Review


John McCallum’s contribution to Ashgate’s *St Andrews Studies in Reformation History* series examines the “ongoing work of Reformation” (1) in Fife parishes during the eighty years following Scotland’s official Reformation, and ultimately offers “a more complex narrative of the development of the reformed church” (232), one which transcends existing, overly simplistic narratives of Reformed Protestantism’s ‘success’ or ‘failure’ in Scotland.

The first two chapters trace the growth of a Reformed ministry and the formation of kirk sessions, those critical instruments of ecclesiastical discipline. Some attention is given to the role that presbyteries and synods (eventually) played in the reformation of conduct, and the prevalent assumption of an “automatic correlation between presbyterianism and discipline” (51) is helpfully put to rest. The third chapter examines worship in the churches of Fife, and highlights the role that readings of Scripture, common prayers, and psalm-singing—over against preaching and catechesis—played in fostering a Protestant identity among the Scots. Chapter four examines more developed attempts to protestantize the laity through religious instruction, particularly as Reformed ministers and kirk sessions came into their own in the 1590s and following. Chapters five and six return to the subjects of ministry and kirk sessions. The identity, training, correction, and career paths of ministers are
examined, and the ‘uneventful’ (151) nature of most ministerial careers highlighted as evidence of a fairly effective ministry in the early decades of the seventeenth-century; the identity and operations of kirk sessions are likewise explored, and their socially diverse constitution and relative independence from higher ecclesiastical and/or civil jurisdictions emphasized. McCallum’s final chapter considers the nature, subjects (both crimes and criminals), and effectiveness of ecclesiastical discipline in greater detail, undermining in the process some cherished scholarly notions about kirk sessions’ fundamentally un-religious motives for disciplining parishioners, their obsessions with matters of sexual misconduct, and their (sexist) proclivities to target women for discipline.

McCallum’s work mirrors Margo Todd’s groundbreaking study *The Culture of Protestantism in Early Modern Scotland* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002) in a number of significant regards: it is oriented towards the experience of average parishioners (and so delves deeply into session records and similar documents, while evincing little interest in major political happenings or squabbles among the theological elite during the period in question); it emphasizes the (ironic) role that continuity with the pre-Reformation kirk played in the protestantization of early-modern Scots; it acknowledges that reform in Scotland—or at least in Fife—properly occurred *with* the people (i.e. with cooperation from the laity, by participation in worship and catechesis, membership in or compliance with kirk sessions, etc.) rather than *to* the people (a top-down reformation) or *from* the people (a bottom-up reformation).

Unlike Todd’s work, however, *Reforming the Scottish Parish* is marked by a strict geographical concentration and careful attention to chronology, features which undergird a number of unique, positive characteristics to McCallum’s study. His work brings the stark incongruity
between the progress of reform in central burgh parishes and that in rural parishes into focus. It also gives due attention to the earliest decades of official Protestantism (and the rather different parish realities which characterized those decades over against later years).

Most significantly, McCallum’s work informs our sense of the process—and often very slow progress—involved in achieving a culture of Protestantism in Fife and beyond. Proper sensitivity to that process should temper any tendency to tell the history of the Scottish Reformation as an unequivocal ‘Reformed success’ story. Ultimately, of course, the reformers did accomplish something rather remarkable through the various machineries of ministry, religious instruction, and discipline—a fact McCallum not only concedes but is eager to detail. But as he skilfully reminds us, they did not accomplish it overnight, or in straightforward fashion, or even through those vehicles they deemed most instrumental to changes in religious outlook and practice.

Reforming the Scottish Parish raises the bar for local Scottish Reformation histories. Close scrutiny and careful analysis of historical records is coupled with a thorough command of secondary literature on early modern Scottish religious history; McCallum exercises proper reserve in drawing conclusions for the nation as a whole from realities in Fife, but he rightly situates his findings on the historiographical map of Scottish Reformation studies more broadly, and does not hesitate to weigh in on continuing debates about the religious history of early modern Scotland when his study has bearing upon them.

The work might have been improved by a more consistent attempt to situate findings of his study on the larger historiographical map of European Reformation scholarship. The phenomena McCallum examines beneath the rubrics of ‘religious instruction’ and ‘ecclesiastical discipline’ have occupied the interests of recent continental Reformation
historians beneath the rubrics of ‘confessionalization’ and/or ‘Christianization’. McCallum nods toward such scholarship in his conclusion; but a more thorough engagement with such scholarship might have contextualized and informed his findings in meaningful ways. Yet this constitutes a relatively minor failure in an otherwise outstanding work.

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