
The Scottish Reformation was never, as Alec Ryrie correctly points out, inevitable. It was not, as pious Protestant writers used to assert, the inevitable result of God’s will nor was it the only response which could have been taken to the ills of the late medieval church. But once one comes to the realization that the Reformation was not inevitable one faces the rather daunting task of explaining why it happened and why it took a particular form. Why did Scotland become Protestant in the 16th century? Why did it not retain its previous loyalty to the Catholic faith and to the papacy?

Alec Ryrie sets himself the task of offering an explanation for the Reformation in Scotland both in general terms and also the more specific question of ‘why this Reformation took place, rather than one of many other “Reformations” – and, indeed, counter-Reformations – that seemed possible in sixteenth-century Scotland.’ (p. 7, emphasis in the original). The book focuses on the early reformation period, from the time of Luther up to the events of 1559-1560. The book is well structured, well-written, and clearly argued. Ryrie follows his introduction with a look at the question of corruption within the early sixteenth century Scottish church, noting that both Catholic reformers and Protestant reformers had their distinct reasons to stress corruption within the church. He then moves on to discuss early developments under James V, and the events of 1543, and the impact of the English ‘rough wooing’ on Scottish religious developments. Two thematic chapters look at the attempts of Catholic reformers to bring change to the church and the continuing Protestant presence in Scotland in the 1550s respectively. Ryrie argues that the 1550s were not a period of significant growth for the Protestants and it
was not as a result of their increasing popularity that the events in
the late 1550s took the shape that they did. Two chapters are
devoted to the events which took place from 1557 to 1560. In
many ways these are the heart of the book and its argument. Alec
Ryrie sees the Protestant Reformation as coming swiftly and
unexpectedly: ‘The Reformed Church established itself in 1559-
60 with remarkable speed, but also with remarkable firmness.
This was not a matter of pre-existing “privy kirks” stepping in
to take over Scotland’s religious life. Rather, it was a sudden
yet profound change which took place during the war itself, as
political events forced Scots rapidly to reassess their allegiances,
and to abandon their various attempts at compromise.’ (p. 192).
Particular emphasis is placed on the role that the French army and
its occupation had on souring the Scots to their old ally, and
making them willing to risk a change in foreign policy and an
alliance with England. Ryrie argues these events were dramatic,
indeed a revolution, from which there was no going back in terms
of religion. This was all achieved by an activist minority, dedi-
cated to a particular kind of Reformed theology becoming the
religious ideology of Scotland. The book’s narrative ends in 1560.
The revolution had taken place.

The origins of the Scottish Reformation does not rely on
new sources for its arguments. Instead, as Ryrie notes, the book
represents an attempt to ask new questions of familiar sources
and provide new answers (p. 5). The book also looks beyond the
Scottish situation to the European stage and see both the effect of
Europe on Scotland and the effect of the Scottish Reformation on
European events (p. 7).

As much as I enjoyed reading the book and appreciated the
clarity of both the argument and its expression, I found myself
both disappointed and unconvinced as I reached its conclusion.

The disappointment was largely that the book in several
places did not live up to the expectations it set for itself. For
example, on the issue of corruption within the pre-reformation
church this seemed a natural place for a broader discussion of
these issues on a European scale. Alec Ryrie does mention the
state of the church in England, but here I anticipated some discus-
sion of Eamon Duffy’s argument in The Stripping of the Altars for
the vitality of the English church. I was equally disappointed not
to see this issue engaged when the argument was made that the collapse of ‘Scottish Catholicism as a living system of piety was remarkably sudden and complete.’ (p. 10). It would seem natural here to contrast the Scottish situation with that in England, or at least with the England that Duffy has posited. There were other places where The origins of the Scottish Reformation did a better job at bringing in European events and was able to place Scotland within the broader European context, but on the whole I was disappointed that the book did not live up to its promise in this area, as it seems a very important issue to consider. Similarly, I was disappointed not to have a clearer understanding of why Ryrie thought that the Calvinist model of Reformation had triumphed over the Lutheran, or indeed the English models of Reformation. The case for the failure of Catholic reform is well presented, but the choice among the various kinds of Protestants and the reason why the Reformed or Calvinist brand succeeded required more attention.

There is no doubt that the crisis of 1559-1560 was vital to the Scottish Reformation. But, was there no going back after this? As Alec Ryrie makes clear in many places, those wanting a Reformation of the Reformed variety were a minority. Not enough evidence is provided for the statement that a return to loyalty to Rome was impossible after the events of 1560. At the very least in its implementation, the Reformation required time to put down its roots. This was done through the preaching of Reformed doctrine and the implementation of moral discipline, both of which took time. Was it a rapid Reformation? I was not convinced, not for any ideological reason, but based upon the case presented. There was no compelling new material to make me rethink my understanding of the Reformation as a more lengthy process, both before and after 1560.

The origins of the Scottish Reformation is well-written and clearly argues the case for a rapid Reformation focused on the years 1559-1560. Chapters of the book or the entire book will certainly contribute to good discussions in undergraduate and graduate classes.

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