Margot Todd’s *The Culture of Protestantism* won the “Longman - History Today Book of the Year” prize for 2003; the granting of such a prestigious award reflects the significance of this study. An extensive examination of a much under-utilized source, an exploration of the social and cultural impact of the Reformation on early modern Scots and an interdisciplinary approach all come together to produce a work which is sure to become a standard in Scottish Reformation studies. This work is successful in helping to explain how the Protestant Reformation was achieved at a very basic societal level, and in describing what these changes meant for Scots of all social groups.

One of the most impressive elements of this study is the sheer volume of material explored. The minutes of dozens of Kirk session and other Kirk courts from 1560 to the 1620s provides the mainstay of Todd’s research. The Kirk sessions were local church courts which monitored the moral behaviour of its parishioners. These courts were persistent in the surveillance of the most intimate details of the lives of early modern Scots, and as such they offer an excellent opportunity for historians to understand the Reformation from a social and cultural perspective.

Through an anthropological framework, Todd examines the minutes of the Kirk sessions to piece together what changes in religious belief and practice were ushered in with the Reformation, what mechanisms the Kirk used to transfer these changes in thought process and understanding to the Scottish population and what impact these had on the culture of early modern Scots. This process is repeated throughout the book, with each chapter focussing on a different emphasis of the reformed Kirk. The first item explored is the significance of “the word” within the Kirk of Scotland. Todd explores how this new religious ideal was translated into forced attendance at sermons; as well as what the significance
of preaching and the new reformed faith was on the minds and attitudes of Scottish parishioners. We quickly see the systematic “instilling [of] new habits of self-discipline in the population on a very large scale, parish by parish.”(p.42)

Todd then explores how “the word” altered the sacraments and how this produced an “experiential and affective understanding” amongst the Scottish people. (p.85)

Todd continues to pursue this methodical process of identifying changes brought about by Protestant reform, how the Kirk convinced Scots to adapt these principles and what the long-term impact was on the culture of early modern Scots. Repentance, popular pastimes and holidays, the Kirk’s role as community peacekeeper, the monitoring of family activities, what sacred time and space meant to parishioners and what role the ministers and elders of the Kirk played in the Reformation of both religion and culture all receive separate attention in each chapter. Slowly, the traditional understanding of the elders as “a meddlesome crew prowling the streets and peering in people’s windows to ferret out innocent merrymakers” is destroyed. (p.231) This uninformed image is instead replaced by an understanding of the intricate role which the Kirk played in the success of the Reformation at a popular level, as well as weighing in on the historiographical question of what impact the Reformation had on the lives of early modern people.

This work is not only important in exploring reform from a fresh, interdisciplinary perspective to answer previously un-askable questions, but the extensive use of Kirk session records is equally important in revealing the wealth of information available in such an important, but under-utilized source. There have only been two other major studies which have exploited the significance of these sources. In Uses of Reform: ‘Godly Discipline’ and Popular Behavior in Scotland and Beyond, 1560-1670 Michael Graham mined the session records to explain the role of discipline in early modern Scottish society. Leah Leneman and Rosalind Mitchison have also employed the session minutes in a variety of articles and the companion books Sin in the City: Sexuality and Social
Control in Urban Scotland 1660-1780 and Girls in Trouble: Sexuality and Social Control in Rural Scotland 1660-1780 to explore questions of illegitimacy.

Although these works are very important studies, most historians were aware that the Kirk session records would yield information on discipline and bastardy. Todd, on the other hand, has shown how much information can be gathered about daily existence, family life and popular culture in early modern Scotland. This study has revealed the importance of these sources and is sure to act as a springboard for many other studies about the lives of “the masses” in post-Reformation Scotland.

As with any study, there are some potential points of debate. Some academics may challenge Todd’s equation of culture to national identity. (p.402) Also, the theoretical framework of ritual is used to argue that within the Protestant culture there was a “multivalent meaning ...[which] co-ordinated [Scottish Calvinists] into a cogent whole that could both address individual issues and unify a diverse community.” (pp.406-407; 5-7) Although Todd does argue that individuals shaped the emerging Protestant culture (p.20), the dissent of the tens of thousands, if not the hundreds of thousands who appeared before the sessions are not directly addressed. These voices are largely lost within the structures of ritual theory, when instead they should be seen as taking an active role in challenging, shaping and defining the culture in which they lived.

The Culture of Protestantism is an extremely important book for those interested in understanding both reform and society in early modern Scotland. In addition to the significant contribution that Todd makes to Scottish historiography, the book is also well written and an interesting read. The abundance of evidence provided by Todd gives the reader a fascinating look into the lives of post-Reformation Scots and is a must-read for anyone interested in Scottish history.

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