

The Reformation in Scotland¹

This article from *The Oxford Companion to Scottish History* by Michael Lynch tries to analyse the Scottish Reformation by using four questions formulated by Christopher Haigh to analyse the English Reformation. Was it:

- a rapid Reformation from below?
- a rapid Reformation from above?
- a slow Reformation from below?
- a slow Reformation from above?

For England, Haigh argued that it was:

- a slow Reformation from below
and
- a slow Reformation from above.

For Scotland, Michael Lynch argues, by using different definitions of what a 'Reformation' was, it was essentially:

- a rapid Reformation from above
and
- a slow Reformation from above.

The piece ends by briefly considering the question:

- What were the successes and failures of the Scottish Reformation?

This is a standard question asked of the many Reformations of the 16th century across Europe. A balance sheet such as this is useful because it can reveal historians' definitions of what a reformation essentially consisted of, and what assumptions historians make.

The Scottish Reformation

For generations of Scots, 1560 was the most important year in Scottish history. It has a sense of inevitability about it – the overthrow of an ailing, corrupt institution, the pre-Reformation church, which was rejected quickly and decisively. And for some, there was also a whiff of destiny. As late as 1960, the 400th anniversary of the Scottish Reformation, the professor of Church History at Glasgow University claimed that the Kirk was a 'national symbol' and that 'one may doubt whether there could be a Scotland without it'.

¹ www.educationscotland.gov.uk, accessed 19 April 2013.

History helps us to understand where we are. For many people living in present-day Scotland, the Kirk is no longer a key symbol of national identity. Fewer than 20 per cent of Scotland's adult population are now members of the Church of Scotland.

A rapid Reformation from below?

The Scottish Reformation came late – over 40 years after Martin Luther's first protest in Wittenberg. After its slow start, Protestantism had, from the viewpoint of the authorities, spread at an alarming rate from the mid-1550s onwards. In 1552, after the confused years of the 'Rough Wooing', the execution of George Wishart and the expulsion of the Castilians from St Andrews, including John Knox, into French prisons and galleys, the provincial council of the Church was congratulating itself on the fact that the 'fiery flame of heresy' had gone out.

By 1555 the authorities were worried by a fresh upsurge of heretical, Protestant literature. 'Privy kirks' sprang up in Edinburgh, Angus and Dundee at about the time Knox visited Scotland in the winter of 1555–6. The 'First Bond' of the 'Congregation', which suggested a new level of organisation among the Protestants, was drawn up in December 1557. In September 1558, a Protestant demonstration broke up the annual St Giles' Day procession through the streets of Edinburgh, seized the saint's statue and ritually drowned it in the nearby Nor' Loch.

The revolt of 1559–60 began eight months later with a popular riot in Perth, after an inflammatory sermon by Knox. Over the next seven weeks, the Congregation systematically toured central Scotland, stripping out 'idolatry' as they went. They reached St Andrews on the night of 10 June. The inhabitants went to bed as Catholics. They woke up as Protestants. Overnight, the walls of the parish church were whitewashed, the high altar pulled down, communion rails, choir stalls, organs, statues and side altars all removed. In their place was installed a simple pulpit where they heard John Knox preach on the expulsion of the moneylenders from the Temple.

The Scottish Reformation was carried out in the name of the 'commonweal'. Matthew Parker, archbishop of Canterbury and no friend of Knox, compared events in England, where things had been done with order and decorum, with the extraordinary happenings in Scotland, where, as he saw it, 'the people are the orderers of things'. Parker saw not only a rapid reformation but one from below.

Despite a series of temporary setbacks in the autumn and winter of 1559, the Reformation in Scotland was complete by August 1560. The French troops who had backed the regent, Mary of Guise, had been withdrawn; the regent herself was dead. A parliament, acting in the name of the 'commonalty of Scotland', with an unprecedented 100 lairds drawn from most quarters of Scotland, proscribed the Catholic mass, banned the jurisdiction of the pope and gave authority to a Protestant Confession of Faith, largely drawn up by Knox. A sea change in worship followed quickly.

The Reformation encountered unexpected difficulties after Mary, Queen of Scots, came back to Scotland in August 1561 after the death of her French husband, Francis II. On her return, a band of Protestant demonstrators tried to break into the queen's private chapel at Holyrood to stop the Catholic mass. They were held back but, just eight days later, her official entry into her capital was turned into an extraordinary demonstration of Protestant triumphalism: the Queen was presented by a boy descending from the clouds with the keys to the burgh but also an English Protestant bible and psalm book.

The Queen was treated to a series of demonstrations of Protestant militancy; one piece of street theatre told the story of the defiance of Moses by three heretical Israelites who were consumed by fire. The message could hardly have been more uncompromising. This spectacle was the bluntest confrontation anywhere in 16th-century Europe of Catholic monarchy by a radical Protestantism. It took place just two days before the first of Mary's infamous interviews with Knox. It was small wonder that Mary asked Knox why he obliged her subjects to obey him rather than her.

Protestant expectations were held in check until Mary was deposed in 1567. At that point, at an excited meeting of the General Assembly, there was talk of a second Reformation. After 1567, the prospects of a Catholic revival ebbed quickly away. The new church steadily consolidated its position. By the time John Knox died, in November 1572, the Reformation was utterly secure.

A rapid Reformation from above?

The Reformation was inextricably linked to the power of the nobles and a vacuum in the power of the state. The play *Ane Satire of the Three Estates*, written by Sir David Lindsay of the Mount, was a bitter satire on the corruption and ineptitude of the hierarchy of the church and a blunt warning to incompetent kings; King Humanity spends much of the play in a drunken slumber. Its hero, in most modern productions, is the figure of John the Commonweill and the comic high-point is when he seizes the chance as the King finally falls drunkenly off his throne to jump into it.

This play became one of the best sellers in print of post-Reformation Scotland but the *Satire* was primarily written as a court entertainment, by a royal herald. Played before a court audience, it was a warning, on the eve of the Reformation, of the awful prospects that might follow from a reformation from below, in the hands of the 'rascal multitude'. John was not the hero but represented the threat of what the people, the many-headed monster *Hydra*, might do if kings or bishops fell down on the job.

The Scottish Reformation came late. There is a rough but accurate rule of thumb for reformations in Europe. The later they came, the more rapid and authoritarian they were. In Scotland, a magistrates' reformation took charge, with little or no role for the people. The Congregation which had pushed through the revolt which had stopped short of being a revolution were the *Lords* of the Congregation; the initial five signatories of the First Bond were all from the landed classes. One result was that in Scotland, a

‘revolution’ took place in which virtually no one lost their jobs, in government, the law courts or town councils.

The Reformation parliament, despite the 100 lairds from various parts of Scotland who attended it, was orchestrated by leading nobles. It was their kinsmen or dependants who filled it to overflowing. There was no sudden power grab by a new elite of smaller men. Control of politics rested, as before, with the nobles. Lairds would not attend another parliament in such numbers for another 50 years. The leading nobles commissioned John Knox to draw up a Book of Reformation to present to the parliament. But they were dissatisfied with it, especially with the section on their own role, as godly magistrates. They told Knox to redraft it, and added five other advisers to help him. The odd result was that what we now know as the *First Book of Discipline* was not completed in time for the Reformation parliament and was never fully adopted.

What was clear about the events of 1559–60 is that the nobles were firmly in control. The radicals had key demands: they included an act of uniformity on all clergy and a test act, obliging all office holders in both church and state, ranging from law lords to school masters, to subscribe the new Protestant Confession of Faith; and they wanted the wholesale transfer of the lands of the Catholic Church to the new Kirk. But they achieved none of these things. A test act did not come until 1573; the act of uniformity not until the 1580s; and the wholesale inheritance of the lands and wealth of the Catholic Church never happened. On each of these points the nobles had vital interests. They did not want a radical Reformation in which brother, spouse, kinsman or neighbour would be excommunicated. Society as they knew it would have collapsed if Knox or ‘John the Commonweill’ had been given their head. The nobles opted instead for a drip-feed Reformation – with high ideals but only moral persuasion to back it.

Both Protestant and Catholic landowners already enjoyed possession of much church land through feuing. That process began in the 1530s and it reached a climax 10 years either side of the Reformation of 1560. In towns, the town council, usually dominated by wealthy merchants, remained in control. Above all, the elites saw retaining control as more important than religion. And they succeeded: except for Perth, there is little evidence of popular unrest, still less of significant popular Protestantism.

The result was not so much a Reformation from below, although its organisers would use the rhetoric of popular protest as propaganda – such as the ‘Beggars’ Summons’ of 1559. It was instead a Reformation pushed through and carefully controlled from above, against a backcloth of nervousness about popular discontent and riot. The Reformation began with a noble revolt in 1559–60. It was consolidated by a second revolt, in 1567, when Mary, Queen of Scots was unexpectedly deposed by a coup within a coup. It is easier to argue that the real hero of the Scottish Reformation, defined in these terms, was not John Knox but Lord James Stewart, earl of Moray, and half-brother of Queen Mary.

A slow Reformation from above?

History is a two-speed process. Taking the fast train allows a glimpse of events – or an overview. It is often wiser to take the slow train to see what is really going on. What were the underlying processes which made the Reformation possible and, through consolidation, gave it deep roots?

The Reformation, above all, needed manpower. But this is where the evidence, sometimes described as the most reliable indicator of the spread of the Reformation, is at its most problematic. By the end of 1561, Scotland had more than 240 new Protestant ministers installed; by 1567 the figure was about 750; and by 1574 about 1000 of the country's 1100 parishes had a Protestant clergyman in place. Translated into more realistic terms, which take account of the fact that until the 1590s three out of four of the new ministry were only readers, unable to preach or to administer communion, the Reformation progressed patchily for at least the first two generations after 1560.

In many rural parishes, a sermon would have been heard only once a month and communion was available only once a year – little different from the situation before 1560. The new church might have achieved a basic level of conformity relatively early but genuine conversion needed dedicated, trained missionaries and a campaign spread over decades. Those ministers also needed to be paid. The new church, although the fact was unpalatable to many Protestant clergymen, progressed only at the pace allowed by the state, which financed it.

In a few places, such as the hothouse of St Andrews, there was a 'big bang' Reformation. In many others, there was a slow burning fuse. Aberdeen seems to have had the ingredients of a fast Reformation from above: the town council joined the revolt of the Lords of the Congregation late, in the spring of 1560; they sent representatives to the Reformation parliament and, while there, appointed a new Protestant minister, and purchased a Geneva gown for him. Yet Aberdeen had no Kirk Session until the Queen and her Protestant privy council visited the town in the autumn of 1562. The new session was the town council at prayer, but most of them were Catholics. The story of the Protestant Reformation in Aberdeen, as a top-down phenomenon, is not complete until after the ruling Menzies faction lost control, at the end of the 1580s. In effect, the Reformation in Aberdeen took 30 years to run its course.

In the late 1580s, the General Assembly commissioned surveys of the religious affiliations of the Scottish nobility. The results were not comforting. About one-third was reported to be 'papists' or Catholics. These reports probably reveal as much about the fears of the Kirk as they do about the persistence of Catholicism. But they do suggest that conversion to Protestantism was not a once-and-for-all process. Also, these reports suggest that the forces of continuity are likely to have outweighed the pressures making for change. In many ways, with the Reformation, the more things changed, the more they appeared to remain the same.

The Kirk repeatedly appealed to the nobles to act as godly magistrates. Usually, they fell somewhere short of that ideal. The Reformation in Scotland coincided with the rise of new landed classes and new groups in urban society. It took place against a background of steep price rises, an active market in land, rack-renting, and a sharply increasing divide between rich and poor. The groups that benefited – newly ennobled peers, lairds who profited from the sale of church lands, wealthy merchants and lawyers – were all anxious to find new emblems of their status.

But there were also new, extra instruments of power available: the new power of the state was seen in the new prominence of the privy council and the central law courts; the rising influence of new groups in local society was reflected in the baron court and Kirk Session, dominated by merchants and lawyers in the towns, and by lairds and greater tenants in the countryside. It was little wonder that the Kirk Session became an instrument of social control, with no less than 60 per cent of business being taken up with matters of morality and sexual behaviour.

A slow Reformation from below?

Many Scots have heard the story that in 1638 Jenny Geddes threw a stool at the pulpit of St Giles in protest against a new prayer book, provoking not only a riot but a revolution against Charles I. But Jenny Geddes, symbol of the religion of the people, was an invention of the 19th century, when a variety of different Protestant churches were each trying to lay claim to being the authentic inheritor of Scotland's Protestant past. The riot of 1638 was almost certainly orchestrated by leading figures within the capital. The National Covenant itself, signed by every sector of Scottish society ranging from nobleman to humble cottar, at the time was called the Nobleman's Covenant. The godly magistrate was still in control, though perhaps the grip was beginning to slip.

The first evidence that is available to prove what has been called a 'new enthusiasm for worship' appears more than 20 years after the Reformation. In 1582, one of Edinburgh's ministers, John Durie, made a spectacular entry into the capital after a period of enforced exile. He was greeted, one account claims, by a crowd of 2000 who broke out into Psalm 124, *Now Israel may say*, the battle hymn of Calvinism, in unrehearsed four-part harmony. It should be remembered that the only bible available in the vernacular (not in Latin) was in English not Scots, and cheap, affordable bibles did not materialise before the 1630s. Instead, the psalms, sung to familiar, common tunes, were the most potent communicator of Protestant ideas. But necessarily, this was a fairly basic message.

It is easy to fall into a trap of expecting that something as seismic as the Reformation would have a profound and immediate effect on the lives of ordinary people caught up in it. The real irony of the Reformation is that it was impossible overnight for the aspiration of the few to become the conviction of the many. Instead, it probably took three or four generations. On a range of issues – attendance, irreverent popular attitudes to communion and church services, ineffective preaching and catechising the young – it

is not difficult to find parallels which show that the problems of the Protestant Church in 1600 were not greatly different from those of the Catholic Church in 1550.

Successes and failures of the Reformation?

There are different kinds of Reformation, with differing agendas, assumptions and expectations. Each needs to be thought of in terms of both success and failure. One fairly plausible benchmark is as follows:

The Reformation succeeded most where it changed things least.

This was only natural in a society which was conservative, suspicious of change and especially fearful of social unrest. Where the Reformation reinforced existing habits and institutions, it succeeded most readily. The Kirk Session was the partner of the new central law courts and the local baron court. But where it did make decisive and violent changes, the Reformation usually failed, at least to begin with.

Over time (that is, more than a century), the Reformation brought a new freedom to the Scottish people – of thought and independent-mindedness. The heirs of ‘John the Commonweill’ were the radical Covenanters of the 1670s and 1680s. In the meantime, the Reformation brought a new freedom only to the people who mattered: those who had power and status or were already in process of acquiring them. The symbol of this version of the Reformation was not so much the Bible, which remained the preserve of the wealthy few until the 1630s, but the communion token and catechism: one was used to monitor the behaviour of congregations, and the other was relied upon by successive generations of schoolmasters, ministers and Kirk elders to thump the basic tenets of Protestant beliefs into the ungodly.

The Reformation led to a state Kirk and a new kind of state, more interfering, intrusive and authoritarian than before. Claims about the separation of the ‘two kingdoms’ advanced by radical Presbyterian ministers like Andrew Melville have obscured that simple fact. The task for Scottish Protestants throughout the 17th century and beyond was twofold: how to throw off that part of the legacy of the Reformation; and how to preserve intact their faith in doing so. The battle between the people above and the people below was one of the most important products of the Reformation. The script for much of the internal dissent, schisms and reunions which so marked the history of Scottish Protestantism was already drafted in outline.