## George Wishart: a Torch of the Reformation in Scotland[1]

I am led to attempt a paper on George Wishart, partly because of a family connection which I refer to later in this paper, and partly by an interest in two questions: firstly, why would a man die (or perhaps more accurately put himself in a position of risk of death) over what appear to modern eyes, relatively small points of religious doctrine; secondly, why would those in authority think it worth killing him over those same points? The first question is answered readily enough. In a time when religious questions were to some, perhaps a relatively small part of the community, the most important thing in life, and when salvation for eternity is seen as the object, death may be actively pursued in that cause and certainly risked. It is of course also possible that for many there is a certain tinge of egotism in the heroism of martyrs:

> ...they never fail who die
> in a great cause: their gore may soak the block,
> There may sodden in the sun, their limbs
> Be strung to city gates and castle walls.
> But still their spirit walks abroad. Though years
> Elapse, and other share as dark a doom,
> They but augment the deep and sweeping thoughts
> Which overpower all others, and conduct
> The world at last to freedom.[2]

The second question is I think much harder. The explanation in part of course is the same in that there were certainly some in the established church who felt sufficiently strongly about these relatively small questions of doctrine to risk their own lives and therefore thought relatively little of taking the lives of others. I think however the main thrust of the explanation is essentially a question of political power.

In 1500 the whole of Europe had a degree of religious unity that it had not long enjoyed before and was not long to retain afterwards. From the Atlantic coast of Spain to the eastern borders of Poland; from the far north of Scandinavia and Scotland through to the southern tip of Italy, Europe was Christian, Catholic and acknowledging the primacy of the Pope. The enormous political importance of that Christian unity and authority over that total area was of sufficient political importance to be worth spilling some blood to maintain.

It is certain that there were many religious groups supporting the established church of 1500 who were enthusiastic supporters of killing off

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[1] An earlier version of this paper was presented to the Society in April 1995.

[2] Lord Byron, *Marino Faliere.*

those whose religious views diverged, even to small degrees. So when on 28 February 1527 the first of the Scottish martyrs of the Reformation, Patrick Hamilton, was burnt on the judgment of Archbishop James Beaton of St Andrews, on 21 April 1528 the teachers of theology at the University of Louvain wrote a letter the to Archbishop in which they thank St Andrews for the service they had rendered to the church by the execution of the wicked heretic Patrick Hamilton and congratulate the University of St Andrews on the enviable distinction which it had acquired by this demonstration of Catholic zeal: 'Let us labour with one consent, that the ravening wolves may be expelled from the sheepfold of Christ while we have time'.[3] Even so, it is hard to accept that civil authorities would accept public executions and the inevitable public unrest that they would generate without some real political purpose.

George Wishart seems to have been born in approximately the year 1516 (the year before Luther nailed his Theses to the door of Wittenberg Cathedral). This date of birth is calculated substantially only by reason of the belief that at the time of his execution he was only 30 years of age. Since the youth of the martyr George Wishart added greatly to his prestige and the effectiveness of his martyrdom, there is some motive for his supporters to make him as young as possible. The date of birth should therefore be treated with a certain degree of reserve. The name Wishart is merely the Anglicisation of the French name Guiscard which was in the sixteenth century, as now, a common French name. 'Gu' in French changes to 'W' in English as in Guilliaume and William. 'Sc' tends to be transferred into English as 'Sh' and 'd' and 't' are frequently interchanged between all languages and frequently over time within the one language. The Wisharts indeed seem to have had a French origin like the Stewarts, the Bruces and the Brouns. One of the main branches of that family became possessed of an estate called Pittarrow in the County of Mearns and the family seems to have had some significance.[4] According to Knox, George was a younger son of John Wishart of Pittarrow and a brother of James Wishart of Pittarrow who held the office of Clerk of Justiciary to James V and at one time King's Advocate and who died towards the end of the year 1524.[5] According to Tytler, he was the son of James Wishart not his brother, and therefore the grandson of John.[6] The dates seem to fit Tytler's account more comfortably. Robert Chambers' *Biographical Dictionary* says he was probably the son of James Wishart, the Justice-Clerk.[7]

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3 John Knox, *History of the Reformation*, ed., William M'Gavin (Edinburgh, 1831), p. 14.
4 William Anderson, *The Scottish Nation* (Glasgow, Melbourne and Dunedin, 1877).
5 Knox, *History of the Reformation,* p. 16.
6 Patrick Fraser Tytler, *History of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1866), Vol V, p. 341.
7 *A Biographical Dictionary of Eminent Scotsmen* (Glasgow, Edinburgh and London, 1855).

Wishart's life has become encrusted with the sugar coating of hagiography. He features early and large in Howie's *Scots Worthies* which, although a work of historical interest in its own right, is not a very reliable source of information. I have used particularly the edition of Howie's *Scots Worthies* by Rev. J A Wylie LLD and Rev. James Anderson of c.1860.[8] Even at that late date, the editors were able to begin their historical introduction with the memorable lines: 'there is nothing of much interest in modern history till we come to the middle of the 14th century'. The basic facts of his life I take from Tytler supplemented from Howie and other indicated sources.

Since it appears clear that Wishart learned ancient Greek at a fairly early stage of his education and since it is asserted in many places that at the beginning of the sixteenth century only King's College at Aberdeen taught ancient Greek to their pupils, it seems likely that he was educated firstly at that college. Wishart attended the University of Cambridge. It should be remembered of course that at that date universities essentially prepared students for only one career, namely the church. After his studies at Cambridge in 1538 (which if his birthday is correct means he was 22 years old) he opened a school at the town of Montrose in which he taught Greek (said by some to the first Greek grammar school in Scotland). In Montrose he was patronised by John Erskine of Dun, provost of Montrose who was an earlier opponent of the Catholic Church. To teach Greek and particularly the Greek New Testament was then regarded as a heresy deserving the severest anathemas of the church and heavy punishment. This also would seem strange to us in the twentieth century but it has to be remembered the church had built up a very considerable amount of doctrine as to the exact meaning and interpretation of the Bible and particularly the New Testament drawn from the Latin translations then generally used. To go back to study the original Greek was to give rise to the possibility of doubting or re-interpreting the many ambiguities which had been resolved by the church and enshrined in the Latin translation.

In 1538 Wishart was summoned by John Hepburn, the Bishop of Brechin, to explain. Wishart fled. It would seem that the willingness to risk death that later came upon him was not established by that stage. In 1539 he is recorded as being in Bristol then within the diocese of the Bishop of Worcester, then Bishop Latimer later one of the Protestant martyr bishops during the reign of Queen Mary I of England. Latimer was a prominent reformer and no doubt therefore sympathetic to Wishart. Latimer had appointed him as a lecturer and a preacher in some of the churches of the city of Bristol. While there he was accused of 'blasphemous heresy' by the Dean of the diocese. Tytler gives the clearest account; that he preached against the offering of prayers to the Virgin. He was tried before Archbishop Cranmer, the Archbishop of Canterbury, also of reformist sympathies and also later to

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[8] All subsequent references to Howie are to the account of Wishart's life in that edition.

be executed in the period of Catholic restoration under Mary I of England. He was convicted of teaching heresy and sentenced to 'bear a faggot in St Nicholas Church of Bristol and the parish thereof on 13 July 1539 and in Christ Church and the parish thereof on 20 July 1539'. Wishart submitted to that act of penance. He left England in 1540, going to Switzerland to study the Helvetic confession of faith. He translated it into English. He returned to England probably late in the year 1541, went to Cambridge where he took up residence in one of the colleges and both taught and studied. It was there that he met his later biographer who contributed an account of him to Foxe's Book of Martyrs. Wishart returned to Scotland in July 1543 in the company of the Scottish commissioners who had been in London negotiating a marriage between Prince Edward of England and Mary Queen of Scots.[9]

Scotland in 1543 was a maze of different parties and rivalries. In foreign policy there were the supporters of the French alliance opposed by the supporters of an English alliance. In politics there were a myriad of different groups but particularly Hamiltons led by the Earl of Arran against the Douglases. In religion there were the traditionalist opposed by various shades of reformers. Generally, but not always, support for the French alliance went with support for the traditional religion, and support for an English alliance went with support for one of the shades of religious reform. Even Arran himself was at one time sympathetic to the Protestant cause, and his return to the traditional religion may have been partly inspired by political considerations. But crossing over every dividing line there were personal or family animosities or allegiances. The support for a marriage of Mary and Edward was naturally the pro-English party, and the religious reformers. Over all there was the apparent incompatibility of the independence of Scotland and the independence of the mind.

It would seem clear that by this stage Wishart was sympathetic to the English cause, that is to say to political and military co-operation between England and Scotland and hence to what was seen as the reforming cause in the church and therefore against the continuing political and military co-operation between France and Scotland and the maintenance in Scotland of the traditional faith. At the least he was prepared to show openly support for the pro-English party by returning to Scotland in their company. Professor Mackie suggests that it is just possible that he was an emissary between the English Council and the Scottish enemies of Cardinal Beaton.[10] Our late patron Professor Gordon Donaldson does not mince words and calls him 'an English agent' — at least in political terms.[11] Wishart's sympathy for the English cause and against the French cause, whatever his religious views,

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[9] Tytler, *History of Scotland*, Vol V, p. 341.

[10] 'The Earlier Tudors', *Oxford History of England*, Vol 7, reprint (Oxford, 1985), p. 407

[11] G. Donaldson, *James V-James VII*, Edinburgh History of Scotland, (Edinburgh, 1965) reprinted (1990) p. 74; see also 'The Painful Preacher', *The Story of Scotland*, (Glasgow, 1988), Vol. I, p. 324.

marked him out as an opponent of the great supporter of Scotland's continued alliance with France and the traditional Europe against England, namely Cardinal David Beaton.

The best description we have of Wishart was that he was tall, black haired, wore a long beard, moved gracefully, spoke eloquently, was always courteous and expressed himself as wanting to learn as much as to teach. He wore the usual modest garb of the lower orders of the clergy of the time: a French cap, a frieze gown, plain black stockings, white banns and white cuffs at his wrists. He seems to have adopted a conscious copying of the actions of Christ as described in the gospels with some additions from the early Christian fathers. He is said to have eaten very moderately and to have adopted a practice of fasting every fourth day. Thus he followed the practice of parts of the Catholic church of fasting once a week but avoided the day of his fast corresponding with the rest of the church's fast day more than once a month. He also made a practice of giving parts of his apparel away to the poor from time to time which must have put him to some cost in replacing garments and maintaining his consistent appearance.

Not long after his return to Scotland in 1543 he is reported as preaching at Dundee. There his sermons on Paul's Epistle to the Romans attracted much attention since it included direct criticism of established church practices. He was well received at Dundee which drew the attention of the establishment. However, despite the general reputation for bloodthirsty suppression of Protestant views which Knox, Howie and others tried to give to Cardinal Beaton, all Cardinal Beaton did was to send Robert Mill of Dundee to stop him preaching in Dundee. In the circumstances of the considerable public attention which Wishart was receiving, the step taken seemed to be very mild. Mill made the request in public just after Wishart had finished one of his sermons. Howie quotes a supposed *verbatim* account of what Wishart then said though who was present to take it down is not recorded. Its accuracy should be treated with the greatest scepticism. Firstly it is almost too saintly to be true, but that could fit in with Wishart's conscious emulation of Christ. Secondly, it is upon this statement that Wishart's supposed gift of prophecy or alternatively power to call down God's vengeance, is based. It would seem more likely that those trying to advance the Protestant cause, and particularly to advance Wishart in the martyr stakes, had added to the words supposedly said after he was asked to leave Dundee; references to subsequent events to make Wishart's words appear as a prophecy:

> God is my witness that I never minded [intended] your trouble, but your comfort; yea, your trouble is more grievous unto me than it is unto yourselves; but sure I am [that] to reject the word of God, and drive away his messengers, is not the way to save you from trouble but to bring you into it. When I am gone, God will send you messengers who will not be afraid either for burning or

> banishment. I have at the hazard of my life remained among you preaching the word of salvation; and now, since you yourselves refuse me, I must leave my innocence to be declared by God. If it be long well with you, I am not led by the spirit of truth; and if unexpected trouble come upon you, remember this is the cause and turn to God by repentance, for he is merciful.[12]

Of course, being in contact with the pro-English party Wishart may well have expected that an English raid might affect Dundee in the not too distant future and have been wanting to take advantage of that trouble the town was likely to suffer to advance his own reputation. Prophesy generally involves a good source of reliable information. In fact there were two English invasions while he was preaching in Scotland (in 1544 and again in 1545), invasions led by the Earl of Hertford usually referred to in Sir Walter Scott's famous phrase as the 'Rough Wooing'.

A more likely explanation is that when troubles later broke out in Dundee the reformist party was prepared to attribute those troubles to the way the town had sent Wishart away and thereby to take advantage of the subsequent problems. It is perhaps only a small step after that for someone to 'remember' something specific Wishart had said about the comings of the troubles. Having left Dundee he moved to the west country. Howie reports that about four days after he left Dundee the plague broke out. Outbreaks of plague in rat-infested cities was common until relatively modern times particularly in seaports where the infected rats and fleas came in. The mechanism of plague, how it broke out and what its source was, was not generally understood at that time. Biblical studies had led people to perceive outbreaks of serious disease as being referrable to divine ill-will. The old testament contains a number of examples. Word got to Wishart of the outbreak of the plague. He returned to Dundee. There is no reason to doubt a sincere belief on his part that he may be able to do something to assist by prayer, though of course we now know that a solid policy of rat eradication and of careful cleaning to avoid rats and fleas would have been a more practical step. Having arrived in Dundee he spread the word that he would preach from the head of the East gate. He asked those who suffered the infection to stand outside the gate and those who did not suffer the infection within the gate. Since the fleas were presumably within the city rather than outside the city reversing the arrangement would have been safer. His preaching was said to have brought great comfort to those who listened. The text was *Psalm* CVII, verse 20: 'He sent his word, and healed them and delivered them from their destructions'. He stayed in the city after that bringing comfort where he could and particularly taking special interest in the poor. Certainly he exposed himself to the risk of infection in the town.

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[12] Howie, *Scots Worthies*, p. 10.

One of the other stories in Howie about Wishart in Dundee which appears doubtful is that Cardinal Beaton had bribed a priest, Sir John Wightman, to assassinate Wishart; that the supposed assassin chose as the spot to carry out his purpose the foot of the pulpit immediately following a sermon which one would have thought would give the assassin the minimal chance of escaping; and it is suggested that Wishart somehow worked out what the assassin had in mind and seized his hand before he could even draw a dagger and took his dagger from him. The priest is then supposed to have confessed his intention of assassinating Wishart and the crowd who had been listening to the sermon are supposed to have cried to have the assassin handed over to them but Wishart defended the would-be assassin from violence and allowed the priest to escape. Points that do not make any sense about that story are: Why would a supposedly paid assassin choose a place so public as to minimise his chances of escape? How was Wishart able to sense that the priest was wanting to assassinate him before even a dagger had been drawn? Why would Cardinal Beaton have needed to pay an assassin when, if what the hagiographers of the time say is right, he was able to burn or strangle or otherwise murder his opponents in private with impunity, and was regularly doing so? Why did the supposed assassin confess on the spot in a way which must have placed his life in jeopardy? Tytler observes that no evidence of this event survives from original or contemporary letters or records.[13]

Perhaps something quite trivial happened which has been blown up by subsequent re-telling into an attempted assassination, or it is a piece of hagiographer's invention, or if one was thinking of twentieth-century parallels, perhaps the supposed assassin was a secret supporter trying to develop goodwill and public support for Wishart. Howie's portrait of Wishart as a gentle person leads him to omit the fact that his preaching against the Catholic Church in Dundee was so effective that it led to riots about 4 September 1543 in which the houses of both the Black and Grey Friars were destroyed.[14] When civil authorities intervened to restore order, Wishart denounced them in turn. In 1544 a group of Scots, only some of whom were committed Protestants, were plotting to assassinate Cardinal Beaton and sought support from Henry VIII, who offered protection, and, if they were successful, a cash reward. Particularly, they were Sir James Kirkcaldy of Grange who had been displaced as treasurer by a Hamilton, Norman Leslie (son of the Earl of Rothes), Crichton of Brunstane, the Earl Marischal (otherwise the Earl of Kintore) and the Earl of Cassillis. In fact Norman Leslie and Kirkcaldy's son were among the assassins who did finally kill Cardinal Beaton.

Although it is clear enough that Wishart was deeply involved with the pro-English group that included those plotting to assassinate Cardinal Beaton,

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[13] Tytler, *History of Scotland*, Vol V, pp. 343.
[14] Chalmers, *Life of Mary*, Vol II, p. 403.

heated controversy has arisen as to whether he was actually one of the conspirators in the murder plot. In a century in which popes countenanced massacres and John Knox approved of murder (of Cardinal Beaton in particular) it is not surprising that Wishart may also have been involved in a murder plot. Tytler concludes that Wishart had acted as a messenger in carrying letters from Crichton of Brunstane to the Earl of Hertford at Newcastle about the conspiracy to murder the Cardinal and then other letters from that town to Henry VIII relating to the conspiracy formed by Brunstane for the assassination of Cardinal Beaton. Tytler also refers to an interview between Henry VIII and Wishart at Greenwich after which it is said that Wishart returned to Newcastle and then proceeded to Scotland. The source of material for this seems to be a letter of the Earl of Hertford of 17 April 1544 in which it is said 'A Scotishman called Wyshert' was the bearer of the letters referred to.[15] No first name is given. Wishart is by no means an uncommon name either spelt with a 'y' or an 'i'. However we do know that Crichton of Brunstane was a friend and protector of Wishart throughout his time in Scotland so that we have established connection between our Wishart and Crichton of Brunstane. We do not of course know that Wishart was in any way privy to the contents of the letters or actively supported the plan for the assassination of the cardinal. We do know however that Wishart was sympathetic to the English reforming prelates and to the reform of the church and therefore in Scotland was in the pro-English party and against the pro-French party and politically on the other side from the cardinal as well as being religiously on the other side from the cardinal. Assuming, as indeed seems quite probable, that Wishart was indeed the bearer of the letters, all that can reasonably be inferred is that he was completely trusted by Crichton of Brunstane and the Earl of Hertford. The letter of the Earl of Hertford of 17 April 1544 does not tell us precisely the date on which Wishart is supposed to have carried the letters so it is not possible to fit the date of the supposed journey to Newcastle and then on to London and back into what we know of Wishart's activities in Scotland between July 1543 and his death on 1 March 1546.

The life of Wishart as depicted by the early reforming church historians follows so closely and typically the lives of the saints of the earlier church that one is really left to wonder what the historical worth of any of it is. After Wishart left Dundee he is said then to have gone on to Montrose where he is said to have performed the mass or 'administered the sacrament of our Lord's supper' and to have preached with success. Having received a letter from a supposed intimate friend requesting him to come he set out to respond to the request. He was accompanied by some supporters for part of the journey. About a quarter of a mile out of Montrose he stopped, saying to the company: 'I am forbidden by God to go on this journey. Will some of you be pleased to ride to yonder place (pointing with his finger to a little hill) and see what you

15 Tytler, *History of Scotland*, Vol V, p. 379.

find for I apprehend there is a plot against my life'. Wishart then went back to town and his supporters went forward to the place indicated where they are said to have found 60 horsemen waiting to intercept Wishart. This was supposed to have been another plot of Cardinal Beaton's. The letter requesting Wishart to come was then found to be a forgery. This story does not make much sense either. If they were going to seize him or kill him on a country road what was the need of 60? Where had the 60 people come from if the town of Montrose had been welcoming Wishart's preaching so much? How (apart from saintly powers of prophecy) could Wishart have known that the horsemen were waiting for him? How come the gift of prophecy did not work at an earlier point, for example by enabling him to identify the letter from his supposed intimate friend as a forgery? Tytler says there is no original or contemporary record of this 'narrow escape' either. However it does seem to be established that from some time early in this period, possibly even from the end of 1543, he was generally surrounded by armed men when he preached, to protect him, and wherever he went a two handed sword was carried in front of him by some trusted follower; at one stage Knox himself performing this guard duty.

Howie's account of Wishart then continues with the endeavour to turn Wishart into a Christ-like figure whose martyrdom helps to found the true church in Scotland by the next incident much embellished with detail. Shortly after escaping from the 60 horsemen he is said to have left Montrose for Edinburgh stopping the first night at Invergowrie. None of the 60 horsemen seemed to be still around. He is observed by his friends to get up in the middle of the night and to go into a garden and to prostrate himself upon the ground praying and weeping for nearly an hour. When pressed the next day as to what he was doing he is reported to have said:

> I assuredly know my travail is nigh an end, therefore pray to God for me, that I may not shrink when the battle waxeth most hot. ... God will send you comfort after me; this realm shall be illuminated by the light of Christ's gospel, as clearly as any realm ever was since the days of the Apostles; the house of God shall be built in it; yea, it shall not lack (whatsoever the enemy shall devise to the contrary) the very copestone; neither shall this be long in doing, for there shall not many suffer after me. ... But alas! If the people become unthankful, the plagues and punishments which shall follow will be fearful and terrible.[16]

The references here to old testament prophets foretelling doom for those of little faith, and the obvious references to the role that martyrs play in the establishment of the church and to the coming of the future protestant church in Scotland, are all so convenient and helpful to support the later established

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16 Howie, *Scots Worthies*, p. 14.

Church of Scotland that the accuracy of the reporting must really be approached with a degree of scepticism.

Thereafter Wishart is reported over the next weeks to have preached with great success and apparently well announced in advance at Leith shortly after 10 December. If the Cardinal and the Earl of Arran were really concerned to have stopped him it is difficult to imagine they would have had much trouble in doing so. The next sabbath he preached at Inveresk to a large crowd both in the morning and afternoon. The real politics of what was going on however is perhaps unwittingly revealed by Howie in his account of the preaching at Inveresk in that Sir George Douglas (the supporter of the English party against Arran and Beaton) is reported to have declared that he would not only maintain the doctrine of what he had heard at the sermon but would also maintain the person of the teacher to the uttermost of his power. During this period Wishart seems to have moved about in West Lothian, Midlothian and East Lothian with the group known to Reformation historians as the East Lothian Lairds. The next two sabbaths he preached at Tranent. If he was supposedly in so much danger it is surprising that he was able to preach two successive Sundays at the one small town. In each of the sermons in this period it is reported that he dropped hints that his ministry was near to an end.

The close connection of Wishart (and indeed at that time and later, Knox) with the East Lothian Lairds is evidence enough of his pro-English sympathies. The East Lothian Lairds were Crichton of Brunstane (one of the conspirators in the 1544 plot to murder Cardinal Beaton), Douglas of Longniddry (of the Douglas opponents of the Hamiltons), Cockburn of Ormiston, Heriot of Trabroun and my own ancestor Broun of Colstoun.[17] They collaborated with the English invaders about the time of the Battle of Pinkie in 1547, actually joining the Duke of Somerset, making their own houses available and assisting the English garrisons in Hailes and Haddington.[18] It is understandable that the East Lothian residents were fed up with regular invasions from England and saw an English alliance as the only long term solution.

The next place Wishart preached after Tranent was at Haddington (the birthplace of John Knox and the town nearest to Broun of Colstoun) where it is said that his congregation was at first very large but the following day very few attended. The Earl of Bothwell had put around that he did not favour people attending those services. The fact that he got poor audiences the second day led him to tell Knox who was with him that he was weary of the world since he perceived that men were becoming weary of God. Nonetheless he preached another sermon at St Mary's at Haddington. It is difficult to

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17 Donaldson, *James V-James VII*, p. 78.

18 *The Records of the Cockburn Family*, eds, Sir Robert and Harry A Cockburn (London and Edinburgh, 1913), p. 116.

understand how the priests and clergy made their churches and pulpits available to Wishart if there were such extensive plots against his life and such official disapproval of him. For this last sermon his audience was quite small. In the course of what he preached on that occasion, criticising the town for the small attendance to hear his sermon Howie reports that he said: 'Sore and fearful shall the plagues be that shall ensue this thy contempt'. The subsequent capture of Haddington by the English in 1547 following the battle of Pinkie was later advanced by Wishart's hagiographers as the fulfilling of the threatened punishment on Haddington for their small attendance at his last sermon. The fact that any time the English came into Scotland they nearly always came up the east coast and Haddington was the first major town that they passed after Berwick, is not held to be a more natural explanation.

After his last sermon he went to the home of one of the east Lothian Lairds, Cockburn of Ormiston, accompanied also by Crichton the Laird of Brunstane and Sir John Sandilands, the Younger of Calder. It is said that Knox also wished to accompany him but Howie exculpates Knox for not being in at the death by Wishart having reportedly said to him: 'One is enough for a sacrifice at this time'.[19] After he had retired to sleep that night at Ormiston the Earl of Bothwell arrived at about midnight. This is of course consistent with the literary traditions that the bad characters, like thieves, come in the dead of night. However the Earl of Bothwell seems to have entered into direct negotiations with the Laird of Ormiston suggesting that if Mr Wishart was delivered up Bothwell would see that no evil should befall him. Wishart had little alternative but to go along with this proposal and is reported to have said: 'God's will be done'. The Laird was also therefore exculpated from responsibility. The Earl of Bothwell is then reported to have confirmed that no harm would come to Wishart and shaken hands on it. The Earl of Bothwell then took Wishart to Elphinstone where the Cardinal was waiting. Tytler reports that the Cardinal was disappointed that the conspirators, particularly Crichton of Brunstane were not also taken and sent men back to get them, but Crichton escaped.[20] Cockburn and Sandilands were captured and locked up in Edinburgh Castle from which Cockburn of Ormiston escaped by leaping from a wall[21] – evidently not a maximum security prison. At first Wishart was taken into Edinburgh and then to Hailes, the Earl of Bothwell's principal residence in East Lothian. He was thereafter taken back to Edinburgh. Howie's story here becomes somewhat confused and difficult to follow. It appears clear however that the Earl of Bothwell was eventually persuaded to hand Wishart over to the Cardinal.[22]

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19 Howie, *Scots Worthies*, p. 16.
20 Tytler, *History of Scotland*, Vol V, p. 346.
21 *The Cockburn Family Records*, p. 116.
22 Spottiswood, *History*, p. 79.

Howie says that after a few days in Edinburgh Wishart was sent to St Andrew's. Buchanan reports that the Archbishop of Glasgow had told Wishart that he had endeavoured to have a civil judge appointed for Wishart's trial but that he had failed after David Hamilton of Preston, a kinsman of the Earl of Arran and therefore also a kinsman of the first of the martyrs, Patrick Hamilton, had remonstrated and pointed out the danger of attacking the servants of God who had no other crime laid to their charge but that of preaching the gospel.

At St Andrew's the Cardinal summoned bishops and superior clergy to meet on 27 February 1546 for the trial. Wishart was in the meantime held in prison in the Sea Tower. On Howie's account Wishart was certainly a great man to take advantage of any opportunity: as Wishart arrived at his trial, a poor man asked him for alms; Wishart gave him his whole purse. The trial seems to have begun with one John Winram, the sub-prior, preaching a discourse on the nature of heresy. Following this John Lauder acted as Wishart's accuser. The account of the trial in Howie is strongly supportive of the villainy of the Cardinal and all his men and of the saintliness of Wishart. Among the things he is reported by Tytler to have said that did not win him any sympathy with the ecclesiastics were: that even though excommunicated he had the right to preach; he declared the insufficiency of outward ceremonies to salvation; he derided auricular confessions; he condemned that invocation of saints and the doctrine of purgatory; and he stigmatised church practices and Catholic doctrines as 'pestilential, blasphemous and abominable, proceeding from the devil'.[23] Upon being convicted Wishart is said to have kneeled down and prayed apparently in front of the whole company and his accusers and judges sufficiently loudly and vocally that his words were taken down by somebody or able to be reconstructed afterwards. The prayer, set out in detail in Howie, has obvious references to the words of Christ from the cross and to a number of other famous speeches by martyrs. It has all the hallmarks of either having been thought out very well in advance or having been written up afterwards by sympathetic editors.

He was sentenced to be executed the following day. He was refused the sacrament of the Lord's supper and having been invited to breakfast with the captain of the castle the next morning before the execution he turned that into a mass/sacrament of the last supper with the captain's family and is said also to have delivered an exhortation to the captain's family taking some half hour. The day of execution was 1 March 1546 so that he had been back in Scotland two years eight months.

At the appointed time the two executioners came to Wishart. They dressed him in a black linen coat and fastened bags of gunpowder about him and put a rope around his neck, a chain about his waist and bound his hands

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[23] Tytler, *History of Scotland*, Vol. V, p. 347.

behind his back. He was then led to the public square for execution. As was usual a place was provided for those who had condemned him to witness the execution from the cardinal's palace. On the way to the stake he was said to have been asked for alms again by two beggars. The accounts of martyrdom of all sides seem to be peopled with ubiquitous beggars or the poor. It occurs so invariably in accounts of martyrdoms and it seems so wildly improbable that executioners taking a man to the stake would pause for chats with beggars or that beggars would think it a good time to ask for alms from the passing victim, that I really am left wondering whether it ever happened at all. But it is a sort of ritual inclusion in accounts of martyrdom. The optimistic beggars are said to have asked for alms even though he was completely prepared for the stake. Wishart is said by Howie to have replied: 'I want my hands wherewith I used to give you alms; but the merciful lord vouchsafe to give you all necessaries, both for soul and body'. There is a well known drawing of the event in Victorian times by W H Margetson.[24]

As is usual also he was allowed to deliver a fairly free speech from the scaffold. Again, I have never understood how it is that authorities who are condemning a man to death for what he has spoken about and said should provide him with a large audience and splendid platform to say some more. I also find it a little difficult to understand how, at a time when there was no public address system, a martyr going to the stake in the middle of a large square with a large number of active people around him and many people who have come to see the sight, is able to speak so clearly that his words can be written down and recorded for posterity. Sympathetic reconstruction by hagiographers must be the explanation. Howie sets out in detail what he is alleged to have said. It includes his confidence in his salvation, prayers that his accusers may be forgiven, express forgiveness of the executioner and that he was suffering that day with a glad heart. Tytler reports that the guns of the fortress were pointed at the platform and the gunners stood by with lighted matches — to discourage any rescue attempt like the one that had occurred at the burning of Patrick Hamilton.

The bags of gunpowder had been placed about his body with a view to ensuring a quick death as soon as the fire was lit but although they ignited they seem not to have achieved the desired purpose so the executioner then used the rope around his neck to extinguish his life quickly so that he was not in fact burnt alive. Whether the execution of Wishart was completely legal having regard to the fact that no warrant was actually issued by the secular authorities, is an issue that perhaps need not be gone into. Certainly it does not seem that all the due formalities were followed.

The other controversy about Wishart's death is whether it was then the pretext or actually the occasion of the assassination some three months later on

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[24] Recently reproduced in, *The Story of Scotland* (Glasgow, 1988) Vol. I, p. 305.

29 May 1546 of the Cardinal by Norman and John Leslie of the family of Rothes, William Kirkaldy of Grange, James Melvill of the family of Carnbee, Peter Carmichael and others. Overall since the existence of a conspiracy to murder the Cardinal had been well established prior to the execution of Wishart and since the assassins were more notable for their political and personal opposition to the Cardinal than for any religious zeal, and that the assassins then obtained English support to hold the castle, until a French force dislodged them,[25] the better conclusion seems to be that the execution of Wishart provided a useful support for the political impact of the assassination and assured the assassins of some support within the country.

Wishart was of course not the first of the martyrs of the Scottish reformation nor the last. The first was Patrick Hamilton who died on 28 February 1527. Then there was the mass execution on Castle Hill in Edinburgh on 28 February 1538 of Robert Forrester; Sir Duncan Simson, priest; Friar Killore, Friar Beveridge and Dean Thomas Forrest, a canon regular and vicar of Dollar. After Wishart there was Adam Wallace also executed at Castle Hill Edinburgh after a trial at Blackfriars. There was then effectively the last of the martyrs, Walter Milne, executed on 28 April 1558. Of them all, the one who seems to have got the best press at the time and who gets the most continuing veneration in the histories of the Church of Scotland is George Wishart who, if the account given of his life by Howie were anywhere near correct must indeed have been a very saintly man. He provided a balance in the competition of martyrs to the earlier and at least equally saintly martyrdom of Sir Thomas More in 1535.

Overall it is difficult to know whether the execution of Wishart served the purposes of the established church and of the pro-French political party in Scotland. The provision of a martyr is always risky since it gives the movement a rallying cry, a point of reference and an example of leadership and suffering in the cause which is likely to attract the attention and support of others. As Tytler puts it: 'the spectacle exhibited by their death compelled even the most indifferent spectator to some inquiry'.[26] On the other hand locking the subject up in a gaol or castle somewhere is always tricky since it encourages rescue attempts and makes the prisoner, again, a focal point for opposition. As a later example the long period of imprisonment of Mary Queen of Scots in England left her as such a point of danger to the crown that ultimately she was executed even after so many years of incarceration. Modern experience is much the same. The imprisonment of terrorists leads to rescue attempts, and further terrorism to try to induce the release of the imprisoned terrorists. The control of international terrorism seems to be

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25 See Dr Elizabeth Bonner's recent article, 'The Recovery of St Andrew's Castle in 1547: French Naval Policy and Diplomacy in the British Isles', *English Historial Review*, Vol. CXI (1996) *passim*.

26 Tytler, *History of Scotland*, Vol. V, p. 339.

rendered more difficult for those countries that do not have a provision for a death penalty.

On the other hand for the Cardinal and the church to have done nothing about Wishart's preaching must have attracted adverse comment from the rest of the international Catholic Church and may, or again may not, have added to the strength of the pro-English faction in Scottish politics at the time. Overall the only logical conclusion that can be drawn from what we know of the consequences is that the execution of Wishart did not do any good for either the Catholic church or the continuation of the Scottish-French alliance. Perhaps the established church's great problem at that time was a relative lack of charismatic preachers and leaders with a reputation for saintliness. This of course itself was a by-product of the political importance of the church and the fact that the high church offices had to be used to pay the salaries of what we would now call the higher civil service and ministers.

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