



The Scottish History Society Learning Resource

The Scottish Reformation, c.1525-1560

Letter of barons, freeholders and the whole 'community of the realm' of Scotland to Pope John XXII, written in Latin and dated Arbroath, 6 April 1320

Introduction

Here we explore the history of the Scottish reformation, how the Reformation Rebellion of 1559-60 came about, and the nature of the reformation as both event and process. The Scottish reformation was remarkable for the fact that despite some underground engagement with Protestantism in Scotland by small groups of radicals and individual outspoken preachers from shortly after the period when Luther started writing (around 1520), there is no compelling evidence that Scotland was on its way to becoming as complete a Protestant nation as it did, almost overnight, in 1560. Prior to this, it had been a fairly typical, and very devout, Catholic country.

That Protestantism became Scotland's main religion was in part due to committed preachers like George Wishart and John Knox, who actively recruited and enthused the most influential and powerful sections of Scottish society to the Protestant cause. It was also down to a failure of the Catholic Church to see the threat that Protestantism posed in Scotland, and to recognise its own shortcomings and internal problems. It was equally a political rebellion as much as a spiritual one, and the nobility who led the rebellion against Mary of Guise, Queen Mary's mother and regent of Scotland in the late 1550s, were keen to move Scotland's diplomatic axis away from Scotland's age-old relationship with Catholic France. By the 1550s, this relationship was threatening to annex Scotland through the young queen (who was herself descended from the French aristocratic household of Guise-Lorraine and who was married to the Crown Prince of France, Francois) and move it towards Protestant England.

Political context, 1503-1560

Between 1503 and 1560, a dramatic change took place in Scotland's traditional foreign policy. From the outset of the Wars of Independence in the thirteenth century, Scotland had enjoyed a close friendship with France – known as the 'auld alliance' – and had been a bitter enemy of England, with frequent periods of warfare between the two neighbouring states. In 1503 King James IV of Scotland (1488-1513) married Margaret Tudor, the daughter of King Henry VII of England and the sister of the future Henry VIII. This marriage established a dynastic link between the ruling houses of the two nations that would ultimately lead to James' great-grandson, James VI, becoming king of both realms in 1603. James IV was succeeded by the infant James V when he was killed by the English at Flodden in 1513. In the 1530s James V married directly into the French royal family – he managed to do this because Henry VIII's new religious position made James increasingly valuable on the European stage.

When the Pope failed to grant Henry VIII a divorce from his wife Catharine of Arragon in favour of Anne Boleyn, Henry effectively created his own church with himself at the head. He launched the Act in Restraint of Appeals to Rome in 1533, forbidding his subjects from asking Rome to arbitrate on legal disputes like marriage or legitimacy. This was followed by an Act of Royal Supremacy over the church in 1534, where Henry proclaimed himself head of both the spiritual and temporal realm in England.

James V, situated at Henry's northern border, thus controlled a gateway by which England could be invaded by European Catholic forces, especially after his marriages to the French princess Madeleine and then Marie de Guise strengthened his ties to France. The birth of James' daughter, Mary, in 1542 marked a drastic change in dynastic and religious policy, not just for Anglo-Scottish relations but also for the wider European scene. Mary made a nice dynastic prize for England or France as she had, through her grandfather, a strong claim to the English and Scottish thrones. Whoever married her could permanently secure the Scottish throne to their heirs. After the death of James V, Henry thus shifted his policy from diplomatic accord with an equal monarch to aggressive and arbitrary courting of Mary through both open warfare on Scotland – a series of attacks known as the 'rough wooings' – and the cultivation of a pro-English faction at court.

Early reform movement, c.1520-c.1545

During the 1520s a number of cultural developments began to appear that would inform the political shape of things to come. The first was the circulation of Martin Luther's reform ideas in printed and manuscript form, which had begun to appear in Scotland, particularly in the east coast ports, via merchants and trading vessels from the Low Countries and the Baltic states. There must have been a noticeable reading of these texts, as the parliament of 1525 passed an 'Act anent heresy' banning their importation and reading on pain of forfeiture (loss of property and goods).

The first Protestant martyr to die as a result of disseminating the reformed message was the student and university master Patrick Hamilton, who had come back to St Andrews in 1527 (after a brief spell in Germany) espousing a number of Lutheran beliefs. He was burnt outside the gates of St Salvator's College on 29 February 1528. Hamilton's fellow student Henry Forrester, tried and executed by the Archbishop of St Andrews, James Beaton in October 1533, had also studied at St Leonard's, entering the college in 1526. There were instances of desecration of Catholic churches in Ayrshire between 1528 and 1532, further martyrdoms in St Andrews for heresy in 1538-9, and another small group of craftsmen executed for Protestant beliefs in Perth in 1543. However, these were all small isolated instances of Protestant belief, not evidence of a general trend.

The Protestant message in Scotland arguably only fully crystallised when the charismatic preacher George Wishart, the first Scot to come back to Scotland with the religious message being preached by Swiss reformers (including John Calvin) rather than the German ones, began to preach around Scotland in 1545. His death at a trial presided over by Cardinal David Beaton on 1 March 1546 actually made his message stronger – Wishart went willingly to be burnt alive before St Andrews castle, and kissed and embraced his executioner in forgiveness.

Treaties of Greenwich and Treaty of Haddington, 1543-1548

The death of King James V in 1542 and the accession of the infant Queen Mary allowed a period of breathing-space in Scotland without a strong Catholic monarch for those who had tendencies towards Protestantism to explore these ideas without serious fear of reprisal or loss of favour. At the same time, this Protestantism became bound up (for many nobles, at any rate) with increasing animosity towards England, which had seceded from the Catholic faith under King Henry VIII in the early 1530s.

In December 1542, a regency council of Cardinal David Beaton and James Hamilton earl of Arran, and the earls of Moray, Argyll and Huntly was proclaimed. However, early the following year Arran had Beaton imprisoned, seized power for himself, and wrote to Henry VIII, promising reformation.

In the parliament of March 1543 Arran authorised the reading of vernacular bibles which were then brought up 'by the cartload' to disseminate Protestantism among those who could read. At the same time a number of Anglo-Scottish 'assured lords' brokered a peace treaty between Scotland and England known as the Treaties of Greenwich, which would marry the young Queen Mary to Henry VIII's heir, Prince Edward. This was ratified by Arran on 25 August but the earl subsequently lost power in late 1543 to a counter-coup by Beaton. Cardinal Beaton swiftly repudiated the Greenwich treaties but by then the Protestant genie was out of the bottle – the government had briefly legitimated Protestantism.

Mary of Guise and the French interlude, 1548-1559

After the young queen had been sent to France, her mother, Mary of Guise, was made regent of Scotland. Mary was an effective ruler – she rewarded her adherents with gifts of land and money, and bribed those who were liable to waver. She tried to restore firm central government and deal with the administration of justice and regulation of trade. However, the Scottish nobility became increasingly suspicious of her. Her effort to introduce a form of valuation tax in 1556, although sensibly withdrawn, led to considerable mistrust between her and the Scottish nobility. The following year Mary also tried to engineer a war against England but when the army reached the Border on 17 October 1557 the principal Scots noblemen refused to fight. Notably, these included the Duke of Châtelherault and the Earls of Morton and Argyll, who all would be active on the Protestant side during the Reformation Rebellion.

Religion in Scotland, 1546-1559

Mary failed to address the issue of religious reform seriously. The murder of Cardinal Beaton in 1546 meant that there was no leadership in the church, and although John Hamilton did take his place, it was two years before he had sufficient authority to act as Archbishop of St Andrews. This had allowed Protestantism to grow quietly – there was a move from small underground meetings of individuals in secret 'conventicles' to more public 'privy kirks'. Despite the growth of Protestantism, with the resumption of French influence it looked as if the Catholic religion could be fully restored in Scotland. Indeed, although there was a sizable community of Scottish religious exiles in Geneva and abroad led by John Knox and his friend Christopher Goodman, with the resumption in England of a Catholic state under Mary Tudor in 1553 they had nowhere to hide in the British mainland.

Path to rebellion

On 1 January 1559 'The Beggars' Summons' was posted on the doors of all monasteries, abbeys and friaries, and threatened violent dispossession of friars. Addressed in the name of the 'blind, crooked, bed-ridden, widows, orphans and poor of Scotland', it read as follows:

'Ye your selves ar not ignorant (and thocht ye wald be) it is now (thankes to God) knawen to the hail warlde...that the benignitie or almes of all Christian people perteynis to us allanerly; quhilk ye, being hale of bodye, stark, sturdye, and abill to wyrk...hes thire many yeiris...maist falslie stowin fra us...[we] warne yow, in the name of the grit God, be this publyck wryting, affixt on your yettis quhair ye now dwell, that ye remove fourth of our saidis Hospitales, betuix this and the Feist of Witsunday next, sua that we...may enter and tak possessioun of our said patrimony, and eject yow utterlie fourth of the same.' (Knox, ii, 255-6).

The rebellion, May 1559-July 1560

2,500 men from Ayrshire, under the earl of Glencairn, arrived to defend Perth against the Regent. After negotiation Glencairn's forces ceded control of Perth to Guise on 30 May, who immediately tried to enforce Catholicism in the town via martial law. This was highly unpopular, and her troops shot dead a boy during the reoccupation. These events pushed Lord James Stewart, queen Mary's half-brother, and the earl of Argyll to declare for the reformers, and become leaders of party known as the 'Lords of the Congregation.' The Congregation ransacked Fife and 'reformed' St Andrews in mid-June, and by the end of the month they had taken Edinburgh. They put out feelers to England for support, and in the meantime consolidated their control over their heartlands in Angus and the Mearns, Fife, and the south-west.

The Reformation Parliament, August 1560

Without royal sanction or authorisation, the Lords of the Congregation and their supporters ushered in the religious revolution that not only would permanently transform Scotland's church, but would also affect its cultural and intellectual life at every level, and permanently alter Scottish national identity. This meeting, known as the Reformation Parliament, outlawed the practice of Catholic worship in Scotland and denied that the Pope had any spiritual authority over Scotland or power to adjudicate on legal matters such as marriage and divorce, ending at a stroke a relationship between Scotland and the Catholic Church that had existed for centuries.

Scotland's First Reformed Polity

To support this confession a group of Protestant ministers and intellectuals – known, unfortunately, as the 'six Johns', because they all shared the same first name, but which included John Knox – created a polity 'touching the reform of religion in Scotland'. This blueprint for what would become the Church, or Kirk, of Scotland, later known as the First Book of Discipline, was accepted in an act of secret council in January 1561, and aimed to bring about sweeping changes to the Scottish parish system. Churches were to be stripped of their idolatrous religious art and decoration and whitewashed, so that only God and Christ would be worshipped, and not their images, or images of the saints (prohibited, along with all manner of intercessory prayer, as a feature of the Catholic faith).

Key Figures

John Knox (c. 1514-1572)

A Protestant preacher and firebrand, Knox started life as a parish priest and notary public. Inspired by the preaching of the Protestant martyr George Wishart, Knox joined a band of early Protestants who seized St Andrews castle in 1546 and murdered Cardinal Beaton. When the castle was captured by the French, Knox spent two years as a galley slave before becoming involved in the Protestant church in England and on the Continent. Knox played a key role in the Protestant rebellion of 1559-60 and the events leading up to it. He was also a skilled polemicist, writing many tracts on man's right to resist his ruler on grounds of religion. His masterwork was his massive *History of the Reformation in Scotland*, which provided an account of the events of the rebellion from the viewpoint of the reformers and attempted to legitimise the actions of the Lords of the Congregation. His extreme radicalism ultimately made him an embarrassment to the moderate Protestant party that took root at Queen Mary's court and he was marginalised politically. He died at St Andrews in 1572.

James Hamilton, second earl of Arran and Duke of Châtelherault (c. 1519-1575)

Hamilton was the grandson of James Hamilton, first Lord Hamilton, and Mary Stewart, sister of James III. His lineage meant he was heir presumptive after Mary Stewart between 1542 and 1566, although there were questions about his legitimacy owing to his father's divorce from his first wife, Lady Elizabeth Home. Hamilton's proximity to the throne guided much of his policy; he was also known for being highly fickle and changeable, which goes some way towards explaining his inconsistent shifting between various factions in the reformation struggle. Becoming governor on the death of James V in December 1542, over the course of 1543 Arran negotiated an alliance with Henry VIII that agreed the marriage of Mary Queen of Scots and the young Prince Edward and authorised the reading of the bible in the vernacular. The return from France in late 1543 of his staunchly Catholic brother John Hamilton, Abbot of Paisley (and from 1549 Archbishop of St Andrews) and from England of Matthew Stewart, fourth earl of Lennox (who had a strong claim to the Scottish throne from another branch of the Stewart family), along with the widespread socio-economic disruption caused by anti-clerical riots, prompted Hamilton to quickly reverse his pro-Protestant pro-English policy. He negotiated the Treaty of Haddington with Henri II of France in 1548, for which he was rewarded with the duchy of Châtelherault in Poitou (worth around £5000 Scots a year). He remained regent until 1554 when Mary of Guise replaced him. In 1559 he became one of the Lords of the Congregation, but supported Mary Stewart after her enforced abdication as one of the 'Queen's Men' between 1567 and 1573; his shifting from one side to another over the course of these two events was likely motivated by his desire to protect his status as heir presumptive.

Cardinal David Beaton (1494?-c. 1547)

Beaton studied at St Andrews and Orleans, and began his rise to prominence under the patronage of John Stewart, fourth duke of Albany and governor of Scotland between 1515 and 1524. In 1524 he helped negotiate a French marriage for James V in accordance with the terms of the Treaty of Rouen (1517), and was appointed to the commendatorship of Arbroath. He made a name for himself as an administrator in Scottish central government and as a diplomatic agent to the French court between 1524 and 1543, spending four and a half of the ten years after 1533 in France. He led the negotiations relating to James V's French marriages, first to Princess Madeleine, daughter of François I (1537), and then Mary of Guise (1538). In 1537 Francis I nominated him to the French bishopric of Mirepoix, to which he acceded on 5 December. In December of the following year he was made one of five new cardinals created by the pope. On 14 February 1539 he succeeded his uncle, James Hamilton, as archbishop of St Andrews. Following the death of the king in late 1542, Beaton clashed with the earl of Arran on the regency council and was initially imprisoned by him in the first half of 1543. Following Hamilton's volte-face against his own English policy Beaton eventually outmaneuvered him and led the faction that repudiated the Treaty of Greenwich in late 1543. Beaton was an active prosecutor of heresy as archbishop, and in spring 1544 he was made legate a latere, which gave him broad powers to act on behalf of the pope in the affairs of the Scottish church. Beaton was blamed for the military assaults against Scotland by Henry VIII between 1544 and 1546 following the repudiation of the English alliance, and his trial and execution of the protestant preacher George Wishart on 1 March 1546 sparked outrage among the Protestant Anglophile faction. He was assassinated by a small group of Fife lairds during a dawn raid on St Andrews Castle on 29 May, and his body preserved in a casket of salt and subjected to ritual humiliation.

Mary of Guise (1515-1560)

Mary was a member of the powerful French house of Guise, who had close links to the ruling Valois dynasty. She was queen of Scots and consort of James V from 1537 until 1542, and adopted a pro-

French, pro-Catholic stance (along with Cardinal David Beaton) in the struggles for control of the Scottish government after James' death with the pro-English Hamilton family (led by James Hamilton, the earl of Arran). Mary succeeded Arran as regent in Scotland in April 1554, and her policy centred on shoring up French influence in Scotland and ensuring that her daughter Mary's inheritance was protected. Although Mary initially fought a strong military campaign against the Lords of the Congregation, the intervention of English forces early in 1560 made quashing the rebellion increasingly difficult, compounded by Mary's growing ill-health (she likely suffered from dropsy). She died in the early hours of 11 June 1560.

The Lords of the Congregation (act. 1557–1560)

The Lords of the Congregation were the group of Scottish nobles who mounted a successful rebellion against Mary of Guise. The formation of the group is dated to the 'first band' of 3 December 1557, the signing of a largely medieval style agreement of mutual protection and association, in this case to press for reform of the church along protestant lines. The 'first band' was signed by Archibald Campbell, fourth earl of Argyll, Alexander Cunningham, fourth earl of Glencairn, James Douglas, fourth earl of Morton, Archibald Campbell, Lord Lorne (fifth earl of Argyll from 1558), and Lord John Erskine, later seventeenth or first earl of Mar. With the exception of Erskine, these men emerged two years later at the head of the congregation. A much larger group lay behind them, although their signatures have not survived or were not explicitly appended to the band. Together they represented the core of the underground protestant movement of the late 1550s, the geographical strength of which lay above all in Ayrshire, Angus and the Mearns, Fife, and the Lothians. The leadership and composition of the lords of the congregation altered and expanded at different stages during the wars, and expanded to include those who sup

Mary Stewart (1542-1587)

Mary Stewart, daughter of James V and Mary of Guise, became Queen while an infant, following her father's death at the Battle of Solway Moss. In 1548 Mary was betrothed to the Dauphin (crown prince) of France, the future Francis II, and was sent to be raised in France, a staunchly Catholic country. Mary and Francis became king and queen of France in July 1559, but on 5 December 1560 Francis died, and she returned to Scotland in August 1561 to take up rule of a country that had ushered in a Protestant revolution in her absence.

Suggested reading

Narrative/Political Studies

Ian Cowan, *The Scottish Reformation* (London, 1982)

Jane Dawson, *Scotland Re-formed, 1488-1587* (Edinburgh, 2007; available as an e-book), chs. 7-10

Gordon Donaldson, *The Scottish Reformation* (Cambridge, 1960)

James Kirk, *Patterns of Reform* (Edinburgh, 1989)

Alan MacDonald, *The Jacobean Kirk* (Aldershot, 1998)

David McRoberts (ed.), *Essays on the Scottish Reformation* (Edinburgh, 1962)

David Mullan, *Episcopacy in Scotland* (East Linton, 1988)

Alec Ryrie, *The Origins of the Scottish Reformation* (Manchester, 2006)

Cultural Studies

James K. Cameron (ed.), *The First Book of Discipline* (Edinburgh, 1972), introduction

James Kirk (ed.), *The Second Book of Discipline* (Edinburgh, 1980), introduction

Michael Graham, *The Uses of Reform 1560-1610* (Leiden, 1996)

Michael Lynch, 'Preaching to the converted?', in A MacDonald (ed.), *The Renaissance in Scotland* (Leiden, 1994)

John McCallum, *Reforming the Scottish Parish: The Reformation in Fife, 1560-1640* (Aldershot, 2010)

David Mullan, *Scottish Puritanism* (Oxford, 2002)

Margo Todd, *The Culture of Protestantism in Early Modern Scotland* (London and New Haven, 2002)

ported an English alliance, such as James Hamilton, duke of Châtelherault, and Lord James Stewart, Mary Stewart's half-brother.