R ichard Maitland (1496-1586) is not a well-known poet, except to medieval-renaissance specialists; he usually rates about two short poems in a long anthology. I have discovered only two articles on his poetry, one by Maurice Lee which - while certainly valuable - is historical rather than literary (1969), and a useful commentary on some of the better poems by Alasdair MacDonald (1970). The comparative neglect is understandable, as Maitland’s range is narrow: the majority of his forty-four surviving poems are about the breakdown of law and order, a consequence of the civil war that became endemic in mid-sixteenth-century Scotland. Most of Maitland’s remaining poems offer moral and religious instruction, to counter the ungodly times. This suggests a further reason why he tends to be passed over: moral verses usually lack appeal. Yet he is a better poet than a cursory look would indicate, and deserves more attention. Within his main themes of corruption and devastation, there is variety in form, tone, and topic; and the better poems are distinctive and moving. These are almost always the less general and more specific poems, a point that will be amplified shortly. I shall begin with a brief introduction to Maitland’s career and his poetry, and then examine three poems in more detail.
He seems to have begun composing poetry abnormally late, in his sixties, and about the time that he became blind - he was so by 1561. We probably have all the poems he wished to preserve, as they survive in his own two collections, the Maitland Folio and Quarto. The latter manuscript is dated 1585 (shortly before Maitland's death) and is written by his daughter, or at least her amanuensis. His earliest dateable poems celebrate the taking of Calais, from the English by the French; and the marriage of Mary, Queen of Scots, to the Dauphin of France. These events occurred in 1558. The latest poem where one can at least estimate a date is a complaint against “lang proces” in the courts. It is addressed to James VI, and apparently assumes that the King has reached the age of majority and is able to make his own decisions. Ages of majority are flexible, but the poem can hardly have been written before 1579, when James entered Edinburgh amid much traditional ceremony and seemed, at the age of thirteen, to be assuming some of the duties of a king. (Maitland was then eighty-three - and of course the poem may well be later than this.)

In between are poems referring to various political and social events, such as the Assembly of the Protestant “Lords of the Congregation,” who banded against the French Regent in 1559; the disputes between supporters and enemies of Queen Mary in the later 1560s; and the pillaging of Scotland in the early 1570s. The poems not only give information on political events but also about the daily life of the period. Maitland was a judge from 1554 to 1581, which coincides with his career as a poet,
and he quite often discusses legal proceedings, with the theme that these are breaking down under the pressures of corruption or naked force. Thus he complains about unjust “new found lawis”: “Be quhilk sum trew men ar opprest / Of housis and landis dispossess.” He also describes life in court and on farms, and has a very long description of the extravagant clothes of burgers’ wives. He does, in fact, provide a detailed account of the political and social conditions of his times.4

Maitland’s basic political predilections, at least in the earlier poems, are conservative and patriotic. He sympathizes with the (French) Queen Regent and the old religion, and is suspicious of the Protestant reformers and their English allies. He approves of the French capture of Calais, because at that juncture Scotland was more linked with France than England, and because of the precedent for the Scots retaking Berwick. His anger at the “Thieves of Liddesdale” despoiling north, into Scotland, has as corollary the assumption that they should be going south, into England. His house and lands were at Lethington, twenty miles east of Edinburgh: understandably, the area he is most concerned about is Lothian, and after that Lowland Scotland. In “The Assembly of the Congregation” (which begins “Eternall god tak away thy scurge”) he prays: “That all trew folk from Berwik to Bahquidder / May leif in rest unreft in this new yeir.” This covers the land from the English border to the Highland one, Berwick being “rightfully” Scottish, and Balquidder only ten miles inside the Highland line. One would not expect Maitland to see
England as home territory - and he emphatically does not - but it is noteworthy that the Highlands, except perhaps for a narrow strip bordering the Lowlands, are also outside his purview.

Maitland’s official position is that poetry should convey general truths rather than comment on particular situations. “On the Malyce of Poyetis” is against writers who attack individuals, a practice which Maitland sees as both risky and unethical, and when he himself writes against treason (which seems a safe theme) he says: “I will not speik in speciall / Bot pray all in generall / That wicked vyice to flie.”\textsuperscript{5} Certainly, some of the poems one would expect to be specific are not. In those on Queen Mary’s marriage and the taking of Calais, the political event merely provides the occasion to offer general sentiments (except for the conclusion of the Calais poem). And his poem on the “pleasouris of Aige” is written in the first person, but is made up of general reflections on old age.

Yet many poems are specific in that they actually investigate political events and situations, or individuals’ actions; and some poems relate Maitland’s personal situation. A political poem advocating “Unione amangis the Lordis” points out the dangers of bringing in either English or French troops. If the King’s supporters win the immediate war with the help of the English, it will be at a heavy price: “quhat thay get in hand / Castell toun or land / Thay will it not restoir.” If, on the other hand, the Queen’s supporters win by French assistance, the Scots will soon find themselves vassals of France.
“Remember how thay pleit yow befoir.” A “Lament for the Disorderis of the Cuntrie” begins in conventional terms with appeals to God and denunciation of murder, but then becomes more particular.

Som hes thair place brint in ane gleid
Thair guddis spuilyit halallie
Thair servantis slaine sum brint to deid
Thair selvis taine uncourteouslie.

This point about the burning of servants suggests that Maitland had in mind events that had recently occurred. That impression is made stronger by what follows, where he states that “for ane missive bill” the owners of the houses would have obeyed the Regent. A “missive bill” is presumably just a written order, and the implication is that the Regent, Morton, has needlessly ordered looting and killing. Other poems are not only specific but personal: “Solace in Age” is, at least in part, about Maitland’s own predicament, rather than any old man’s. “My hous my landis and my geir/Fra me they hauld.”

Where Maitland is general, he understandably tends to be conventional: where he is specific, he is likely to be distinctive. With few exceptions, the best poems are specific in one of the ways suggested above. Their most evident merits are that they are rhetorically controlled and develop a clear argument; and their language is, if not colorful, pithy and resonant. To explain this last point: Maitland’s poetry is not rich in images, but his concentrated language often produces a kind of
synecdoche common in proverbs. There are several examples in his best known poem, “Satire on the Age.” For example: “We cum to bar with Jak and steill.” A jak is a soldier’s coat and the phrase means that disputes are settled less by law than by force. Again: “I saw na gysars all this yeir / Bot kirkmen cled lyik men of weir.” Gysars, ministers, and soldiers represent - respectively - traditional merrymaking, religion, and war; and the first two are abruptly cancelled by the third. A final example: Maitland contrasts the worlds of past and present by saying: “They had lang formis quhair we haive stuillis.” The changes in furniture also indicate changing values, from communal feasting and presumably sharing, to a more individual and selfish life. The benches and stools become symbols.

I want now to look at three of Maitland’s poems in more detail, and attempt to bring out their merits. These are, “Aganis Oppressioun of the Commounis,” which is not well known, and “In this New Yeir” and “Aganis the Theives of Liddissaill,” which are liable to turn up in anthologies. “Aganis Oppressioun of the Commounis” has an uninspiring title - the poet can hardly say he is in favour of oppression - and a conventional opening. The common people are being ill treated by “thift and reif and plaine oppressioun.” However, a clear argument then emerges. The oppression is explained as excessive demands for rent and services, so that the tenants can no longer pay rent or work their own farms - and thus face eviction. The third verse addresses a wider political situation, the replacement of the Church as landlord
with much harsher temporal lords. Then there is more
detail on these landlords’ demands and the con-
sequences for the tenants, who cannot tend their
own farms “Thocht all thair bairnis sould want breid.”
The results, noted in the fifth verse, are waste land -
because many tenants have been driven off - and loss
of status. “Mony hes quhippes now in thair hand / That
wont to have bayth lak and speir.” They are now merely
poor farmers, whereas they were at least yeomen.

This is both the conclusion of the first half of the
poem and the starting premise for the second half.
Again, the poet uses proverbial symbolism. Jak (soldier’s
clothing) and spear signify being armed and ready for
combat: whips signify farmers too poor and unskilled
to take up arms. A class has been dispossessed of its
wealth, status, and function. The poem then amplifies
this point with the images of tenants left with “ane
crukit meir” (a run-down horse) turf for saddles, and
only stones and clods for weapons. Logically enough,
the poet then appeals to the Lords to treat their tenants
better; the primary reason is charity, but another now
begins to emerge. Let the Commons live “sufficientlie to
thair estait” so that “thai may serve yow baith air & lait.”
The Commons have a function in society beyond provid-
ing wealth to the Lords, and this is now made explicit:
without well-provided Commons, the Lords will not be
able to defend the country, or themselves.

Predictably, the last verse urges the Lords to help
the Commons and states that God will reward them if
they deal justly, and otherwise “plaige” them. But an
additional point is made, which is also a development of the previous argument: the Lords' successors may fall into the ranks of the Commons and then be treated equally badly. There is some force to this since, if the Commons can be declassed, so can the Lords; and, moreover, the decay of the Commons is likely to cause the decay of the landowners. As late as the nineteenth century, some of the evicted Highlanders are reported to have said: "Since you have preferred sheep to men, let sheep defend you." That sentiment, that a Lord needs well-provided men, was not an anachronism in Maitland's time. The poem is, then, less general and conventional than the opening leads one to expect. There is a well-developed argument, and the main points are conveyed forcefully, in terse images.

"In this new yeir" (which appears only in the Maitland Quarto) has a dominating refrain - it opens the poem, of course - and, as in many of Maitland's poems, it maintains the tone and central theme. New Year is traditionally a time of hope, so that its conjunction with "weir" sets up a contrast, that then runs through the poem. There is another tension that becomes obvious as the poem proceeds: there is "na caus to sing" as the poet reiterates, and yet he is singing, for the rhythm of the refrain is insistently musical. Each verse then sets up a contrast, the first two dealing with the main warring factions: "Frenchmen" and the Protestant Lords of the Congregation; and then the invading armies of England and France. In the third verse, the Border and "borrowmuire" are less clear as
entities and probably carry several associations. The Burrowmuir is beside Edinburgh and therefore central; when placed with the “Border” the two together refer to the whole country. Second, the Border is usually turbulent and lawless, but now even Lothian is in the same state. And finally, the Burrowmuir was where criminals were executed; Maitland is partly stressing his theme of criminal plundering, and partly suggesting that there will yet be a reckoning for the plunderers.

The last two verses move away from the political situation. Being merry is set off against dying, and this world against the next. In all the verses, the final word or phrase receives heavy emphasis, because it is final, and because it rhymes with the key word “sing.” Thus, in the first verse, the image of “bair biging” (buildings destroyed down to the walls) sums up the state of the country; in the second verse, “cuming” evokes the invading armies of England and France; in the third, “hing” suggests both criminality and retribution. Then “na thing” is part simply negative, in keeping with the previous verses, and part humorous, marking a shift in tone. “Ending” signifies death, but also heaven and, perhaps, the end of the wars; the lament has moved to a rather positive conclusion. The poem as a whole has a conversational tone; the voice is from the remote past, but it vividly conveys hopes and fears.

“Aganis the Theives of Liddisdaill” moves on swiftly, like the thieves - or raiders - themselves. The first four verses follow their movements. First there is the warning that they are abroad, and nothing is safe. The
second verse gives a more close-up view: they are on the move, breaking down gates, then doors - to enter houses. The actual plundering is then described: they search out everything movable and, if there is resistance, kill and burn. The fourth to sixth verses give an account of the wider effects of the robberies, beginning with an aerial view: the thieves are spreading out to the north, from Ettrick (on the Borders) to Lauderdale, into the usually safe Lothians. Farming is halted and the countryside wasted. At best, farmers have to pay blackmail, which only delays the onset of poverty.

In the next five verses, we are given the names of individual thieves, which come thick and fast, brief descriptions that bring out their rapacity, and comprehensive lists of what they steal. Not much distinction is made between the thieves, except perhaps that the first two operate on a bigger scale. Their names may well be generic rather than referring to specific people. It is not very significant that the first names are standard - Will, Hab, Jok, two Johnes, Hob - as there was a small pool of first names available, except perhaps for the upper class. But the second designation is, in each case, suspiciously general: “lawis,” “schawis,” “lairdis,” “park,” “syide” seem to mean, respectively, rounded hills, woods or flat land beside hills, associate of a landed man, meadow, wide valley. These are the main features of the border landscape, and hardly act as distinguishing terms. (“Clements Hob” does sound more like an actual name: “Clements” could be a patronymic or a place. But even here there may be puns on “clam,” to grope at, and
“clem,” low and untrustworthy - to indicate a small-time thief.) These are, then, probably a mass of archetypal thieves rather than historical individuals. The last four verses touch on the political causes for the thieves’ devastations. Most great men are unable to prevent the thieves crossing their lands. Some great man must be backing the robbers; and if there is only one, that implies the Regent, Morton. The ending is, typically for Maitland, defiant: he expects to see at least some of the thieves hanged.

This poem begins with urgent denunciation and never loses momentum. The tone is colloquial and the points made at first seem random, as by someone pouring out their grievances without thought of ordering them, but the poem actually maintains a clear line of thought: from an account of the raiders’ movements, to the widespread devastation they create, to an inventory of thieves and what they steal, to the political cause, and finally to the hope of justice and revenge. Many of the images are compressed and suggestive. “Yet,” “dure” (stanza two), “bair wais” (“walls,” stanza seven) work as metonymy. The state of those paying blackmail is brought home with equally simple images.

Thay that had flesche & breid & aill,
Now ar sa wraikit
Maid puir and nakit
Fane to be staikit with walter caill.

That is, they are left with cabbage leaves in water.
These are compressed images, like those found in proverbs.

Other effects derive from expansion, from details and lists that seem capable of widening out indefinitely. There is the list of thieves' names, which suggests a never-ending succession of bandits picking the country clean. We also have an extended list of what they steal. “Thay leif not spindill, spone nor speit / Bed, boster, blanket, sark nor scheit” - and so on, to include almost every household item one can think of. This brings out, not only the ferocity of the thieves, but also their petty greed and the total destruction they cause - like a swarm of locusts. And the lists, which are apparently going to account for everything in a given category, also create an impression of realism.

These poems are very different in form, but all concerned with the conditions of the times. Resemblances will be evident in theme and imagery, and in the characteristics of the speaker, which come through strongly. As elsewhere, Maitland is tender hearted - he seems genuinely concerned about the state of the poor, for example - but also clear thinking and tough minded. He complains a lot, and indeed all these poems might be termed laments, but also suggests solutions. And he never seems entirely helpless; there is a vein of defiance in these, and most other poems. Maitland does more than project an appealing personality, however. He is, in at least twelve to fifteen poems, a good poet; with a distinctive personal tone, strong logical control, and starkly expressive language. He should be more widely read.
The texts of the poems are based on the Quarto Manuscript. I have not anglicized words or even regularized spelling (though tempted) as these procedures are likely to cause more problems than they solve. The poems are more easily comprehensible if read aloud, and of course preferably in a Scots accent.

*Aganis Oppressioun of the Commounis*

It is greit pitie for to se  
How the commounis of this countrie  
For thift and reif and plaine oppressioun  
Can na thing keip in thair possessioun  
Quhairof that thay may mak ane lyfe  
Yit nane will punische that transgressioun  
Thocht nocht be left to man nor wyfe.

Sum with deir ferme ar herreit haill  
That wont to pay bot pennie maill  
Sum be thair lordis ar opprest  
Put fra the land that thay possest  
Sair service hes sum hereit sone  
For cariadge als sum hes no rest  
Thocht thair awin worke sould ly undone.

Sum commounis that hes bene weill staikit  
Under kirkmen ar now all wraikit  
Sen that the teynd and the kirklandis  
Come in greit temporalle mennis handis  
Thay gar the tennentis pay sic sowmes  
As thay will ask or quha gainestandis  
Thay wilbe put sone fra thair rowmes.
The Teynd that tennentis had befoir
Of thair awin malingis corne and stoir
Thair lairdis hes taine it our thair heid
And garris thame to his yaird it leid
Bot thair awin stok thay dar not steir
Thocht all thair bairnis sould want breid
Quill thay have led that teynd ilk yeir.

Sic extortioun and Taxatioun
Wes never sene into this natioun
Taine of the commounis of this land
Of quhilk sum left waist lyand
Becaus few may sic chairgis beir
Mony has quhippis now in thair hand
That wont to have bayth lak and speir.

Quhairthrow the haill communitie
Is brocht now to sic povertie
For thay that had gud hors and geir
Hes scantlie now ane cruikit meir
And for thair saidillis thay have soddis
Thay have no wappinis worth for weir
Bot man deffend with stanis and cloddis.

Thairfoir my lordis I yow pray
For the puire commounis find sum gud way
Your land to thame for sic pryice geif
As on thair maling thay may leif
Sufficientlie to thair estait
Syne thame defend that nane thame greif
That may serve yow bayth air & lait.
Riche commounis ar richt proffitabill
Quhen thay to serve thair lord ar abill
Thair native countrie to defend
Fra thame that hurt it wald pretend
For we wilbe our few ane nummer
Gif commounis to the weir not wend
Nobillis may not beir all the cummer.

Help the commounis bayth lord and laird
And god thairfoir sall yow rewaird
And gif ye will not thame supplie
God will yow plaige thairfoir Iustlie
And your successioun efter yow
Gif thay sall have na mair pitie
On the commounis nor ye have now.

In This New Yeir

In this new yeir I sie bot weir
Na caus to sing
In this new yeir I see bot weir
Na caus thair is to sing. [Refrain]

I can not sing for the Vexatioun
Of frenchemen and the congregatioun
That hes maid trowbill in this natioun
And monye bair biging.

I have na will to sing or danss
For feir of England and of France
God send thame sorrow and mischance
Is [sic] caus of thair cumming.
We ar sa rewlit ritche and puire
That we wait not quhair to be suire
The bourdour as the borrowmuire
Quhair sum perchance will hing.

And yit I think it best that we
Pluck up our hairt and mirrie be
For thocht we wald ly doun and die
It will us helpe na thing.

Lat us pray god to stainche this weir
That we may leif withoutin feir
In mirrienes quhill we ar heir
And hevin at our ending.

In this new yeir I sie bot weir
Na caus to sing
In this new yeir I sie bot weir
Na caus thair is to sing.

_Againis the Theives of Liddisdaill_

Of Liddisdaill the commoun theiffis
Sa pertlie steillis now and reiffis
That nane may keip
Hors nolt nor scheip
Nor yit dar sleip for thair mischeiffis.

Thay plainlie throw the countrie rydis
I trow the mekill devil thame gydis
Quhair thay onset
Ay in thair gait
Thair is na yet nor dure thame bydis.
Thay leif richt nocht quhair ever thay ga
Thair can na thing be hid thame fra
For gif men wald thair housis hauld
Then waxe thay bald
To burne and sla.

Thay have neir hand hereit haill
Ettrik forest and Lawderdaill
Now ar thay gaine
In Lowthiame
And spairis nane that thay will waill.

Thay landis ar with stouth sa socht
To extreme povertie ar brocht
Thay wicked schrowis
Hes laid the plowis
That nane or few is that ar left ocht.

Bot commoun taking of blak maill
thay that had flesche & breid & aill
Now ar sa wrakit
Maid puir and nakit
Faine to be staikit with walter caill.

Thay thefis that steillis and tursis hame
Ilk ane of thame hes ane to name
Will of the lawis
Hab of the schawis
To mak bair waiss thay think na schame.

Thay spuilyie puire men of thair pakis
Thay leif thame nocht on bed nor bakis
Bayth hen and cok
With reill and rok
The lairdis lok all with him takis.
Thay leif not spindill, spone nor speit
Bed, boster, blanket, sark nor scheit
Ihone of the park
Rypis kist and ark
For all sic wark he is richt meit.

He is weill kend Ihone of the syide
A gretar theif did never ryide
He never tyris
For to brek byris
Our muire and myris our gud ane gyide.

Thair is ane callit Clementis Hob
Fra ilk puire wyfe reiffis thair wob
And all the laif
Quhat ever thay haif
The devill ressaif thairfoir his gob.

To sie sa greit stouth quha wald trowit
Bot gif sum greit man it allowit
Richt fair I rew
Thocht it be trew
Thair is sa few that dar avowit.

Of sum greit men thay have sic gait
That redye ar thame to debait
And will up weir
Thair stollin geir
That nane dar steir, thame air nor lait.

Quhat causis theiffis us our gang
Bot want of Iustice us amang
Nane takis cair
Thocht all forfair
Na man will spair, now to doe wrang.
Of stouth thocht now thay cum gud speid
that nather of men nor god hes drie
Yit or I die
Sum sall thame sie
Hing on a trie, quhill thay be deid.

*Ralph Stewart*

*Acadia*

**Endnotes**


4 Ibid. pp 99, 45, 27.

5 Ibid. p. 87.

6 The Maitland Club edition, following the late eighteenth-century editor Pinkerton, has “landis” - which would probably mean “landed” - for “lairdis.” There seems no good authority for this, but anyway it is equally unspecific.