
With *The Culture of Controversy*, Alasdair Raffe has developed an innovative new approach to the study of the Restoration period and beyond. Taking inspiration from the cultural turn in early modern Scottish historiography sparked by Margo Todd’s seminal book *The Culture of Protestantism in Early Modern Scotland* (2002), Raffe thematically analyses the characteristics of the presbyterian-episcopalian controversy of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century with reference to a wide range of printed and manuscript polemical tracts, as well as sources which relate to lay involvement in controversy such as accounts of sermons and crowd violence. This provides a much-needed cultural perspective on the complex religio-political debates of the tumultuous period and augments the wealth of work undertaken from the high political angle, such as Clare Jackson’s *Restoration Scotland* (2003). By widening the analysis beyond the Restoration and into the Revolution and post-union periods, as Raffe does in his article in the *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Scottish History* (2012), he is able to exemplify the legacy of the ideas and practices fostered by culture of controversy on the social and political spectrums of modern Britain. This approach has proven fruitful in the recent historiography of early modern England, particularly in Mark Knights’ insightful *Representation and Misrepresentation in Later Stuart Britain* (2005).

*The Culture of Controversy* benefits from an extended introduction that stretches over two chapters. This allows Raffe to define his terms in chapter one and to set out the key confessional battlegrounds in chapter two. The Habermasian notion of the public sphere steadily emerging throughout the seventeenth century which has been given much credence in English historiography is rejected as teleological and not applicable to early modern Scotland due to the significant differences in the social structures of the two
kingdoms. Controversial culture is presented as an alternative framework for analysis, focusing on the ways in which people from all walks of life expressed their confessional allegiance and grievances. Raffe then goes on to set the scene for the re-establishment of episcopacy at 1662, arguing that episcopalian and presbyterian controversy replaced 1650s protester and resolutioner controversy. The rest of the book analyses presbyterian and episcopalian controversial discourse and practice, arguing that one confessional culture existed at 1660 (presbyterianism) but that two existed by 1714 (presbyterianism and episcopalianism). This argument downplays the significance of the shattered presbyterian unity and bitter debates characteristic of the 1650s. Indeed, the major weakness of this book, and of most work done on the Restoration period, is the lack of acknowledgement of the divisiveness of the interregnum. This leads to an oversimplification of the Restoration settlement and fails to recognise episcopalian polemics pre-1660. Raffe acknowledges the fluidity of presbyterian and episcopalian allegiances in his chapter on nonconformity, but more could be done to emphasise the complex and wide ranging beliefs held throughout this period, which does not always allow for the straightforward label of presbyterian or episcopalian to be applied. It is a legacy which stems from at least as early as 1638.

The book is very successful, however, in outlining the development and divergence of mainstream presbyterian and episcopalian confessional cultures. Part one focuses on controversial discourse, where Raffe succinctly outlines the ever-contentious role of the covenants; the language of persecution, fanaticism and enthusiasm deployed by both confessional groups; and the scrutiny that the clergy received from lay and clerical opponents. This allows Raffe to highlight areas of incongruity between the two cultures that reveal key confessional differences in practical areas such as worship, preaching, and clerical behaviour. The chapter on persecution is particularly enlightening as it reveals that both sides deployed similar language when opposing the established church, thus highlighting the interdependency of the two groups’ evolution. In part two, Raffe turns to controversial action: namely nonconformity and crowd violence. A spectrum of conformity is advocated, which is a welcome addition to an
analysis that can sometimes oversimplify the seventeenth century schisms. Equally welcome is Raffe’s acknowledgement of grass roots motivation for collective violence that established a tradition on which eighteenth century dissenters could build.

The Culture of Controversy is very readable piece of academic work which rectifies the absence of cultural analyses of Restoration Scotland. His conclusion that different confessional cultures co-existed and developed in tandem to one another throughout the seventeenth century is convincing. He also outlines that more research is required to uncover the extent to which these cultures existed at the lay level and between localities. The failure to incorporate the 1650s is problematic and leads to some generalisations, but the “culture of controversy” framework in place of a public sphere is a useful and valid approach to studying early modern Scottish religious culture.

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