



# The Scottish History Society Learning Resource

## The National Covenant, 1637-60

### Introduction

The years of the mid-seventeenth century saw Scotland take up arms in a series of conflicts that wracked Britain and Ireland. Connecting them all was one sovereign: Charles I. Under the banner of the National Covenant, large numbers of Scots from across the social spectrum took up arms against their King and his advisors in defence of Scottish religion.

#### Prayer Book and National Covenant

Despite sharing a sovereign and a commitment to Protestantism, religious practices in Scotland were very different from those practiced south of the Border in England and across the Irish Sea in Ireland. In addition to the hierarchy of archbishops and bishops, the Scottish reformation had followed a different route than its neighbours to the south by establishing a nationwide general assembly, provincial synods and regional presbyteries. Pressure in some quarters to reform the Scottish Kirk more drastically aimed squarely at purging bishops and the remaining fragments of Catholic worship.

It is into this religious context that Charles I's attempts to implement a new book of prayer in Scotland must be viewed. In consultation with Scottish bishops, and without advice from either the General Assembly or provincial synods, Charles and his advisors drew up a modified version of the English Book of Common Prayer for use across Scotland. The book ordered changes to local preaching practices and services to bring them into line with services in England. Despite protests to the contrary, orders were distributed to implement the book in July 1637. Violent protests occurred in Edinburgh upon the first reading of the book with accusations that the book would reinstate Catholicism to Scotland.

Presbyteries and synods dissented against the Prayer Book and organised meetings across the Central Belt, despite prohibition by the Crown, in late 1637. The protesters re-subscribed the 1596 Confession of Faith as a mutual band of support and organised further meetings to discuss a new band that would protect Scottish worship. The resulting document, the National Covenant, was presented to parishes across Scotland for subscription from February 1638.

Charles I condemned the actions of the Covenanters, threatening them with arrest, but eventually acquiesced to grant the holding of a nationwide General Assembly in November 1638 to heal the divisions emerging in his northernmost kingdom. While Charles sent his envoy, James Hamilton of Hamilton, to quell Covenanter resistance the Covenanter leadership sought to further reform the Church of Scotland along strongly Presbyterian lines. Archbishops and Bishops were refused entry, intimidated by veiled threats, and, as a result refused the Assembly's legality.

The Glasgow Assembly represented a bold step for the Covenanters by moving from protest to outright resistance. Hamilton's attempts to dissolve the Assembly when it became more vocal were refused. In his absence, the Assembly pushed new reforms to the Kirk without Royal approval. In the first week of December, the Assembly moved into legislative overdrive, removing the contentious prayer book, abolishing the office of archbishop and bishop and punishing those who refused to accept the National Covenant.

## **Bishops' Wars**

The actions at Glasgow had created a clear division between the Covenanters and the Crown. Attempts to negotiate continued but the Covenanter's policy of punishing those who failed to acquiesce to the Covenant created a constant source of tension. Attempts to create a rival 'King's Covenant' were largely unpopular and failed to bridge the divide.

Both Crown and Covenanters began preparing to protect their interests with military force in January 1639. Charles informed northern counties in England of his intentions, whilst the Covenanter leadership appointed committees of war for each shire to manage a war effort. As Charles planned to levy troops from northern England in early 1639, the Covenanter leadership launched publications to obtain support in England for their enterprise. Charles responded by publishing his response and encouraging key supporters in Scotland to assassinate Covenanter ringleaders.

In March 1639, skirmishes occurred around Aberdeen where the Marquis of Huntly's troops attempted to repel the advance of the Covenant into the north east. In the Central Belt, Covenanter nobles controlled most strategic fortifications and moved troops towards the Border. As tensions increased, Charles demanded that Covenanter troops remained ten miles from the Border while his own forces pushed towards Duns in April 1639. Gross exaggerations of the strength of the Covenanter force flooded into the Royalist camp as it headed towards Kelso. The Royal army refused to engage and retreated southward in June 1639. What became known as the First Bishops' War had produced only skirmishes, while the treaty that closed the conflict, the Treaty of Berwick, proved inconclusive. The vague agreement at Berwick provided only a temporary truce.

Both sides attempted to regroup through the second half of 1639. Charles, exhausted by attempts to bankroll military action, recalled the English Parliament in April 1640 and ordered the improvement of Crown fortifications at Edinburgh and Berwick. The Covenanter leadership continued their policy of purging non-Covenanters from places of prominence and pushed their forces towards the Border. In August 1640, fearing a Royal invasion, the Covenanter force thrust into Northumberland, defeating a Crown force at a key crossing of the Tyne at Newburn on 28 August 1638. The Covenanters moved downstream and overran Newcastle, occupying the settlement in September.

Charles was forced back to the negotiating table as Westminster sat aghast at a foreign occupation of a strategically and economically important port. The Treaty of Ripon ceased hostilities in October 1640, while the Covenanters and Crown representatives ironed out the major details over the next ten months. Despite the Second Bishops' War being over, the resulting Treaty of London in August 1641 was a disaster for the Crown. While it ordered the Scottish army to be disbanded, it required the Crown to pay the Scottish army's arrears of pay and, critically, demanded that the changes ordered by the Glasgow Assembly be given royal assent. Charles signed.

## **The Solemn League and Covenant**

With Royal approval following the Treaty of London, the Covenanter leadership pushed forward with its campaign of moral reformation, while former bishops fled or accepted positions as parish ministers.

Royal attempts to settle the Covenanter issue had reduced with the outbreak of rebellion in Ireland in October 1641 and civil war in England in August 1642. The Covenanter leadership opted to send troops to protect the Protestant interest in the northern counties of Ireland but remained aloof from the English conflict.

The Covenanters discussed an alliance with both the Crown and the English Parliament. It was not until August 1643, however that such an agreement was reached when Westminster sent envoys to Edinburgh to discuss a band of support. In exchange for the expertise of the Covenanter army, Parliament began discussions to reform the English Church along Presbyterian lines to create a pan-British Church. The document, the Solemn League and Covenant, bound English and Scottish subjects together in the defence of mutual religious interests. The Covenanter army entered England in January 1644.

The Solemn League and Covenant was not accepted by all Covenanters and split those who had signed the National Covenant in 1638. A small proportion rejected the agreement as a betrayal of the original Covenant and its aim to protect Scottish religion alone. The rejection was grounded on the belief that the English Parliament contained a radical Independent wing, or 'sectarians', who were not in favour of Scottish-style Presbyterianism and had only accepted the Solemn League to obtain the services of the Scottish army.

To cement the new relationship, Scottish commissioners were sent south to discuss changes to the Church of England at the Westminster Assembly of Divines. Differences between Scottish and English Presbyterians, in addition to the presence of more radical English independents, created a great deal of tension that was noted by the Scottish commissioners in their letters home. After two years of discussion, the Assembly ordered the publication of a new Directory for worship, unifying English and Scottish worship into a loose alliance. In 1646 and 1647, the English Parliament moved slowly towards a largely unpopular Presbyterian-inspired system of Church government.

## The Engagement

The presence of a Covenanter army in England provided an important opening for supporters of the Crown in Scotland but it proved short lived. Forces led by James Graham, the Marquis of Montrose, had taken important burghs throughout 1644 and 1645. In August 1645, Montrose occupied Glasgow in a show of Royal power. Montrose marched towards the Border but was intercepted at Philiphaugh near Selkirk in September 1645 by Covenanter forces returning from England. The Covenanter army returned from England in earnest in early 1647. With Montrose's army scattered the Royalist interest in Scotland required another figurehead.

During the winter of 1647, Scottish Royalists opened secret negotiations with Charles I led by James Hamilton of Hamilton. Hamilton's agreement, 'or 'Engagement', with Charles offered a brand new Scottish force to invade England to tip the balance back into the King's favour. The document was signed on Christmas Day 1647. Covenanter leaders were furious with Hamilton's secret negotiations and his failure to guarantee Presbyterianism and, following lengthy discussions in Edinburgh, rejected them outright in 1648. Hamilton attempted to raise a force to fight for this Engagement throughout early 1648 and, with allies in Parliament in Edinburgh, gave the Engagement force of law.

The Kirk condemned those promoting Hamilton's Engagement, either in raising troops or preaching pro-Engagement sermons from pulpits. Despite these prohibitions, the Engagement split the Kirk for a second time. A number of ministers who had signed the Covenant were suspended for their support of

the Engagement – these ministers preferred to side with Charles I and ardent Royalists than the English ‘sectarians’. Hamilton eventually gathered enough men to invade England in July 1648.

Hamilton’s force was easily defeated at Preston, Lancashire, in August 1648. The Engagers had failed to pick up enough support on their march through northern England and were easily scattered by the forces of the New Model Army. To quell any future Royalist resistance in Scotland, the English Army invaded Scotland in October 1648. The only means they had to do this was to remove royalists from Parliament in Edinburgh and reinstate Covenanters in key positions of prominence. There was continued distrust between English Independents and the Covenanted leadership, but both could agree that latent Royalism needed crushing. The English army left Scotland before Christmas 1648.

## Changing Perspectives

It was once a common place for historians to blame Charles I for his mismanagement of Scotland’s distinct religious landscape. His lack of contact with the country of his birth and the peculiarities of his personality were all taken as indicative of a man who was out of touch. As a result, studies of Covenanted Scotland were drawn into larger debates over the interconnectedness of the wars in the other Stuart realms. Such studies were accused of relegating Scottish history to a subservient role, as part of the explanation for the English Civil War rather than an analysis of Scotland itself.

Presbyterianism’s role in all of this remains central to the debate. Presbyterianism is considered as a real agent of change in the 1640s; particularly with the Scottish presence at the Westminster Assembly of Divines. Historians frequently argued that this was part of a federal union, with a Presbyterian Church system at its heart, led by Lowland, Covenanted, Scots. Despite the internal conflict, these interpretations put the 1640s as the halcyon days of the National Covenant. However, where historians were once content to see the Kirk as a spent political force by the end of the 1640s, recently there has been a trend to see the Kirk as a key player in Scottish life throughout this period. Attempts to see how congregations dealt with this period of change have made use of the unprecedented range of archival material. While the Kirk leadership aimed at real political change, congregations were remarkably stable in times of crisis showing great flexibility.

## Suggested reading

### Classic Texts

- I. B. Cowan, ‘The Covenanters: A revision article’, *Scottish Historical Review*, 47 (1968)
- D. Stevenson, *The Government of Scotland under the Covenanters, 1637-1651* (Edinburgh, 1982)
- D. Stevenson, *Revolution and Counter Revolution 1644-51* (London, 1977)
- D. Stevenson, *The Scottish Revolution 1637-44: The Triumph of the Covenanters* (London, 1973)
- J. K. Hewison, *The Covenanters*, 2 vols (Glasgow, 1913)
- W. Makey, *The Church of the Covenant 1637-1651: Revolution and Social Change in Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1979)
- C.V. Wedgwood, *The King’s Peace* (London, 1955)

## Most Recent Books

- J. Barrett & A. Mitchell, *Elgin's Love Gift: Civil War in Scotland and the Depositions of 1646* (Chichester, 2007)
- E. M. Furgol, *A Regimental History of the Covenanting Armies, 1639-1651* (Edinburgh, 1990)
- C. R. Langley, *Worship, Civil War and Community, 1638-1660* (London, 2015)
- A. I. Macinnes, *The British Revolution, 1629-1660* (Basingstoke, 2004)
- R. S. Spurlock, *Cromwell and Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2012)
- B. Robertson, *Royalists at War in Scotland and Ireland, 1638-1650* (Farnham, 2014)
- J. Young (ed.), *Celtic Dimension of the British Civil Wars* (Edinburgh, 1997)