

CHAPTER 1

A Nation Awakened 1527–1728

The Reformation Period 1527–1572¹

Influences

Numerous were the factors that led to the Protestant Reformation in Europe. These included an emphasis by humanist thinkers on a more critical examination of the Bible; the translation of those Scriptures into vernacular languages; the development of printing, which disseminated new ideas more widely and more quickly; and the growth of nationalism, which sought to weaken papal jurisdiction within the states of Western Europe. However, the beginnings of the Reformation are popularly dated at October 1517 when German priest and theology professor, Martin Luther, nailed his ninety-five theses to the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg, denouncing many Church abuses, especially the sale of indulgences, whereby as a means of raising funds Church officials collected money in return for absolving the purchaser of his sins. Developments on the Continent progressed much more quickly than in Scotland. In Switzerland, the Reformation was initiated by Zwingli in Zurich in 1520, spreading to Basle, Berne, and Geneva, in which town the movement was led by John Calvin. Calvinism was adopted in France, the Low Countries, England and subsequently North America.

1. This is an approximate dating of the main period of the Reformation in Scotland, from Patrick Hamilton's return from Germany, when he began preaching Reformed doctrine, till the death of John Knox.

Lutheranism was espoused by Sweden in 1527 and Denmark in 1546, and also became the established religion of Norway, Finland, and Iceland.

It is widely accepted that the comparative smoothness with which the Reformation was effected in Scotland was due to such factors, among others, as the rich spiritual legacy left by the old Celtic church, with its centuries-long emphasis on education, and the teachings of men like French lawyer and pamphleteer, Peter Dubois (*c.* 1250–1312), English Franciscan friar and philosopher, William of Occam (*c.* 1288–*c.* 1348), and Czech priest and reformer John Huss (*c.* 1371–1415), all three of whose radical thoughts many Scottish travellers and students heard the reformers preach in various European centres, and which they brought back to their native land. Perhaps more significant was the influence of Lollardy, where through the safe passage granted by English monarchs to inhabitants of the northern kingdom, a continuous stream of Scottish students attended English Universities from 1357 to 1389, especially Oxford. It was during this period that the influence of theologian, preacher and translator, John Wycliffe (*c.* 1324–84) was most powerful, and Oxford was seething with his anticlerical and biblically-centred reforms.²

Though essentially an English movement, Lollardy thus made its presence felt north of the border. Building on Wycliffe's emphasis on biblical authority and on preaching, Lollards attacked the status of the papacy and the clergy, and denied the Roman Catholic doctrines of the mass and other sacraments. James Resby, an English Lollard, exercised an irregular preaching ministry in Scotland directed to the poor. Condemned and executed in Perth in 1407, he became the first of the Scottish proto-Protestant martyrs. The influence of Lollardy north of the border can be measured by the fact that after the founding of the Universities of Aberdeen, Glasgow and St Andrews in the fifteenth century, the ecclesiastical authorities made visitations to purge the teaching staff of Lollard errors. (It was at St Andrews also that the Hussite Paul Kravar was tried and burnt, *c.* 1413, for denying transubstantiation, prayers for the dead and the sacrament of confession – all of which Lollards had also denied).³ A group of Ayrshire lairds known as the 'Lollards of Kyle' remained within the Roman Catholic

2. A. M. Renwick & A. M. Harman, *The Story of the Church*, Leicester 1958, p. 140.

3. T. M. Lindsay stated that archaeological research has brought out evidence of 'a closer connection between Scotland and Bohemia' than had before been suspected (*The Reformation in Scotland*, Edinburgh 1882 [reprinted 2006], p. 145).

Church despite their low view of Catholic errors (and were to be more receptive to Knox than most before 1560).

As early as 1525 the Scottish Parliament deemed it necessary to ban the importation of any works of Luther or his disciples, and attempts were made to suppress the recitation of ‘his heresies or opinions’ throughout the realm.⁴ But Reformation literature continued to be smuggled in from the Continent to east coast ports such as Montrose, St Andrews and Leith, evidently having a ready market among scholars and the literate.⁵

Patrick Hamilton

The ‘new’ doctrines were also carried back to Scotland by men like Patrick Hamilton (c. 1504–28) and George Wishart (c. 1513–46). Hamilton, on a visit to Germany in 1527, became acquainted with Reformation leaders, by whom he was instructed in the knowledge of what he now saw as ‘the true religion’. After only six months he was constrained to return to his homeland, taking up residence on the family estate at Kincavel, near Linlithgow. ‘The bright beams of the true light’, wrote John Knox, ‘which by God’s grace was planted in his heart, began most abundantly to burst forth as well in public as in secret.’⁶ For during a few brief months at the close of 1527, this emboldened 23-year-old, ‘inflamed with zeal to God’s glory’, began ‘sowing the seed of God’s work ... exposing the corruptions of the Romish church, and pointing out the errors which had crept into the Christian religion as professed in Scotland’. He was favourably received and followed by many, unto whom he readily ‘shewed the way of God more perfectly’.⁷ ‘Linlithgow must have been stirred to no little excitement’ by Hamilton’s powerful and impacting preaching, noted one historian,⁸ that it forced Archbishop Beaton to take notice and enforce measures to end it. Hamilton was invited to St Andrews, where for nearly a month he was allowed to

4. Nigel M. de S. Cameron (Ed.), *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology* (hereafter *DSCHT*), Edinburgh 1993, p. 694.

5. A witness to Patrick Hamilton’s execution was John Johnstone, who, as a Scottish exile, wrote pro-Reformation devotional literature, which was printed on the Continent in the early 1530s.

6. John Knox, *The Reformation in Scotland*, Edinburgh (1982 edition), p. 4.

7. John Howie, *The Scots Worthies*, Edinburgh 1870 (reprinted 1995), pp. 11–12.

8. Alexander Cameron (Ed.), *Patrick Hamilton: First Scottish Martyr of the Reformation. A Composite Biography*, Edinburgh 1929, pp. 37–8.

preach and dispute. At length he was arrested and tried as a heretic. He famously became the first martyr of the Scottish Reformation when he was burned at the stake on 29th February 1528.

George Wishart

The martyrdom of Hamilton served to stir up more widespread interest in the controversial ideas he taught, and in the 1530s a growing band of lairds and noblemen openly argued against clericalism and imbibed Lutheran views. At the same time more and more Scots were reading English translations of the Bible and discussing them. But it wasn't until the following decade that another Hamilton appeared on the scene. From 1544, after his return from England and the Continent, George Wishart made his controversial religious views known first in Montrose, where he taught in a school, then in Dundee. Here, he preached both day and evening for several weeks in St Mary's Cathedral, to which location townsfolk converged in huge numbers, keen to hear this fervent young preacher with his new ideas. Wishart's popularity in Dundee greatly worried the authorities, who forced him into exile to south-west Scotland, via Perth.

He preached the gospel in Ayr 'with great freedom and faithfulness' to a great concourse of people who crowded to his sermons.⁹ Here, the Earl of Glencairn was one of his principal supporters. Everywhere, opposition was set against him, and in Mauchline the Sheriff of Ayr installed a garrison of soldiers in the church to keep him out. Constraining his supporters from entering by force, Wishart instead resorted to a muir on the edge of the town, saying, 'Jesus Christ is as mighty in the fields as in the church'. Here, he stood on a bank and preached to the great multitude who resorted to him for more than three hours. 'God wrought so wonderfully thereby', wrote Robert Fleming, 'as one of the wickedest men in all the country, the laird of Shield, was converted, and his eyes ran down with such abundance of tears, as all men wondered.'¹⁰ While in this region, Wishart also often preached with remarkable success at the church of Galston and at other places. As a result of his ministry in the region over the course of around a month, one biographer writes, 'spiritual revival was sweeping through Ayrshire'.¹¹

9. Howie, *The Scots Worthies*, p. 20.

10. Robert Fleming, *The Fulfilling of the Scripture*, vol. 2, Glasgow 1801, p. 297.

11. James W. Baird, *Thunder Over Scotland: The Life of George Wishart, Scottish Reformer, 1513–1546*, California 1982, p. 121.

Hearing that the plague had broken out in Dundee, Wishart at once returned in order to comfort the dying. Here he again laboured for many weeks, preaching from the top of the Cowgate in the east wall of the city to both the living and healthy inside the city walls and the dying on the outside. His sermons were of much blessing to both groups of people, who ‘thought themselves happy in having such a preacher’.¹² The reformer’s last sermons were preached in East Lothian, where, in Leith, Inveresk and Haddington around Christmas time 1545, increasingly large crowds gathered to hear him. At Ormiston he was seized by the Earl of Bothwell and brought before Cardinal Beaton, Archbishop of St Andrews.

John Knox

Wishart was martyred in 1546 – semi-strangled then burned at the castle – but his passionate message found an echo in the heart of men like Haddington-born John Knox (c. 1514–72)¹³, who had befriended the reformer, and even served for a time as his bodyguard. In St Andrews, Knox found himself among ‘desperate outlaws, ardent Reformers and young lads’ who followed him for the purpose of instruction.¹⁴ His first sermon, preached in the parish church, drew a vast crowd, and he was unanimously declared their leader. ‘Some men hew at the branches of the Papacy’, men said, ‘but this man strikes at the root.’¹⁵ Here also, a ‘Reformed’ communion service was held – the first of its kind in Scotland, as Knox dispensed the sacrament to over 200 people.

The next twelve years Knox spent variably as a prisoner/slave to the French navy, as an exile in England and in Europe, where he came under the strong influence of John Calvin in Geneva, and as a fugitive yet fiery and uncompromising preacher in various parts of lowland Scotland (1555–6), where his sermons deeply affected the poor and nobility alike. One English ambassador said that his preaching ‘put more life into him than six hundred trumpets’.¹⁶ Knox preached repeatedly in Edinburgh,

12. Howie, *The Scots Worthies*, p. 21.

13. Some sources claim his birthplace to have been the village of Gifford, four miles south of Haddington.

14. Richard Owen Roberts, *Scotland Saw His Glory*, Wheaton 1995, p. 36.

15. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, vol. XV, Cambridge 1911, p. 882.

16. Various Contributors, *Scottish Divines 1505–1872*, Edinburgh 1883, p. 11.

where, from the pulpit of St Giles, he thundered forth his appeals, warnings and threats, and such was the force of his personality that in the eyes of many he was the real ruler of Scotland. Wrote James Burns:

His convictions were maintained at white heat. His speech, which was rugged, impassioned, and majestic, especially when he assumed the role of prophet, swept away the timid opposition of other men. His sincerity, which none doubted, the transparent honesty of his motives, and his utter fearlessness of consequences appealed even to his enemies. His outstanding ability and his knowledge of affairs made him an ally which no party in the state could afford to disdain.¹⁷

Knox wrote that as he preached, he beheld ‘the fervent thirst of our brethren, night and day sobbing and groaning for the bread of life. If I had not seen it with my own eyes, in my country, I could not have believed it ... The fervency here doth far exceed all others that I have seen.’¹⁸

As a result, the seeds of the Reformation were beginning to grow up in Scotland and to bring forth fruit. ‘A great awakening was taking place among the people’¹⁹ who were beginning to shake off the lethargy and bondage of centuries of serfhood, superstition and spiritual darkness. Thus the Protestant cause gained ground every day. ‘God did so multiply our number’, wrote Knox, ‘that it appeared as if men had rained from the clouds.’²⁰ In May 1559 Knox returned from Europe to find that Ayr and Dundee were already officially Protestant through sanction of their town councils. In addition, that growing band of Scottish nobles and lords – now termed the ‘Lords of the Congregation’ – were more zealous than ever for reform, and were seeking to strengthen local Protestant congregations that were springing up here and there throughout mainly central Scotland.

Scotland was now in active revolt against the occupying French troops, who were becoming increasingly resented. It was, however, only

17. James Burns, *Revivals: Their Laws and Leaders*, London 1909, pp. 241-2.

18. Thomas McCrie, *The Story of the Scottish Church*, Edinburgh 1874 (reprinted 1988), p. 82.

19. Burns, *Revivals: Their Laws and Leaders*, p. 237.

20. Iain H. Murray, ‘The Puritans and Revival Christianity’, in *Banner of Truth*, September 1969.

with direct intervention of a ten-thousand-strong English army and naval fleet sent north by Queen Elizabeth that, finally, in July 1560 a decisive treaty was signed, whereby the French withdrew completely and Scotland was allowed to govern its own affairs. The following month an unauthorised Parliament met in Edinburgh and was found to be overwhelmingly Protestant. With almost incredible swiftness and unanimity, it declared for the Protestant faith, abolished Roman Catholicism, and called for a form of confession. This was drawn up and presented in four days and was accepted almost without a dissentient voice, being grounded upon ‘the infallible truth of God’s Word’. As early as the 1570s and ’80s, claims Harry Reid, ‘no one could deny the essential fact – Scotland was a Protestant country’.²¹

The triumph of Reformation opinions was almost immediately challenged, however, with the return from France of eighteen-year-old Mary (Queen of Scots) in 1561. Knox engaged in repeated conflicts with the monarch, who did all in her power to overawe him by her authority or move him by her charms. Following a scandal involving the murder of her husband, Lord Darnley, and her almost immediate re-marriage to James Hepburn, Earl of Bothwell, Mary’s reputation was in tatters. Forced to abdicate, she fled to England, where lengthy captivity and untimely death awaited her. Meanwhile, the health of the great reformer began to break down. Knox preached for the last time in St Giles in November 1572. He had to be helped into the pulpit, but once there, ‘the old fire which had set Scotland in a glow broke out once more. The cathedral rang with his trumpet notes. So vehemently did he preach that he was like to rend the pulpit in pieces.’²² When the sermon was over, however, it was seen that his strength was spent and the end near. He died two weeks later.

Thomas Smeaton, a contemporary of Knox, said of him, ‘I know not if God ever placed a more godly and great spirit in a body so little and frail. I am certain that there can scarcely be found another in whom more gifts of the Holy Ghost, for the comfort of the Church of Scotland, did shine.’ French theologian Theodore Beza called him the ‘great apostle of the Scots’.²³ Four centuries later, Harry Reid regards Knox as

21. Harry Reid, *Reformation: The Dangerous Birth Of The Modern World*, Edinburgh 2009, p. 151.

22. Howie, *The Scots Worthies*, p. 63.

23. *ibid.*

far more than a powerful preacher. He was ‘an inspiration. Charismatic, energetic, resolute and zealous, he gave the Scotland cause substance and heart, and he helped bring about by far the most significant revolution in Scotland’s long and turbulent history’.²⁴

Extent of the Reformation

It would certainly be an exaggeration to suggest, as did church historian James Kirkton, that ‘in Scotland the whole nation was converted by lump’ (‘a nation born in one day’)²⁵, for much of the country beyond the Highland line remained in spiritual darkness for many years afterwards (not least because there was a chronic shortage of new ministers who could speak Gaelic).²⁶ The remark made regarding Scotland a decade later, that ‘there were not ten persons of quality to be found in it who did not profess the true reformed religion’, is equally inaccurate.²⁷ Nevertheless, it has been testified to that within just six or seven years of its genesis the Reformed church had 850 ministers serving nearly 1,200 parishes.²⁸

Yet, clearly, all was not well. For even when the reformers obtained tacit conformity to Protestant beliefs and worship, the persistence of Catholic practices in many areas for decades to come showed that the Protestants did not have full hold on the people. In 1581 the Scottish Parliament issued a general lament that

the dregges of idolatrie yet remaine in diverse parts of the realme,
by using of pilgrimages to some chappells, wels, croces, and suche

24. Harry Reid, *Reformation: The Dangerous Birth Of The Modern World*, Edinburgh 2009, pp. 234, 185. In his academic yet accessible study of the Reformation to mark its 450th anniversary, Reid dissolves a number of popular and unsympathetic myths regarding the uncompromising reformer. He was, Reid reveals, a true Anglophile who ‘loved and cherished England every bit as much as his native Scotland’ (p. 189). He was, further, ‘emphatically not the killjoy of popular caricature’ (he was not against pastimes such as golf or dancing) and was ‘always something of a ladies’ man’. He also appreciated wine and fellowship (p. xxvi). Indeed, he had no objections to taverns and public houses being open on Sundays, as long as they were shut during the hours of public worship (p. 189).

25. James Kirkton, *The Secret and True History of the Church of Scotland from the Restoration to the year 1678*, Edinburgh 1817, pp. 21-2.

26. For the arrival of true Protestant reform to the Highlands and Islands, much of which was only nominally affected by the Reformation, see Chapters 3 and 4.

27. Kirkton, *The Secret and True History of the Church of Scotland*, pp. 21-2.

28. Reid, *Reformation*, p. 251.

other monuments of idolatrie, as also, by observing of the festivall dayes of sancts, sometimes named patrons, in setting forth of bone fires, singing of carrells, running about kirks at certane seasons of the yeere, and observing of suche other superstitious and Papisticall rites.²⁹

However, by the turn of the seventeenth century, after little more than a generation of reform, the Protestants had largely succeeded in breaking up the religious pulse of late medieval Catholicism. Through the Reformation the heartland of Scotland had been won for the Gospel.

The Reformation certainly carried its share of overzealous accompaniment, such as the public humiliation of some Catholic priests who continued celebrating Mass, and the destruction, particularly in 1559, of altars, images and ‘all monuments of idolatry’ in many of the nation’s monasteries. The first to be invaded was St Andrews; this was followed by the monasteries of Scone, Stirling, Cambuskenneth and Linlithgow.³⁰

Yet the formal declaration of the nation as a Protestant country was a decisive development which accelerated the demise of medieval Scotland and spawned the rise of a new nation. Scottish historian, Professor Tom Devine, believes that the subsequent actions and policies of the Reformers transformed virtually every aspect of Scottish life; religious practice and authority, culture and education, the national mindset and identity, and radical new relations with England. Notwithstanding some possible negative aspects,³¹ Devine believes the Reformation had a lasting, profoundly positive influence on Scottish history, such as that of ‘inspiring that great flowering of intellectual culture in the eighteenth century, the Scottish Enlightenment’.³² Harry Reid, too, looks on the Reformation as ‘the time when, belatedly, mediaeval Scotland vanished

29. David Calderwood, *The History of the Kirk of Scotland*, vol.3, p. 593; vol. 4, pp. 656-6.

30. McCrie, *Story of the Scottish Church*, pp. 36-9.

31. The secular Scotland of the new millennium, Devine believes, views the Calvinist tradition as a malignant force which ‘spawned intolerance, oppressive social disciplines, an aggressive and rapacious capitalism, sexual guilt and dysfunction, and warped attitudes to music, painting and the creative arts, which have only been changing in recent generations’ (Tom Devine, ‘Scotland: The Reformation and the Enlightenment’, in *Life and Work*, January 2010, p. 11).

32. *ibid.*

and Scotland finally entered the modern world'. The Scottish settlement, constantly modified over following centuries, laid down, Reid believes, 'the foundations of an extraordinary forward looking new state, away ahead of its time in matters such as education and welfare (a system of poor relief was to be introduced on a scale virtually unknown elsewhere in Europe, and there was to be a school in every parish)'³³ – all of this largely a reflection of Knox's highly adventurous personal vision. Knox had also longed for an age of ongoing friendship between Scotland and its auld enemy, England; this became largely realised in the Reformation, whereby many generations of suspicion and bloody hostility suddenly ended. In short, 1560 was, in Reid's view, 'indubitably the greatest year in Scotland's history'.³⁴

While Reid acknowledges that some aspects of the Reformation were indeed negative, e.g. its 'oppressive emphasis on (the) pervasive and sometimes oppressive social discipline', he feels this was more than offset by its positive influences –

the ameliorative emphasis on self-restraint, on self-improving, on education (discussion, argument and reading became much more prevalent), on democracy (politics and religion was devolved down to the individual), on social responsibility and on social inclusion. Scottish society was to progress from being feudal, ignorant and backward to being more cerebral and aspirational.³⁵

While it was undoubtedly an intellectual and political movement, the Reformation in Scotland was primarily a religious awakening.³⁶ It was,

33. Harry Reid, '1560: The Greatest Year in Scotland's History', in *Life and Work*, January 2010, pp. 14-15. Three centuries after the Reformation, James Burns could look back on its ongoing effects upon the national life of Scotland in terms of education as being 'incalculable' (Burns, *Revivals: Their Laws and Leaders*, p. 255).

34. *ibid.*

35. Reid, *The Reformation*, pp. 246-8.

36. Revival historian, Brian Edwards claims that whereas reformation is primarily to do with doctrine – what we believe, revival is primarily to do with life – how we behave. Nevertheless, he states that ideally the two go hand in hand, with reformation often being accompanied by revival – 'this was certainly the case during the time of the Reformation across Europe in the 15th and 16th centuries' (Brian H. Edwards, *Can We Pray for Revival?*, Darlington 2001, pp. 22-3). See also Derek Frank, *The Jeremiah Diagnosis*, Godalming 2000, for a lively discussion on the distinction between reformation and revival.

from the beginning, explains James Burns, ‘a religious movement set in motion by men who profoundly realised the corruption around them and who, having received light to their own souls, were willing to lay down their lives to hand on that light to others’.³⁷ It was a popular movement, affecting all classes, not least the poor, for whom it offered enormous benefits. It called into being a nation, awakening among the people a national consciousness. In perhaps no other country was the influence of the Reformation more immediate, deeper in character or more enduring, the rise of which in Scotland came with less bloodshed than in other nations. ‘Whatever other countries lost through the Reformation’, summed up Burns, ‘it will be admitted by the most candid of observers that Scotland lost least and that the middle of the sixteenth century saw the outburst of a new spiritual and national life and the founding of a church in keeping with the genius and character of the people. In Scotland, perhaps, more than in any other country, the spiritual movement of the sixteenth century reaped its finest and most lasting fruits.’³⁸

The Post-Reformation Period 1572–1600

Robert Bruce of Kinnaird

The closing years of the sixteenth century witnessed several notable cases of localised spiritual refreshing and awakening in mainly central Scotland. At the very outset of the ministry of Robert Bruce (c. 1554–1631) at John Knox’s old pulpit of St Giles, Edinburgh in the late 1580s, there was, in the words of Robert Fleming, an ‘extraordinary effusion of the Spirit when he first dispensed the Sacrament of the Supper’.³⁹ From that day,

he shined as a great light ... the power and efficacy of the Spirit most sensibly accompanying the word he preached ... some of the most stout-hearted of his hearers were ordinarily made to tremble, and by having these doors which formerly had been bolted against Jesus Christ, as by an irresistible power broke open, and the secrets of their hearts made manifest, they went away under

37. Burns, *Revivals: Their Laws and Leaders*, p. 247.

38. *ibid.*, pp. 255–6.

39. Robert Wodrow, quoted in Iain H. Murray, *The Puritan Hope: A Study in Revival and the Interpretation of Prophecy*, Edinburgh 1971 (reprinted 1991), p. 22.