Review


Historians interested in the ways in which Scotland’s people lived in the sixteenth century have no doubt eagerly awaited Margo Todd’s edited collection of the Perth kirk session books, dating from between 1577 and 1590. Their wait has not been in vain, as there is certainly much to recommend this edition to anyone interested in a glimpse into the inner-workings of a burgh community in the post-Reformation period. Rather than a top-down view of the reformed church, by utilising records from the lowest rung of the church court hierarchy Todd allows the experiences and voices of the people active on the ground and in the court to speak for themselves.

This collection gains the reader’s attention from the start, with a lively introduction that perfectly primes one’s desire to investigate the cases contained within. Todd ably demonstrates the justification for the edition, before describing the manuscript, the burgh and its people. Todd brings the early modern burgh of Perth to life in her description of its physical features and the daily dealings between members of its community, and this part of the introduction provides interesting reading for historians of all levels – from those just dipping a toe into the history of early modern Scottish burgh, to those more familiar with its inner workings. This section also highlights the differences between Perth and other, similar Scottish towns (like Edinburgh and Aberdeen) by pointing out that Perth was a ‘crafts town’ (p.
while the trade of towns like Edinburgh and Aberdeen were dominated by merchants. Appropriately, considering that this is a collection of kirk session records, the events of the Reformation in Perth are then sketched out in few words but sufficient detail. As the town in which John Knox preached his first sermon upon returning to Scotland in 1559, and as a town in which the Reformation was accomplished swiftly and completely, Perth’s importance in the Scottish Reformation has long been acknowledged. In this, the kirk session elders had the clear support of the wider community. The bulk of Todd’s introduction is devoted to a discussion of the personnel who made up the kirk session, its procedures and penalties. A series of examples of just how far the session might go in order to inspire appropriate levels of penitence in its recalcitrant members makes for fascinating reading, and also causes the reader to consider the role of natural disasters and outbreaks of sickness in determining the extent of a punishment – the fate of two adulterers in January 1585 (p. 44) makes for particularly harrowing reading! The final section of the introduction delineates the editorial conventions followed in the transcription.

The transcription itself is clear and easy to read, though readers unfamiliar with sixteenth-century spellings might struggle initially. In general, the cases deal with issues of behaviour that were of concern to the church fathers, which could range from garbage in the kirkyard to incidences of fornication. Extensive footnotes provide additional detail in individual cases, define obscure terms, and direct readers to sources of further information. Some such information is contained in the appendices provided at the back of the volume. There, lists of Perth elders and hospital masters from the same period as the volume are available, as are session disciplinary entries from 1568. As Todd notes, ‘in the absence of an extant volume of session minutes from the period 1560-77, they provide evidence of the existence of an earlier
session’ (p. 485). Todd’s efforts, therefore, to provide as much background knowledge and detail as possible are admirable. However, while Todd ably demonstrates the value and potential uses of the information contained in these cases, a nod to the potential limitations of the kirk session records might also have been useful. While much can be learned through these types of court and cases, what remains hidden from the reader? What information needs to be supplemented from other sources? What aspects of community life are obscured?

These questions are, however, quibbles rather than major concerns, and should not detract from the excellent resource provided by Todd in this edited volume. Todd’s obvious dedication and care in introducing and transcribing this volume means that it can be unreservedly recommended – and as it costs considerably less than an airplane ticket to Scotland (necessary if one would like to consult this resource in situ in the archives), this is something over which far-flung researchers can rejoice!

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