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Hume's "Bellmen's Petition": The Original Text

M. A. STEWART

Writing to Dr. Clephane on 18 February 1751, Hume mentioned a satirical "Sheet call'd the Bellman's Petition" that he had recently written, but had been unable to find a printer for in Edinburgh.¹ By 10 March he apparently had a printer, but could not yet say if the job was done.² Burton was to identify this work with a printed broadside that we now know to have borne the nominal date of 27 January, which gives some indication of the delay in publication. Although the short title used in Hume's casual correspondence has stuck, there seems no good reason to retain it. The full title indicates that the Petition was written in the name of the whole company of Bellmen (i.e., bellringers) rather than that of the individual who ostensibly subscribed the covering Letter.

Burton reproduced a segment of the Petition in a victorianized version, from a copy of the original.³ A full but more garbled transcription containing both syntactic and semantic anomalies had been published independently, without recognizing Hume's authorship, in a nineteenth-century literary miscellany called *The Scotch Haggis*.⁴ This version—the only one generally known by the middle of the present century—was reproduced as Appendix B in J. V. Price's *The Ironic Hume*, and excerpted with its errors compounded in E. C. Mossner's *Life of David Hume*.

There are in fact at least three extant copies of the original,⁵ two of which have come into the public domain only recently. These have been collated to provide the text which follows.⁶ Although it is possible now to offer a more

authentic text, one anomaly still remains in the last sentence of the first paragraph of the Letter accompanying the Petition. If Hume had been deliberately trying to reproduce the style of an uneducated writer it is unlikely he would have limited it to a single solecism. The three words proposed for restoration in the text below are not the only possibility; but their accidental deletion would be explainable in the light of the immediately preceding clause.

The original consists in a half-sheet of common (unwatermarked) paper, printed on both sides within an area approximately 29.1 x 14.1 cm. The surviving copies have been variously trimmed to page sizes between 32.3 and 30.2 cm. in length and between 19.7 and 16.5 cm. in width. The Bodleian copy has lost the final line of page 1 through close trimming.

NOTES

1 J. Y. T. Greig, ed., *The Letters of David Hume*, 2 vols. (London: Clarendon Press, 1932) I 149, corrected from the original in the National Library of Scotland.

It must have been the satirical tone that caused the difficulty. There was no block to the publication of measured criticism of the case for increased ministerial stipends. Fifteen church elders who dissented in the vote of the General Assembly in 1750 found a printer for their *Exposition of the Reasons of Dissent from a Resolution of the last General Assembly, to Apply to Parliament for an Augmentation of Stipends, &c.* (Edinburgh, 1750).

2 Hume to Gilbert Elliot, HL I 156. Hume was then living at Ninewells, and if he continued to be obstructed in Edinburgh could perhaps have found a printer in Berwick.

3 J. H. Burton, *Life and Correspondence of David Hume*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1846), 1:317-19. Burton's transcription contains two errors in wording.

4 *The Scotch Haggis: Consisting of Anecdotes, Jests, Curious and Rare Articles of Literature* (Edinburgh, 1822). The same title was used for other literary compilations at other dates, but these did not include Hume's piece.

5 Bodleian Library, Vet. A1 b.3 (57); National Library of Scotland, APS. 4.96.45 (to be recatalogued); *id.*, Crawford Miscellaneous Broad-sides 1397 (on deposit). Cambridge University Library disclaim any knowledge of the copy credited to them in *David Hume and the Eighteenth Century British Thought: An Annotated Catalogue* (Tokyo: Chuo University Library, 1986), 181.

6 Some slight adjustments have been made to the format of the headings.

THE
P E T I T I O N
OF THE

Grave and venerable BELLMEN (or Sextons) of the
Church of SCOTLAND, to the Hon. House of
Commons.

Most humbly sheweth,

THAT whereas the Reverend Clergy of the Church of SCOTLAND, mov'd by that sincere Regard to the Glory of GOD, which has so conspicuously appear'd in Men of that sacred Character, throughout all Ages, have applied to Parliament for an Augmentation of their Stipends:

And whereas the learned Body of Schoolmasters, incited by that pious Example, and moved by the same Regard to the Glory of GOD, have also applied for an Augmentation of their Sallaries:

And whereas it has pleas'd the Divine Providence to bless both these Applications with such assured Prospect of Success: It might appear strange, if the grave and venerable Body of Bellmen, being also ecclesiastical Persons, though of inferior Character, should be so backward in this holy Cause, and so neglectful of the Glory of GOD, even though call'd upon by this illustrious and edifying Example of their Superiors.

The grave and venerable BELLMEN, therefore, of the Church of SCOTLAND, having weigh'd these Considerations, do now presume to lay their Case before the Honourable House of Commons; not doubting but they will meet with the same kind Reception, which is indulg'd to the Reverend Clergy and learned Schoolmasters.

The venerable BELLMEN beg Leave to support the Petition by the following Reasons.

That it can be prov'd demonstrably, from Scripture and Reason, that the Cause of Religion is as intimately and inseparably connected with the temporal Interests and worldly Grandeur of your Petitioners, as with any other of these Ecclesiastics whatsoever.

That as your Petitioners serve in the Quality of Grave-diggers, the great Use and Necessity of their Order, in every well-regulated Commonwealth, has never yet been called in Question by any just Reasoner; an Advantage they possess above their Brethren the reverend Clergy.

That their Usefulness is as extensive as it is great. For even those who neglect Religion, or despise Learning, must yet, some Time or other, stand in Need of the good Offices of this grave and venerable Order.

That it seems impossible the Landed Gentry can oppose the Interests of your Petitioners; since, by securing so perfectly as they have hitherto done, the Persons of the Fathers and elder Brothers of the foresaid Gentry, your Petitioners, next after the Physicians, are the Persons in the World, to whom the present Proprietors of Land are the most beholden.

That as your Petitioners are but half Ecclesiastics, it may be expected they will not be altogether unreasonable nor exorbitant in their Demands.

That the present Poverty of your Petitioners in this Kingdom is a Scandal to all Religion, it being easy to prove, that a modern Bellman is not more richly endow'd than a primitive Apostle, and consequently possesseth not the Twentieth Part of the Revenues belonging to a Presbyterian Clergyman.

That whatever Freedom the profane Scoffers and Freethinkers of the Age may use with our reverend Brethren the Clergy, the boldest of them trembles when he thinks of us; and that a simple Reflection on us has reformed more Lives than all the Sermons in the World.

That the Instrumental Music allotted to your Petitioners, being the only Music of that Kind left in our truly Reform'd Churches, is a necessary Prelude to the vocal Music of the Schoolmaster and Minister, and is by many esteemed equally significant and melodious.

That your Petitioners trust the Honourable House will not despise them on Account of the present Meanness of their Condition: For having heard a learned Man say, that the Cardinals, who are now Princes, were once nothing but the Parish Curates of ROME, your Petitioners, observing the same laudable Measures to be now prosecuted, despair not of being, one Day, on a Level with the Nobility and Gentry of these Realms.

May it therefore please, &c.

A LETTER to a MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT, with
the foregoing PETITION.

BUCKHAVEN, 27th Jan. 1751.

Honoured and Worthy SIR,

IT having pleased the LORD to visit his sinful People of this Church with many and great Tribulations, it was with Consolation we saw a Kind of PISGAH Prospect opened to us of better Days, by the Application of the reverend Ministers and learned Schoolmasters for an Augmentation of their Stipends and Sallaries. And we, having no less Zeal, in our inferior Station, for the same holy Cause, have also agreed upon an Application to a like Purpose; which I am empowered to transmit to you by that Conveyance commonly called by the Profane, the POST. For I do not find there is any Gospel Name for it. If it seemeth good in your Eyes, after communing with your Heart in Prayer, it would be a Furtherance of this Godly Work, if you would get printed in the great City a sufficient Number of Copies of this PETITION, and* order one to be delivered to every Member of the House, on the great Day of Grace, whereon the Reverend Ministers are to present their PETITION, it might, with the Divine Assistance, very much forward so good a Work, and might be the Cause, that both of them may meet with the same Success; which I am sure both of them equally deserve.

Now, worthy and honoured Sir, if you will be the Instrument of the LORD in this holy Undertaking, I do hereby promise you, in my own Name, and in that of all my Brethren, that he, amongst us, whom the LORD will bless with the comfortable Task of doing you the last Service in our Power, shall do it so carefully, that you never shall find Reason to complain of him. I am,

HONOURED AND WORTHY SIR,

Your Friend and Servant in the Lord,

ZEROBABEL MACGILCHRIST,

Bellman of BUCKHAVEN.

* Some phrase like *if you would* seems to have been lost before *order*.