

The Reformation in Scotland

As in other countries, the Reformation in Scotland was partly the product of political machination. Nevertheless, while there was a connection between Scottish nationalism and the campaign for Reform, it is clear that, when Reformation came, it was not simply the result of political expedience. There was, in fact, a profoundly spiritual side to the Scottish Reformation and a genuine desire to inaugurate a godly Commonwealth.

The fact was that the pre-reformation Church in Scotland suffered from numerous abuses and was in dire need of reform. Up to about 85 per cent of parishes had 'their revenues directed to support bishops, abbeys and the more central churches' leaving local priests impoverished and, due to low standards of education, unable to conduct effective pastoral ministry.¹ To some extent the Church was manipulated by the monarch and by the nobility and its remoteness from Rome tended to divorce it slightly from papal authority. In different regions, the church was linked to the leading local families which rendered it economically dependent while an agreement between James V (1512-42) and the pope had enabled Scottish kings and queens to levy taxes on prelates. Several of James's illegitimate sons were made titular abbots with revenues from the abbeys going to the crown. Thus, whereas Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries in order to appropriate their wealth, in Scotland the church already contributed to the crown's income. All this made a legal, crown-sponsored Reformation, as happened in England, unlikely.

Alongside this James hated Lutheranism and, though he wanted to exercise control over the church in Scotland and was rumoured to be considering a similar reform to that of Henry's England, he desisted. Indeed, in 1541 an act was passed endorsing Catholicism and making it a capital offence to reject papal authority. Another act exhorted 'archbishops, ordinaries and every prelate and kirkman' to reform 'in habit and manners to God and man'.² James made David Beaton (1499-1546), nephew of James Beaton, Archbishop of St Andrews, his closest advisor. Beaton held a bishopric in Languedoc and cultivated relationships with the French in order to strengthen Scotland against the apparent threat from England, which was governed by James's uncle, Henry VIII. Beaton secured the king's marriage first to Madeleine, daughter to king Francis, and then to Mary of Guise. This would have profound repercussions in Scotland, in Scottish relationships with England and in the subsequent history of the Scottish church.

According to Michael Graham, there were three reasons why the Reformation took hold in Scotland.

¹ R. Tudur Jones, *The Great Reformation: From Wyclif to Knox – Two Centuries that Changed the Course of History* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1985), p. 185.

² Quoted in Harry Reid, *Reformation: The Dangerous Birth of the Modern World* (Edinburgh: St Andrews Press, 2009), p. 161.

1. There existed a small, regional and rather weak indigenous movement which sought reform. Despite its weaknesses, it was able to ensure that the matter of Reform would emerge from time to time and it paved the way in a number of regions for the Reformation to be adopted fairly quickly.
2. The Church could not exercise independence because it was linked so closely with the local nobility.
3. Political factors over the course of the sixteenth century made it expedient for leaders of Scottish society to adopt the Protestant cause.³

There is little evidence of Lollard influence in Scotland though there were undoubtedly Lollards in the country. John Knox (c.1514-72) recorded the trial of a group of Ayrshire Lollards in 1494, accused of denying transubstantiation, the efficacy of praying to the dead, papal authority and advocated marriage of clergy. They were apparently acquitted. Although there is no independent evidence to corroborate Knox's account, we know that Ayrshire was one of the first regions to embrace reformation, which suggests the possibility that there had been some historical antecedents in that area.

The Scottish parliament became concerned at the distribution of Lutheran books in the early 1520s, with a ban on their sale being implemented in 1525. In 1528, Patrick Hamilton (c.1504-28), great-grandson of James II (1430-60) and educated at St Andrews, Paris and Wittenberg, became the first Protestant martyr when he was lured by the duplicitous James Beaton, Archbishop of St Andrews, detained, condemned and burned at the stake on 29 February. He was followed by David Straiton at Edinburgh in 1534 and, most famously, by the charismatic and popular George Wishart (c.1513-46). Wishart is probably the most significant of the protestant 'martyrs' in Scotland given that he had adopted a Zwinglian stance and his advocacy of preaching and the eradication of ritual caused outbreaks of iconoclasm in Ayrshire. He was burned at the stake on 1 March 1546 at the insistence of David Beaton, who by that time had succeeded his uncle as Archbishop of St Andrews. His death marked the downfall of Beaton, who had been influential at Court. Local lairds rose up, stormed the castle and assassinated the Archbishop, ostensibly in revenge for the killing of Wishart, but more probably because of political advantage. John Knox first came to prominence at this time, acting as unofficial chaplain to the murderers as they barricaded themselves into the castle. He had acted as bodyguard to Wishart, walking before him carrying a sword. He had by that time rejected Catholicism, in which he had been priested, and began to preach an evangelical gospel. When the castle was finally bombarded by the French, Knox was sentenced to be a galley slave for life, but he was freed after nineteen months largely through the influence of Edward VI.

These early movement towards Reform appeared to fizzle out, only to re-emerge in the 1550s.

³ Michael F. Graham, 'Scotland', in Andrew Pettegree (ed.), *The Reformation World* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 412.

Although he remained a Catholic, John Hamilton (c.1511-71), Archbishop of St Andrews (from 1546, as successor to David Beaton) sought moderate reform through making the faith understandable in a number of tracts intended for general consumption. He also convened a number of Scottish church councils in 1549, 1552 and 1559. As R. Tudur Jones notes:

The programme was thorough enough and aimed at securing an effective supervision of church life, the better instruction of the laity and the raising of standards of education for the priesthood. But the vested interests of leading clergy in the system as it was, together with the constant bestowal of church revenues upon laymen, particularly by the Crown, nullified all attempts at Reform.⁴

During the 1540s and 1550s, Scottish politics played a particularly important part in the progress of the Reform movements. James V's premature death in 1542 left his daughter, Mary, as queen despite the fact that she was only one week old. Her mother, the French noblewoman Mary of Guise, was regent for most of the next twenty years. Henry VIII sought to marry his infant son, Edward, to Mary, in an attempt to break the power of France in Scotland. However, there was an anti-Englishness developing at the time, exacerbated by 'unremittingly savage'⁵ English invasions in 1544-5 (namely the 'Rough Wooing') and the defeat of the Scottish armies at Pinkie in September 1547. As Protestantism was linked with England, it remained unpopular at this time; Scottish nationalism appeared to lean more towards France and Catholicism than England and Protestantism despite the fact that, in 1543, parliament sanctioned the ownership of a Bible in English (not, be it noted, in Scots). However, in 1553, with the accession of the Catholic queen Mary to the English throne, Protestantism was separated from England and the reform movement began to gain popularity north of the border.

Two forms of dissent emerged in Scotland at this time. A patriotic dissent represented the growing resentment felt at French influence in Scottish affairs. A religious (Protestant) dissent was also growing. When Mary died in 1558, and Mary Queen of Scots declared herself the rightful Catholic heir to the throne (she was descended from Margaret, Henry VIII's older sister), and John Knox arrived back in Scotland in 1559 from his exile in Europe, the two forms of dissent began to converge.

Knox's influence on the Scottish Reformation was immense, though he could not have effected it alone. It is thought that there were a number of 'privy churches' in the lowlands during this time, as well as at St Andrews, Stirling, Dundee, Edinburgh and Perth. These churches appear to have been organized with elders and deacons and they conducted forms of kirk sessions. The congregations would gather to read the scriptures and celebrate communion often using the 1552 Book of Common Prayer. When Knox visited Scotland in 1555 (a time when he was working in Geneva with Calvin) he was impressed by the work which was being done to reform the Church, writing of Protestant activists that their

⁴ R. Tudur Jones, *The Great Reformation*, p. 186.

⁵ Reid, *Reformation*, p. 167.

‘fervency doth ravish me’.⁶ He enjoyed the protection of Mary of Guise and made contact with many powerful people, perhaps paving the way for a permanent return. In 1559, Perth, Dundee and Ayr all adopted the Reformation, which gives rise to the claim that privy churches had paved the way in those areas, though, of necessity, no evidence has survived regarding their existence let alone their practices and membership.

In 1557-8, Mary of Guise hardened her attitude towards the Protestants. The final Protestant martyr, Walter Myln (c.1476-1558), was burned at the stake at St Andrews. The Archbishop, John Hamilton, decided to make an example of him – a miscalculation given that Myln was now over eighty and bravely met his end, telling the massed crowd (which had demanded to hear him) not to be ‘seduced by the lies of priests, monks, friars, abbots, bishops and the rest’.⁷ Myln was the only Protestant to be executed for his faith during the regency of Mary of Guise – a stark contrast with Mary I who, at the same time, was putting around three hundred Protestants to death. At this time, Mary tended to rule through trusted Frenchmen and by bribing Scottish aristocrats while excluding the lairds and nobles from government – the latter being increasingly attracted to Protestantism. Nevertheless, Protestantism, with some notable exceptions, was at this time largely an underground and secret movement. There was no national organization, though it was changing its theology from the early Lutheranism towards a more robust Calvinism.

From this time the ‘Lords of the Congregation’ began to take a more prominent part in events. They had formed in 1557 around a written bond – a traditional way of covenanting in Scotland – which was initially signed by the Earl of Argyll and his son, the Earls of Glencairn and Morton, and John Erskine of Dun. They pledged to

... continewallie applie oure hoill power, substaunce, and oure very lyves to mentene sett forwarde and establische the MAIST BLISSED WORDE OF GOD, and his Congregatione, and sall lawboure, at oure possibilitie, to haif faithfull ministers puretie and trewlie to minister Christed Evangell and Sacraementes to his Peopill.⁸

They also wrote to Knox in Geneva and asked him to return to Scotland.

Although initially unpopular, the Lords seem to have bided their time and became more of a focus for Scottish independence during the final years of Mary of Guise’s regency. Though they remained disorganized, they took advantage of the fact that Protestantism was, in the late 1550s, being openly advocated.

On 1 January 1559, the ‘Beggar’s Summons’ appeared on religious buildings all over Scotland. The document demanded that friars yield their wealth to the poor or have it confiscated. ‘This remarkable document shows the concern for the

⁶ Reid, *Reformation*, p. 176.

⁷ Reid, *Reformation*, p. 178.

⁸ Graham, ‘Scotland’, p. 417.

downtrodden which runs like a silver thread through the history of the Scottish Reformation'.⁹

In May 1559, John Knox landed at Leith. The Scottish Reformation now had a prophet and a leader, one schooled in Calvin's Geneva and able not merely to preach the evangelical gospel, but to impose a new order on the Kirk.

In the summer of 1559, Henry II of France died and his sickly son inherited the throne. The Guise family were more preoccupied with securing continued influence in France than consolidating French power in Scotland. Alongside this, Knox wrote to Elizabeth I pledging to work for perpetual peace between the two nations and negotiations began between the Lords of the Congregation and the man who would become Elizabeth's trusted advisor, Lord William Cecil. Money made its way from England to Scotland, but the Lords did not have sufficient military strength to defeat the massed French troops. Cecil worked on Elizabeth, arguing that the Lords were not technically rebels as Mary of Guise, as regent, was not the legitimate ruler but another citizen. He further convinced her of the threat to England that a French force in Scotland posed. She eventually agreed to send her army and navy north to rid Scotland of the French.

The Lords of the Congregation gradually won a propaganda war to persuade the Scottish that the French were an occupying force and the English were really their allies. This was a greater victory than any of their military campaigns. The Lords of the Congregation raised an army and by the end of July 1559, Dundee, Perth, St Andrews and Edinburgh were under their control. Knox was appointed minister of the Tollbooth, Edinburgh. Although Mary of Guise was able to retake Edinburgh, the Lords met at the Tollbooth on 21 October and declared that she was no longer regent. Mary of Guise died on 10 June 1560; the Treaty of Edinburgh was signed on 6 July ensuring that virtually all foreign troops were to be removed from Scottish lands, Mary Queen of Scots was to eschew all claims to the English throne, a council was to be formed to govern Scotland and a parliament summoned.

The parliament gathered in August 1560 and, although religious matters were beyond its remit, it soon outlawed papal authority, the celebration of the mass and Catholic baptism, and endorsed a Reformed confession of faith (the 'Scots Confession'). Those attending an illegal mass were to be imprisoned; a third offence was punishable by death. The Church of Scotland was to be governed by a democratically elected assembly rather than by the pope or by the monarch. While these moves never gained royal assent, they gradually permeated Scottish society as more and more of the regions embraced the Reformation.

The first Book of Discipline was published in 1561 calling for a new order for the church and claiming the monies confiscated from the old church for the promotion of the new. This latter claim led to the Book being ignored by parliament as many who sat there had benefitted from the previous taxation of the church. The Book 'was an attempt to roll out a completely new society, with

⁹ R. Tudur Jones, *The Great Reformation*, p.189.

very advanced notions of public welfare and education; and it is informed by – for the mid-sixteenth century – a remarkably passionate and compassionate social concern’.¹⁰ This was followed, in 1562, by the Book of Common Order which provided the new church with its liturgy. In so doing, Knox demonstrated that, much as he wanted to maintain the peace with England, his theological and liturgical views had been shaped by Geneva and not by Cranmer (in fact Knox had referred to Geneva as ‘the maist perfyt school of Chryst that ever was in the erth since the dayis of the Apostillis; in other places, I confss Chryst to be trewlie preachit; but maneris and religioun so sinceirlie reformat, I have not yit sene in any uther place’¹¹), and this despite the fact that early Protestants had used the 1552 Book of Common Prayer. Communion was to be celebrated once a month; the high point of the service was the sermon.

The kirk sessions were established and became influential in everyday life. They investigated drunkenness, sex offences, doctrinal error and Sabbath breaking. They administered poor relief and parish education as well as the administration of marriage, birth, baptism and burial. It also called and assessed ministers, of whom there was a distinct lack. The educational provisions were implemented in order to assist in recruiting young, scholarly ministers, while Readers were also introduced who could read prayers and even sermons in the absence of acceptable ministry.

Certainly the events of 1560 were highly significant, though Hans Hillerbrand counsels caution in assessing them:

The chronicler must not overemphasize the import of the events of 1560. Parliament had not been authorized to deal with the religious question, and not until 1567 did the crown finally give legal sanction to the new church. For seven years there was, as one of the Protestant leaders remarked, ‘nothing of our religion established, neither by law nor parliament’. To say that the decision of Parliament in 1560 made Scotland Protestant begs the question of precisely how this occurred. In 1560 a new church was simply recognized, while the structure of the old church was left intact. While 1558 and 1559 had been a rather tumultuous time – Archbishop Parker remarked in England, ‘God keep us from such a visitation as Knox hath attempted in Scotland, the people to be orderers of things’ – the establishment of Protestantism took place quietly. Continuity and gradual change characterized the atmosphere in Scotland in a setting of civil strife.¹²

In August 1561, Mary Queen of Scots, who had been living in France, returned as a widow. She chose to work with the Protestant nobles rather than seek to reconvert the land, on condition that she was able to practice Catholicism. This was agreed, though John Knox opposed the compromise. Mary was unable to act

¹⁰ Reid, *Reformation*, p. 244.

¹¹ Hans J. Hillerbrand, *The World of the Reformation* (London: J. M. Dent, 1975), p. 167.

¹² Hillerbrand, *The World of the Reformation*, p. 169.

as a 'godly magistrate' and was content to allow the church to govern itself, which it did through a general assembly which gathered twice a year. Mary made some unwise decisions regarding marriage – she married her cousin, Henry Stewart (Lord Darnley) who was subsequently murdered just after Mary had given birth to a son (who would become James VI of Scotland and I of England). The queen herself was implicated in the plot. She later married the Earl of Bothwell but following disastrous defeats to the English in 1567-8 she fled to England where she was executed in 1587 for plotting against Elizabeth.

From the 1570s the Kirk was concerned with working out what to do about bishops. They tended to have an administrative task and though James Douglas, Earl of Morton and leader of the infant James's government, sought to reform the Kirk on an English pattern where the church was governed by the crown through royal appointment of bishops, he was unsuccessful. A 'two kingdoms' theory emerged where church and state had separate governments and this was strengthened with the arrival of Andrew Melville (1545-1622) in 1574 to be principal of Glasgow University. Melville would become Knox's successor as the most influential man in the Scottish Kirk.

A second Book of Discipline advocated a Presbyterian system of church order and was adopted by the government in 1581. Once the Book of Discipline had been adopted, there followed an attempt to establish a godly commonwealth based in part on the exercise of discipline through enforced penitence. The government also approved the formation of thirteen presbyteries. James VI attempted to restore the episcopate in the 1590s. However, as Michael Graham argues: 'The ecclesiastical structure of the old church was not abolished; it was merely allowed to wither away while an alternative structure was devised'.¹³ Bishops were eventually abolished in the Kirk in 1639.

The Scottish Reformation, if not completely bloodless, was far less bloody than the English one. This was remarkable, because Scotland was a playground for murderous, lawless noblemen. Very slowly, towards the end of the century, King James VI began to assert some kind of control over them. By that time, Scotland was undeniably Protestant, even if the Kirk was not yet thoroughly Presbyterian. As Harry Reid notes:

The new Church did not sprout into full being overnight. Some towns like Ayr and Dundee, were already well-established centres of Protestant fervor; but, in other communities, especially in the far north, Scotland could still hardly be regarded as a Protestant country. In the Highlands, there was a chronic shortage of new ministers who could speak Gaelic. After six or seven years, there were about 850 ministers to serve almost 1,200 parishes. The minister of the parish of Edinburgh was John Knox, the great exemplar. Not everyone – in fact, nobody – could match his standards. Yet a fast and potent process of evangelization had taken place, In the 1570s and the 1580s when the time came to refresh and renew the

¹³ Graham, 'Scotland', p. 424.

young Church, nobody could deny the essential fact: Scotland was a Protestant country.¹⁴

Alongside this, one further point needs to be made. 'The legalization of the Calvinist faith in Scotland marked the first (and last) instance of a formal establishment of Calvinism anywhere in Europe. The movement was formidable in many places – the Netherlands, France, Hungary – but only in Scotland did it score success'.¹⁵

¹⁴ Reid, *Reformation*, p. 251.

¹⁵ Hillerbrand, *The World of the Reformation*, p. 169.