
In *Religious controversy in Scotland*, David George Mullan presents a collection of previously unpublished documents which highlight the dispute over church government which played out in the first fifteen years of Charles I’s reign in Scotland, and which eventually supplied the spark that ignited the flames of civil war in all of Charles’s kingdoms during the 1640s. As editor of this collection, Mullan is particularly well-suited: his previous studies — *Episcopacy in Scotland: the history of an idea, 1560-1638* (Edinburgh, 1986); *Scottish puritanism, 1590-1638* (Oxford, 2000), among others — examine the main lines drawn in the controversy over ecclesiastical form in Scotland from the middle of the sixteenth century to the eve of the civil wars. In the “Introduction” to the collection, Mullan supplies the background to this increasingly volatile debate, identifying both the Scottish and English conditions which led to the division between Laudian-episcopalians and their Presbyterian, and other, opponents.

While recognizing shared British concerns, Mullan clearly describes the Scottish context for the selections by integrating his description of the documents into a broader historical summary of the period. Although situating the summaries within this wider discussion provides chronological and ideological placement, the reader would have benefitted from having each précis, discussion of authorship, and each manuscript’s provenance located as an editorial preamble preceding the document itself, making them more user friendly and limiting the need to leaf back to remind oneself of the particular details of each piece.

The sources themselves nicely outline the points of contention in the theological debate in Scotland, particularly from the Presbyterian side. From a “Historie” of the religious “innovations” in Scotland during Charles’s reign, to the reaction to royal ecclesiastical policies of the mid to late 1630s
by prominent Scottish divines, to several episcopalian voices, the documents themselves range from involved theological discourse, to more personal accounts such as the (perhaps exaggerated) censure of William Wishart's parish activities and John Guthrie’s impassioned defense of his episcopal duties. The only questionable inclusion in the collection was the appending of “Woman’s Universe” to the “Protestation” against Wishart’s activities – while Wishart’s joint-authorship poem is mentioned briefly in the accusations, there seems nothing in the excerpt which sheds any light on the main points of dispute (a proof-reading slip notes its location as “?? ??” in note 33 on page 200.)

This minor error aside, editorial footnotes show Mullan’s care in providing explanatory information on references to events and key people whose passing mention in the text might have perplexed some readers. The index to the volume is thorough and functional, and is supplemented by a separate index of scriptural citations. The editor’s attention to detail is also apparent in his correcting of inaccurate transpositions from various sources in the original manuscripts, in the location of scriptural and patristic sources referred to in the texts, and in his explanations of obscure or uncertain words. However, the stated editorial practice advising readers to refer to the editor’s own studies where “suitable documentation may be deemed to be wanting” (p. 19) might have prompted the inclusion of a list of Mullan’s works to more readily accommodate readers’ inquiries.

Overall, the texts included here and the editorial illumination provide a useful window into Scottish religious debate in the early seventeenth century, and the Scottish background to the British civil wars. Mullan’s choice of selections adds to our understanding of this context and furnishes texts which would otherwise not be so readily accessible.

Before concluding, it is necessary to consider several editorial remarks which gave this reviewer some pause. On page 12, Mullan asserts the importance of the “didactic” use of history, and goes on to suggest that this allows – perhaps requires – “a tentative moral judgement”. In this vein,
he states that Scottish covenanters were akin to twentieth-century conspiracy theorists and concludes that it was the covenanters’ “folly which led directly to the violent deaths of thousands of their own countrymen” and that, as the “intelligentsia” of their society, they were particularly well-equipped to resist such spiritual compulsions through their “access to the universities and to the training in logical thinking which formed such a significant element in the curriculum” (p. 13). Mullan’s pronouncements here are problematic, even detrimental, in several serious ways. First, while one can concur with Mullan’s view that historians must bridge “the distance one may feel from early modern evangelicalism” (p. 12), its intent here is misapplied. To compare religious responses in the 1630s to modern conspiracy theorists rips such early modern tenets out of their intellectual, political, and religious context. The necessity of recognizing the difference between the early modern and early-twenty-first century religious mindsets and perceptions of the world is not the same as judging those seventeenth-century sensibilities through modern mores and considerations. Such inclinations put student and scholar alike in danger of misunderstanding or, worse, not comprehending at all the importance of Christian views which played such a key role in motivating early modern people to act. In addition, to expect a greater degree of “rationality” from early modern intellectuals is similarly misinformed. Reason is not absolute but instead informed by different world views and differing levels of access to and accuracy of information. To expect the rational response to a particular set of religious and political circumstances in the seventeenth century to be the same as the response in the early twenty-first century is misguided. Finally, for Mullan to limit editorial comment to only the Presbyterian and covenanting party’s accountability in the destruction of Scotland which followed in the 1640s is to absolve the responsibility of the Laudian episcopalian party who were equally as determined to force and enforce their own views and who were equally culpable. All sides had their views of religious correctness and divine purpose, and neither can be more
blamed or abrogated from their involvement in and continuation of the internecine disaster which unfolded over the course of the next two decades in Britain.

One hopes that these brief editorial diversions are disregarded by those who will use this collection: it would be a pity to misconstrue the import and context of such worthwhile sources, neglecting the benefit of what is otherwise a fine editorial effort and addition to the scholarship on early seventeenth-century Scotland.

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