

# Collected Psalter Reviews

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The following is a series of reviews of various psalters available for purchase at the time of the writing. It is hoped that this will be helpful for those who are new to psalm singing or are curious as to what options are available.

## **1 1650 Scottish Psalter**

Also known as the *1650 Psalter*, the *Psalms of David in Metre*, and the *Scottish Metrical Version* (SMV). It is widely available both for free online

and for sale in various formats (words-only or with music). Some recommended versions are *The Comprehensive Psalter*, if it can still be found, or *The Scottish Psalmody* from the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing). Also available in the back of one of the words-only books of *Sing Psalms* is an excellent version (my preferred version if I just want the words). It is available from the Free Church of Scotland.

How does one write a review about what many consider to be *the* psalter? The most famous and widely used psalter in English history, sung by Presbyterians (and others) almost exclusively for over two centuries and still possibly the most widely sold psalter today? Opinions on this psalter, much like the Authorized (King James) Version of the Bible, are largely polarized. Regardless of what I write I am sure to offend someone. Nevertheless, I have looked at and used this psalter considerably and would like to offer my take on it.

## Background

There is a good history of psalters and psalm singing to be found in Henry Glass' 1888 book *The Story of the Psalters*, available on Google Books. David Silversides also has an article and lecture which can be [readily found](#), though it should be noted that he is really opposed to the use of any other psalter.

The SMV has a rich history of psalm singing that preceded it, most notably the *Sternhold and Hopkins* version. This version had several composers, primarily Thomas Sternhold and John Hopkins, and was partially under the commission of both Edward VI and Queen Elizabeth I. This version was finally completed and published in 1564. The psalter endured long but some of the verses suffered from poor poetry. For example, Hopkins composed the following for inclusion in the psalter—

Why doost withdrawe Thy hand aback,  
And hide it in Thy lappe?  
O plucke it out, and be not slack  
To give Thy foes a rappe!

And another contributor, William Whittingham, also composed this versification of the Athanasian Creed—

The Father God is, God the Son,  
God Holy Spirit also,  
Yet there are not three Gods in all,  
But one God, and no mo.

Clearly, godliness and good poetry do not necessarily go hand in hand. There were many, many versions thereafter that individuals tried to produce and none really met with success. It was not until 1643 when the Westminster Assembly was looking at a recent versification by Francis Rous that the story really picks up again. The assembly saw the need for a unified psalter and suggested starting with Rous'. After much revision and discussion, the psalter was approved in 1646, yet this is still not the version we have today. The Scots took the psalter back to Scotland where it again underwent review and scrutiny, was sent out to the churches and was rewritten and revised until less than 10 percent of Rous' original work remained. It was finally published in 1650. The end result was indeed well-worth the labor and time and it is still arguable that the level of accuracy mixed with verse has never been matched. The end result was something which the men who worked on it believed to be "more plaine, smooth and agreeable to the Text than any heretofore."

In many ways the SMV was the culmination and polishing of the previous psalters. No psalter is perfect but this psalter was examined by some of the godliest and most knowledgeable men of the day and surpassed all that preceded it. Men expert in Hebrew who might not necessarily be the best at poetry, but were definitely some of the best biblical scholars labored to make certain it was faithful to the original. I also greatly appreciate that it was sent to review to churches, because it is the congregation that will be using it and it usually is not until it is put into practice that the real strengths and weaknesses become evident. The SMV was the best psalter seen up to that point and was to remain the dominant psalter for at least the next two hundred years, perhaps continuing even today.

## **Translation**

David Silversides gives some examples of where "padding" actually captures more of the meaning of the original than perhaps is even present in our Bibles. This is true, but there are also places where the padding seems to be just to fill up the meter, but that is a problem with any non-prosaic translation of the psalms.

One of the biggest features of this psalter is that it is not just a versification, it is a translation into verse—that is, it does not start with the English text, it starts with the Hebrew text. For this reason, some of the language is stilted, but rarely does it depart from the text. Even so, sometimes it does depart (notable examples are usually in alternate versions of the psalm included perhaps for historical reasons).

There are a few places where the translation or versification is either unclear or misleading. One famous example is—

Pure to the pure, thou froward kyth'st  
unto the froward wight.

Though I believe this to be unfair since this is by far the worst offender. Another place where it is misleading is where the line breaks over stanzas, such as Psalm 96 between verses 12 and 13—

Let fields rejoice, and ev'ry thing  
that springeth of the earth:  
Then woods and ev'ry tree shall sing  
with gladness and with mirth  
Before the Lord; because he comes,  
to judge the earth comes he:

Since musically the tune ends at “mirth”, to the ear (which cannot hear punctuation), it makes it sound as though “he” is coming before the Lord to judge the earth. It is at least potentially confusing. Verses which rely on punctuation to make the meaning clear can be sources for confusion.

Another place I find strange is Psalm 136, where in the first version each stanza translates the same Hebrew phrase both as “for mercy hath he ever” and “for his grace faileth never”. I just wonder why they chose to translate the same word in both the positive and the negative and the only reason I can think of is for variety, but that seems almost like it is an attempt to improve God’s word. The second version of Psalm 136 is also a bit loose. For example, verse 10 is given as—

To him that Egypt smote,  
Who did his message scorn;  
And in his anger hot  
Did kill all their first-born

Which if it is compared to Scripture, adds quite a bit to what is given in the AV as “To him that smote Egypt in their firstborn.”

But these examples are limited. In general the translation is very accurate and can be relied upon and learned from. In general, the language is very outdated (no one speaks like this today) and much of the grammar is convoluted (e.g. “makes me down to lie”) but can still be understood if one takes the time.

## Music

There is no music proper to this psalter, but the entire psalter was designed around the 8.6.8.6 meter and each psalm has at least one selection in this meter. This is also called *Common* or *Ballad* meter because it was the meter to which popular or common ballads of the day were sung. The translators wanted the common people to be able to sing the psalms readily to the tunes they already knew.

This feature of the psalter is in my mind one of its great strengths, and also one of its great weaknesses. It is a strength because you need only learn one tune and can then make use of the entire psalter (note that this is strongly advised against). This can be great for people who know only a few tunes and are unable to learn more.

It is also a weak feature because it gives something of a sameness to the psalms though, the introduction of some CMD tunes can help mitigate this. It also forces the translation into a certain rhythm and one gets the impression that only having eight and six syllables alternating is what contributed to some of the words feeling like they were shoehorned into the reversed-grammar pattern we see in the psalter—some of the longer meter compositions allow for more accuracy and singability just because there is more leeway with the words. Lastly and possibly most importantly, unless one is very careful the tunes can become confused and misused. It is not appropriate to sing a battle march to Psalm 13 for example, nor a dirge to Psalm 1. This has been dealt with in various ways, including offering suggestions for tunes (as *The Scottish Psalmody* does) or tying a tune down to a specific page (as *The Comprehensive Psalter* does). It is still my impression that the variety of CM tunes is limited.

To me it is also important to have tunes “married” to psalms, as it both helps many with memorization and also helps to set the mood and tone.

In my opinion, the benefit of having all the psalms in CM has largely been eclipsed by the amount of tools available to an individual today. We can readily learn new songs from a plethora of recordings and have no need of being tied to just one meter. Nevertheless, this may certainly still be a strong point for some people only comfortable or confident in learning a few tunes.

## Conclusion

Has the SMV stood up to the test of time? There are many things to commend it. Many of the commissioners from the Westminster Assembly

worked on it and approved it as faithful. Perhaps more importantly to me, it was approved by the entire Scottish Church and was not just the work of a single individual. It has a long and faithful history and has been well-loved by the church.

The Scottish church was approached around 1880 as part of the United Presbyterian movement to update the psalter and while they acknowledged that the psalter was old, the language was outdated, and that it had some defects, yet they also said that it had been ingrained in the minds and hearts of the Scottish people for so long as to be almost a part of their being and they chose not to revise it. Sadly there are very few Scottish psalm-singers left, and perhaps the revised *Sing Psalms* version was one of psalm-singing's last gasps in Scotland. We can only pray that it will prove to be the case.

So here is where I become controversial and I am sure will stir up many disagreements. I have sung this psalter a lot and love it, but despite all it has to offer I cannot recommend its continued use simply because of the language barrier.

Let me clarify: I cannot *personally* recommend its use for *congregations*. I can definitely see using it in a family, for private devotions, for 1650 psalter gatherings, for Reformation Day, or quite a few other events. But for general singing in the congregation, I feel that to continue using it is rather introspective. I say that because if the psalter is used for historical reasons, for continuity reasons, or even for accuracy to the AV reasons, the focus seems to be on the existing members of the congregation, and that is a dangerous place to be. No, I am not advocating being seeker-friendly but I do feel that the only person who will be impressed with the use of the SMV and AV when they visit a congregation are people who are already looking for that, or are perhaps literature majors. The rest will probably think it is some kind of cult or dead church. I interact with my co-workers regularly and invite them over for supper and family worship. I cannot in good conscience hand them a 1650 psalter and say "here, now you have God's word in your own language so you can sing to him. Enjoy." Or my Jewish co-worker, who though we share the psalms, would look at this as completely Scottish and arcane.

Any objection, any difficulty can be surmounted. Some will say the language is more accurate so we should use it but I honestly think there are modern psalters that one will not suffer or lack anything from using so that claim seems empty to me. If we truly wanted to be accurate we should just go straight to the text. It is clear that the language is archaic, obsolete, and is not the tongue of the common people. The Scottish commissioners rejoiced in the fact that their version was more fluid than any preceding it,

and readily accessible. If it is not so today, do you think they would have revised it? It can be learned, it can be loved, but again it seems introspective to do so. Perhaps the objection is that there are no suitable alternatives. I disagree but respect that.

Perhaps your congregation is different but we have on occasion a good many students in ours. We have foreign visitors, and recently one person who had never been to church before. We welcome these kinds of interactions. Introducing psalm singing to brand new Christians is a joy. We are not trying to please them but at the same time we try to make no attempt to please ourselves at their cost. It has been said that this psalter has been blessed so much that we should seriously consider before moving to something else. I would also like to add that with something so vitally important to the lifeblood of the common Christian, putting up artificial barriers is something that should be seriously considered. At least consider bearing with the weaker brother who would find this an unnecessary obstacle.

So once again, I love this psalter, I use it regularly. I have no problem with the language personally and know my children would not either. But I am also glad that our congregation does not use it in worship and that there are very suitable alternatives which give us God's words accurately and in our own tongue. And if while traveling I come across brothers and sisters who are still using this excellent psalter, I will gladly join them in praising God using it.

## 2 The Comprehensive Psalter

The text of this psalter is from the 1650 Scots Metrical Version (SMV) so I will not review the text itself. I do not know if this psalter is available for purchase any longer as the fpcr.org catalog appears to have disappeared.

### Background

Others could give far more information on the history of the psalter but this is how I understand it. The Texas congregation, under the direction of Richard Bacon, had been using RPCI's split-leaf psalter for a while but replacements were either expensive or hard to get and were less sturdy for pew psalters (and after seeing children using psalters one can guess why that was a concern!). The RPCI psalters were indeed a bit fragile. For this reason they decided to create their own, sturdy pew psalter. Yet split-leaf psalters were too impractical to produce so it was decided for both practicality and cost to have a single page with music above and psalm stanzas below. "Comprehensive" refers to the entirety of the psalter as being valuable to the Christian in worship.

### Format

The binding is sturdy and of good quality, simple and elegant. The pages too are good paper and should stand up to plenty of use.

One of the interesting things about this psalter is that it is split into sections with the intention that if you sing a section a day, and all six sections again on Sunday, you will have sung twice through the psalter in the year.

Interestingly, the committee (or session) chose to use some of the "second versions" in the main portion, but allowed for the "first version" in the "alternative version" section at the end of the psalter.

### Typesetting

The typesetting is clear and the font easy to read. Psalm headings (i.e. "A Psalm of David") are included and fit well. One complaint I have, (and perhaps that is just preference) is that the heading showing the portion of the psalm (i.e. "Psalm 29:1-6") is in a sans-serif font while the rest of the psalter is in serif. I found it somewhat jarring to the eye, but I admit that is minor.



A second complaint I have is that it is sometimes confusing when singing through the entirety of a psalm that no distinction is made between entire psalms and psalm portions in the headings. An example of these headings is “Psalm 22:1–10” which is only the first 10 verses of 31 total, while “Psalm 23:1–6” is the entire psalm. It becomes confusing if one turns the page and finds out they already sang the whole psalm. This has annoyed me to the point where I have even considered using a sharpie to make the correction. But my bibliophilia will not allow me.

The third complaint is that the CM lines have been combined (i.e., instead of 8, then 6 on the next line, it is 14 per line). This makes it a little more difficult to sing “line by line” and I find myself losing my place sometimes if I have to glance away. I suspect this was done in the interest of space.

The indices are very useful and contain first lines, tunes, composer’s names, and a glossary of unfamiliar words. I also find the “loudness notation” *mf*, *m*, *mp*, etc. to be helpfully placed next to the text. It gives a sense of connectedness and emotion to the psalm as we really focus on the words.

## Music

The music is arranged much in the way of the split-leaf psalter, but without the split. That is, the music is on top and the words are underneath. I find this arrangement very satisfactory because it is much easier for me to read in an entire line and continue singing while tending to say, small children! It is also easier for me if I need to learn the music as it is more compact. I understand the value of having the words and music together (in-between the lines), in learning parts for example, but the more I have sung from a psalter the more I have grown to love the split format as a personal preference.

Many of the tunes are older and while this is nice for historical purposes, some of them are just simply not good tunes in my mind and many of them have a sameness to them. I can read music but my wife cannot and even after singing a tune for 20 stanzas she would still not have the tune memorized. There are some really beautiful old tunes that are easy to learn (Tallis’ Canon comes to mind), but many of the old tunes have a wandering and unpredictable feel to them. I suspect that this was done primarily to avoid copyright issues, the inside page says all the tunes except for two of Ruddell’s are believed to be in the public domain.

That said, the committee really did strive to match tunes to words in a way that was fitting the mood and I think largely did succeed. A while

back I downloaded the MIDI files of all the tunes in the psalter but the link appears to be bad now (along with the psalter link), so if anyone is in need of the midi files I presume I can share them.

I also think that the tunes are in a singable range for the most part, which is nice since very few psalm singers have the range of Sarah Brightman!

## **Conclusion**

I really like this psalter in general and it is probably one of the best media for enjoying the SMV, with the main contestant being *The Scottish Psalmody* by the Free Church of Scotland. I also really like the blue ribbon that comes for marking.

### 3 The Scottish Psalmody

Like *The Comprehensive Psalter* the text of this psalter is from the 1650 Scots Metrical Version (SMV) so I will not review the text itself. It is available for purchase primarily from the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) who sells it through various venues that are a little difficult to track down.

#### Background

Aside from the history of the SMV, I do not know much about the history of this particular publication. My understanding is that it was originally printed by the FCS and then reprinted by the FCSC for use in their congregations but that it has also enjoyed extensive use among other denominations and congregations as well.

#### Format

The psalter is a split-leaf, cloth-bound with a glued binding but fairly sturdy with good quality paper. The edition I have was printed in 2013 but I get the impression that this is a reprint of an earlier edition. The typesetting is not completely clean and it has a little bit of a dated feel to it.

The indices are good, but simple. At the front is a list of tunes and the psalm they are associated with. In the back is a subject index of psalms, to aid in choosing a psalm for various occasions.

#### Words

The words are easy to read but I was disappointed that the convention used in the SMV portion of *Sing Psalms* was not used, such as underlines for two syllables expressed on one note or marks for where one syllable was held for two notes. I liked that because it gave a consistency when singing with others and also a quick note to people unfamiliar with the words that this line had an unusual part to it. It is disappointing for me just because I was hoping for it, but those who have not experienced it or congregations used to the SMV will not miss it.

#### Music

There are about 140 tunes in CM or CMD and another 50 or so in other meters, giving a good selection of music to choose from. Without singing

through all of them they look to be mostly familiar tunes, set at a singable range, and in general easy to learn while still being enjoyable and pleasant.

Much like FCS's publication, *Sing Psalms*, this has suggested tunes and their numbers next to each Psalm, giving an appropriate and consistent setting for each of the 150 Psalms. I find this very useful.

## **Conclusion**

All in all, I really like this psalter for the SMV. My edition had a couple of pages that interfered with the split-leaf portion but I suspect that is not always the case. Despite the lack of singing notes in the text, this is one of the better editions of the SMV for its music. I would like to see a little better binding and page cut, cleaner text, and singing marks for the words but still think it is an excellent edition of the SMV.

## 4 “The Psalter” of 1912

This psalter is still available, and still widely used, primarily in CRC and PRC circles as closely as I can gather. It has the prestige of being a joint effort of 9 denominations, according to its introductory note. In many respects it was an improvement over the lack of fluidity in earlier psalters, but from my standpoint its usefulness is severely marred by its translational methodology.

### Background

Much of my history comes from J.C.K. Milligan’s paper in *The Psalms in Worship*, edited by John McNaugher.

In 1871 the United Presbyterian Church (not very long after it was organized in 1858) published a revised version of the metrical psalter. I have a copy and while I have not thoroughly examined it my general impressions were that the main effort was to update the Scots Metrical Version (SMV) of 1650 in order to make it more fluid and easy to sing. General impressions show that generally this was accomplished while effort was still made to keep as close to Scripture as possible.

In 1879, the Irish Assembly adopted a revision, and in 1889 the American Reformed Presbyterian Synod also issued a revised version, giving four versions in use at the time between different Presbyterian churches.

While the United Presbyterians seem to have been satisfied with theirs, they had a desire for uniformity with other Psalm singers and in 1893 started a movement between 9 churches and a committee of 23 members from them. The first meeting was in 1901 and they met twice a year to compare individual studies and verses, meeting about nine sessions, 10 hours a day, for 10 or 15 days at each session.

### Translation Practices

According to Milligan, the committee was

charged to keep close to the original text, to conform to the language of the Authorized and Revised translations, to avoid extended paraphrases, to provide a variety of meters, and to express the inspired thought with chasteness and elegance of style in accordance with modern standards and tastes. It has been well said that a translation ‘must not be so literal as to convert rich prose into poor verse, not so faithful as to be punctilious in interpretations, nor yet bound to the Hebrew

idioms, while preserving the precise form and color of the inspired sentiment.’

Which is where I would found myself in disagreement. And indeed this seemed to be the case because Milligan then says that it was on this point that the joint committee “met their greatest hindrance to harmonious action.” Little wonder. If I remember correctly, the American Reformed Presbyterian Synod left over this and instead republished their 1889 version. He continues

some shuddered at every word of the original that was omitted, and trembled for the Ark when a word or phrase was added to the text; and yet one or the other must be done or the work would stop.

Their methodology included keeping the names of some nations when they felt this history was important (Ammon, Amalek, Philistia), and in other cases just changed it to a more generic “nations far and near”. Milligan also says this with respect to God’s name:

Jehovah is so often Jesus, ‘whose name every tongue should confess,’ that this name might well be represented by ‘Jesus’ instead of ‘Lord’ or ‘God’; and the use of that precious name would make the Psalms more acceptable to a multitude of Christians, and would obey the divine injunction, ‘whatsoever ye do, in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus.’

I disagree with the above statement and use of the verse. Nevertheless, this explains somewhat the use of the name of Christ throughout this psalter. While I do believe many of these passages are indeed talking about Christ (in light of New Testament exposition), doing this loses the historical meaning where it talks about the original David as well. Rather than a double-meaning (David and Christ) we get only a single meaning. I would think if this practice were warranted, the apostles would have used the name of Jesus in their quotations of the Psalms. I understand there was a push to make the Psalms more palatable to the congregations that already sung hymns as well (Milligan intimates that there were hymn-singers on the committee). Unfortunately it seems like they made them so agreeable that there was less of a distinction between the two and people wondered why they should stick with the limitations of the Psalms. If we are going to change them and make them palatable anyway, why use them at all?

Some phrases were also made more palatable to the sensitive modern ear and we find Psalm 137 referring not to dashing infants on stone, but “How happy he who shall repay the bitter hatred of her foe.”

## Music

For uniformity, the committee usually had one version of the psalm, and the music is probably the best feature of this psalter, in addition to the smoothness they strove for.

## Conclusions

I believe Milligan is correct in extolling the literary excellence of *The Psalter*. It has a pleasant sound to the ear, many of the tunes are well-chosen and married to the text. Unfortunately, as Robert Copeland said in the introduction to *The Book of Psalms for Worship* it "...forthrightly valued elegance and aesthetics over fidelity to the Hebrew text. It simply omitted psalm portions the committee thought tasteless or sub-Christian."

Milligan says

Possibly it is too free for us, and too literal for liberal hymn-singers. Examine it closely, and mark all its failings; but consider it mainly as an introduction of the Psalms to those who have long used the hymns exclusively. The Committee earnestly aimed to make it acceptable to all parties, and the merits of the work are specially due to the zeal and ability of our hymn-singing brethren.

If history is any teacher, it seems that this compromise was devastating, as even the United Presbyterian Church had left exclusive psalmody within a decade or two. It certainly is enough to give one cause for reflection. This psalter might have its place, but that place is not in worship in my mind and I will avoid it for something more faithful.

## 5 Sing Psalms

The entirety of the text is available in PDF or Word format from [here](#). I really appreciate them making it available for people to use freely. It is available for purchase from the above website, from [Crown & Covenant](#), or from Banner of Truth, at varying prices.

### Background

The Free Church of Scotland used the 1650 Scottish Psalter (SMV) for years but somewhere in the 1980s or 1990s a committee was put together to revise the psalter and put it into modern language. This was published in 1994.

### Translation practices

The preface states

Because of the constraints imposed by the use of metre and rhyme, a metrical translation of the Psalms is inevitably freer than a prose translation. But what it may lose in terms of verbal correspondence it compensates for by rendering the Psalms into the metrical idiom to which English language readers are accustomed. A metrical translation is more than a paraphrase which renders in verse certain thoughts suggested by the original passage of Scripture. Sing Psalms is a metrical translation rather than a paraphrase in that every effort has been made to set out in verse what is to be found in the original text. At times compression of expression and also expansion have to be employed to adjust to the metrical format of the English version; this has been done in such a way as to steer a middle course between over-expansion of Scripture and undue omission. . . In its desire not to impose any specific interpretation on the Psalms, the Committee has been careful, in passages which in the light of the New Testament are interpreted as messianic, to avoid a rendering which determines whether the passage is exclusively or typically messianic.

### Formats

The psalter comes in two basic formats: with music, and words only. If you want music you have the choice to do either staff or sol-fa. These are split-leaf. If you choose words-only you have the choice between just a straight, words-only and another slightly more expensive version that additionally has the complete SMV in the back. Both are typeset very clearly and beautifully and are a pleasure to look at. The binding is rugged and should stand up to a good bit of use.



### SMV version in the words-only version

This last version is *fantastic* as they have several means in the text of aiding in pronunciation and singing. This is not so much evident in the new version of the psalms, but in the SMV this is extremely helpful. The three aids are:

- Underlines: where the syllables or words should be on the same note. For example, in Psalm 1:3, “river” and “never” are both underlined. Similarly in Psalm 2:6 we have “appointed” “Zion” and “anointed”.
- Grave accents: where the syllables should be broken to be pronounced. As in Psalm 3:1 “increased” has no accent and is pronounced with two syllables, while in 3:5 there is “sustained`” which is pronounced as three syllables.
- Diaeresis marks: where a portion of a word should be held for two notes. Example in the second version of Psalm 6:1, where “indignätion” has two dots over the “ä”, indicating that this should be held for two notes. Incidentally, holding the note over the vowel in words like this has been my practice as opposed to trying to split up “tion” into two syllables.

So this version is very valuable just for the consistent notes. It is especially helpful when something occurs in the middle of a line instead of at the end so you do not run out of syllables at the end of the line. It could also be extremely helpful for congregational singing to keep everyone on track. My wife and I have found that different families develop different ways of dealing with the idiosyncrasies in the SMV and when we get together to sing with others it can cause a little bit of dissonance.

This psalter is valuable for this reason alone. Even if you never use the *Sing Psalms* updated language, the 1650 psalter is still there and in this format is the most useful and easy to use format I have seen yet, even without music. When singing the SMV, this will be my go-to psalter.

### Staff note version

As with other split-leaf psalters, the main advantage is that you can have the music with the words (which is useful to someone like me who reads music) and yet one can also change the tune if there is a more familiar one or just to change it up and keep the psalm fresh in our understanding. Yet at the same time I really like having the words in verse form underneath. I recognize the useability of psalters that have words in line with the notes,

but for understanding and following along I personally find the versified form more helpful and definitely more helpful for people who do not read music.

As an aside, we had a visitor to church a few weeks back that was not a Christian and was unfamiliar with singing. She said she got confused when we sang the first line of the first bar, then the first line of the second bar (instead of going to the second line of the first bar). Not a problem for someone who is used to singing from written music though.

The psalm portion of the splitleaf is arranged as you would expect and has the psalms numbered in the outer margin of each page for reference as you thumb through (so many pages would have a large “119” on the outer margin of both the recto and verso pages). Additionally the pages are numbered at the bottom in numerical order so one could say either “turn to Psalm 117” or “turn to page 329”.

The music portion is arranged by meter, so the first 100 tunes or so are all CM, the next section is CMD, then LM, etc. So while it might be awkward that psalm 2 might use the 200th tune (thus you are on a beginning page in the psalm half but later page in the music half), this makes it easier to change the tunes up by flipping a few pages to the right or left.

Each psalm is headed with two or three suggested tunes and sometimes tunes suggested for different portions of the psalm. I found this very helpful so that we can keep with a consistent tune if we choose and not haphazardly fit a different tune to Psalm 3 each time we use it. Each of the suggested tunes is fitted to the psalm’s tone to set the appropriate mood (no rousing marches to Psalm 137 please).

One big thing about the music arrangement is that it appears to be very easy to sing (it does not go too high or too low for the average singer). The arrangements in *Sing Psalms* seem well-suited to singing harmonies.

## Music

Many tunes are very familiar to users of other Psalters. St Peter is in the suggested list for Psalm 1, for example, and we found other tunes that we were familiar with from the *Book of Psalms for Singing*. There are many, many new tunes that are modern. I know this because the author’s name has only one date next to their name and then a dash! I found a number of these tunes on a hymn website so it appears they were not necessarily composed for this psalter by members of the church. One of the things I was pleasantly surprised to find is that all of the tunes I looked at were very easy to follow. Some CM and CMD tunes are rather... tuneless? Boring?

Hard to pick up on or hum? There have been some tunes I'll try to use for our family and even after 20 stanzas my wife still has not quite got the meandering tune. That can be a problem. These tunes I found I was able to sight-read and follow along after listening to the tune once or twice, even the ones in a minor key. That is a major success in my mind, even if it means not using more complex yet beautiful tunes.

My complaint with the tunes so far has been that there is not a lot of support for them. I found some on a hymn site and found [one site](#) that has some congregational singing on some of the psalms but not all of them by any means. So people who are not musical may have difficulty learning many of the tunes in there, which cuts out a large portion of the value.

## Conclusions

I have compared by Bible to this psalter and found some instances where I thought they did a better job than the SMV and some instances where they were more loose. Both versions have some amount of padding and both capture the meaning, line-by-line and often word-by-word of what I have in my Bible and what I can glean by looking at Strong's Hebrew numbers. Both are far superior (by some criteria) to the RPCNA *Book of Psalms for Worship* and that does please me. After using the psalter for a while, I have found no problems with it yet. The text appears to be very close to the original and even places where it seems to differ slightly I find that the Hebrew allows for these nuances, or in some cases the psalter translators were closer to the Hebrew idiom than the prose translators.

I may have different expectations and criteria for a psalter than many others, but I find this one meets mine very well. I like the split-leaf format for the ease of musical choice, I like having the entire psalm versified and placed together for the purposes of singing the entire psalm. I also really like the accuracy I have seen so far and yet the ease with which it can be sung. My wife and I both characterized it as much, much smoother than the SMV and also more easy to understand without so much convoluted grammar. And places where I have found it loose I may just being picky, much like I can be picky with the SMV, but I am not sure. This demands more study. No version will be perfect but some will be better depending on the criteria and I have been thoroughly pleased with this psalter.

## 6 Psalms for Singing: A 21st Century Edition

It is hard to find information on this psalter, whether it be from its own website or others. I do not think a good review can be done without extensive use of the psalter and I just simply do not have the time to devote to this particular one so will give my impressions and findings so far. It is available for purchase from both [Crown & Covenant](#) and from [Covenant Books](#).

### Background

The psalter was produced by and primarily for the use of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland. My understanding is that the practice of their 1979 version had been to use the old 1650 Scottish Metrical Version and simply add new versions to it, but in 1990 they decided to completely update the psalter. From the preface:

In 1990 a Petition was brought to the Synod of the R. P. Church of Ireland urging Synod, ‘to commission the Psalmody Committee to proceed with a modern version of the Psalter with the utmost haste.’ The Committee had already been giving serious thought to this matter and in its report to the Synod had asked it to advise, ‘on the whole matter of future revision.’ Synod subsequently commissioned the Committee to proceed with a complete revision of the 1979 Psalter. The following year Synod approved the following strategy:—

1. The words must be an accurate translation of the original.
2. The meaning must be readily understood. Thus archaic language must be replaced and contorted syntax eliminated. Awkward and contracted words should be avoided.
3. While we should strive for rhyme we should not be limited by an absolute necessity for it.
4. New tunes with new metres should be incorporated. It was later agreed that unused tunes be deleted.
5. Some well-loved Scottish Metrical versions should be retained side by side with the revisions.
6. This strategy should be applied to versions currently available rather than starting from scratch with only the Hebrew text. (It was later agreed that the main resources for revision groups should be Hebrew interlinear text, the New American Standard Version and the New International Version, together with the past and current Psalters of the R. P. Church of Ireland and the R. P. Church of North America and the revised versions of the Free Church of Scotland and the Presbyterian Church of Eastern

Australia. The co-operation of the last three bodies in giving permission to use ideas and portions is gratefully acknowledged.)

7. As new versions become available these should be sent round the congregations for use, comment and helpful suggestions.

## **Translation practices**

As noted in the preface and committee strategies, the psalter is largely a compilation of versions from various psalters used by other denominations rather than a completely new translation. This is evident both by the meters chosen for various psalms and even the tunes, many of which I was quite familiar with. The words were slightly altered from the versions I knew but whether that was for better or worse I do not know without studying it in more detail.

Like most psalter revisions, the committee had a goal of eliminating contorted syntax. This was largely successful but there are a surprising number remaining. For example in Psalm 119 Part 22A “True to your word, me wisdom give”.

They do include a number of regularly used SMV selections but not too many to be overwhelming. This was a good choice since the goal was a new psalter.

Archaic language appears to have been removed completely, except for the historical selections which seem to always be a second or third version of the psalm.

## **Formats**

The version I bought was a slim, cloth-bound split-leaf version, with a glued binding. The paper is a little thinner which helps on size. The pages are generally easy to turn and nicely set and seems relatively well-constructed but I do wonder how well this would stand up to regular congregational use.

It is very nicely typeset and quite pleasant to look through. Several indices are included but they are fairly simple. There is one at the front which lists Psalms by category (Laments, Penitential, and Praise) and at the rear there is one metrical index of tunes and one alphabetical.

My main complaint with the format is that there does not seem to be any recommended tune selections for a given psalm. I suppose it is easy to pencil this in but I would suspect that different congregations will choose widely different tunes. This may be the current practice of the denomination and so not a problem for them but I really appreciated the tune recommendations

found in *Sing Psalms* that would offer some consistency from congregation to congregation.

### **Music**

From a brief look through the music it looks very easy to follow, nicely set, and offers a wide variety. Since this was a compilation and revision of other psalter versions I do recognize a lot of the tunes. I really do not have much to comment on this particular aspect except to say that it looks quite useable.

### **Conclusions**

This is clearly a labor of love by an entire denomination and has much to commend it. I particularly like that the work was split up between many committees that were trained in the work and that this work was sent around to congregations for testing and approval before being put into use. I think we could learn from that example, even as they undoubtedly were following the Scottish Church's practice with the development of the 1650 psalter.

It seems like this is suited more to a particular denomination and their history but also appears to be quite accurate and easy to use. Aside from some minor things that makes *Sing Psalms* superior, I am not sure which psalter I would recommend: both appear to be excellent choices but the *Sing Psalms* has a higher physical quality. Without using both extensively I could not say which would be the more accurate to the text as both seem to follow the original quite closely.

## 7 The Complete Book of Psalms for Singing with Study Notes

This psalter is put out by the Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia and was largely under the direction of Rowland Ward. Two distinct thoughts came to my mind as I looked through this psalter: first that it is apparent it is a labor of love. Second, that it feels somehow cobbled together. I was not certain what to expect with this psalter and found myself surprised in a couple of instances. For example, it is far more of a compilation from other psalters than a new translation. It is available from [Crown and Covenant Publications](#).

### Background

The preface states that even though there still remain churches that hold to exclusive psalmody, these churches are slow to provide fresh renderings, in current English, to share with the wider church. It is my impression that it was out of a recognition that the Scottish Metrical Version (SMV) is dated and that some modern versions are more of paraphrases, that led Mr Ward to attempt the publication of this psalter. He states that these selections have been put together with a view to accuracy, and for the most part I believe he succeeded, although it is largely the compilation of previous psalters instead of his own composition.

### Format

The book comes hard bound with two ribbon strips for marking. Inside are plenty of appendices and at the front an explanation of the psalter and the use of metrical psalms. Also included are brief (single-paragraph) notes on each of the psalms which gives an explanation and ties it into the New Testament with cross-references. These are especially helpful and I liked the idea very much.

The paper is of reasonable quality, presumably it was to make the book thinner but I find it has a little too much bleed-through from the other side to really suit me. Perhaps if a whiter paper were used instead of grey that would help with the contrast. It is here though that the “cobbled” nature of the psalter is really evident. There does not appear to be any consistency in formatting. The general format is to have two bars of notes on top with the words in stanzas underneath but sometimes the notes are on the left page and words on the right. Some times the words are in double-column, sometimes

the words go from the right page to the top of the next page, with music underneath them instead of at the top of the page. Sometimes it transitions from single to double-column. It is not the most elegant arrangement.

From what I can tell, the psalms are printed in their entirety instead of portions, though occasionally a psalm will have a portion in addition to the full psalm. Though I am not certain why, sometimes the portion comes after the full psalm, and sometimes comes before, as with Psalm 72, where verses 17–18 are “version A” and the entire Psalm is “version B”.

## Translation

The preface states

The translation is a rendering in international English, with reasonably natural word-flow, rhymed in about 50% of cases. A conservative approach to textual problems has been adopted, novelty for its own sake avoided, and a real effort made to render into a metre which respects the structure of the particular psalm and enables logical units to be of singable length. . . Compression or expansion of the parallel parts of a verse has sometimes been necessary, but care has been taken to convey the meaning with fidelity. In respect of overall accuracy, a considerable improvement on most earlier psalters has been gained by avoiding large additions of paraphrase that waken the force of the original. Care has been taken to render the Divine names accurately:

Elohim, El, etc.	God, Strong One, Almighty
Yahweh	(gracious/covenant LORD, GOD, God of grace, Jehovah
Adonai	Lord, sovereign Lord

However, it should be noted that most of the words are not original to Mr Ward. They are actually a compilation from other psalters. The appendices list several sources which include the 1650 Scottish Psalter, the 1880 Irish Psalter (lightly revised version of the SMV), the United Presbyterian Psalter of 1912, the RPCNA Book of Psalms with Music of 1950, the RPCNA Book of Psalms for Singing of 1973, the PCEA Psalms for Singing of 1983, the Anglo-Genevan Book of Praise of 1984, and the CRCNA Psalter Hymnal of 1984. Some of these have been modified, or corrected from their sources and about 10% seem to be original compositions of Mr Ward’s. In my brief perusal of them they seem to be pretty close in accuracy, even if the language seems a little unpolished at times. And because it came from different sources it becomes a strange amalgamation where sometimes “thee” is used and sometimes it is not, sometimes “hath” is used and sometimes “has”.



## Music

For the most part, the music selections seem appropriate and I appreciate that tunes were chosen which represent the mood of the psalm but are also not terribly difficult to sing. Most were familiar to me from other psalters. I did think it odd that Psalm 137 was set to *Melita* (users of the maroon *Book of Psalms for Singing* will recognize it as the tune of 84B, “Advancing still from strength to strength”). I usually think of that as a rousing tune and dashing infants against stones does not fit in my mind.

The music format is once again, somewhat cobbled. It looks as though it was taken from multiple sources and the shape of the notes, the vocal range, and the formatting of the bars varies from page to page. I almost get the impression that this psalter was pieced together by hand using scissors and a copier.

Midi files are available from the [church's website](#).

## Conclusions

I can appreciate the work that Mr Ward did on this. I like the idea of trying to strive for accuracy, but I question the method. I also really appreciate the notes on the psalms at the beginning and think they are a valuable addition to the psalter. But generally this feels like the love-labor of an individual and not the polished work of a denomination. It feels inconsistent and pieced together and while it may have its use, unfortunately, it is doubtful it stands a chance of becoming widely used or of being a classic.

## 8 Book of Psalms for Singing

This psalter still has and will always have a solid place in my heart: I was first introduced to the singing of psalms using this psalter and many of the words will remain indelibly engraved in my mind. This psalter is available for purchase from [Crown & Covenant Publications](#).

### Background

The RPCNA originally moved from the 1650 Scottish Metrical Version to a version in 1889 that was a relatively minor update of the convoluted language and was not very widely accepted in the denomination. About 1893 the RPCNA sent delegates to join the work on the “Unified Psalter”, which eventually became “The Psalter” of 1912. After working on the committee for over 10 years, the RPCNA decided it had gone a direction they could not continue in and decided to publish their own psalter, using earlier, approved versions of psalms from the unified committee’s earlier work. This was published in 1911 and was a large success among the congregations, the main complaint being a complexity of music. Synod commissioned a revision of the music portion of the psalms in 1919 and another in 1929. Both revisions changed little to the psalter, with the latter adding a couple of additional selections but not changing much of the prior versions. There was another revision in 1950 that also changed little but more than the previous revisions did.

Then in 1973 a more thorough revision gave this, the *Book of Psalms for Singing* and placed our psalter in the tradition of including the text in between the lines of music. Older language was retained but great effort was made to render it easy and fluid to sing.

It comes in a red, hardbound version that is fairly durable and pleasant to use, and about as large as most hymnals due to the many selections.

### Translation

The psalter preface does not say much in the way of translation. In some ways I get the impression that this psalter departed a little from the Hebrew, for whatever reason I do not know. Particularly I would note Psalm 110 where the line “in battle with thine enemies be thou the conqueror” is particularly puzzling to me. Other lines gave me the impression that the biblical text was implying something (like commands to sing psalms) that were not there in the original. Despite these few things, it was still very

close to the original and was helpful for getting God's word into my heart and mind.

## Music

As a beginning Psalm singer (but a long-time hymn singer) I was very happy to find many hymn tunes in the psalter. People have put together lists of well-known tunes that were very helpful to me when I was learning.

Most of the tunes are relatively easy to sing and they often fit the words very well. Particularly I recall 32C being especially compelling to me when I was first introduced. The tunes suffer at times from a pitch that I think it just a little too high for most congregations and from a few complex tunes but generally it was very well done and well-suited to *a capella* singing.

The psalter also gave a wide variety of selections, sometimes having the entirety of the psalm in multiple meters.

The entirety of the music is available in MIDI format from [psalter.org](http://psalter.org).

## Conclusion

One feature of this psalter that I found very likeable is that even though the psalms are divided up (usually no more than six stanzas to a page and tune), they are also set in the same meter across all the portions so that the entire psalm may be sung to a particular tune. Unfortunately in practice many congregations seemingly just stuck with the portion that was on the page and rarely sang multiple portions to get the entire psalm. However, this is not a fault of the psalter.

In general this was a very nice psalter and one which introduced many Christians to psalm singing. It still leaves a very strong impression on me and I am grateful that it was published. It is a little dated though, and I would have a hard time recommending this as a primary psalter with several other good options available. Generally I would recommend either *Sing Psalms* or the RPCNA's 2009 *Book of Psalms for Worship* if one is looking for a modern psalter.

## 9 Book of Psalms for Worship

I remember my excitement and anticipation (for several years) surrounding the new Psalter for my denomination (RPCNA). I knew the committee had been working on it for years and when it was finally printed and I got to see the preview copies given at synod I was very impressed. Now the dust has settled and I have had time to use it extensively. This psalter in its various forms is available from [Crown & Covenant Publications](#).

### Background

The psalter contains some excellent material in the front, including a history of psalm singing and a discussion of the use of the psalter and how Christ is worshiped in them.

The RPCNA originally moved from the 1650 Scottish Metrical Version to a version in 1889 that was a relatively minor update of the convoluted language and was not very widely accepted in the denomination. About 1893 the RPCNA sent delegates to join the work on the “Unified Psalter”, which eventually became “The Psalter” of 1912. After working on the committee for over 10 years, the RPCNA decided it had gone a direction they could not continue in and decided to publish their own psalter, using earlier, approved versions of psalms from the unified committee’s earlier work. This was published in 1911 and was a large success among the congregations, the main complaint being a complexity of music. Synod commissioned a revision of the music portion of the psalms in 1919 and another in 1929. Both revisions changed little to the psalter, with the latter adding a couple of additional selections but not changing much of the prior versions. There was another revision in 1950 that also changed little but more than the previous revisions did. In 1973 a more thorough revision gave the *Book of Psalms for Singing* and placed our psalter in the tradition of including the text in between the lines of music. Older language was retained but great effort was made to render it easy and fluid to sing.

After a more than a decade of work the psalter revision committee completed the latest revision and it was published in 2009. It is a complete reworking of the psalter to bring it up to modern-day language, much like the FCS’ and RPCI’s recent psalter revisions.

## **Format**

The psalter looks absolutely beautiful. Bars of musics are standardized so that opposing pages no longer look mismatched. Everything is clean and easy to read and follow. The psalter's colophon states they used Adobe's InDesign and Stempel Garamond for the text. I believe this is very appropriate. Each psalm is clearly labelled with the verses that it includes and also has a verse from the New Testament at the top of each selection, appropriately tying in Scripture with Scripture.

All in all, this is one of the most beautiful music books I have seen, psalter or hymnal.

The psalter comes in four basic formats (excluding a limited edition, and spiral-bound "large print" edition):

### **The Standard "Pew" edition**

Very sturdy and hardbound, better quality than the old hardbound *Book of Psalms for Singing*.

### **The Softcover edition**

Perhaps helpful for precentors who use a stand or for laying flat on a surface, it is softbound, thin, and lays open easily. It is full-size, however.

### **The Mini Psalter**

This is quite popular among the youth in our church. It is about the same thickness and paper as the larger editions but shrunk down to about half the size and with a soft cover. Note that this is not for people with poor eyesight! 4 by 6 inches.

### **The Thin Mini**

Also 4 by 6 inches and probably my favourite edition, this soft-cover edition uses thinner paper to cut the thickness down by at least half. Slightly larger than a pocket Bible, still very readable, and yet very portable.

Also available is a PDF version available by license at a reasonable price for those who would like to use it with a projector in their congregation. From the iTunes app store there is a very nice app available for iPad that shows the full sheet of music and allows one to play midi files. The Android app is less featured as of this time and no development has been done on it in over a year.

## Translation

There was a good amount of concern when the new psalter was released. Many had become very familiar with the 1973 “maroon” psalter and were reticent to give it up. Others liked the stylistic language of the old psalter and saw no reason to update it to modern English. There was even one letter to the editor in the RP Witness that thought this change of language (from thee and thou) would be “only detrimental” to the church!

However one feels about it, I do think the committee did a reasonable job with what they set out to do and that was to revise the 1973 psalter into modern English. To do so they

consulted both the Old Testament Hebrew and modern English Bible translations (e.g., NASB, ESV, NIV, NKJV) throughout its work, seeking always to be sensitive to the wide array of matters that related to such a revision project: accuracy, clarity, readability, singability, and various nuances of poetic genre.

The translations are noticeably loose in some areas (as was the older psalter). I think the meaning is still captured and nothing false is taught, but where you fall on the “literal” versus “singable” spectrum will determine whether you like this or not. I had one person tell me that in his scrutiny of the Psalter before it was published that he found the 1973 to be more faithful to the Hebrew in about half the time and the new psalter to be more faithful about 1/3 of the time, with the remaining 1/6 of the time them being about equal.

Regardless, the text has been made much, much more singable in my mind. Awkward phrasing and archaic words have been eliminated and some of the repetitive rhyming has been corrected. It flows smoothly and is very understandable for the common person. We have had many people visit our congregation and enjoy singing the Psalms with us.

In the first edition there were some psalm portions that I believe violated the principle of not tampering with Scripture (inserting “allelujah amen” as a refrain for example). Synod quickly addressed these and subsequent editions have had these offending psalms removed.

## Music

The music has been vastly improved in my mind. Many new tunes have been added and several old, difficult tunes have been removed. Psalm 119X is still included but as 119W now. Oddly, to my mind, many think this tune is far too difficult, and all I can it is quite beautiful when all the parts are

going and it is really not that difficult once shown (and once it is pointed out that the melody is the tenor line).

There really are some beautiful new tunes, some done by members of the denomination and the marriage of words to music is better than I have ever seen done before. 42D and 16D are excellent examples of this. 13B and 99A have become congregational favorites.

There are still a few psalms where “filler” lines are included that, for example, repeat the last line sung. I dislike this personally.

## Conclusion

My main complaint (and it is a big one) is that one cannot sing through all the psalms. Let me explain. This is not a problem for some because they only ever sing psalm *portions* anyway (when is the last time you sang through all of Psalm 68?). I have been increasingly convicted however that we have moved away from the practice of psalm singing and moved toward psalm *portion* singing. Sometimes our congregation only ever sings the second half of a psalm and we miss the context of the first half (perhaps how oppression in the first half turned to praise in the second). As such, we are in danger of singing only those portions we like, as opposed to singing the whole counsel of God.

The old 1973 psalter was very conscientious about this and would have the entire psalm in the same meter, sometimes the entire psalm would be in several different meters, but you could still sing through the entirety with each. This is no longer the case. Excluding Psalm 119 (which naturally is broken into selections) I count 14 psalms that cannot be sung all the way through. An additional 4 can be done, but awkwardly because they combine say, 86.86.86 with CM selections. An additional one can be done but only if you repeat two verses.

Additionally, there are another 25 psalms where only a portion of the psalm is available for that specific meter. So while Psalm 95 can be sung in entirety in selections A, B, and C put together, D is just a fragment and if you use this tune you cannot sing the whole psalm.

As I said, this is not a problem for everyone and as far as I know I seem to be the only one who has noticed this. I have had several people say they do not recall this ever coming up at synod or the Psalter reviews so I can only assume it was an oversight and not intentional. I am in the process of writing a letter to synod and I hope that this will be addressed in future editions, as I believe it to be theologically important.

Nevertheless, this is an excellent psalter, though not as word-for-word

accurate as other psalters. If there are theological issues with how something is translated I would be glad to have it pointed out. I have not yet seen the RPCI psalter but the only one that I would place in contention with this psalter overall, for congregational use, is FCS's *Sing Psalms*. In music/text marriage it is superior and in overall format I really love it. It is delightful to be blessed with such a beautiful and up-to-date Psalter to use in the church. One of the really nice things is that all of the tunes are available on [Psalter.org](http://Psalter.org) and [Crown & Covenant](http://Crown & Covenant) also sells CDs with the psalms being sung quite beautifully by various groups. There are also some congregational recordings of some of the psalm selections available at [www.thepsalmssung.org](http://www.thepsalmssung.org).