

## In Search of the Scottish Reformation<sup>1</sup>

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The standing of the Scottish Reformation has undergone considerable change in the course of the past generation. As late as its quatercentenary in 1960, the professor of Church History in the University of Glasgow was still able to claim with confidence that the Reformation had produced a church which was a 'national symbol' and that 'one may doubt whether there could be a Scotland without it'.<sup>1</sup> In the Scottish diaspora, in places such as small-town Canada or New Zealand, where John Knox and Andrew Melville churches, replicate faithfully stages of the schisms and re-unions within the nineteenth-century church, this is probably still the prevailing view. One of the most influential works ever to come out of that diaspora claimed that:

Scotland and Presbyterianism seem to have been made for each other. Even to this day, when the old dogmatisms have softened and sometimes all but evaporated, a thoroughbred Scot who for one reason or another is not a Presbyterian tends to feel somewhat ill at ease about it, even a little embarrassed, almost as might an American who preferred cricket to baseball or an Englishman who liked Cervantes better than Shakespeare.<sup>2</sup>

Within Scotland itself, however, such moral certainties now seem outdated. An article by a conservative columnist in *The Scotsman*, during the meeting of the General Assembly in May 1999, argued that the 'Church of Scotland may still be the established national church but it is no longer the church of the nation'. The fact that the General Assembly then met in another place, supplanted by the new Scottish parliament, which is what now represents the Scottish nation, exaggerated still further the dislocation of the two of the key elements of Scottish identity – a Protestant church for a Protestant people. The same piece pointed to a severe drop in attendance over the past generation: the Church of Scotland had been losing members 'almost as fast as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party has lost voters'. Although it has 680,000 communicant members, 'only 17 per cent of Scotland's adult population are now members of the Kirk'.<sup>3</sup> In a country where prayers in the new parliament will be allocated on a proportional basis to the various faiths of the people it represents, where stands now the long enduring twin ideas that the Reformation of 1560 was one of the central facts of Scottish history and that Protestantism has been the historic backbone of the nation?

It is not the case that everywhere in an increasingly secular age the Reformation has lost ground as a symbol of the nation. The Netherlands still has an official Protestant historiography of its past, cast in the form of an

<sup>1</sup> [www.educationscotland.gov.uk](http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk), accessed 19 April 2013.

heroic struggle for independence and freedom. The visual propaganda of the age still evokes powerful images. It is made up of two basic elements: images

such as the Antwerp Fury of 1576 still underpin the notion of a heroic past, based on the escape from foreign oppression. And the biblical analogies afforded by events like the raising of the siege of Leiden in 1574, acting out the parable of God's people, nourished by loaves and fishes, help sustain the idea of the divine deliverance of a Protestant nation from oppression.<sup>4</sup> The irony is that there are more Catholics than Protestants in the present-day Netherlands. Here, however, is a nation which still clings to the congenial religious parts of its past and has continued to embellish an iconography of national identity over the course of the twentieth century.

In Scotland, by contrast, the Reformation is no longer a useable past. Outside of the zealots, most Scots and certainly most contemporary Scots politicians, of all parties, can see little point in the arcane religious struggles and debates of the Reformation. Notions of oppression and a release from the 'thralldom of strangers' now seem remote. Even Scottish nationalism has lost the distinctly Protestant tinge which it possessed as late as the 1970s. Just as Protestant historians of the nineteenth century preferred to pass over the Middle Ages to find Protestants before their time, whether in the culdees or Columba, so late twentieth-century Scots, looking for moral certainties to help reconstruct a new national identity pass over the confusions of the Reformation period, which as well as underlining Scotland's distinctiveness also set Scot against Scot and turned Scotland away from Europe towards a Protestant beleaguered isle. Wallace and the Wars of Independence or, for some, Fletcher of Saltoun and federal parliaments are more meaningful icons to be plucked from the past to use in the present. Scotland's alternative parliament, the General Assembly, is an alternative no more. The only *afficiandos* of John Knox are historians of ideas, zealots or his occasional biographers. Debates over former fundamental issues such as the role of superintendents in the post-Reformation church are now the harmless eccentricity of a handful of academics.

Has a balanced view of that Reformation yet been arrived at? In August 1998, a controversy was manufactured in a Sunday newspaper over a set of official support materials provided for secondary schools on Mary, Queen of Scots and the Scottish Reformation. A right-wing Catholic columnist, with some support from Catholic schoolteachers, took strong objection to schools being 'fed Protestant myths' and saw the support pack as a 'slur on Catholicism'. In fact, the pack had relatively little to say about the pre-Reformation church, but what there was fell well short of acceptable standards of historical analysis.<sup>5</sup> The subsequent correspondence, from rival religious viewpoints, exchanged views and traded errors but much of it had one thing in common: an inherent assumption that this history *belonged* to someone, as the intellectual property of one or other of the denominational churches.

There is an irony here. Although the Scottish Reformation is no longer a powerful myth, it has largely been abandoned to those for whom it still *matters*. The situation brings to mind a common visual metaphor of the sixteenth century – the weigh beam: on it, all the accumulated dregs of papistry, including the pope’s triple crown, are outweighed by the pure, simple truth of the Gospel. An alternative, in later images and one probably more congenial in Scotland, is that the counterweight was Calvin’s *Institutes*, sometimes also with a sword.<sup>6</sup> The Reformation is perhaps the most difficult period in Scottish history for professional historians to act out their accustomed role, of challenging received establishment views. In other areas of Scotland’s past, recent historians have consciously taken on the role of the awkward squad; they have been prominent as critics of William Wallace assembly-line histories and the output of Templar websites; they revel as exposers of half truths peddled by politicians and journalists; and they enjoy their work as deconstructionists, whether of British identity or Highland folk myths. By contrast, even at an academic level, Reformation history is still too often the preserve of historians who are religionists, having a personal investment in what they are researching. Where else in Scottish history would crude ideological determinism – such as an argument based on the force of ‘the simple truth of the Gospel’ – be allowed to operate? Are there many other areas where historians would be permitted to claim proprietary rights to a topic or to dismiss historical findings on the grounds that they were either a ‘slur on Catholicism’ or ‘offensive’ to modern-day Protestants?<sup>7</sup> Are heirs of nineteenth-century landowners or now, for that matter, the descendants of cleared crofters afforded such moral high ground?

As a result, many myths of the Scottish Reformation, while they no longer enjoy a high profile, remain largely unchallenged. One of the most influential and perceptive studies of the Reformation is Euan Cameron’s *The European Reformation*. It reflects a historiography which, over the past twenty-five years, has been revisionist, challenging and provocative. When it reaches Scotland, such questions are conspicuous by their absence.<sup>8</sup> There is instead a traditional mixture of ecclesiastical history and politics, reflecting the agenda established by Gordon Donaldson but also utilised by his presbyterian opponents:

The preoccupation of any historian of the Scottish Reformation must be, as the preoccupation of contemporaries was, with church order, with systems of administration, with organisation and even with finance.<sup>9</sup>

When decoded, what this meant was history according to contemporary *divines*. Such history will be at its most revealing in analysing the progress and internal politics of the post-Reformation church as an institution. It will touch on but not fully explain a reformation of religion since it largely relies on evidence of a clergy-driven movement, which is often in the form of fairly

raw data of the provision of ministers or readers to parishes. And it will scarcely reach the subject of a reformation of manners. The stranglehold of such institutional history, in which the main concern of many of the practitioners is to defend their corner, helps explain how conservative the process of questioning the Reformation century has been in Scotland.

Judged from elsewhere in Reformation studies, the possibility of four basic, interacting patterns needs to be postulated.

- (1) a rapid Reformation from below?
- (2) a rapid Reformation from above?
- (3) a slow Reformation from below?
- (4) a slow Reformation from above?<sup>10</sup>

It has been argued that England experienced a combination of the third and fourth of these patterns: a slow Reformation from both above and below.<sup>11</sup> In Scotland, the equation is likely to be different, not least because its Reformation, by most comparisons, came so late. But if it is accepted that the Reformation in Scotland was, as in England, a two-speed phenomenon, the most plausible combination is that it took the form of a rapid Reformation from above and a slow Reformation from below.<sup>12</sup> The former might have a time-frame of *c.* 1557–60, from the time of the First Bond of the Lords of the Congregation to the Reformation parliament or the convention of nobility which considered the First Book of Discipline late in 1560. Alternatively, it might be seen as operating from *c.* 1557–67, and the relaunching of the Reformation after the deposing of Mary, Queen of Scots.<sup>13</sup> Whatever the precise time-frame, there can be little doubt that the elite remained firmly in control: the excesses of the ‘rascal multitude’ were held in check after the initial outbreak of popular iconoclasm at Perth in May 1560; and the lairds who flooded to the Reformation parliament in unprecedented numbers in August 1560 came as an demonstration orchestrated by the nobility<sup>14</sup> rather than as part of an attempt to claim for themselves a greater influence in the new Protestant commonweal. If there was an ‘novel appeal ... to a public opinion’,<sup>15</sup> seen in documents such as the ‘Beggars’ Summons’, it was almost invariably the case of the elite resorting to populist propaganda rather than a genuine demand from the lower orders.

The slow Reformation from above<sup>16</sup> has a different agenda, looking for genuine and widespread conversion rather than mere conformity to Protestantism and, as such, it needs a much longer time-span, extending over three or four generations after 1560, except perhaps in those areas such as Kyle and Angus where there had been significant growth of a Protestant

movement for a generation or more before 1560. The key element lay in discipline. It operated through the agencies of the newly established church courts, run at local level by the existing elites, which complemented the expanding authority in this period of the baron court or town council. In the Highlands, where few kirk sessions appeared before the second quarter of the seventeenth century,<sup>17</sup> a variant of the same phenomenon appeared: there, the progress of the Protestantism depended on the more informal authority of clan chiefs, kindred and the learned orders.<sup>18</sup> In both cases, however, the spread of Protestantism depended on a top-down, *sustained* implementation of a reformation of manners, enforced by new or enhanced instruments of social discipline, as well as a mere reformation of religion.

The idea of a two-speed Reformation can cut through a series of contradictions or ambiguities in interpretation. In particular, it can contextualise the claims and counter-claims made by presbyterian and episcopalian historians that the Reformation was both ‘radical’ and ‘moderate’. The orthodox case has been succinctly put:

In worship, out went Latinity, sacerdotalism, altars and unleavened wafers, auricular confession, the cult of Mary and the saints, the celebration of holy days and feast days, prayers for the dead, belief in purgatory...

This is the basis for the argument that the hallmarks of the Reformation were ‘radical and innovative’.<sup>19</sup> By contrast, the case that the Scottish Reformation was characterised by moderation rests, for the most part, on implied contrasts with England: in Scotland there was no Act of Uniformity, no Test Act (at least not until 1573) and no forced evacuations of the religious houses.<sup>20</sup> What, however, was never fully explained was *why* these did not happen, for it is clear they formed part of the reform programme for radicals like Knox, who felt a keen sense of betrayal as a result. When Lord James Stewart, former Augustinian prior of St Andrews as well as leader of the Lords of the Congregation, blocked Knox and other Protestant demonstrators from access to Queen Mary’s first Catholic mass in August 1561, he was also blocking these radicals from the monastic precinct of his commendator half-brother.

A third influential historian is worth considering. David Hay Fleming in his book, *The Reformation in Scotland*, devoted two chapters to what he called the ‘characteristics’ of the Scottish Reformation. He began:

If the Reformation in Scotland had to be characterized in one word, that word might be *thorough*. Its thoroughness was at once its chief characteristic and its glory.

In two following chapters, entitled ‘Consequences’, he went on to describe the destruction of manuscripts, books and buildings: ‘It may be frankly

acknowledged that the Scottish Reformers heartily approved and encouraged the destruction of altars, images and service-books', although, he claimed 'there was apparently much less of that in Scotland than in England, even proportionately.' His last line of defence of the stripping of the altars was:

Lovers of art may have good cause to regret the loss of priceless treasures,  
but ... when immortal souls are in the balance with works of art, no  
Christian can hesitate as to which should be preferred.<sup>21</sup>

There can be little doubt that Hay Fleming was a religionist, who shared a belief in the message of Protestant propaganda such as the weigh beam: the corruptions of papistry were, for him, swept aside by the force of the Gospel.

These three sets of propositions – radical and innovative; moderate; thorough – seem incompatible yet each has within it at least a half-truth. The Scottish Reformation began with a revolution, of sorts, but what followed was less a tidy story of steady consolidation than a series of contradictions and ambiguities which were largely provoked by the initial flurry of events in 1559. In the short term, that Reformation was violent as well as moderate. Hay Fleming's was the last work of any consequence, apart from occasional essays by Catholic historians,<sup>22</sup> either to attempt to justify or to describe in any fullness the widespread iconoclasm and image-breaking which so clearly marked the Scottish Reformation. Only two pre-Reformation altarpieces survive<sup>23</sup> and only two craft banners. One of the latter is the Fetternear Banner, the altar cloth of the Edinburgh fraternity of the Holy Blood, preserved in hiding in a remote location;<sup>24</sup> the other is the craft banner of St Bartholomew, patron saint of the glovers, which was at the menders when the riot incited by John Knox swept through the parish church of St John in Perth in May 1559.<sup>25</sup> There has instead been something of an embarrassed silence over the 'stripping of the altars'. Yet historians, to understand the complex loyalties and emotions which were at work in and after 1560, need come to terms with the motivations and reactions of different sets of contemporaries involved in the cleansing of 'idolatry': they would have included convinced iconoclasts, mere looters, the urban mob, descendants of those whose family tombs were desecrated and the patrons (both individual and institutional) of looted altars, in which there had been considerable investment over the course of the previous century. Such patrons would have ranged from rural lairds or nobles to urban craftsmen.<sup>26</sup> The enforced auctions of ecclesiastical valuables and vestments organised by town councils in and shortly after 1560 were a calculated attempt both to exploit and to harness the force of radical Protestantism as part of a calculated effort to retain their authority amidst the Reformation crisis.<sup>27</sup>

There has also been a reluctance until recently to admit either the internal contradictions amongst the reformers or that the Reformation hit rough water

in the mid-1560s, forcing further compromise and retrenchment. Yet 1565 and 1566, beginning with the Chaseabout Raid, the first failed Protestant noble coup, and ending in Queen Mary's 'triumph' at Stirling<sup>28</sup> after a second, unsuccessful rebellion, were by any measures *anni horribiles* for Knox and the radicals.<sup>29</sup> By then, there was a chorus of complaints from the General Assembly about the spread of the 'pollution' of the mass in various parts of the country, growing fears of an international Catholic conspiracy against 'the religion' and a growing, worrying dependence, for the radicals at least, of the new church on the patronage of a Catholic queen. The resort of Knox to a 'no surrender' defence of the purity of the new church, seen in both the Preface to Book IV of his History and his tract on Fasting, needs to be seen as a reflection of the problems faced by the Reformation rather than a measure of its success to that date.

The impact of the Reformation, what it did and did not do, has wider implications: it has cast something of a shadow over the history of the century before 1560<sup>30</sup> and it has also forced rather too much the history of the three-quarters of a century after 1560 into the straitjacket of an ecclesiastical history agenda. Both points are beginning to be recognised.

It has recently been complained, if only as an aside, that the cultural history of late medieval Scotland has suffered as a 'result of a Protestant-dominated historiography which had no wish to recognise the richness of the material and literary culture which the Reformation destroyed, or to admit the reformers' collusion in its destruction'.<sup>31</sup> The renewed interest in late medieval literature, music and philosophy has tended to be driven by subject specialists rather than historians. Yet it needs to be remembered that the cultural world we have lost – whether of Henryson, Carver or John Ireland and John Mair – would, in contemporaries' minds, have been inseparable from the religious world which was lost in or after 1560. There is an analogy to be made here with Jenny Wormald's trenchant complaint about the confusion in historians' minds over James VI and I: was he 'two kings or one'?<sup>32</sup> Much the same stricture could be applied to the century after 1450. Or is it too often seen as the century before 1560? Was this an age of cultural achievement or a period of spiritual decay? It is difficult to argue for both since many of the artefacts – the books of hours, the music of Carver and others, the collegiate churches, the cult of the Passion – were made for religious purposes. Most of the personnel were the same, whether we are thinking of philosophers (of the circle of John Mair or of a generation earlier), educationalists or other kinds of humanists. A good deal of the content of the Protestant reform programme when it was belatedly drawn together in the autumn of 1560 was the product of either the pre-Reformation generation or the generation before that.

Spiritual truth, divine providence and the glory of God were the motivation of makars, musicians and philosophers alike.<sup>33</sup> As a result, the reaction of conservative Protestants or Erasmians after 1560 was to try to preserve as much of the past as could be salvaged, in sharp contrast to radical iconoclasts like Knox.<sup>34</sup> The result was a cultural diversity within Protestantism, which has as yet fully to be dissected. Which better represents its mainstream: the Books of Knox's uncompromising *History* which can be dated to 1565–6 or the *Bannatyne Miscellany*, a collection of late medieval poetry, including largely orthodox religious lyrics, brought together about the same time by an Edinburgh lawyer, who was at the centre of a circle of literary patronage?

Such an example of a close linkage with the past raises a fundamental question. It is by now widely accepted that, in most centuries of known Scottish history before modern times, continuities are liable to outweigh changes.<sup>35</sup> Is it possible to apply that dictum to the Reformation century, in which change seems so obvious and demonstrable? Or is it the great exception?

To illustrate this point, it is worth turning to another recent, populist treatment of the Scottish Reformation:

By the end of the fifteenth century the church had become massively influential and hugely wealthy. But it was also bloated and corrupt, and it had started to sow the seeds of its own destruction ... By 1500, many ordinary Scots had stopped going to church. They were fed up with its less reputable practices, such as the custom [of] ... indulgences.<sup>36</sup>

The only evidence for this assertion is a single passage in the report of a provincial council's report:

The present convention, perceiving that the greatest neglect of the divine mysteries has prevailed among the subjects of the realm within these last few years, so that very few indeed out of the most populous parishes deign to be present at the sacrifice of the holy mass on Sundays ... or to attend the preaching of God's word.<sup>37</sup>

But the report dates to 1552, half a century later. When scrutinised, what evidence there is points in a very different direction. 'Within these last few years' suggests that in 1500 attendance was not the problem which it would later become, probably some time during the disturbances of the 1540s.

There is here a problem of balance, which has a wider resonance. Is there in this passage and in other, more academic treatments an unspoken assumption that the Reformation produced dramatically improved attendance after 1560? The difficulty is lack of evidence. We simply cannot be sure. The only

attempt to address this question came in a study of the Reformation in Angus and the Mearns, which used the data from 1560 onwards of plate collections in the small parish of Monifeith, near Dundee. Although an imperfect science, as its author readily admitted, these calculations seemed to show that attendance varied hugely; from week to week it averaged only 10 per cent of the potential congregation in the 1570s, with larger numbers being guaranteed only at what were the former great feast days of the old church, Easter and Christmas.<sup>38</sup> The result, it might be concluded, in this heartland of Protestantism, was a reformation of religion but not, a social historian of the Reformation might deduce, a reformation of manners.

This is not an isolated example. One of the central concerns of orthodox Catholic reformers, in Scotland as well as elsewhere, was irreverent behaviour in church and especially during Holy Communion:

Ye vicaris, curatis, and uther priestis ... thole nocht your parrochianiris to cum to this blysit sacrament misordourlie. But put tham in ordoure be your ministeris before the altare, and requyre tham to heir yow reid the afore wryttin exhortatioun, without noysse or din, and to sit styll swa in deuotioun, with deuote hert and mynde, quhill thay be ordourlie seruit of the saide blyssit sacrament.<sup>39</sup>

The arrangements for communion after 1560, that it be celebrated four times a year in towns and twice a year in rural parishes, mirrored the concerns of the Genevan authorities that over-frequent celebration might risk public disorder. Even so, complaints by the General Assembly in 1617 seem to indicate that little had changed:

To remedy this irreverent behaviour of the vulgar sort in receiving the holy Communion, it is found meet by this assembly that the minister shall in the celebration give the elements out of his own hand to every one of the communicants saying when he gives the bread, ‘Take, eat, this is the body of the Lord Jesus Christ, which was broken for you; do this in remembrance of him’ ... [At the end] the Minister ... gravely exhort his people that they communicate reverently, and show a humble and religious behaviour in receiving the same.<sup>40</sup>

On a series of issues – including ineffective preaching and catechising the young as well as poor attendance and irreverent popular attitudes to communion and church services – it is not difficult to find parallels which show that both human nature and the problems of the churches were not greatly different in 1600 from what they had been in the 1550s.<sup>41</sup>

Would it not be reasonable to conclude, as historians of many other European reformations have done, in many cases over twenty years ago,<sup>42</sup> that the

problems of faith, discipline and order were faced by all sixteenth-century churches, Catholic, Calvinist, Lutheran, and that none was particularly more successful in dealing with them than any other? If so, this conclusion might point to two other, general suggestions. Based on the evidence we have – as distinct from negative evidence or mere wish fulfilment – it looks as if a reformation of manners was slow in arriving and there may well have been relatively little difference in the state of popular religion in 1500 and 1600. In turn, that may suggest that Scottish society, especially in rural areas, was throughout the Reformation century naturally resistant to change and more afflicted by popular unrest than has hitherto been assumed.

The difficulty in reaching the lower levels of Scottish society in this period because of the nature of the sources raises the questions of what justification there is for talking, as some Protestant historians are fond of doing, of a ‘people’s church’ emerging after the Reformation.<sup>43</sup> Does that claim not assume that the church before the Reformation was somehow divorced from the people? But where, in turn, is the evidence for that assumption? What little work has been done, which has not been contradicted, has tended to emphasize the close-knit ties of priest, vicar or curate with his flock.<sup>44</sup> And a recent study of the Dominicans in the century before the Reformation showed that the order, like parish churches, was staffed by local men – sons, brothers or neighbours of the local congregation.<sup>45</sup> After the Reformation, because of the emphasis put by Protestant reformers on the need to raise the status of the parish clergy, through education and income, a distinction can be made: the new presbyters of the late sixteenth century were usually of a higher social standing and better education than the old priests and were, ironically, ‘even further away from the origins of their parishioners’.<sup>46</sup> In that sense, the church of 1600 was less a people’s church than that of 1500. But this trend was probably already under way before 1560 and it was certainly replicated in other European countries, both Catholic and Protestant, as confessional churches tried to professionalise and control their clergy more closely than before. What has been called ‘the age of the catechism’,<sup>47</sup> was also the age of the disciplinary tribunal, whether it took the form of the exercise and presbytery or the diocesan court.

If the church in post-Reformation Scotland was a church of the people, it might well be asked, which people? Here, there are specific examples for the noble or lairdly classes which suggest continuity across the Reformation century in patterns of religious piety and the motives which underpinned them. Consider two images. The first is Rosslyn Chapel, although it could be Crichton, Lincluden or a score or more of other rural churches upgraded to collegiate status in the century after 1450, a process linked to the emergence in the 1450s of a new class of landed power, the lords of parliament.<sup>48</sup> The second is Skelmorlie Aisle, at Irvine in Ayrshire, built by the Montgomery family in 1636, dubbed a ‘Protestant equivalent of chantry chapels’<sup>49</sup> and one

of the most prestigious of seventeenth-century, elaborate funerary monuments. The motives involved in these two examples are likely to have been much the same. Rosslyn was a pilgrimage church but also a burial vault and family chapel, designed to allow worship in private. Skelmorlie, like many other examples of the same period, was entered from outside the church by means of a separate doorway, above which was an elaborate armorial. Inside, the family tomb, built of marble and complete with painted ceiling, was no less impressive.<sup>50</sup> The resort of many post-Reformation nobles to family burial aisles, sepulchres and mausoleums circumvented the reformers' desire for public worship but it also continued in the tradition of the collegiate church, often intended as a *private* chapel. It also fed the desire of new *arrivistes* to devise for themselves a past and a lineage. Prayers for the dead and the belief in purgatory may have gone, as presbyterian historians insist, but the same underlying fears of death persisted. Such physical demonstrations of conspicuous piety as Crichton and Skelmorlie reflect those fears as well as a parallel desire for status and godliness. Seen in this light, it matters little if these pious investments were meant to achieve less time in the purgatory by means of the Catholic votive mass for the dead and the treasury of merits or to allow the founder and his family to elbow their way up the queue of the 144,000 Calvinists predestined for salvation.

The godly actions of lairds like Robert Campbell of Kinzeaneleuch, who, because of his dissatisfaction with provision by local ministers, made a nightly scrutiny in the 1560s of his immediate family and servants and a weekly examination of his tenantry, have been used by sceptical historians to argue for the imperfection of pastoral care in a shire which had 100 per cent absentee clergy before 1560 and inadequate provision after 1560.<sup>51</sup> Viewed from a different perspective, it is likely that Campbell's initiative was merely a return to past practice, when the grant made by the papal Penitentiary of a licence to a family chaplain for a portable altar made private worship possible.<sup>52</sup> The wholesale dechristianisation of the medieval nobility is a curious and implausible creation of modern historians. The late medieval religion has been caught in a vacuum, between the predominantly political interests of the recent generation of late medieval historians and the pre-determined agenda of many post-Reformation ecclesiastical historians. Medieval historians have on the whole tended to know more and care much more about ecclesiastical politics – and particularly disputes over benefices and tussles for control of religious houses – than about religion.<sup>53</sup> The result is that post-Reformation godly nobles seem to be a new phenomenon<sup>54</sup> when the overwhelming likelihood is that they were continuing in an established vein amidst new circumstances.

The point is not an isolated one. The late medieval world which we have lost, or not yet reclaimed, will, once reclaimed, change the way we look at the Reformation itself. The faults of the old church are liable to be linked to the

fault lines within the new church. And the strengths which the new church had are likely to be in the areas where the link with the past was best preserved.

Brief examples of each phenomenon must suffice. There was a certain amount of anticlericalism evident in the 1530s and 1540s. It was not as conspicuous or as violent in Scotland as in England, yet it undoubtedly existed. Once the genie of popular anti-clericalism, however, was out of the bottle, it was difficult to put it back in. In 1560–61, the new Protestant regime in Edinburgh, brought to power by a coup from outside, was in a genuine quandary. On the one hand, it wanted to push ahead, in advance of national agenda, by throwing into exile clergy of the old church and flirting with the popular anticlericalism which had exhibited itself in Edinburgh in the St Giles' Day riot of 1558. On the other hand, the new regime was also nervous of popular riot and clamped down hard, and probably too zealously, on craft disturbances; one of Knox's closest associates even fired a handgun into the crowd when the council was trapped in the tolbooth by a protesting crowd in the spring of 1561.<sup>55</sup> By 1600, it is possible to argue that, with the new presbyters having their incomes restored to what benefice holders probably enjoyed in fourteenth century,<sup>56</sup> there was considerable anticlerical feeling in some towns, such as Edinburgh and Perth. Anticlericalism, it is likely, was as significant a phenomenon in 1600 as it was in 1500, even if it had different effects.

The ethos of the kirk session in Angus and the Mearns, it has been claimed, was the reflection of a deeply conservative lairdly culture.<sup>57</sup> In the sophisticated world of professions and merchants in the capital, an urban version of the same phenomenon was prominent soon after 1560. Edinburgh's lawyers formed an intelligentsia which 'had merged Christian or Erasmian humanism containing Lutheran elements with a native tradition of learning'.<sup>58</sup> They wanted to reform society without breaking the cultural values which underpinned it. Such men were hardly likely to be Knox-style moral bulldozers or converts with a simple mission. Their Protestantism conformed to their existing values, and high among those was a deeply conservative desire to preserve Scotland's cultural heritage. This was the caste of mind which produced, for the entry into the capital of Charles I in 1633, a parnassus with a contemporary version of the nine 'ancient worthies for learning', going back to Duns Scotus.<sup>59</sup> These are further examples of a top-down Reformation.

Is it likely that, in such an environment, the uncompromising preacher would quickly produce results? Comparisons with missionaries in other centuries are seldom used by Reformation historians, despite the gaps in their own evidence. Yet historians of the fifth and sixth centuries, who have a keen appreciation of the problems of the laconic nature of the sources for early

Christianity, have turned to the highly developed techniques of historians and social anthropologists of missionaries in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for guidance: the conclusion that conversion almost never happened overnight and that it took titanic and prolonged efforts by driven men and women over decades seem highly plausible.<sup>60</sup> Why should the sixteenth century be different? Why should the process of evangelisation and conversion – as distinct from mere conformity – have been easier with the Reformation, when many of the best established instruments to aid clergy trying to catechize their flocks had been jettisoned and were not yet effectively replaced? Statues of the saints, altarpieces, stained glass windows, all of them the ‘so-called bibles of the humble’, were destroyed without much of an arsenal of ready-made replacements at hand. Cheap bibles were not available in Scotland before the 1630s or 1640s.<sup>61</sup> In such circumstances, would it not be fair to suggest that any work which relies for evidence on the ‘pure, simple truth of the Gospel’ should mentally be recatalogued under ‘tracts, catechetical, Protestant’?

Where analogies have been identified, linking the pre-Reformation world to that of post-Reformation culture, there has been a tendency to judge such linkages from the standpoint of the future rather than the past – a breach in the normal operation of the historical mind. The tracing of common threads linking the intellectual world of the pre-Reformation Renaissance and the circle of John Mair to the philosophical historians of the high Enlightenment demonstrated an important continuity of scholarship over more than two centuries. Yet to label it ‘Calvinist humanism’<sup>62</sup> was akin to claiming that Home Rule was the preserve of a nationalist party, which was founded some fifty years after the idea emerged in the 1880s.

The creation of a forerunner is a natural temptation for the Reformation historian, anxious to detect the roots of the Protestant movement and its causation. All too often, however, it is an illusion. Much the same kind of intellectual forerunner was devised by Gordon Donaldson, when he tried to trace the origin and impact of the cult of the Passion. Citing three short passages from Arundel MS 285, one the key documents of late medieval Passion poetry in Scotland, he detected a tension between the cult of the Passion and worship of the Virgin Mary: ‘clerical eyebrows must have been raised’, it was claimed, by such lines.<sup>63</sup> Yet this misunderstood the late medieval Catholic mind, in which there was no necessary conflict between the two cults. On the fringes of the Fetternear Banner, crafted for the Edinburgh merchant guild in the 1520s and showing the direct influence of the Flemish cult of the Holy Blood, are rosaries – the penitential exercise devoted to the Virgin Mary.<sup>64</sup> The cult of Mary as mother of Christ was also a favourite theme of the Dominicans, strange as it may seem to those who know them as front-line troops in the battle against heresy or as a recruiting ground for early Protestants. Again, the propaganda of later Protestant reformers was

readily accepted as evidence – rather than as propaganda. As a result, continuities were mistaken for precursors.

The history of Scotland in the three-quarters of a century after 1560 has too often been presented in terms of an ecclesiastical history writ large or as a road between the first reformation of 1560 and a second, in 1638. In both versions, the rival reformed traditions have sought to impose their own agendas. The decades of the 1580s, 1590s and later are bestrewn with the happenings dictated by these agendas. One need think only of the vocabulary of the period – the ‘Negative Confession’ of 1581, the ‘Black Acts’ of 1584, the ‘Golden Act’ of 1592 – to demonstrate that. Here, the distinction between what is merely happening and the more fundamental question of what was really going on<sup>65</sup> may again help cut a swathe of understanding through rival myths. To date, the ‘what’s going on’ school has largely been composed of historians of ideas. They have often been concerned with an updated, more sophisticated version of Sidney Burrell’s search for the origins of the covenanting tradition,<sup>66</sup> recently defined as ‘an ongoing process of Scottish self-definition – and definition – which began with the Reformation of 1560 and was to culminate ... in a second Reformation in the late 1630s and 1640s.’<sup>67</sup>

The difficulty here is twofold. One is the time span involved – seventy or eighty years, amounting to two or three generations between 1560 and the undoubted change of gear which came sometime in the 1630s. As a result, one may wonder whether such a search falls foul of the mistake of trying to explain historical processes before they bite. The second difficulty is that this approach tends to overlook the contrary developments which took place in between. The reasons are understandable: the long reign of James VI (1567–1625) still awaits analysis. In particular, what is often missed is the growth of state power: the new dimensions of authority available to the crown and its supporters (including the church) in the decisive second and third generations after 1560. State formation,<sup>68</sup> which has become one of the key components in early modern history, both extended and set limits on the process of a slow Reformation from above.

Unpalatable as it may be to many, the Reformation in Scotland, like other late Reformations in Protestant Europe, was essentially a top-down phenomenon. A useful, widely recognised benchmark worth bearing in mind is that the later that Reformations occurred in sixteenth-century Europe the more directed and authoritarian they were likely to be. That dictum can be applied both to local or civic reformations and, above all, to territorial monarchies.<sup>69</sup> Here is a different context in which to understand the remarkable fact that no one holding major office lost it as a result of 1560 and very few town councils experienced a coup.<sup>70</sup> No prominent social group, it might be added, lost position or power. The path was prepared for the coming to power of a godly

prince and for the laying down of what has notably been called the ‘fitted carpet’ of state power,<sup>71</sup> extending to the furthest parts of the realm; it gave a new level of protection to landowners as well as to the monarchy.

It could well be argued that the King’s Confession of 1581 (only later dubbed ‘Negative’), together with the actions of parliament in 1584 and 1592 (the so-called ‘Black’ and ‘Golden’ Acts) saw both a decisive move towards state formation and an attempt at a further Reformation, this time under the control of the state. In this context, it is as well mentally to put to one side (until the breakdown of relations between king and kirk in 1596) the all too familiar figure of Andrew Melville as leader of a ecclesiastical protest movement, and to recall a different Melville, the *confidante* of James VI and court poet in the 1580s and early 1590s. Many of the initiatives taken to implement a second-stage Reformation were those of this new state. The *Second Book of Discipline*, which was as principled and impractical as the First and was out of date by the time it was approved by the General Assembly in 1578, also occupies far too much of the centre stage of history in this period. The first attempt to make ownership of the Bible compulsory was not an initiative of the church but an act of parliament, in 1579.<sup>72</sup> And it needs to be remembered that the first national covenant was an act of the state. In February 1581, the young godly prince had his whole court subscribe the King’s Confession on their knees during a two-week celebration of the marriage of the daughter of the murdered earl of Moray and the obscure Stewart courtier later to be acclaimed as the bonnie earl of Moray. A month later, the Confession was read from pulpits, by royal decree, which insisted it be subscribed throughout the realm.<sup>73</sup> In October of the same year, parliament passed a series of acts, confirming previous religious legislation since 1560, condemning adultery, blasphemy, pilgrimages and other ‘superstitious rites’, and acknowledging that every parish should have a pastor with a ‘sufficient and reasonable stipend’.<sup>74</sup> This state-sponsored second Reformation, run in the name of a godly prince, needs to be more fully acknowledged, even if it does not conveniently fit into notions about a divide between the ‘two kingdoms’, later to be visited on the period by presbyterian historians of the early seventeenth century. It had some successes, notably in the areas of augmentation of stipends and promotion of new levels of social discipline, but it was far from being a complete success. Yet it was only after the consensus between state and church broke down in 1596 that a clerical opposition party began to materialise in any clear-cut form.

One way to escape the myths of the post-Reformation period would be to substitute a different set of questions, about authority rather ecclesiastical politics or religion as such. Here, the central figures would not be clerical leaders such as Andrew Melville or popular, mythological figures ranging from John the Commonweill to Jenny Geddes but the godly magistrate, operating either in his baron court or local kirk session, and the professional

minister, enjoying by the 1620s a new level of security and prosperity, as a pensioner of the state, largely protected from taxation. In terms of his social role, the minister was as much a *fonctionnaire* of the state, whether defined as at central or local level, as an instrument of the church. Is it sensible, amidst the complexities which enmeshed a Protestant church in a Protestant state, for historians to cling, Melvillian-style, to a theocratic notion of two separate kingdoms – the kingdom of God and that of the world? Or would it be more realistic to begin with the dilemmas of a state church obliged to operate in a new kind of state?<sup>75</sup>

Alternative sets of questions would be forced, too, about the social effects of the rise of Protestantism. Was the key instrument of evangelisation the Bible, which could bring a new and potentially subversive freedom of thought to its readers,<sup>76</sup> or the catechism and the communion token, which brought new dimensions of social control? This opens up a more complex world than the one protected by conventional myths about the Reformation. Which was the real world? The answer, at times – as it is with this case – is that both were. Within that conundrum, there lies a more plausible answer to the roots of the social and religious tensions of the seventeenth century than responses driven by one or other of the standard myths of the Scottish Reformation.

1. J.M. Reid, *Kirk and Nation* (Glasgow, 1960), 173.
2. Geddes MacGregor, *Scotland: an Intimate Portrait* (Boston, Mass., 1990), 78; originally published as *Scotland forever Home* (New York, 1985).
3. Allan Massie, 'Alternative parliament that shaped the nation', *The Scotsman*, 11 May 1999.
4. 'The Spanish Fury in Antwerp, 1576' (anon.) and 'Distributing herrings and white bread following the liberation of Leiden, 1574' (Otto van Heen), reproduced in K. Bussmann and H. Schilling (eds.), *1648: War and Peace in Europe* (Munster, 1998), 27–8.
5. *Scotland on Sunday*, 6 & 13 September 1998; *Mary, Queen of Scots and the Scottish Reformation, 1540s–1587* (Higher Still History Support Materials, August 1998), 11, 12, 39–40, 43, 93. One extract read: 'Although it was carefully organized and very wealthy, few people wanted to join the church for religious reasons. Most of those who did become churchmen were attracted simply by the church's wealth.'
6. Reproduced in *De Kracht van het Geloof: De Kerk en de Europese Samenleving* (Wording van Europa: Hilversum, 1992), 89.
7. G. Donaldson, *Scotland's History: Approaches and Reflections*, ed. J. Kirk (Edinburgh, 1995).
8. E. Cameron, *The European Reformation* (Oxford, 1991), 385–8.
9. G. Donaldson, *The Scottish Reformation* (Cambridge, 1960), 1–2.
10. Cameron, *European Reformation*, 239–40, 300–04, 396–400, 411–16.

11. C. Haigh, 'The recent historiography of the English Reformation', *Historical Journal*, xxv (1982), 995–1007; R. Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: the Ritual Year, 1400–1700* (Oxford, 1994), 73–4, 107–10.
12. This is discussed more fully in my 'A reformation from above or below? The Scottish example' (forthcoming).
13. *BUK*, i, 94–5, 106–07, 121.
14. M.D. Young (ed.), *The Parliaments of Scotland: Burgh and Shire Commissioners*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1993), ii, 809–11.
15. G. Donaldson, *Scotland: James V to James VII* (Edinburgh, 1965), 102.
16. This is discussed in M.F. Graham, *The Uses of Reform: 'Godly Discipline' and Popular Behavior in Scotland and Beyond, 1560–1610* (Leiden, 1996); and M. Lynch, 'Preaching to the converted? Perspectives on the Scottish Reformation', in A.A. MacDonald, M. Lynch and I.B. Cowan (eds.), *The Renaissance in Scotland: Studies in Literature, Religion, History and Culture offered to John Durkan* (Leiden, 1994), 301–43.
17. Cf. J. Kirk, *Patterns of Reform: Continuity and Change in the Reformation Kirk* (Edinburgh, 1989), 305–33.
18. J. Dawson, 'Clan, kin and kirk: the Campbells and the Scottish Reformation', in N.S. Amos, A. Pettegree and H. van Nierop (eds.), *The Education of a Christian Society: Humanism and the Reformation in Britain and the Netherlands* (Aldershot, 1999), 211–42; D.S. Thomson, 'Gaelic learned orders and literati in medieval Scotland', *Scottish Studies*, xii (1968), 57–78.
19. Kirk, *Patterns of Reform*, p. xvi.
20. Donaldson, *Scottish Reformation*, 64, 69, 74–5, 176, 179.
21. D. Hay Fleming, *The Reformation in Scotland: Causes, Characteristics, Consequences* (London, 1910), 241–313, 314–428, at 241 (author's italics), 315.
22. D. McRoberts, 'Material destruction caused by the Scottish Reformation', in D. McRoberts (ed.), *Essays on the Scottish Reformation, 1513–1625* (Glasgow, 1962), 415–62.
23. T.S. Robertson, 'The church of Fowlis Easter', *Trans. of Aberdeen Ecclesiological Society* (1888), 39–42.
24. D. McRoberts, 'The Fetternear Banner', *Innes Review*, vii (1956), 69–86.
25. D. McRoberts, 'A sixteenth-century picture of St Bartholomew from Perth', *Innes Review*, x (1959), 281–6.
26. Seen, for example, in the illustration of the 'Iconoclastic Fury' (1566) in the Netherlands, reproduced in *De Kracht van het Geloof*, 90.
27. Hay Fleming, *Reformation*, 319–22.
28. M. Lynch, 'Queen Mary's triumph: the baptismal celebrations at Stirling, December 1566', *SHR*, lxix (1990), 1–21.
29. W.I.P. Hazlett, 'Playing God's card: Knox and Fasting, 1565–66', in R.A. Mason (ed.), *John Knox and the British Reformations* (Aldershot, 1998),

- 185–6.
30. S. Boardman and M. Lynch, ‘The state of late medieval and early modern Scottish history’, in T. Brotherstone and D. Ditchburn (eds.), *Freedom and Authority: Scotland c.1050–c.1650: Historical and Historiographical Essays presented to Grant G. Simpson* (forthcoming, 2000).
31. R.A. Mason, *Kingship and the Commonweal: Political Thought in Renaissance and Reformation Scotland* (East Linton, 1998), 105n.
32. J.M. Wormald, ‘James VI and I: two kings or one?’, *History*, lxxviii (1983), 187–209.
33. A. Broadie, *The Shadow of Scotus: Philosophy and Faith in Pre-Reformation Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1995), 3–4.
34. T. van Heijnsbergen, ‘The interaction between literature and history in Queen Mary’s Edinburgh: the Bannatyne Manuscript in its prosopographical context’, in MacDonald *et al*, *Renaissance in Scotland*, 183–225.
35. M. Lynch, *Scotland: a New History* (London, 1991), p. xvii.
36. ‘Waging war in name of God’, Millennium Life series on Scottish History, *Daily Record*, 3 April 1999.
37. *Statutes of the Scottish Church, 1225–1559* (SHS, 1907), 138–9.
38. F.D. Bardgett, *Scotland Reformed: the Reformation in Angus and the Mearns* (Edinburgh, 1989), 158–9.
39. *Statutes of Scottish Church*, 190.
40. *BUK*, iii, 1141; Lynch, ‘Preaching to the converted’, 332–3.
41. For attendance, see *Statutes of Scottish Church*, 138–9 (1552); *BUK*, ii, 716, 719 (Dumfries and Fife, 1588); for preaching, *Statutes*, 171–2 (1559); Alexander Hume, ‘Ane Afolde Admonitioun to the Ministerie of Scotland’ (1609), *Wodrow Misc.*, 569–90, at 588; for catechising the young, *Statutes*, 145 (1552); *BUK*, iii, 1126–7 (1618).
42. G. Strauss, *Past and Present*, lxxvii (1974); Cameron, *European Reformation*
43. See eg. M.H.B. Sanderson, *Ayrshire and the Reformation: People and Change, 1490–1600* (East Linton, 1997), ch. 9: ‘The People’s Church after 1560’.
44. D. McKay, ‘Parish life in Scotland, 1500–1560’, in McRoberts (ed.), *Scottish Reformation*, 85–115.
45. J. Foggie, ‘The Dominicans in Scotland, 1450–1560’ (University of Edinburgh Ph.D., 1998).
46. Sanderson, *Ayrshire*, 133; see also Cameron, *European Reformation*, 390–96.
47. J. Bossy, *Christianity in the West, 1400–1700* (Oxford, 1985), 119–20.
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  51. Lynch, 'Preaching to the converted', 333.
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  59. M. Lynch, 'The age of Renaissance and Reformation', in R. Mitchison, *Why Scottish History Matters* (2nd edn., Edinburgh, 1997), 42–4.
  60. C. Thomas, 'The Origins of Insular Monasticism' (Rhind lectures, 1999).
  61. Lynch, 'Preaching to the converted', 329–30.
  62. D. Allan, *Virtue, Learning and the Scottish Enlightenment: Ideas of Scholarship in Early Modern History* (Edinburgh, 1993).
  63. G. Donaldson, *Faith of the Scots* (London, 1990), 61–2.
  64. D. McRoberts, 'The rosary in Scotland', *Innes Review*, xxiii (1972), 81–6.
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  71. J. Goodare, *State and Society in Early Modern Scotland* (Oxford, 1999), 286–311.
  72. *APS*, iii, 139, 211.
  73. M. Lynch, 'Court ceremony and ritual during the personal reign of James VI', in Goodare and Lynch (eds.), *Reign of James VI*, 71–3; Calderwood,

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*History*, iii, 501–06; Melville, *Diary*, 87.

<sup>74.</sup> *APS*, iii, 210–14.

<sup>75.</sup> See Goodare, *State and Society*, 172–213.

<sup>76.</sup> Donaldson, *All the Queen's Men*, 34, likened the appeal of the reform programme in 1559–60 to a modern 'theology of liberation'.