THE ASLOAN MANUSCRIPT

I.C. Cunningham

The Asloan Manuscript (NLS, MS. 16500, previously MS. Acc. 4233) of the early sixteenth century is, even in its present lamentably imperfect condition, one of the most important sources for Scottish prose and verse of the period. Several of the pieces included in it, especially those in prose, are not preserved elsewhere. Some are also found in the approximately contemporary and equally fragmentary prints of Chepman and Myllar; more appear in later manuscripts, such as the Bannatyne and Maitland Folio. In the latter cases Asloan is always an important witness, even if obviously less crucial than in the first. It is also interesting as a manuscript book, whose production and history can be traced in some detail.

The manuscript first came to scholarly attention at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Its then owner, Sir Alexander Boswell, 1st Bart., of Auchinleck, in collaboration with the Deputy Keeper of the Records of Scotland, Thomas Thomson, had several items from it printed at his private press (see below I, no.xii (bis), xvi and xviii). Substantial extracts were transcribed by William Gibb for George Chalmers (now EUL, MS. La.III 450), and these were used by David Laing for Bannatyne Club and other publications.¹ About 1890 the manuscript itself was for a short period deposited in the British Museum, but later attempts to ascertain its whereabouts and gain access were fruitless.²

In 1917, however, agreement was reached between the owner, Lord Talbot de Malahide, and the Scottish Text Society on the publication of a complete transcript. The editor, W. A. Craigie, worked from a set of photographs (now NLS, MSS. 335-6), and the edition was published in two volumes in 1923-5. Later editions of individual works and spot checks by myself show this to be what was intended, a serviceable and substantially accurate guide to the text (the notes are less full than they might be), but it cannot be of much help in codicological matters.

¹ In particular Select Remains of the Early Popular Poetry of Scotland (1822), Holland's Howlat (1823), and The Poems of William Dunbar (1834).
² See e.g. correspondence in the Athenaeum (1906) i, 422, 482, 516, 671.
Only with the purchase of the manuscript by the National Library in 1966 did it become fully accessible. Since then editors of individual pieces have used it; among these Dr Catherine van Buuren (see below I, no.xxii) calls for special mention. The present paper tries to bring together existing information and add some new facets, to give as complete a description of the manuscript as is at present possible.

I. Contents

The original contents are known from a list on ff.iii-iv compiled by the principal scribe, John Asloan (see below, IV), and headed 'Heir begynis [the contents of the] buke follow[and]'. This comprises 71 numbered items (not strictly 71 separate pieces: i-xii go together, xii (bis) has to be added and liii subtracted). Of these 34 are totally lost, and seven are imperfect. The following tabulation gives Asloan's own numbers and titles as in his list (the numbers on the first page of the list, as far as xxv, are lost; these are supplied from the headings; viii is totally omitted in the list); also, for those which survive, folio numbers and headings and subscriptions; then information about other sources and modern editions and literature (the latter selective). In transcription I generally follow van Buuren rather than Craigie (except for final ss).

(i-xii) John Ireland, 'Treatise on the Passion, etc.', c.1490 (no general title in the contents-list or in the text). Unique. Asloan MS, i.1. For the author see the edition of his Meroure of Wisdom by C. Macpherson, F. Quinn and C. McDonald (STS, 1926, 1965, 1990); and J.H. Burns, 'John Ireland: theology and public affairs in the late fifteenth century', IR, xli (1990), 151-81.

i, [ii] In Prinis ane chapitur schawin be master Ihon yrlan of þe wertewe of þe glorius passoun of Ihesu nixt efter þat he h... þe causs of this compilacoun Capitulo primo & secundo

ff.1, 4v [no headings or subscriptions, but (as also in the following) there are chapter summaries]

iii Item of þe sacrament & wertewe of penance in generale

f.5v [no heading or subscription]

iii Item of confessioun sacramentale with condicionis & profetis þ[arof]

f.5v [no heading or subscription]