
On the afternoon of Wednesday, 28 February 1638, the National Covenant was read for the first time in Greyfriars’ Church, Edinburgh. In the coming weeks, copies of the Covenant were carried from the capital to parishes all over Scotland. In its endeavour to band all the Scottish people together as one elect nation before God, the Covenant displayed breathtaking ambition, but it also expressed a conventional attachment to a socio-political hierarchy headed by the king. Over the course of the next half-century, Scots discovered that the fundamental internal tension between loyalty to God and to the king was irreconcilable.

Raymond Campbell Paterson’s *A Land Afflicted* carries the reader from the lofty idealism of 1638, through a long and painful process of disillusionment that culminated in the consignment of the Covenant to the dustbin of history. This is first and foremost a battle-by-battle account of the Covenanting wars, concluding a trilogy on Scottish warfare that began with the 1290s. Despite the focus on military detail, Paterson maintains a lively and engaging style. His achievement here is to give events on the battlefield their necessary place within the monstrously complicated politics of the period, both in a Scottish and British context. In this respect, Paterson is to be commended for producing an account which is lucid enough for the general reader to follow but which broadly manages to eschew popular clichés. There is no hackneyed mythologizing of James Graham, marquis of Montrose, for example, presented here as a magnetic but highly flawed individual, whose political relevance was far surpassed by that of his rival, Archibald Campbell, marquis of Argyll.
Paterson’s narrative does well to convey the over-riding motivation of the Scottish political elite in this period – the struggle to protect the revolution of 1638-41. Paterson’s analysis generally acknowledges how difficult it was for the Scots to prevent their interests being ignored or subverted, as much by an untrustworthy king as a parliament increasingly dominated by independency. His assessment of the Scottish decision to give up King Charles to those who would eventually have him executed acknowledges the intractability of their position. He is less generous about the Solemn League and Covenant of 1643. If it turned out to be “one of the greatest political errors in Scottish history” (p.69), it also needs to be considered as a practical response to the problem of multiple monarchy. If the Covenanters failed to see the problems of forcing Presbyterianism on England, it was nonetheless not unreasonable for the Scots to see a Presbyterian England as the only long-term safeguard for their church.

Paterson is clearly more at home in the 1640s than in the later seventeenth century, and this is reflected in the fact that the forty years between the Cromwellian occupation and the 1689 revolution gets a third of the space devoted to the civil war period. While Paterson rightly emphasises the instability and polarisation generated by a hurried, ill-conceived Restoration settlement, the ambiguities of religious thinking in this period are not articulated. There was a broad reaction against the radicalism of Covenanting principles after 1660: the Covenant which had once embraced an entire nation became the preserve of marginalised radicals. Yet the newly revived episcopate never seemed able to capitalise on this to stabilise their position in Scottish society. This was partly due to misfortune, but it was also due to a suspicion of episcopal government in Scotland that the Covenant helped to entrench.

The absence of any analysis of the Covenant ideology, its roots in the distinctive nature of the Scottish reformation and its enduring legacy amongst Scottish radicals, is one of the principle disappointments of this book. Paterson has done the general reader a great service in making this complicated period so accessible, but the scholar will find few new insights into seventeenth-century political and religious thinking within these pages.

Laura A.M. Stewart
University of Edinburgh