The Nationalism of the Scottish Reformation

From its earliest days, Scottish patriotism has always had religious overtones. During the Middle ages this characteristic held an important place in nationalistic thought, but it became even more obvious in the sixteenth century as a result of the Protestant Reformation. This movement in turn provided the foundation upon which Scottish nationalism of the seventeenth century grounded its belief in the uniqueness of Scotland as a "convenanted" nation. This was the new dimension given by the Reformation to Scottish nationalism. Some have attempted to insist that Knox and his colleagues were really anglicizers, but the fact is that they gave a different religious direction to Scottish national thinking that has endured until the present time.

The earliest form of a Christian church in Scotland was of rather mixed parentage. Ninian seems to have represented the Roman tradition while Kentigern probably brought the old British and Columba, the Irish traditions. Yet they all seem to have differed from the Roman pattern introduced by Augustine into England. The result was conflict between the Celtic and Anglo-Saxon churches which ended in the defeat of the Celtic church at the Synod of Whitby (664), and the eventual submission of even Columba's Abbey of Iona (717) to the Roman pontiff. The work of Romanization was completed in the eleventh century by Queen Margaret, the Anglo-Saxon wife of Malcolm Canmore and her sons especially David I. 1

Yet in spite of the acceptance of Roman Catholic doctrine, government and practice, the Scottish clergy continued to be determinedly "Scottish." In order to ward off the attempts of the archbishops of York to control their church in 1225 they obtained the right to hold their own provincial councils under the direct rule of the pope. Seventy-five years later they carried this assertion of independence farther by giving their support first of all to Sir William Wallace and then to Robert the Bruce, Earl of Carrick, in the struggle to free Scotland of English domination. This nationalism even led them to defy the pope who supported Edward I, and to carry on their ecclesiastical duties for twenty-five years while under papal interdict. 2 In so doing they undoubtedly provided ground for later Scottish assertions of freedom from English and even papal control.

The same attitude continued within the Roman Catholic fold down to the Reformation. When the pope in 1472, without the consent of James III, created Patrick Graham, Bishop of St. Andrews, an archbishop, James
promptly threw that prelate into prison. Then to balance St. Andrews' power, later in the century parliament of its own authority raised Glasgow to an archbishopric, a move to which the pope gave his assent. A study of Bishop Elphistone's Aberdeen Breviary, the first printed work published in Scotland, reveals the same nationalistic point of view, for he sought to prepare and use a work which was entirely Scottish in character, with only Scottish saints, both historical and mythical. The final expression of this attitude came to fruition in Archbishop Hamilton's Catechism of 1552 from which all reference to the supreme authority of the papacy was carefully omitted. 3 Thus throughout the medieval period the Scottish church displayed an independent, nationalistic attitude, even more determined than that of most other nations.

But while this was so, we must also recognize that its attitude was not based upon religious or theological reasoning. Although holding to all Roman Catholic doctrines, the clergy were determined to run their own affairs. On the other hand, when there was no strong national feeling among the people as a whole they seemed to go along with the general acceptance of papal control. The establishment of various continental monastic orders in the country, the journeying of young scholars to France, Germany and Italy to study and the appealing of law cases to the curia in Rome, all helped to dampen overly nationalistic sentiments. Yet such sentiments did remain latent to rise if, as and when the English attempted to control the church, or if the papacy sought to aid the English by the exercise of its authority on their behalf. We must emphasize, however, that this nationalism was not because of disagreement in doctrine, but was political or economic in nature.

The sixteenth century saw a change in Scottish ecclesiastical nationalism. It was not, however, a completely new phenomenon, for the fifteenth century had seen the beginnings of the change in the advent and spread of Lollardy, particularly in the southwest. Opposition to papal taxation and exactions in England had triggered Wyclif's opposition to Rome which had then led on to his rejection of much of Roman Catholic doctrine. Consequently when his followers, the Lollards, because of persecution crossed, into Scotland they brought with them not only his views on salvation, predestination and similar matters but also his antipapalism whose obverse side was national ecclesiastical independence, reinforced by a total rejection of the doctrine of papal supremacy. Knox indicates this in his report of the charges laid against Adam Reid of Barskimming and his fellow Lollards of Kyle in 1494. In the family of the Campbells of Kinzeaneckleuch and a few other households these views continued to be held down to the Reformation. 4

In the sixteenth century political and religious nationalism joined forces. The acceptance first of Lutheran and then of Calvinistic or Reformed doctrine and policy, placed the Scottish Protestants in direct opposition to Roman Catholic teaching and consequently to papal authority. But this meant opposition also to any foreign power which would attempt to force the Scots back under the Roman Church's authority. In this way the political and the religious became intertwined, with the latter tending for many to dominate the scene. It was this approach that added a new and different dimension to Scottish nationalism.

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We must recognize of course that Scotland had always had its anglophiles who for various reasons, often personal, favored either union with or submission to England. After Flodden Field (1513) the sentiment for friendship, if not union, with England grew. Having lost many of the heads of noble families in that battle which was a useless sacrifice on behalf of a faithless France, a considerable number of Scots, especially those living within striking distance of the border, felt that the only hope for Scotland was friendship with their southern neighbor. They desired peace, but knew that this would never be possible as long as, tied to the French chariot wheels, Scotland was forced to participate in the constantly recurring Anglo-French wars. Both the land-owners of Lothian and the areas to the south and west, as well as the merchants of Edinburgh, Dundee and Perth felt that they could carry on their daily activity of earning a living, only if they could do so in peace without the constant threat of the raids of English moss-troopers on land and pirates or privateers at sea. Consequently sentiment in favor of friendship with England grew steadily during the first half of the sixteenth century.

A reinforcement of this point of view came with the advent of Lutheranism to Scotland in the 1520s. The civil authorities, spurred on by the ecclesiastics authorities, found it necessary to pass and execute laws against those who held the new doctrines. The first victim was Patrick Hamilton burned in 1527, but during the thirties a number of others walked the long path to the stake. Those responsible for such prosecutions were usually those who also clung tenaciously to the "auld alliance" with France. That country, they believed, was the one hope of Roman Catholicism in Europe, and after James IV's marriage with Mary of Lorraine, also in Scotland. The maintenance of Roman Catholicism and French influence in Scotland became, therefore, inseparable in the thinking of most Scots.

Because of this, the Protestant element in the country found themselves inevitably pushed in the direction of the English. One factor in this move was the ecclesiastical development in England, for in 1534 under Henry VIII's leadership England rejected the papal supremacy over the church, and for the next little while Protestantism seemed to be achieving the position of a legal religion. Naturally this attracted Scottish Protestants to the party of those who wished for friendship with England. Added to this was the fact that since most of the Protestants came from either the east and west coast burghs, or from the southern regions of the country, peace would also be to their advantage politically and economically. Protestantism thus joined hands with more secular interests, although the English party was by no means entirely Protestant, its leader, the Earl of Angus, being a Roman Catholic, nor did all the Protestants necessarily back the anglophiles, although they tended to do so.

At this point a question arises as to the pro-English party's policy. A number of the Protestant anglophiles such as the Earl of Glencairn, Lord Maxwell and other nobles and lairds, were on occasion prepared to take oaths of fealty to Henry VIII in order to gain his support for their activities in Scotland. Did they not by so doing indicate that they were prepared to destroy Scotland as a nation? They have been accused of this not only in our own day, but also in the sixteenth century. As one looks at their record, however, one soon discovers
that they usually took a very independent line when it came to carrying out Henry's arrogant and often stupid demands. He constantly berated their leader, the Earl of Angus and others for not being sufficiently active in the English interest. Furthermore, he usually made such calls upon them that they simply could not fulfill. We find, therefore, that although they sought Henry's assistance, and at times his protection, they were by no means prepared to accept him as the ruler of Scotland. They were ready to go along with him, just as long as he would enable them to withstand French, and in the case of the Protestants, Roman Catholic domination and persecution.

This came out in the Treaties of Greenwich. After the death of James IV in 1542, leaving a week old daughter as heir to the throne, the Earl of Arran, the Governor, reached an accord with Henry in which it was arranged that Mary and Prince Edward would eventually be married. At the same time every effort was made to guarantee Scotland’s independence. When Henry, however, demanded Mary’s immediate despatch to England and the turning over of all the strategic castles to his control, not only did the Governor swing over to the side of the French party led by Cardinal Beaton and the Dowager Queen Mary, but most of the English party did the same. The latter might not like French domination and many feared Roman Catholic persecution, but they were still not prepared to accept Henry as their overlord.

The outcome of this development was that from about 1545 into the 1550's, the French interest dominated Scottish political and ecclesiastical policies. Furthermore, the “rough wooing” of Henry and Protector Somerset (1545-49) did nothing to encourage anyone in Scotland to turn a favorable eye upon their neighbors to the south. True, a number of lairds in Lothian and the southern regions became “assured” to the English. This was, however, largely out of fear of English attack, while others had the further incentive of their Protestantism, which after the burning of George Wishart (1546) came under increasing pressure from the French-controlled government. Yet it would seem that even those who became “Englishmen” in this situation were not prepared to accept English overlordship any more than they would submit to French. Consequently once the English found it necessary, because of threats from the continent to withdraw their troops from Scotland, the “assured lords” quickly sought the revocation of the acts of treason enacted against them. Indeed, Henry II of France could boast in 1552 that Scotland had become a French province, a condition to which he would soon reduce England.

There is no doubt, however, that the situation was confused and confusing. The constant English pressure from south of the border, the establishment of the Reformation in England and the Franco-Roman Catholic efforts to keep the Scots within the French orbit all led to near chaos. It would seem that the clarification of the Protestant position came only with the advent of Knox as the leader of the Reformation. Even while absent on the continent he had exercised an important influence on the thinking of the Protestants, an influence it is well to note which did not favor conformity religiously or ecclesiastically to the English pattern. He thought in different terms. This became apparent on his visit to Scotland in 1555.
Some from among both Knox’s enemies and friends have endeavoured to prove that he was an anglicized Scot who was prepared to bring his country both politically and ecclesiastically under English control. The facts of the case, however, do not support this contention. That he had, after his stay in England on his release from the French galley, a strong affection for England we cannot doubt. The very fact that he married an English wife would seem to point in this direction. But he had his very grave doubts about the adequacy of the English Reformation. While in England he had come into direct conflict with both the Protestant nobles who had been more interested in taking over church lands than in accepting Reformed doctrine, and with ecclesiastical leaders such as Cranmer and Ridley who sought to cling to what he regarded as the remnants of popery in both liturgy and ecclesiastical polity. Furthermore, when minister of the English refugee congregation in Frankfort during Mary Tudor’s reign, he had come into conflict with the Anglican “establishment” party who had forced him to return to Geneva. These experiences left him with a feeling of antipathy to the English Protestant movement.

In Geneva, on the other hand, he found what he felt to be “a true schole of Christ.” There he ministered to what some believe was the first Puritan congregation. While this interpretation depends upon one’s concept of Puritanism, we cannot doubt that the English church of Geneva was very different from that envisaged by the leaders of the English Reformation. The Form of Prayers and Administration of the Sacraments along with the Genevan Bible, with its notes and comments prepared by the members of the congregation with Knox’s approval and assistance, certainly indicated that his views were rather different from those of both the Edwardian reformers and Archbishop Parker and Queen Elizabeth. The Genevan model coupled with the influence of the infant French Reformed Church, seem to have provided him with both the theological and ecclesiastical pattern that he sought to establish in Scotland.

This brings us to Knox’s activities in Scotland. His first real contact with the Protestant movement as a leader came in 1555 when he went to Scotland from Geneva for a period of over six months. During that time he travelled around the country preaching and encouraging the establishment of “privy kirks.” After he left to return to take up his duties of the congregation in Geneva, he sent back a letter to the brethren to advise them on the conduct of their services. His suggested form of “liturgy” if we can call it that, closely resembled that set forth in the Genevan Form of Prayers and he makes no mention of the English Book of Common Prayer. After his experiences both in England and in Frankfort this is hardly surprising, but it does indicate that he was by no means prepared to accept it. A little later we find evidence that some of the privy kirks were using the Prayer Book, but on a voluntary and probably selective basis as an aid, rather than as a complete directory of worship. Knox, on the other hand, ignored the Prayer Book since he sought the establishment of the “true face of the Kirk” which he obviously believed was not shown in the Anglican liturgy.
Yet we must also recognize that he did not wish for a liturgy and form of government that had the “face of a Scottish kirk.” What he desired was a kirk that was truly Reformed according to biblical standards and practice. Consequently when he returned in 1559 to give his aid and leadership to the Protestant movement he brought back with him ideas and probably documents, that represented what he felt exemplified the most Reformed views. These he sought to establish in Scotland, and did so with such success that he could later write that he believed the Scottish Kirk to be the “most perfectly Reformed church” in existence. Furthermore, he sought to have these Reformation principles applied not only in the specifically ecclesiastical sphere, but also in the life and action of the whole nation. In this he believed that Scotland was laying the way to others – even to Geneva!

In all of this hoping, planning and leading Knox received strong, although not always unanimous, support from the other ecclesiastical leaders. Repeatedly the General Assembly, which met twice a year, backed the stands he took. The nobles led by William Maitland of Lethington and others of that ilk, on the other hand, did not favor the organization that the reformers desired, nor did they approve of the General Assembly’s continual demand that the lands of the old church should be used solely for the support of the new kirk, the relief of poverty and the support of education. They sought and obtained possession of most of the ecclesiastical property, and what they did not obtain by direct seizure they hoped to gain by the establishment of an episcopal system that would enable them to channel most of the church revenues into their own pockets. The Earl of Morton was particularly adept at this form of acquisition. Yet even the nobles never seemed to think of the bishops they desired as having the powers of the prelates of the Church of England. This was to come only in the next century.

What then was the attitude of Knox and his supporters to England and the English church? The answer is that Knox wished for English friendship, for he realized that unless Scotland and England stood together as Protestant nations not only their reformation, but that on the Continent also would probably succumb to attack. On the other hand, he was quite prepared to insist on Scottish ecclesiastical and presumably for that reason, on Scottish national, independence. While some have believed that he wished for the union of the two countries, there seems to be no evidence for this claim. He could preach a sermon in which he took “a swipe at cross and candle,” but end the service with a “pressing prayer” for continued amity between the two nations. Believing that the Scottish church was the most thoroughly Reformed in the world, he could only envisage a union which would dismantle the Church of England as it existed, to re-erect another edifice patterned after the Scottish model, a position taken by the Scots commissioners to the Westminster Assembly in the next century, but one which certainly could not even be contemplated under Elizabeth’s rule.

The evidence for this view is first of all that no attempt was made to introduce the English Book of Common Prayer, but instead, the use of the Genevan Form of Prayers with Calvin’s catechism attached was made obligatory for the celebration of the sacraments, marriage and funerals. In the
conduct of the regular services ministers and sessions were allowed to determine their own procedure, although the Form did outline an optional service which had little resemblance to the Anglican liturgy. Another indication of the Scottish position is found in the General Assembly’s criticism in 1566 of the Second Helvetic Confession, for while they accepted practically everything, including the parity of ministers, they read the composers of the confession a lecture on the impropriety of celebrating various holy-days such as Christmas, which they had included in their statement. Then again, when Erskine of Dun wrote concerning the “Haly Kirk” it is interesting to note that he made no mention of bishops; and in a letter to the Earl of Mar, the then regent, he rebuked him for interfering with the church’s affairs. The Scottish church was to be unique, the model for all truly Reformed ecclesiastical organizations.

Even where there apparently was some Scottish imitation of the English pattern, it was purely a surface matter. We have mentioned that the nobles’ bishops were not the same as those in the Anglican church. At first superintendents were created, but they had no different ordination from that of the ordinary minister and were responsible to the General Assembly which frequently rebuked them for improper actions. Even when the archbishopric of St. Andrews was revived by the Earl of Mar, the man appointed to the position, James Douglas had to promise that he would be subject to his brethren in the General Assembly. Some historians have contended that Knox was quite in favor of such an episcopate, but according to his servant, the memoirist Robert Bannatyne, this was not the case for he even refused to take part in the archbishop’s consecration. The reason he did not put up a stronger battle against this re-habilitated prelacy would seem to be that he was in very poor health, as he himself said he was “half deid.” Thus even in the case of apparent assimilation to the English ecclesiastical system, the Scots maintained their independence as a national church.

This tradition, Andrew Melville carried on later in his battle against episcopacy and royal interference and domination of the church. He brought to completion the work begun by Knox in the creation and establishment of a presbyterial system, similar to that of the underground Eglise Reformée in France. Scotland in this way became the first formally “presbyterian nation.”

The distinction, however, led on to a further step. Knox had on one or two occasions referred to Scotland as a covenanted nation, likening it to Israel of old. This idea was taken up in the seventeenth century. The Scots Presbyterians appropriated the idea of the Covenant to make it a distinctly Scottish concept. Since they regarded their church as the most Reformed of all churches, they felt that they had been specially blessed by God with the result that the whole nation stood in a particular relation to him. It was for this reason that they signed the National Covenant (1638) to resist the innovations of the English Archbishop Laud, and submitted with bad grace to Cromwell and his Independents. When they received back Charles II in 1660, again the Covenant idea stirred opposition to submission to English ecclesiastical domination.
which brought on the "killing days" and the rise of the Cameronians. And although the conveants were not reaffirmed in the Revolutionary Settlement of 1692, yet one of the central requirements for the acceptance of William and Mary as monarchs was the guarantee of the position of the Scottish church, for while the Scottish parliament amounted to little or nothing, the church was the heart of the Scottish national identity, a position reconfirmed in the Union of 1707.

In the development of Scottish nationalism, we can see, therefore, that the Reformation played a very important role. Although it had only a negative influence upon the portion of the population that remained Roman Catholic, in that it made them hostile to England, for the dominant Protestant element it was of the greatest importance. It formulated and popularized the belief that Scotland, by virtue of its very complete Reformation, occupied a special position in Protestantism, even in the divine economy. The old political and ecclesiastical nationalism had frequently been largely negative: anti-English, anti-French, anti-papal. While the Reformation approved some of these ideas, it also sublimated them to an attitude which provided the Scots with a positive rather than a merely negative or imitative identity, in the conviction of Scotland's special religious position as a Reformed and Covenantant nation which, above all others, recognized and submitted to the "Crown Rights of Jesus Christ."

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FOOTNOTES


10. Ibid., pp. 407ff.

11. Merriman, OP. CIT., pp. 26ff.


20. IBID., VI, 139.


22. cf. note 15 supra.


24. Ibid., III, 156ff.
25. Ibid., III, 206ff.

26. Works, VI, 616.


28. Ibid., chap. IV.