

Gavin Douglas Biography

Gavin Douglas

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Contents

Gavin Douglas Biography.....	1
Contents.....	2
Biography.....	3

Biography

The Scottish poet, prelate, and courtier Gavin Douglas (ca. 1475-1522) is best known for his vigorous translation of Virgil's *Aeneid* into Scots, the English of the lowlands of Scotland. He is sometimes listed among the Scottish Chaucerians.

Gavin Douglas was the third son of Archibald "Bell-the-Cat" Douglas, 5th Earl of Angus, a man of distinguished family, very active in court affairs. Little is known about Gavin's early life, but he entered the University of St. Andrews in 1490 and earned a master of arts degree in 1494. He may have studied law at Paris under the distinguished Scottish theologian John Major (or Mair).

Douglas soon rose in ecclesiastical preferment and was appointed provost of St. Giles Church, Edinburgh, about 1501. About this time he wrote *The Place of Honor*, a poem in the form of a dream vision; in it he emphasizes the difference between worldly honor and true honor before God. He probably spent some time abroad, in England, France, and Italy, during the early years of the 16th century.

Douglas completed his translation of Virgil in July 1513. It includes not only the original 12 books of the *Aeneid* but also the thirteenth book, composed by Mapheus Vegius in 1428. Douglas wrote a prologue for each book, and these prologues contain interesting material reflecting the critical, philosophical, and moral commonplaces of the time. Rather than translating "word for word," Douglas followed the advice of St. Gregory the Great and translated "meaning for meaning." Moreover, he made Virgil's characters act and speak like his own contemporaries. There are frequent turns of phrase reminiscent of Geoffrey Chaucer. The result is an extremely lively and effective poem that has won high praise from modern critics.

After the disastrous Battle of Flodden in 1513, in which James IV and much of the Scottish nobility, including the elder brothers of Gavin Douglas, perished, Douglas ceased writing poetry and devoted himself to court affairs. The widowed Queen Margaret, who married Douglas's nephew Alexander, assisted him considerably. He was made bishop of Dunkeld but was imprisoned for a time in 1515-1516 and could occupy his see only by making a show of force to dislodge another contender for the office. He died in London in 1522.