

The Illustrious Life of the Very Reverend Dr. George Buist (1779-1860)
of St. Andrews
By His Fourth Great Nephew, Michael T. Tracy



Dr. George Buist taken in about 1855
Courtesy of the University of St. Andrews

“We have today to record the death, at St. Andrews, under peculiarly melancholy circumstances, of the venerable second minister of the Established Church there, the Reverend George Buist, D.D., at the advanced age of eighty-four years...Dr. Buist was one of the oldest ordained ministers of the Church of Scotland...held the rank of Moderator of the Assembly of the Church. He was attentive minister, sincere in the performance of his duties, a thorough business man and his loss will be greatly felt...”¹ Thus ran the front page of the *Dundee Advertiser* newspaper for 20 April 1860 giving a small glimpse of the accomplished life of the Very Reverend Doctor George Buist.

Early years

George Buist was born on Saturday, 20 March 1779 at Orkie Farm in Kettle Parish, Fife.² He was the third son of George Buist, a tenant farmer and his wife Margaret Low. Young George Buist matriculated at St. Andrews University, Scotland’s first university and third oldest in the United Kingdom, where he studied theology in preparation for the ministry in the Church of Scotland. It may

¹ Dundee advertiser 20 April 1860

² Baptismal Record of George Buist, 26 March 1779, Kettle Parish Records, Old Parish Records 435/00200295

be that he decided to go into the ministry at the urging of his uncle, the Reverend John Buist (c1762-1845) minister of Tannadice Parish and also a St. Andrew's graduate.

On 28 September 1802, George Buist was officially ordained as Minister of Falkland Parish, Fife.³

Marriage and family

Given the necessity of securing a stable financial future prior to marriage, it may be surmised that George's ordination at Falkland was a necessary precursor to his marriage in 1805 to Margaret Fernie at Balmerino, Fife. There is a simple entry in the Balmerino church records which states: "March 16. Mr. George Buist, Minister of the Gospel, Falkland and Miss Margaret Fernie of this parish. (Fig. 1)⁴

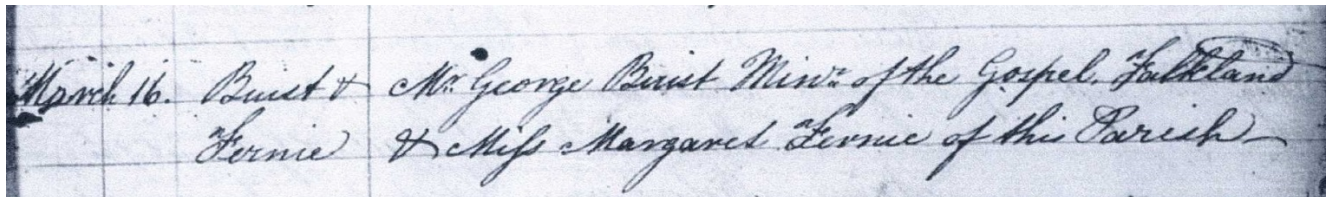


Fig. 1. Marriage Record of Dr. George Buist 16 March 1805

Margaret Fernie was the only daughter and heiress of the lands of Tilliwhandland, Kirton of Aberlemno and Henwellburn which had been owned by her deceased father, William Fernie. These lands were held by George and Margaret Buist until 1845 when they were sold off.

The young couple had seven children. The children were:

George Buist born on Sunday, 2 August 1807 in Falkland and died on Wednesday, 19 July 1842 at the age of 34 while serving with the 10th Light Cavalry in Jalalabad, Afghanistan;⁵

³ Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae Vol 5: Synods of Fife and of Angus & Mearns Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1915 accessed at <http://archive.org/stream/fastiecclesiaesc05scot#page/240/mode/2up/search/Buist>

⁴ OPR 409/0020 0054, Balmerino Parish Records, National Records of Scotland

⁵ Baptismal Record of George Buist, 23 August 1807, Falkland Parish Records, Old Parish Records, National Records of Scotland

Jean Buist born on Sunday, 9 April 1809 in Falkland and died on Tuesday, 4 February 1817 in St. Andrews at the age of 8;⁶

William Fernie Buist born on Friday, 14 December 1810 in Falkland and died on 8 December 1816 in St. Andrews at the age of 6;⁷

William Fernie Buist born on Tuesday, 4 August 1818 in St. Andrews and died on Monday, 9 April 1860 in St. Andrews at the age of 41;⁸

Henry Buist born on Thursday, 12 January 1820 in St. Andrews and died on Friday, 17 April 1840 in Venton, Isle of Wight, England at the age of 20;⁹

Jean (Jane) Buist born on Thursday, 10 January 1822 in St. Andrews and died on Friday, 29 April 1881 in Edinburgh at the age of 59;¹⁰

Margaret Buist born on Sunday, 3 April 1825 in St. Andrews and died on Wednesday, 8 March 1826 in St. Andrews at the age of 11 months¹¹

Move to Lawpark, St. Andrews

In 1813 Dr. Buist was translated to the Second Charge of St. Andrews (regarded as the junior of the two ministries there).¹² In the same year he was appointed to the Professorship of Hebrew at St. Andrews University, a position which he held for the rest of his life.¹³ On 1 July 1818 he bought the estate known

⁶ Baptismal Record of Jean Buist, 9 April 1809, Falkland Parish Records, Old Parish Records, National Records of Scotland

⁷ Baptismal Record of William Fernie Buist, 14 December 1810, Falkland Parish Records, Old Parish Records, National Records of Scotland

⁸ Baptismal Record of William Fernie Buist, 23 August 1818, St. Andrews Parish Records, Old Parish Records, National Records of Scotland

⁹ Baptismal Record of Henry Buist, 20 January 1820, St. Andrews Parish Records, Old Parish Records, National Records of Scotland

¹⁰ Baptismal Record of Jean Buist, 10 January 1822, St. Andrews Parish Records, Old Parish Records, National Records of Scotland

¹¹ Baptismal Record of Margaret Buist, 3 April 1825, St. Andrews Parish Records, Old Parish Records, National Records of Scotland

¹² Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae Vol 5: Synods of Fife and of Angus & Mearns Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1915 accessed at <http://archive.org/stream/fastiecclesiaesc05scot#page/240/mode/2up/search/Buist>

¹³ Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae. The Succession of Minister in the Parish churches of Scotland. 3 Volumes. Perth, Scotland; Perth & Kinross Council Archive

as “Law Milnhead Acre” (now called “Lawpark”) located on the south side of South Street, St Andrews. (Fig.2)¹⁴



Fig. 2. Lawpark, St. Andrews

Photograph Courtesy of Michael T. Tracy ©2010 Michael T. Tracy

The estate had a large garden and stabling for horses situated on one acre of land. Here Dr. Buist and his wife would raise their family and entertain guests and members of the clergy. He also did some of his academic and pastoral work here. Lawpark would eventually be owned by his youngest brother James Buist (1795-1880) after his death in 1860.¹⁵ The property is described in detail in the 1853-1855 Ordinance Survey as a “good dwelling house two stories high and slated with a good garden and the property of the Reverend Doctor Buist, Professor of Church History.”¹⁶

The Buist family, were listed in the 1841 and 1851 Censuses for St. Andrews. In the 1841 Census George Buist was listed as being 60 years of age, a minister with his wife Margaret age 55 and the following children: Jane age 15

¹⁴ Sasine. Disp. & Assign. 22 May 1818. P.R. 105.251

¹⁵ Will of Dr. George Buist, 21 April 1830. Wills & Testaments (SC20/50/31) Cupar Sheriff Court. National Records of Scotland

¹⁶ Fife & Kinross Ordinance Survey Name Books, 1853-1855 for Lawpark, St. Andrews Parish, Fife. Vol 60 Page 20

and George Buist age 10.¹⁷ By 1851, George Buist is listed as being 72 years of age, a minister with his wife Margaret age 67 and daughter Jane Buist age 29. (Fig.3)¹⁸

30/03/1851 BUIST, GEORGE (Census 1851 453/00 018/00 025)

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Parish of		Quoad Sacra Parish of		Within the limits of the Burgh of		Town or Village of			
St Leonard		St Andrew		St Andrew		St Andrew			
House No.	Name of Street, Place, or Road, and Name or No. of House	Name and Surname of each Person who abode in the house, on the Night of the 30th March, 1851	Relation to Head of Family	Condition	Age of		Rank, Profession, or Occupation	Where Born	Whether Blind or Deaf
					Male	Female			
		Jessie Fyall	Daughter	Un	16		Farmer's Daughter	Fifehire, Kirkcaldy	
		John Do	Son	Un	15		Do Do	Do Do	
		Ann Do	Daughter	Un	5			Do St Andrew	
		Robert Fyall	Son	Un	2			Do Do	
		Infant	Daughter	Un	12m			Do Do	
		Nelson Duncan	Servant	Un	16		House-Servant	Do Kirkcaldy	
109	South Street	David Greenwood	Head	Mar	26		Gardener	Do Cupar	
		Mary Do	Wife	Mar	25			Do St Andrew	
		James Do	Son	Un	1			Do Do	
110		George Buist	Head	Mar	72		Minister of the Gospel	Fifehire, Perth	
		Margaret Fernie	Wife	Mar	67			Do Balmaine	
		Jane Buist	Daughter	Un	29		Minister's Daughter	Do St Andrew	
		Christian Todd	Wife-Servant	Un	85		Farmer's Daughter	Do Largo	
		Hannah Manzie	Servant	Un	26		House-Servant	Do St Andrew	
		Margaret Allison	Servant	Un	21		Do Do	Do Do	
		Elizabeth H. Smith	Servant	Un	21		Nurse to an Invalid	Do Perthshire	
111		Robert Nicolson	Head	Mar	30		Fisher	Do St Andrew	
		Catherine Paton	Wife	Mar	26			Perthshire Dundee	
		Arthur Nicolson	Son	Un	7		Scholar	Do Do	
		Robert Nicolson	Son	Un	1			Fifehire St Andrew	
Total of Houses	1 2 U B	Total of Persons...		13					

Fig. 3. 1851 Scotland Census for George Buist Family © Crown Copyright

Further appointments

Ten years after his arrival in St. Andrews, George Buist was appointed in 1823 as Professor of Ecclesiastical History at St. Mary's College, his second academic appointment at St. Andrews University, in which post he again served all his life. But although a full-time minister and a professor twice over, he was appointed in 1833 to the public office of Land Tax Commissioner for Fife, and as such was responsible for the assessment and collection of the land tax within the

¹⁷ 1841 Scotland Census for St. Andrews, Fife, Scotland Ref 453/00 015/00 007

¹⁸ 1851 Scotland Census for St. Andrews, Fife, Scotland Ref 453/00 018/00 025

county. In 1838 he was appointed to the important position of Rector of St. Andrews University. His wide knowledge and inquiring mind led him to become one of the original founder members of the St. Andrews Literary and Philosophical Society, which held meetings in St. Andrews and Fife's county town, Cupar, and was largely responsible for establishing the University museum.¹⁹ He gave a series of lectures on natural history to the Society. As a further testament to his academic stature he was accorded the honor of writing the New Statistical Account entry for the Parish of St. Andrews (1837-1838).²⁰

George Buist's personality

But what of the man himself? George was clearly a man of high integrity. Despite, his two professional chairs, very few of his sermons or for that matter his lectures have survived. As he did not publish any books a picture of his character comes largely from his surviving letters and contemporary newspaper accounts.

On 20 December 1819 writing from St. Andrews, he describes his sadness at the death of his colleague Principal George Hill (1739-1810) who, in association with his university appointment, was Minister of the first charge of St. Andrews. (He too was a distinguished churchman have been Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland and Dean of the Chapel Royal and Dean of the Order of the Thistle.) In his letter to Lord Melville, Chancellor of the University, George Buist recommends himself for the vacancy:

"I have used the freedom to trouble your Lordship with the following representation. There have been two ministers connected with St. Andrews for two hundred years. I have looked into the records which go back to 1638, and from them it appears, that the Crown has been in the uniform practice when a vacancy occurred in the 1st Charge, to present the minister who occupied the 2nd Charge. I feel very grateful my Lord, for your Lordship's kindness in recommending me, on a former occasion, to an office which I have endeavoured to discharge with credit to the University."²¹ He was clearly ambitious.

¹⁹ Bio of the Literary and Philosophical Society of St Andrews. National Archives of Scotland, indexed online at <http://www.nas.gov.uk/onlineCatalogue/>. Person code: STA81

²⁰ Statistical Account of the Parish of St. Andrews, Fife, Scotland. Account of 1834-1845. Volume Number 9, Page Number 449. EDINA

²¹ Letter of Rev. Dr. George Buist, 20 December 1819. Ref. 2014B063. Classmark msDA 816.D8. Papers of Henry Dundas & Robert Saunders Dundas, 1st & 2nd Viscounts Melville. By Courtesy of the University of St. Andrews. Special Collections Department

Dr. Buist was also involved in the campaign to restore the Parliamentary constituency of the ancient Scottish universities. In a letter dated 5 March 1831 written at St. Andrews, Dr. Buist wrote,

“My Lord, one of the members of our academical body (Dr. Cook) has this morning had a confidential letter from Edinburgh from one of the members of the Royal Commission in which it is stated that several individuals connected with the houses of parliament had had communication with His Majesty’s government relative to the propriety of giving a representative in parliament to the Scottish Universities. Lord Grey it is stated and some of the other members of the Cabinet are not unfriendly to the measure, though there is reason to apprehend that it will meet with opposition elsewhere...”²² The Parliamentary seat was restored in 1868 with the universities of St. Andrews and Edinburgh jointly electing one Westminster MP.

Dr. Buist’s worth can also be seen away from his writing desk in his out of doors work, especially in his parochial visitations. According to the *Fife Herald* newspaper for Thursday, 19 April 1860, Page 2:

“Day after day the patriarchal old man would trudge many a weary mile through the countryside, would devote many an hour to desolate houses and the care worn poor.”²³ Service to those less fortunate in the community was Dr. Buist’s real vocation and call throughout his ministry. He was referred to as kind, hospitable and refined with great knowledge. However his parochial visitations were a part of the essence of the man himself.

²² Letter of Rev. Dr. George Buist, 5 March 1831. Ref. 2014B063. Classmark msDA 816.D8. Papers of Henry Dundas & Robert Saunders Dundas, 1st & 2nd Viscounts Melville. By Courtesy of the University of St. Andrews, Special Collections Department

²³ Fife Herald, Thursday, 19 April 1860, Page 2



Fig. 4. Rev. Dr. George Buist in later life
Courtesy of the University of St. Andrews

Later life

Margaret Buist his wife died on 15 November 1854 at the age of 70 and was buried in the Buist family lair in the burial ground at St. Andrews Cathedral.²⁴ After his wife's death, Reverend Doctor George Buist continued to live at Lawpark with his daughter Jane dealing with the household's organization. He continued his rigorous schedule of teaching, lecturing and parochial visitations right up to his end.

His last surviving son, William Fernie Buist was an invalid and caring for him for many years had taken its toll on his father's health, one account describing "the sapping pain of the tie." On the 9th of April 1860 while his father was himself ailing, William died of tic douloureux, (a chronic condition of facial pain and muscle spasm) and phthisis (probably pulmonary tuberculosis).²⁵ The Reverend Doctor's infirmity in old age and bouts of influenza had also taken its toll. The *Fife Herald* newspaper in its Thursday, 19 April 1860 edition reported the following:

"When [Dr. Buist] heard of his favorite son's death, this old Doctor said 'Do not bury him on Friday, the day proposed, but put it off till Monday; I may be able

²⁴ Death Record of Margaret Buist, 15 November 1854, St. Andrews Parish Records, Old Parish Records, National Records of Scotland

²⁵ Death Record of William Fernie Buist, 9 April 1860, St. Andrews Parish Records, Statutory Deaths 453/00 0042, National Records of Scotland

to be there by that time.’ So the funeral was delayed, that the father might follow his son’s bier. Meanwhile, the frail system of Dr. Buist was shaken rudely by the death of his son, weakness supervened, then he rapidly broke up.”²⁶

Reverend Doctor Buist passed away “under peculiarly melancholy circumstances” on Wednesday, 11 April 1860 just two days after his son’s death at Lawpark.²⁷ The *Fife Herald* went on to say further, “then people recollected his words, that he ‘might be able to follow his son to the grave.’ A tinge of prophecy was cast over these words of the moribund, for now he was to accompany that son to his final resting place.” He was 81 years of age.

While these two newspapers reported on his death, though many others did the same in announcing their own tributes. The account in the *East Fife Record* dated 14 April 1860 was as follows:

“St. Andrews. Presbytery. One of the oldest ordained ministers on the Church of Scotland Reverend Doctor George Buist at 88 years and a former Moderator of the Assembly.”²⁸ (The age of death is incorrectly stated as 88 years rather than 81). On 19 April 1860 the *Fifeshire Journal* reported: “St. Andrews Obituary: Death of the Reverend Doctor George Buist, who combined high offices in the Church, which he served for over 50 years, and the University. He was elected Moderator of the General Assembly and was also Professor of Ecclesiastical History at St. Mary’s College.”²⁹ George Buist was buried next to his wife in the burial ground at St. Andrews Cathedral. The Buist family gravestone still stands (Fig. 5) and reads in part, “Sacred to the Memory of the Reverend George Buist, D.D., who was for 47 years one of the Ministers of St. Andrews and for 43 years one of the Professors of St. Mary’s College he died 11 April 1860 aged 81 years.”

²⁶ Fife Herald 19 April 1860, Page 2

²⁷ Death Record of George Buist, 11 April 1860, St. Andrews Parish Records, Statutory Deaths 453/0000 0042, National Records of Scotland

²⁸ East Fife Record, 14 April 1860, Page 2

²⁹ Fifeshire Journal, 19 April 1860, Page 1



Fig. 5. Grave of Dr. George Buist, St. Andrews Cathedral Burial Ground
Courtesy of Dr. Iain Macintyre, 2 June 2013

The *Fife Herald* in its 19 April 1860 edition remembered Dr. Buist in these words which I consider most fitting on his life and career.

“Who will not, in time to come, recall the well-known figure of Dr. Buist, passing by the grey houses of the ancient City? That patriarchal figure, clad invariably with black, with a white neck cloth, with staff or umbrella, and black cotton gloves, the white haired head bent very much, the step decided, as if pressing on to some errand of piety; such a figure of an old man will long dwell in the mind of St. Andrews.”³⁰

What a vivid pen portrait of a man who cared about others, and served the community and the University of St. Andrews, all his long and well-lived life. I am proud that he was my forebear.

³⁰ Fife Herald, 19 April 1860, Page 2

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