

Reviews

THE CULTURE OF PROTESTANTISM IN EARLY MODERN SCOTLAND
by Margo Todd, *Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2002,*
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The Reformation took many years to bed down in outlying rural Scotland. A few miles west of Huntly, on the west bank of the River Deveron, the medieval chapel of St Peter's of Drumdelgie, where the remains of Fr Patrick Primrose OP were interred in 1671 (see 'Patrick Primrose: A Dominican in Seventeenth-century Scotland', *New Blackfriars* September 2002: 425-444), still used as a burial place in 1726, was 'considered as the most holy ground, and consecrated to the catholics', according to the Statistical Account of 1794.

Further up the river, the parish of Glass was created at the Reformation out of the parishes of Drumdelgie (St Peter's) and Dumeath (St Walok's or Walach's). On the Haugh of Beldorney, we hear, in 1726, of 'two natural bathes, called St Wellach's Bathes, much frequented in the summer time by sick folk, especially children'. True, in 1648 the presbytery of Strathbogy, meeting at Glass, condemned the 'superstition at Wallak Kirk'. Yet, in 1742, we hear of 'an old Chappel, called Wella Kirk, so termed by the peasants themselves thereabout, who ascribe wonderful qualities to its water'. Indeed, they leave strips of clothing tied to bushes nearby. Moreover, in the 1726 account, we hear of 'a large church yeard about it, where many of the dead thereabout are entered to this day', together with a 'glebe ... with some marks of the priest his house yet remaining'(all this according to *Illustrations of the Topography and Antiquities of the Shires of Aberdeen and Banff*, Spalding Club: Aberdeen 1847, volume 2; 180-182).

While there is no hard evidence that the blessed Volocus, bishop and confessor, who flourished in the north east lowlands of Scotland in the fifth century (according to the Aberdeen Breviary, printed 1510), had anything to do with the region or even that he existed, it is clear that, late in the 18th century, at Walla Kirk (as maps currently call it), there was a centre of pilgrimage, no longer supported by Catholic ceremonies or clergy, interestingly with no connection with the Virgin Mary; but still functioning, 150 years after the Reformation.

Thus, 'works' such as pilgrimage, appeal to saints, recourse to holy wells, and the like, continued long after they were proscribed. In this marvellous book, richly documented and beautifully written (and printed!), Margo Todd traces the radical shift in Scotland from a profoundly sensual and ceremonial experience of religion to the dominance of the word — from worship 'no longer centred on the dramatic re-enactment of Christ's sacrifice' to 'long morning and afternoon sermons separated by catechism'.

How did this drastic change take place with so little directly religious violence?

Todd cites Gordon Donaldson's statistics (in his essay 'A Backward Nation?'): while the Reformation was no doubt more thorough-going in

Scotland it entailed relatively little killing; in England, under Mary Tudor, nearly 300 Protestants were executed, and, under Elizabeth, more than 200 Catholics; in Scotland about twenty Protestants and only a couple of Catholics were put to death. Patrick Primrose himself, for example, arrested in 1670 for saying Mass, was sentenced to banishment; Alexander Lumsden, another Dominican, also subject to Scots law, escaped the fate of the Jesuit priests and other innocent people, executed after the discovery of the 'Popish Plot' in 1678.

Todd's main theme is that the local church courts balanced the exercise of total control over daily life, marriage and sexual behaviour especially, with an extensive system of poor relief and education, to produce a distinctively Scottish Calvinist culture in which pre-Reformation ritual and drama, propitiatory devices and even imagery, far from being discarded, were reconstructed in a Protestant guise. In churches and graveyards, for example, as she shows in rich and convincing detail, sarcophagus monuments, burial vaults and burial aisles, some of the last even obscuring a view of the pulpit, and all frequently denounced by the General Assembly of the Kirk, pre-Reformation piety about sin and death continued, in a new form. Admiration of the upright life, rather than intercession for the dead person, crept into the inscriptions; but, for all the official Protestant doctrine dinned into people's ears, a great deal of the earlier sensibility survived. The domed basilica-like buildings in Edinburgh turn out to be banks, but the Necropolis in Glasgow, opened in 1832, admittedly modelled on Père-la-Chaise cemetery in Paris, looks quite 'Catholic' in its splendid cult of the (affluent and influential) deceased, at least to the visitor who does not read the dedications.

The walls and pews in early Presbyterian churches often bore painted images, contrary to the standard picture of drab empty spaces. Todd mentions the whole gallery of painted panels depicting the life of Christ from annunciation to ascension in Provost Skene's House in Aberdeen, commissioned in the 1620s by a 'vigorous Protestant' (she reproduces the Resurrection panel).

By mid-18th century the handful of Catholics in Scotland, tolerantly left to their own 'superstitions' the further away from Edinburgh and Glasgow they lived, were gathering on occasion at Walla Kirk and in many other such places. What Margo Todd shows, drawing on the abundance of source material in Kirk session records, is that the piety of many ordinary folk in the Reformed church continued to inhabit emotionally an affective experience of the sacred, medieval-Catholic in origin and orientation, for all the official attempts to eliminate it. The organized desecration of church buildings, looting of books and sacred objects, etc., disclose one aspect of the Reformation in Scotland; the continuing vitality of the proscribed piety, thoroughly documented in this splendid work of historical anthropology, reveals a totally different, hitherto entirely forgotten dimension. The gap between what people are supposed to believe and what most of them actually do is always a fascinating subject.

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