

SOME ASPECTS OF THE ORIGINS OF THE REFORMATION IN SCOTLAND: ANOTHER VIEW ¹

In this extremely contentious debate this paper will attempt to argue, very briefly, that the Reformation in Scotland did not spring from a grass roots movement, but that it was imposed from above by a few for reasons of political expediency and self-interest; and that it was also used as vehicle for ridding Scotland of the French in order to regain their independence.² This does not mean, however, that there was not considerable interest in Scotland among the educated few in the ideas and writings which arrived from the continent following Martin Luther's defiant act of nailing his "95 theses upon indulgences" on the door of the Castle Church at Wittenburg on 31 October 1517.

The ideas of Martin Luther soon became disseminated throughout Europe, aided by the advent of the printing press in the late 15th century. In Scotland, from the 1520s, Luther's ideas formed the focus of debate for a reformation of the Roman Catholic Church until John Knox returned from Geneva on 2 May 1559 thoroughly imbued with Calvinist philosophy and practice. In the sixteenth century, the concept and word *reformation* was a common and frequently used term. Ante 1556 *reform* from the Latin *reformare* meant to renew, restore, re-establish peace. The noun *reformation*, from the Latin *reformatio* meant from 1460, according to Dr. Samuel Johnson: 'improvement of (or in) an existing state of things, institution, practice etc., a radical change for the better effected in political, religious or social affairs'.³ Thus when Luther called for a *reformatio ecclesia* he wanted the Catholic Church to be reformed, renewed, made better; he did not call for

¹This paper is based on the one presented to The Sydney Society for Scottish History on 28 November 1991 as part of 'The Great Debate: Was the Reformation in Scotland a Grass Roots Movement, or the Work of a Few?' Other speakers were Associate-Professor Sybil M. Jack, Dr. Gwynne Jones and Simon H.T. Fraser, the Law Agent of the Presbyterian Church in Australia. The chairman was the President of the Society, Malcolm Broun Q.C. This debate had its origins following a paper which I gave to the Society in 1990 on Henry VIII's "Rough Wooing" of the Scots. If I remember correctly, in response to a comment by Malcolm Broun on French influence in Scotland, I remarked that 'if Mary Tudor had not suddenly died in November 1558, and if the French King, Henri II, had not been accidentally and mortally wounded in July 1559, it is doubtful if the Scottish Reformation would have taken place at that time'. Neil Morrison, whose essay and rejoinder to this paper appears in this issue, took great exception to my remark and a spirited discussion ensued in which almost the entire audience took part. It was therefore decided that a more considered examination of the question by historians and lawyers should take place.

² Professor Cowan argues that "The accession of Mary Tudor to the throne of England in 1553, and the assumption of the regency in Scotland by the Queen Mother, Marie de Guise, from the earl of Arran and the Hamiltons in April 1554, brought the limited attempts at doctrinal and organizational reform to an end until the very eve of the Reformation", I.B. Cowan, *The Scottish Reformation: Church and Society in Sixteenth-Century Scotland*, (London, 1982) p. 107.

³ *Oxford Dictionary on Historical Principles*, (Oxford, 1973).

the Catholic Religion to be overthrown. The development of the various sects of the Protestant religion, of which Lutheranism became one, came later and were to be embodied in what nineteenth-century historians designated as *The Reformation*, that is: using the word with the definite article and upper case first letter, as opposed to *a reformation* with an indefinite article and lower case letter, which is the way it was employed in the sixteenth century.

James V, for example, in dispatches frequently asked his uncle, Henry VIII, for a *reformation* of disputes on the Anglo/Scottish Borders. On 22 October 1541 he wrote to his, 'Derrest uncle, before the resait of your saidis lettres, how sone we gat knowlege of the saidis attemptatis, scharpe charge wes gevin to oure wardanis for reformatioun of the samyn be haiste setting of days of metying with youre officiairis'.⁴ Sir David Lindsay in his play, *Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estatis*, widely accepted as having been first performed before James V and Mary of Guise at Linlithgow on 6 January 1540,⁵ uses the word *reformation* to describe the function of his character, 'Divyne Correctioun'. Correctioun's 'Varlet' heralds the arrival of his master:

'For he maks reformatiouns
Out-throw all Christin natiouns
Quhair he finds great debaits;
And sa far as I understand,
He sall reforme into this land
Evin all the Thrie Estatis.' (lines 1488-93)⁶

Later, when Correctioun is presented to the king, 'Rex Humanitas', he announces that his *reformation*, healing, restoring or renewing applies not only to institutions but also to individuals. He informs the king that:

I will begin at thee, which is the head,
And mak on the first reformatioun:' (lines 1725-6)⁷

Therefore, just as we are obliged to try and understand the meaning and concept of the word *reformation* in the sixteenth century rather than that imposed upon us from the nineteenth century, so we should also endeavour to

⁴ *The Hamilton Papers...*, (ed) J. Bain, Vol. 1 (1532-1543), (Edinburgh, 1890), p. 113.

⁵ R. Lyall, (ed) *Sir David Lindsay of the Mount, Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estatis*, (Edinburgh, 1989), 'Introduction', p. x. Lyall, however, argues cogently that the first performance was at Cupar on 7 June 1552, based upon some efforts at reform of the Church in 1552 instigated by John Hamilton, Archbishop of St. Andrews, *Ibid*, pp. vii-ix. The earliest date, says Lyall, is the one 'proposed by John MacQueen [which] falls in the earlier 1530s. No external evidence exists to support such an early date:' asserts Lyall, 'it depends entirely upon textual similarities between the play and poems written by Lindsay between 1528 and 1530, and upon the identification of King Humanitie with young James V', *Ibid*, pp.ix-x, cf, J. MacQueen, *Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estatis*, SSL 3 (1965-66), pp. 129-43. It is this latter proposition that this paper finds the more convincing.

⁶ *Ibid* p. 53.

⁷ *Ibid* p. 61.

understand the sixteenth century pre-Reformation Catholic Church and Protestant beliefs in the same context.

According to Professor Ian Cowan, the Catholic Church in Scotland by the sixteenth century 'had a well-defined organization governed by a hierarchy that included two archbishops [St. Andrews (1472) and Glasgow (1492)] and eleven bishops. Under their authority, or in the case of the religious orders, that of their superiors, [Abbots, Priors *et al*] a host of well-organized clerics, both regular and secular, numbering in total some 3,000 in a population of about 800,000 or 900,000, purported to serve the religious needs of the nation'.⁸

As regards to Protestantism in Scotland, Professor Cowan says that 'as a distinctively popular movement [it] had no deep roots in Scotland. Heresy in the fifteenth century was virtually unknown and appears to have been confined to a few individuals who, as followers of the teachings of Hus and Wycliffe, were forced to flee from persecution in England and the Continent'.⁹ Thereafter, 'small question of religion moved within the realm' until after the revolt of Martin Luther in 1517, with the exception of the inexplicable reappearance in Kyle in Ayrshire of so-called Lollards. When thirty persons were called to account for Lollard opinions before King James IV, he did no more than simply admonish them. 'The advent of Lutheranism' observes Professor Cowan, 'posed a more incidious threat, however, and by 1525 Parliament was constrained to legislate against the importation of heretical literature from Europe'.¹⁰ 'A parliamentary act of 1535 "anent the dampnable opinzeouns of heresy"' was followed by a series of enactments to be honoured as in the past, permitted only licensed theologians to dispute on the scriptures, forbade those suspected of heresy to discourse on theological subjects and promised rewards for those who accused heretics and revealed their private meetings'.¹¹ Prosecutions followed but their total number, says Professor Cowan, 'was fairly small and they were more often than not followed by abjurations by the accused rather than by legal conviction and sentence'. In fact, before the seven convicted and burnt for heresy in 1539, there were only four persons, starting with Patrick Hamilton in 1528, who met the same fate, although several others fled abroad rather than face their accusers. 'It is clear', asserts Professor Cowan, 'that before 1539 the growth of protestantism was far from a major problem and even Knox, who would surely have dwelt on it in his *History of the Reformation in Scotland*, could find little evidence of it'.¹²

Dr. Michael Lynch agrees with Professor Cowan. He says that 'the

⁸ I. B. Cowan, *The Scottish Reformation*, p. 1.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 89.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 89-90.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 90.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 90.

martyrs in the 1530s were few, ten in all, but the exiles were many' and after 1536, it was the intellectuals who fled. Their first port of call was usually England, and frequently the court of Henry VIII, whose chief minister, Thomas Cromwell, had established a circle of protestant clergy and academics. 'This was, however, usually no more than a temporary refuge', says Lynch. 'Subsequently they went abroad, often to academic careers, like Alexander Alane in northern Germany or, like John MacAlpine in Scandinavia'.¹³ Another fugitive was George Buchanan who arrived in England early in 1539, but as he recalled in his autobiography written at the end of his life, this was the year of the Statute of Six Articles at which time Henry VIII was "burning Protestant and Catholic alike on the same day and in the same fire, and was more intent of safeguarding his prerogative than advancing pure religion".¹⁴ This opinion, however, did not emerge in Buchanan's eulogy to Henry VIII in 1539 which concludes:

'This virtue of yours makes you equal to the immortal gods,
and raises you above the heights of mortal men.'¹⁵

In the same period, he also addressed a poem to Thomas Cromwell in which he describes himself as:

'One who longs with all his heart to be under your protection,
who wandering, exiled and needy,
is tossed about on land and sea by all the evils a deceitful world
contains.'¹⁶

Apparently, these poems did not have the desired effect and Buchanan therefore kept a low profile and he neither went to confession nor communion. At length, under the pretence of proceeding to Germany, he returned to France reaching Paris in August 1539, where he found Cardinal Beaton, the very man who had been responsible for his flight from Scotland, on an embassy for James V.¹⁷

According to Dr. Lynch, the result of the flight of these self-imposed exiles from Scotland was that few returned to their native land, and there was created a serious vacuum in leadership, which took a generation to fill. One who did return from England was the charismatic preacher George Wishart, who had flirted with the radical ideas of Anabaptism while at Bristol. He was,

¹³ M. Lynch, *Scotland: A New History*, (London, 1991), p. 187.

¹⁴ Cited from Buchanan's *Vita Sua* in P. Hume Brown, *George Buchanan, Humanist and Reformer: a biography*, (Edinburgh, 1890) p. 102,

¹⁵ P.J. Ford, *George Buchanan: Prince of Poets*, (Aberdeen, 1982) p. 159.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 155.

¹⁷ Extracts from E.A. Bonner, 'George Buchanan: Priest of the Roman Catholic Church?' first presented at the Australasian Historians of Medieval and Early Modern Europe conference at Auckland University in August 1987; for publication in the *Innes Review* later in 1993.

however, the first of the reformers to draw together some of the disparate strands of Scottish Protestantism. His eighteen-month preaching mission in 1544-45 was dangerous, says Lynch, 'because it was conducted not in secret but in the audience of many', at Montrose, Dundee, Ayr, Mauchline, Leith and Haddington, where he was arrested on the orders of Cardinal Beaton.¹⁸ He was tried and executed at St. Andrews on 1 March 1546. 'The effects of his death' concludes Lynch, 'were mixed: it left an indelible mark on the consciousness of many would-be Protestant sympathisers, but it also deprived the Protestant movement of a natural spiritual leader for over a decade; until Knox returned to Scotland for a brief mission in the Winter of 1555-56.¹⁹

Recently, there has been a fierce debate amongst historians who have tried to assess the strength of Scotland's early Protestants by numbers. But, observes Lynch, 'the case that Protestantism had a "firm footing" a generation before 1560 is based partly on the survival of about 100 identifiable victims of the sudden campaign against heresy waged by Cardinal Beaton between 1538 and 1543; but it also rests partly on the conjecture that the bulk of the one thousand "assured Scots" [or false-Scots or Scottis-Inglistmen as they were known²⁰] who collaborated with the English during the [Anglo/Scottish] wars of the 1540s, had Protestant sympathies'.²¹ Dr. Margaret Sanderson, in her recent biography of Cardinal Beaton, has compiled a 'list of persons accused of heresy or believed to have had Protestant sympathies or associations from 1528 to 1546'. In a population of 800,000 or 900,000 Dr. Sanderson accounts for 168, mainly craftsmen, burgesses, merchants and lairds who had Protestant leanings;²² a very small number indeed by any estimation.

Dr. Lynch sees no necessity to dispute the fact that Protestantism was almost everywhere a minority movement. Most revolts in history started out as such. 'In Germany and the Netherlands', he says, 'it had been in the towns where Protestantism had made its first and most dramatic advances in the 1520s'. In Scotland it was different. There, he continues, 'towns were smaller and located further apart in a landscape of dispersed rural settlement'.²³ The case for arguing that Protestantism was a swelling movement in the generation and a half before 1560, says Lynch, 'is at its weakest in the towns. Knox claimed that eight burghs, Ayr, Brechin, Dundee, Edinburgh, Montrose, Perth, St. Andrews and Stirling, were won over to

¹⁸ M. Lynch, *Scotland: A New History*, p. 187.

¹⁹ *Ibid* p. 188.

²⁰ For an excellent examination of these collaborators see, M.H. Merriman, 'The Assured Scots', *Scottish Historical Review*, XLVII, (1968).

²¹ M. Lynch, *Scotland: A New History*, p. 188.

²² M.H.B. Sanderson, *Cardinal of Scotland: David Beaton c.1494-1546*, (Edinburgh, 1986) pp. 270-284.

²³ M. Lynch, *Scotland: A New History*, p. 189. For further elaboration on Scottish towns see, M. Lynch, 'The Social and Economic Structure of the Larger Towns, 1450-1600', in M. Lynch, M. Spearman & G. Stell, (eds) *The Scottish Medieval Town*, (Edinburgh, 1988), pp. 261-286.

Protestantism by 1559'.²⁴ Lynch, however, argues that 'there was a sizable Protestant presence in only two: Dundee and Perth. In Edinburgh, the number of identifiable early Protestants up to 1556 is under forty and when the town was offered a religious referendum in the summer of 1559 it had been the Protestant minority that had claimed that "Goddis treuthe" should not be made subject to the "voiting of men"; even as late as Easter 1561, eight months after the Reformation Parliament had abolished the mass, only 1,200 (one in six adults amongst the capital's population of 12,500) went to Knox's new Protestant communion. There were few if any large-scale overnight conversions of urban populations, either before or as a result of the Reformation crisis of 1559-60. The atmosphere in Edinburgh and perhaps elsewhere was of an overwhelming lack of commitment to either party in the fracas of 1559-60; the resultant task of the new Protestant ministers in many if not most towns after 1560 was that of missionaries in an environment that was usually suspicious rather than outrightly friendly or hostile'.²⁵

If there was no swelling of a grass roots movement in the early 1550s, as demonstrated by Dr. Lynch's evidence, 'why did matters change in 1558?' asks Professor Cowan. 'The answer', he suggests, 'seems to lie in politics. The impending marriage of Mary Queen of Scots to the Dauphin Francis, eldest son of the French King, Henri II, increased fears that Scotland would be even more effectively dominated by the Queen Regent and her French advisors and would become an appendage of France'.²⁶ On 3 December 1557 the "First Band", a pledge to work for recognition of a reformed church, was drawn up. Professor Donaldson says that, 'although it was signed by Argyll, Glencairn, Morton, Lord Lorne and Erskine of Dun, it failed to attract the support of of the many others for whose signatures ample space was provided'.²⁷ James Douglas, 4th Earl of Morton, who Professor Cowan says 'was the only influential figure to join the signatories',²⁸ had only a few weeks earlier on 15 November 1557 signed a Bond of Manrent to the staunchly catholic Mary of Guise, Regent of Scotland, 'because it is his duty to serve the queen and regent, and for sundry gritudes'.²⁹

Professor Cowan says that 'by early 1558 there was increasing support from the lairds and barons who proceeded to draw up proposals for reformed

²⁴ M. Lynch, *Scotland: A New History*, p. 189. cf. D. Laing, (ed) *Works of John Knox*, 6 Vols, (Edinburgh, 1846-64) Vol. 6, p. 78.

²⁵ M. Lynch, *Scotland: A New History*, p. 189. Also see M. Lynch, *Edinburgh and the Reformation*, (Edinburgh, 1981), Chapter 5, 'Politics and Protestantism in the 1550s', pp. 68-89.

²⁶ I.B. Cowan, *The Scottish Reformation*, p. 111.

²⁷ G. Donaldson, *Scotland: James V - James VII*, The Edinburgh History of Scotland, Volume 3, (Edinburgh, 1965 repr. 1978) p. 89. Also see, G. Donaldson, *The Scottish Reformation*, (C.U.P., 1960), for a detailed examination of Donaldson's views on this subject.

²⁸ I.B. Cowan, *The Scottish Reformation*, p. 111.

²⁹ J. Wormald, *Lords and Men of Scotland: Bonds of Manrent 1442-1606*, (Edinburgh, 1985), p. 363.

worship. The marriage of Mary [Queen of Scots] on 24 April 1558 was accompanied by the well-known "secret" assignation of her kingdom to the King of France if she died without heirs'.³⁰ Seven months later, on 29 November, the Scottish Parliament gave its consent that Mary Queen of Scots might "honour hir spous ... with the crowne matrimoniale ... during the mariage ... and this crowne to be send with twa or thre of the lordis of hir realme".³¹ Professor Donaldson says that 'the conferring of the "crown matrimonial" was to be without prejudice to Mary's Scottish heirs, and no crown was ever sent to France, but the prospect for Scotland was rule by Francis and Mary and their descendants, under whom Scotland could hardly fail to be governed as a province of France'.³²

Professor Cowan observes that following the death of Henri II in July 1559, there was a continuing fear of French supremacy in Scotland which induced even pro-Catholic magnates to join the congregation and also led to an appeal for effective military intervention by the English. Elizabeth was finally to respond to this request in March 1560; 'this was fortuitously followed by the death of Mary of Guise in June. These two factors proved to be decisive. A campaign, which the congregation and their Protestant supporters in Scotland,' asserts Professor Cowan, 'could never have won by their own efforts, was successful. The treaty of Edinburgh between France and England in July 1560 guaranteed the end of French influence in Scotland and, in the parliament that followed, the victorious lairds honoured their commitment to their protestant allies by accepting on 17 August a reformed Confession of Faith. To what extent political reasons engineered the acceptance of the new protestant faith must remain debatable. What is certain that, even in those burghs that supported the congregation, there must have been only small bands of protestant sympathizers before the achievement of military and political success. The view so often stressed by historians,' concludes Professor Cowan, 'that the success of the Scottish Reformation depended upon popular urban support must therefore be questioned. In most burghs support for protestantism stemmed initially from a small minority of the populace who were only permitted to seize the initiative and win over their fellow citizens through the intervention of the local lairds'.³³

There is every reason to support Professor Cowan's suggestion that political motivation was an important factor both in signing the "First Band" in December 1557, and the unanimous amalgamation of the lairds, lords and great Scottish Magnates in August 1560. On both these occasions the political motivation was Scotland's sovereignty and independence, and this, it is argued, was the prime, and the only unifying factor which could overcome the ancient

³⁰ I.B. Cowan, *The Scottish Reformation*, p. 111.

³¹ G. Donaldson, *James V - James VII*, p. 88; cf., *Acts of the Parliaments of Scotland, 1124-1707*, (eds) T. Thomson & C. Innes, 12 Vols (Edinburgh, 1814-75) Vo. 2, pp. 506-7.

³² G. Donaldson, *James V - James VII*, p. 89

³³ I.B. Cowan, *The Scottish Reformation*, pp. 118-9.

feuds and rivalry and ally pro-Catholic magnates with their Protestant-sympathizing political enemies. Independence is a strong and constant thread which runs through Scottish history from early medieval times up until 1788.³⁴ This fervent desire for Scottish independence was the strongest motivation for a reformation in 1559/60 which, in very many respects until the late 1570s, was more a reformation of society than a reformation of religion.

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³⁴ With the death of "Bonny Prince Charlie" in 1788 (Charles Edward *de jure* Charles III, otherwise the Young Pretender, G. Donaldson & R.S. Morpeth, (eds) *The Dictionary of Scottish History*, (Edinburgh, 1977) p.39), and the outbreak of the French Revolution the following year, the Scots finally accepted that they could no longer expect the possibility of a return of their monarchs and, *ipso facto*, their independence. Therefore, the Scots appear to have submitted themselves to Westminster and the heavy hand of the Hanoverians and began to participate in, and enjoy the spoils of, the British Empire in the 19th century.