

**BUKE OF THE HOULATE:
PUBLISHED FROM THE
BANNATYNE MS.,
WITH STUDIES IN THE PLOT, AGE,
AND STRUCTURE OF THE POEM**

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Buke of the Houlate: Published from the Bannatyne MS., with Studies in the Plot, Age, and Structure of the Poem by Arthur Richard

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ARTHUR RICHARD

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See Richard HOLLAND'S

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By
Arthur Diebler, Phil. Dr.

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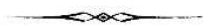
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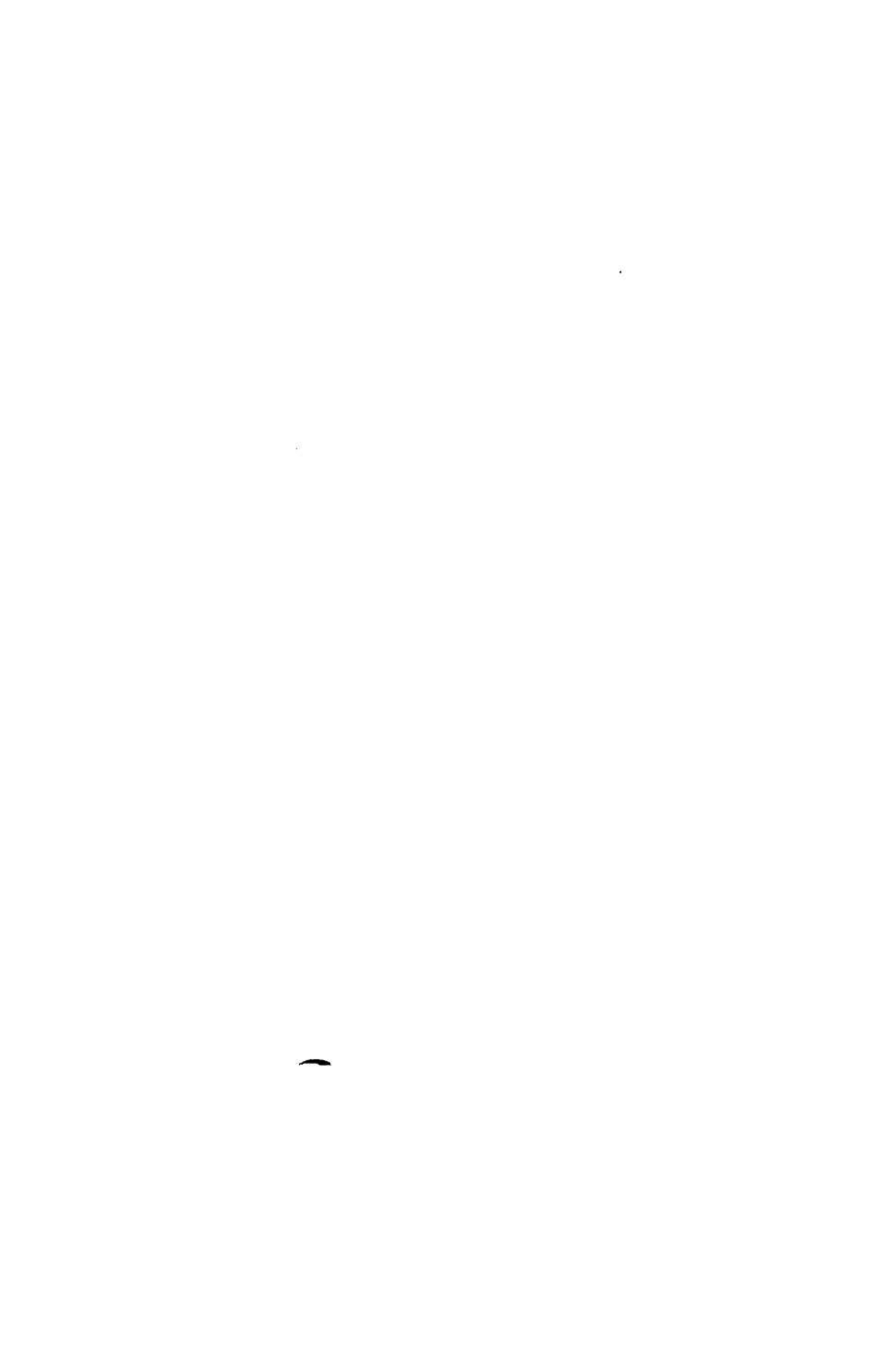
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Investigations on Holland, the author of the Buke of the Houlate.

A strong assertion of national life and the emotion of patriotism are the principal traces, which the struggle for independence left on Scottish poetry. In an almost obtrusive way the national elements and fervent thoughts of liberty especially prevail in the poets of the earlier period. Scottish freedom and Scottish heroes are conspicuously thrust forward in their verse. The descriptive poetry is likewise tributary to a like passionate nationality. Conventional life, conventional landscape are almost unknown to Scottish poets: individuality is dominant, as it were, in nature and people. The ardent love of their native country invests their descriptions with a lovely colouring, whose brilliancy bestows a peculiar charm upon them. Their brightness and vivacity of feeling, united to a deep religious piety, the vigorous fun of their satirical strokes, their lavish exaggeration of humour and wit animate the poetry of Scotland and well repay its study.

A good deal of this excellence is to be observed in Richard Holland, who claims a particular interest among the Scottish 'makars' of the 15th century.

His Buke of the Houlate, which I am about to put before the reader, has been handed down to posterity in two manuscripts:

1. The Ms. of John Asloan, who wrote it in the beginning of the 16th century.

This valuable Ms, containing a select choice of early Scottish poetry, was formerly in the Auchinleck Library at Edinburgh; it is now in the possession of Lord Talbot de Malahide, Malahide Castle, Co. Dublin.

2. The well known Ms. of George Bannatyne, collected and written by him in 1568. and preserved in the Advocates Library at Edinburgh.

The text published hereafter has been taken from the Bannatyne Ms, and collated with Asloan Ms (ed. by David Laing, Edinb. 1823¹); thus it will comparatively be easy to construe a satisfactory reading. In questionable points, no doubt, the Bannatyne Ms. is mostly preferable to the other.

As to our author, Holland, next to nothing is known about his personal life. From his poem we know him to be a decided adherent of the famous House of Douglas, whose glory and power he exhibits in a long series of stanzas. Beyond this, no kind of direct information about his life seems to be left; the conclusions we may be able to draw from his poem, will be elucidated in the course of these inquiries.

¹) According to Brunet, *Manuel du Libraire*, Paris 1862, only 70 copies have been printed of this edition.

As the first allusion to Holland's poem may be considered some verses of his contemporary Henry the Minstrel, who in the X. book of his William Wallace (about 1460) refers to it in the following lines:

'So feyrt it, be wyrkynge off Natur,
How a *Houlat complend off his fetherame*,
Quhill Deym Natur tuk off ilk byrd, but blame,
A fayr fethyr, and to the *Houlat* gaiff;
Then he through pryd rebeyttit all the layff.' (Jamieson's Edition, Buke X, 130.)

Later on, Holland seems to be alluded to in an Act of Parliament, March 1482: After having subdued and exiled the Douglasses, hitherto so formidable to the crown, the King of Scotland promised a free pardon to all those who would forsake Douglas and come over to the King, 'except the personis that pleses his honours (the King) to except, that is to say, the treatouris James of Douglace, . . . Schir Richard Holland and Maister Patrik Haliburton, preistis, and vther sic like treatouris that ar sworne Inglismon . . .'). As the name of Holland was never common in Scotland, and as this priest Schir Richard Holland was so decided a partisan of the noble House of Douglas, it has been very plausibly conjectured that this Holland was no other than the author of our Buke of the Houlate. Nor is it improbable that he had been the domestic chaplain of Archibald Douglas*, to whose wife he dedicated his poem. The conjecture, that our poet was a priest, is moreover strengthened by his exact knowledge of all kinds of religious matters and ceremonies as will be exhibited occasionally in the subsequent examinations.

In the beginning of the 16th century Holland is mentioned, together with other Scottish and English poets, by Dunbar and Lyndsay, and from the manner in which he is alluded to, we may conclude that he was esteemed as a writer of some distinction. Dunbar, for instance, in his 'Lament for the Death of the Makaris' connects Holland's name with that of Barbour:

'Holland and Barbour he (Death) has berevit;
Allace, that he nought with ws lewit!'

(Abbotsford Series of the Scottish Poets, ed. by George Kyre-Todd. Glasgow 1892.)

Lyndsay mentions our poet in 'The Testament and Complaynt of our Sovereane Lordis Papyngo, Kyng James the Fyft':

Quintyn, Merser, Rowle, Henderson, Hay, and Holland,
and continues emphatically to praise their works:

'Thocht thay be deid, thair libellis bene levand,
Quhillkis to rebeirs makeith redaris to reiose'.²⁾

Reasons for dating the poem in connection with historical allusions and events.

The contents of the Buke of the Houlate afford a fairly good guide for determining the time of its compilation. The poet dedicates his book to a 'dow of Dunbar, dowit with a Douglas', and residing in the Forest of Ternway, 'in middlis of Murray' (i. e. Moray)³⁾. The lady here mentioned was Elizabeth Dunbar, who about 1445 brought the earldom of Moray to her husband Archibald Douglas, since her father had died without leaving a male descendant (B. of the Houl. line 548—559). Ternway, from which our poem is likewise dated, had thus become the seat of

¹⁾ Compare Parliaments of Scotland, vol. II, p. 139.

²⁾ Comp. David Irving, The History of Scottish Poetry, ed. by Carlyle, Edinb. 1861, p. 164.

³⁾ See The Poetical Works of Sir David Lyndsay, by David Laing, Edinb. 1879, vol. II, p. 61.

⁴⁾ See the last stanza of the Buke of the Houlate.

Archibald Douglas from about 1445. This year is in the first line to be regarded as 'terminus a quo'. On the other hand our poem must be dated previous to the battle of Arkinholm (March 1455), for on that occasion the husband of the lady, to whom the poem is addressed, was slain, and his brother Hugh, Earl of Ormond (mentioned in line 599), was taken prisoner and executed. The poem bears traces of having been written during the Earl's lifetime. But there are further reasons for dating it sooner. All the relations of the noble House of Douglas were exiled from Scotland in April 1455. By this time the power of the Douglasses was totally broken, and later on it would have been quite impossible to portray the splendour and power of that family in such a way as it has been done by Holland. According to our poem, the Douglasses still lived with the king upon good terms; they are called 'tendir and trewe' (line 403), and the author who was so sincerely attached to the Douglasses, speaks of the king as 'our souerane, quhilk salbe lord and ledar our bred Britane all quhair' (line 374—375).

As a devoted adherent to the Douglasses, Holland would besides have no more exhibited so loyal a feeling, when the king, in violation of hospitality and a safe conduct, had murdered William Douglas at Stirling Castle (21. Febr. 1452). We cannot but acknowledge this date to be a closer 'terminus ad quem'.

Before 1452 the power of the Douglasses rose to the highest pitch. The young monarch had after his marriage with Mary of Guelders, in 1448, arrested many nobles, among them Livingstone, governor of Stirling Castle, and had bestowed their forfeited estates partly upon the Earls of Douglas. The latter raised their claims and pretensions from year to year, and 1449—1451 their partisans especially increased, since William Douglas had renewed a secret bond with the Earls of Crawford and Ross, the most powerful nobles in the north of Scotland. These allies then began to threaten the royal authority in a most serious manner. The revenues and retainers of the Douglasses equalled at least those of the king, so that William Douglas was sufficiently powerful to represent, with a large retinue, the Scottish nobility at the Pope's jubilee at Rome, in 1450, where he was solemnly received by Pope Nicolaus V.¹⁾ — On his return William Douglas even visited the king of England. It can only have been during this period that our poet had reason to eulogize his protectors in the enthusiastic way, of which we read in stanza XXX—XLVII, at a time when the Douglasses did not show any moderation in their claims, when the 'grene tre of Douglas bure branchis on bred blythest of hew', (line 398—399), when 'four branchis²⁾ flureist our all, grittest of gre' (line 407), and when those different branches of the family still agreed with the king.

But as the Douglasses became too turbulent in their ambition, their dazzling prosperity only served to hasten their ruin. Their downfall began with the assassination of William Douglas, in February 1452, and from this time their power was struck at its very root.

Neither is there anything of this decline to be remarked in our poem, nor of the hostilities between the king and the Douglasses, nor of the ensuing civil war, which ended with the destruction and banishment of the different branches from Scotland. No allusion whatever is to be found in the *Houlate* to any of these events after 1452.

But there is another point worth consideration. It is striking that the poet describes in a very prolix manner the appeal of the Owl to the Pope and the reception by him. The detailed exhibition of the Pope's influence, of his array and council, the enumeration of persons belonging

¹⁾ See Gardiner, *A Student's History of England*, London 1892.

²⁾ With these 4 branches our author evidently means: James, 9th Earl of Douglas, and his brothers Hugh, Earl of Ormond (line 599), John, Lord of Halvay, and Archibald, Earl of Moray (line 547—557). To whose wife the book is dedicated.

to the papal court and, in particular, the full statement of the formalities during the reception, entertainment and deliberations (line 92—347; 659—709; 846—866), seem to justify the conjecture that William Douglas's journey to Rome was not without influence on the respective parts of our poem. As is evidenced by the above-mentioned Act of Parliament, our poet was a priest, and perhaps the domestic chaplain of a Douglas. Therefore, it is not impossible that he joined William Douglas in his visit to the Pope's jubilee (in 1450), where he had occasion to get fully acquainted with the Pope's rich array and his manner of treating his guests, both ecclesiastical and temporal estates. Our poem was evidently written after this event, where the poet found material for his instruction and observations.¹⁾ The minute details of the assembly can hardly be explained otherwise, at a time when it was quite out of question to gain such intelligence in Scotland. Or at least this journey to Rome, if Holland did not join in it himself, must have been a fact of general interest, the consequences of which are to be traced in our poem. Since all the other reasons and events, given before, do not contradict the composition after 1450, and since the year 1452 cannot be called in question (William Douglas was already murdered in February 1452), I have reason to decide in favour of 1451 as the date of compilation.

Plot and contents of the Buke of the Houlate.²⁾

No other of Holland's writings seems to have reached our times, except the Houlate, though we may conclude that a poet, endowed with talents such as are exhibited in this poem, did not confine his qualities to a single composition. In spite of its artificial structure, the Houlate abounds in an elegance and opulence of style, which we cannot but admire. With its profound morality, its fervent enthusiasm for the independence of Scotland and the most valiant defenders of that country, — with its delightful gaiety and pleasing garrulity, with its fine description of nature, Holland's Buke of the Houlate does, indeed, claim considerable merit. But altogether it is a curious compilation of so many heterogeneous elements that its value is confined to certain portions, while the whole poem cannot be freed from the reproach of wanting a strict disposition and unity. It is even difficult to state at once its impelling cause and its literary character. There are stanzas which do not in the least transgress the limits of a mere apologue, whose moral simply consists in blaming pride and violence; but there are also portions of the poem, which characterize it as an admirable panegyric, while others, with a stern sarcasm and biting irony, exhibit its satirical outlines. When adapting, in a fanciful way, the peculiarities of birds to the different classes of mankind, our poet must have followed a certain tendency. The long digressions from the original fable, containing both political and personal allusions, prove our poem to be more than an apologue. But before inquiring any further into the plot of the Houlate, we will give an analysis of it, going now and then into its details, according to their respective value for unveiling the difficulties of meaning and design.

In the morning of a fine day of the month of May, the poet takes a walk, and reaching a river he sits down by its side (stanza I & II). Admiring the fair scenery, by which he is surrounded (st. III), he hears a piteous lamentation, uttered by an Owl, who is looking with horror at his shadow in the water (IV—V). The Owl accuses Dame Nature of having shaped him so ugly and resolves to appeal to the Pope of birds, in the hope that, through the prayers

¹⁾ Intercalations as "and syne culd I se", line 359. "I wist", line 659, or "as I rycht knew", line 172, where the poet introduces himself, cannot but strengthen my suggestion of his personal observations.

²⁾ In the following lines I am now and then indebted to Laing's excellent inquiries and to a letter of Walter Scott, printed in Laing's edition of "the Buke of the Howlat".