

**The Bohemian Reformation and Scotland: The Bohemian Protest of the
University Library in Edinburgh**

Prof. Susan Hardmann Moore

*Susan Hardman Moore is an ordained minister in the Church of Scotland, and
Professor of Early Modern Religion at the University of Edinburgh.*

In the treasure room of the University library in Edinburgh – behind locked doors, on its own special shelf – there is a manuscript known as the ‘Bohemian Protest’.¹ It has been part of the University’s collections since the 17th century, and is one of its most precious possessions. Its presence forges a tangible link between Scotland and events 600 years ago surrounding the death of Hus. I would like to use the story of this manuscript to illuminate what Hus has meant for Scotland.

The Bohemian Protest was drawn up in September 1415 by nobles of Bohemia and Moravia, to object to the Council of Constance about its treatment of Jan Hus and his associate Jerome of Prague. Several copies of the Protest were made – at least four – and sent out to different regions, to gather signatures. The manuscript in Edinburgh is now, I believe, the only original copy to survive. It is an impressive sight: a large parchment, about 75cm by 50cm; the letter of protest in the centre, surrounded on three sides by around one hundred signatures, each attested by a wax seal attached to the document by a parchment strip. It is remarkable that the parchment is still intact, unturned, with almost all the seals still there.

The message of the Bohemian Protest is clear. The writers declare that the Council of Constance, ‘we know not with what spirit being led’, has condemned Jan Hus to a ‘shameful and cruel death’ without good cause:

we never heard... that Master Jan Hus... preached... any error or heresy in his sermons... he always led a quiet and godly life in Christ, exhorting all... to observe and keep the rule of the Gospel, and the institutions of the holy fathers, after the preaching of our holy mother church...²

This landmark document of resistance came to Edinburgh in 1657 as a bequest from William Guild.³ Guild was born in 1586, a generation after Scotland adopted the Reformation in 1560. He lived in Aberdeen all his life: a preacher, a scholar, and for a time, Principal of the University of Aberdeen. Guild represents the kind of educated Scottish Protestant who received the message of the Reformation and passed it on. He was not a typical ‘person in the pew’, but what he knew of Hus, how he saw the significance of Hus, gives us an insight into the impact of Hus in Scotland.

The trial and death of Hus would have been familiar to Guild from the vivid account – and even more vivid picture – in John Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs*. In Scotland as in England, Foxe’s book had a standing next only to the Bible. Foxe pressed the story of Hus deep into the Protestant imagination. In later editions of his book, he included the full text of the Bohemian Protest, and stressed its significance. Foxe never saw the original manuscript, but reproduced what he found in another printed history. (Foxe described the parchment as having only ‘54 seals hanging’, so this was not the copy that is now in Edinburgh.)⁴

The heritage of Hus would also have come to Guild through John Knox’s *History of the Reformation in Scotland*. Knox and Foxe knew one another well from shared time as Protestant exiles in Strassburg. Both painted history with the same brush-strokes, as the triumph of gospel light over antichristian darkness. When Knox wrote his *History*, he assumed his readers would know Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs*, so made no mention of Hus. But it is striking that the first person Knox mentions by name, on the first page of his book, is not a Scot but a Czech Hussite ‘Paul Craw’ (Pavel Kravař) who arrived in St Andrews in 1433 and was condemned to death for promoting the ideas of Hus and Wycliffe. Knox says: ‘God gave unto the said Paul Craw grace to resist his persecutors... who condemned him to the fire...’. Little is known about Kravař beyond what Knox tells us; just the outlines of a career at the universities of Paris and Prague, and as a physician at the royal court in Poland. Why he came to Scotland is unclear. A hostile witness wrote that he was ‘sent from Bohemia by the heretics of Prague... to corrupt the Kingdom of the Scots’. In fact, by the time of Kravař, Scotland already had a reputation for being ‘corrupted’ by Wycliffite and Hussite heresy. This

had been noted at Council of Constance, and was partly due to some reformist letters that went from Scotland to Bohemia around 1410, while Hus was still alive. These were open letters to the Scottish clergy, written by an obscure character, Quentin Folkhyrde, who had been influenced by Wyclif. Folkhyrde's letters were translated into Czech, and became popular in Bohemia under the title 'News from Scotland'.⁵

Most of this William Guild would have known from reading Foxe and Knox. Now to the chain of events that led to his acquisition of the Bohemian Protest.

To make sense of what comes next, it is important to lay out three facts about Guild. First, he was an avid book-collector, with interests that included Wyclif and Hus – not long before the Bohemian Protest came into his hands, he purchased a classic text against Wyclif and Hus by Thomas Netter, an English representative at the Council of Constance who died in 1430.⁶ Second, Guild was a patron of the merchants of Aberdeen – to this day the merchant guild toasts his memory at their annual feast – and so he had access to trading networks that reached across the North Sea. Third, perhaps most important, in the late 1630s Guild was at odds with many of his Scottish contemporaries over the National Covenant. This was a time of high tension in Scotland. In reaction to the religious policy of Charles I, which zealous Protestants thought was turning back to Rome, Scottish nobles and gentlemen in 1638 drew up a National Covenant: a solemn vow to defend pure Reformed doctrine and discipline. Its promoters circulated copies to gather signatures. Guild was persuaded to sign, but reluctantly, with caveats: he refused to condemn episcopacy, and declared his loyalty to the king. As a result, when tension between the king and the Covenanters escalated into war, Guild decided to leave Scotland and go abroad.

It was probably his merchant connections that took him to the Baltic port of Danzig (or Gdansk). We can locate him there because he preached to the English congregation.⁷ It was in Gdansk, it seems, that he acquired the Bohemian Protest. The story of how the document came into his possession is hearsay, reported seventy years later, and may or may not be true. It goes like this. A 'Scotch Gentleman' – very likely to be Guild – visited 'the library at Dantzick', and took a keen interest in a manuscript he found there:

his curiosity led him, not only to read, but to desire liberty to take a *Copy* of it; which with some difficulty was obtain'd, and by the Charm of a handsome Gratuity, leave given by the Under-Library-Keeper to carry it to his Lodging.

After Guild finished his copying he took the manuscript back to the library and asked the deputy-library-keeper in Latin what he should do with it. The deputy answered in Latin, 'in two words, *habeat Dominus*'. What followed is not so much a tale of something 'lost in translation' as of something 'gained by poor translation', because 'the Gentleman understood [the deputy's words]... as if he had bid *him* keep it... whereas doubtless the Man intended [the manuscript to be returned to] the ... *Head Library-Keeper*...'. As a result of this misunderstanding, 'the Gentleman brought [the manuscript] away to Aberdene...'.⁸

No hard evidence survives to prove or disprove this tale. And we can only speculate what value Guild attached to the manuscript. Just possibly, what gripped him was not only the historic nature of the document, but also its relevance for his own day, its resonance with the Scottish National Covenant. Like the Bohemian Protest, the Scottish Covenant was an initiative from nobles and gentlemen; it quickly became a badge of religious and political identity; several copies were circulated to gather signatures. I am certain that Guild would have read what John Foxe's high praise for the Bohemian Protest: a remarkable document, which showed 'so many noble and worthy gentlemen, within the small kingdom of Bohemia, so forward in those so dark days and among so many enemies... to take part with Christ'. Foxe presented the Protest as a message to those who held back from identifying themselves 'with the Gospel of Jesus, zealously, as they should do'. Foxe thought such people should read 'the truth... in the story [of the Bohemian Protest] to their shame, or else to their instruction'.⁹ Perhaps Guild took Foxe's words as a condemnation of his own half-hearted support for Scotland's National Covenant. What we do know is that as soon as Guild returned home to Aberdeen, with the Bohemian Protest in his sea-trunk, he signed the Covenant again, with no caveats.

William Guild bequeathed the manuscript to Edinburgh in 1657. Until the 19th

century, seeing the Bohemian Protest was a highlight for visitors to Edinburgh, a tourist attraction. Nowadays it is not on regular display for conservation reasons, but few years ago the University gave a replica to the National Archives in Prague, and another replica can be seen at the International Museum of the Reformation, Geneva. I am delighted to report that the original will be on display in Edinburgh in July this year, to mark the Hus anniversary – a tangible link for us in Scotland with events six hundred years ago.

The question of national identity is high on the agenda in today's Scotland, and the Church in Scotland is working to express the gospel in a changing world. There is a message for our own times in the story of Jan Hus and the Bohemian Protest, which reaches across the centuries, and across political and ecumenical boundaries. It is about having the courage to speak truth to power.

¹ Edinburgh University Library, Bohemian Protest (1415), JZ 438. Discussed in John Small, 'Some account of the original protest of the Bohemian nobles against the burning of John Huss', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 3 (1859), 408-24; David Cuthbertson, 'The Protest Against the Burning of John Huss: The Story of an Edinburgh University Parchment', *The Library* 14 (1913), 146-56.

² Translation from John Foxe, *Acts and Monuments* (1570 edition), Book 5, 776.

³ R. P. Wells, 'Guild, William (1586–1657)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/11720>, accessed 2 April 2015].

⁴ Foxe, *Acts and Monuments* (London, 1570), Book 5, 776-7. Foxe's source was Caspar Hedio (d.1552), who continued of the history of the German chronicler, Conrad of Lichtenau (d.1240): *Abbatis Uspergensis chronicum*, ed. Conrad Hedio (Basel 1569), 381-84. For Foxe's text and commentary, see <http://www.johnfoxe.org>.

⁵ John Knox, *The History of the Reformation of Religion in the Realm of Scotland* (printed in part, 1587, first full edition 1644); Paul Vyšný, 'A Hussite in Scotland: the Mission of Pavel Kravař to St Andrews in 1433', *Scottish Historical Review* 82 (2003), 1-19; Michael Van Dussen, *From England to Bohemia: Heresy and Communication in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 67, 75-7.

⁶ Thomas Netter, *Tomus prioris doctrinalis fidei ecclesiae catholicae contra Vviclevistas & Hussitas* (Paris, 1532). Guild purchased this from a fellow-Aberdonian, William Forbes (d.1634), bishop of Edinburgh: see the links to research by Christine Gasgoigne on Guild's

library at <https://standrewsrarebooks.wordpress.com/2011/11/30/highlight-the-legacy-of-the-william-guild-bequest/>.

⁷ William Guild, *The Christians Passover, or, A sermon preached before the English congregation in Danzik at their receauing of the Holie Communion, by William Guild D.D. and minister at Aberdene* ([Gdansk] 1639). I owe this information, and story of Guild's visit to the Gdansk library, to Russell Newton, who is writing a PhD thesis on 'William Guild and Typology in Scotland' at the University of Edinburgh.

⁸ Thomas Morer, *A Short Account of Scotland* (London, 1702), 81.

⁹ Foxe, *Acts and Monuments* (London, 1570), Book 5, 777.