

The Plague

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See *Collections*, Vol. 2, Chap. 16.

In their chapter on *The Plague* the authors remark that references "in the old records are sufficiently numerous and informative to provide a picture of the enormous problems with which the community was beset,"¹ and the records of the Presbytery and of the Kirk Session of Ayr bear witness to the truth of this statement. After noting the ordinance of the Commission of the General Assembly for the observance, on the first Lord's Day in 1645, of a "solemn humiliation by prayer and fasting for removing of the plague of pestilence in England and Scotland,"² the Presbytery minutes record the approach of the plague: a letter from the late moderator of the Synod of Glasgow and Ayr informs the Presbytery that "it wes thocht . . . that the nixt Synod suld meit in the town of Glasgow," instead of in Paisley, which "wes for the tyme infected with the Pestilence";³ and a month later one of the causes of the absence "since the former Synods" of "Master Johne Burne," the minister of Kirkoswald, is given as the "enclosing of himself in his house becaus of the suspection of the Pest in his parochie, and death of sum in that plague about the kirk."⁴

The most interesting entry, however, is one that reveals the disturbance of normal trading relations, and the use made of the organisation of the Church to relieve the situation, once the plague had reached Ayr. "The bretheren," we read, "taking to there considera[tio]n the state and case of the towne of Air now afflicted by pestilence, were desyred to exhort there severall congrega[tio]ns, to furnish to the said towne, such com[m]odities as they might spaire, vpon the charges of the said towne, vpon a moderat rate, and the sellers of the said com[m]odities within each Paroch to make choise of one day in the weeke for that effect and they to be accompanied with foure of the elders of there session, or other discreet men of the paroch, that so the present necessitie of the said towne may be supplied, and each broth[er] to remember the said towne in there prayers."⁵ Three months later the Presbytery considered the case of the minister of Alloway, Mr. David Mcquorn

1 *Collections*, p. 278.

2 Ayr Presbytery Register (MS), 18 Dec., 1644.

3 A.P.R., 8 Oct., 1645.

4 A.P.R., 12 Nov., 1645.

5 A.P.R., 22 Sept., 1647.

(who had been ordered to "use diligence" in having a manse built and, in the meantime, to reside in Ayr). His excuse for his absence "from his floke in tyme of there visita[tio]n by the plague being no wayes found satisfactorie" he was "gravely censured, & exhorted to be more carefull to visite his floke, hereafter."⁶

Assistance, however, was not confined to the bounds of the Presbytery; immediately after the report of Mr. Mcquorn's censure it is stated that a representative of the Presbytery of Irvine made an appeal for "a voluntarie contribution" because of the "great strait & necessitie of the parochie of the Largues by Pestilence." After having referred the matter to the Committee of the Shire, the Presbytery ask for collections to be made for this purpose.⁷

When one reads the confessions, made at Ayr during the plague of 1647,⁸ and "put in wryt & wpon record . . . for the vse of posteritie,"⁹ one wonders to what particular event the session of Ayr refer when, as the fourth "rod" of God's wrath, they mention "the slaughter of two companies of their young men in the bloddie warrs";¹⁰ or again, why, while the glovers met in their Deacon House, the weavers met "at the hills" of Ayr and the cordiners "at the back of the kirk yeard deik"; or yet again, one wonders why it was only the "deacon & remenant" of the coopers, "the few number of the craft of wakers" [*i.e.*, fullers] and "the few number of candlemakers"—of the last-mentioned three names only—who met together; is it merely because few followed these occupations, or had the members of these crafts suffered more severely from war and pestilence?

Before taking leave of the article in our *Collections* it may be proper to note here that the reader of to-day will almost certainly be misled, when he learns that Johnstone is the place where the plague broke out in 1585.¹¹ Though Murray Lyon also calls this town Johnstone, his transcript of the Ayr Burgh records refers to it as "Sanct Johnstoun,"¹² which indeed it was—St. John's Town of Perth, shortened in our day to Perth. To the modern reader Johnstone probably suggests the Renfrewshire town, which had its origins as such in the feuing, in 1781-2, of the ground at the "Brig o' Johnston," where previously there had been only a few cottages.¹³

6 A.P.R., 8 Dec., 1647.

7 A.P.R., 29 Dec., 1647.

8 *Collections*, p. 278.

9 Ayr Kirk Session Register, 16 Sept., 1647.

10 A.K.S.R., 13 Sept., 1647.

11 *Collections*, p. 274.

12 *Ayr in the Olden Times*, 1928, pp. 15, 16.

13 *Statistical Account*, VII, p. 88; *New Statistical Account*, VII, p. 202.