication are:

- The Scots worthies (first edition) 1775
- Faithful contendings displayed 1780
- The Scots worthies (second edition) 1782
- Faithful witness-bearing exemplified 1783
- Reformation principles re-exhibited 1787
- John Brown; a mirror; or looking-glass for saint and sinner 1793

All were published at Glasgow except for Faithful witness-bearing exemplified, which was published at Kilmarnock.

John Howie (1735-1793) is remembered today mainly as the author of The Scots worthies, a collection of brief biographies of the most prominent figures on the reformed side of the struggle within the Scottish church in the period between the Reformation and the Glorious Revolution and, in particular, of the Covenanter martyrs of the persecutions between 1660 and 1685. From its obscure beginnings, The Scots worthies, in many editions and reprints, took its place as one of the great books of nineteenth century Scots Presbyterianism.

Howie was one of the most prominent lay members and propagandists
of the Reformed Presbyterian church in the eighteenth century. This church was the oldest dissenting body in Scotland, composed of the spiritual descendants of the minority of the Cameronians or 'hill people' which alone refused to accept the Scottish church settlement of 1690, on the grounds of the erastianism and impurity of the established church. On paper at least, it remained the only organised group in the British Isles that was opposed to the whole basis of government as constituted in the eighteenth century, still prepared to justify the theocratic experiments of seventeenth century Scotland and the rebellions intended to overthrow the enemies of the 'crown rights of the Redeemer'.

The six books listed above vary in tone. The Scots worthies and the John Brown work belong much more to the mainstream of eighteenth century evangelicalism than do the other three books listed. These are mainly documentary collections of a strongly sectarian nature — long, heavy and, to most twentieth century minds, infinitely tedious. They are works which cannot be said to have been purchased for show, as Laslett suggested might have been true of more standard works of theology. These are works written for sectarians who took their dissent and its basis seriously and whose literacy must have been of a very high standard. For such groups subscription clearly offered a viable form of publication in eighteenth century Scotland. Subscribers were collected in various ways. Relevant books carried advertisements for future books to be published by subscription. For instance, Faithful contendings displayed contains proposals for the publication of the second edition of The Scots worthies by subscription. The printed proposals include the following conditions:

I. The Book will be printed on a fair paper and new type, the same with the address to the Public, the whole to consist of above 500 pages.
II. The price to Subscribers will only be two Shilling and Sixpence neatly bound.
III. Those who subscribe for twelve copies, shall have one gratis.
IV. The book will be put to the Press as soon as a competent number of subscriptions are obtained, and a list of Subscribers names will be printed, unless forbid.
V. The price to be paid on the delivery of the book.
VI. Such as intend to encourage this undertaking, will send in their names to the Printer without loss of time.

Subscriptions are taken in by John Bryce, Printer and Bookseller in the Salt-market, Glasgow, the Publisher; and all others entrusted with Proposals.

The names of subscribers were therefore collected by the publisher or, much more commonly, 'given in' by local agents, whose names appear in the subscription lists, at the head of the names they have given in (except in the first edition of The Scots worthies). In Faithful contendings displayed — and this is typical — the thirty three givers in include not only three booksellers, two chapmen and one weaver and bookseller, but also six other weavers, a schoolmaster, a shoemaker, a smith, a wheelwright, a tailor, a sewer, a mason, a farmer and a land surveyor. They also include a woman.
This spread of occupations is not untypical of the subscribers as a whole. There are in fact two striking points about the subscribers to this series of books; the first is the sheer numbers collected; the second is that the majority of them are artisan by occupation. *Faithful contendings displayed* records over 1,600 subscribers, *Reformation principles re-exhibited* and *A Mirror* just over 1,000 each, *Faithful witness-bearing exemplified* around 800, the first edition of *The Scots worthies* around 700 and the second edition just over 300. These are respectable numbers of subscribers by any standards, just as the first printing of *Faithful contendings displayed* — a minimum figure of 1,800 copies including multiple copy subscriptions — is a good size for any ordinary eighteenth century book. There were clearly very many keen artisan book-buyers in eighteenth century Scotland, willing to pay 2s.6d. for a sectarian book, when artisan earnings were unlikely to exceed 10s. a week.

There is a problem with the occupational data in that roughly a third of the names on the subscription lists do not have occupations attached. However, in many cases the omissions appear to be simply the result of blocks of names being given in with no occupations attached. If this is so, then it is reasonable to generalise from the two-thirds of names with occupations given, a total of roughly 3,700 for the six books together. Among these approximately three-quarters can be described as artisans. Half the remainder are farmers, while there are generally no more than a dozen persons of higher rank than farmer or merchant named in the lists. On average four occupations account for nearly half the names listed; weavers (about 20 per cent of all names with occupation given), farmers (12 per cent), shoemakers and wrights of various sorts (8 per cent each). Smaller but significant numbers of masons, tailors, merchants and printers (including those in the textile industry) also appear. Altogether nearly 200 occupations appear in the various lists.

In geographical terms the subscribers come predominantly from South West Scotland and the Borders, with large numbers in Glasgow and the surrounding industrialised towns and villages. Smaller groups subscribe from larger towns elsewhere in Scotland and some from Northern Ireland and from London. This distribution clearly reflects the distribution of the Reformed Presbyterian church, though, of course, not all the subscribers need have been of that persuasion. The name of a noted minister of the dissenting Associate Presbytery — John Brown of Haddington — appears in the 1780 list.

Clearly there is great scope for further research on these lists, much of which might be best done at a local level. Most probably other books published for Reformed Presbyterians carry subscription lists, though such books are not always easily tracked down — certainly not in English libraries. The lists considered here might alone yield much to further detailed analysis. Together they provide information on the names, occupations and places of residence of several thousand highly literate, sectarian working class Scots of the later eighteenth century; men (and occasionally women) who were prepared to spend a substantial amount of money on the purchase of books demanding considerable intellectual ability of their readers.