
This volume, number 11 in the publications of the Association for Scottish Literary Studies, reflects the peculiar Scottish concern of the seventeenth century with the relationship between church and state. Indeed, as the editor correctly points out, this was the great theme of Scottish prose writers during the entire period, a theme which gave peculiar form to the nation’s literary corpus, and made the period in modern eyes, as the editor suggests, “the dullest in Scottish literature, since the fourteenth century anyway.”

It is obvious, of course, that Scotsmen writing on the subject did not think so, and therein lay one of the peculiarities of seventeenth-century Scottish intellectual life as William Drummond of Hawthornden pointed out in his *SKIAMAXIA*, a selection from which is contained in the present volume. Drummond, whose own writings remain perhaps the only collected works that might be characterized as “literature” in twentieth-century terms, was acerbic in asking why Scottish Covenanting religiosity should be so intense and grandiose in its aspirations. The answer, clearly, lay in the fact that the Covenanting tradition derived from a fierce intensity of belief (as well as a combination of historical circumstances) that gave a number of Scots a sense that theirs was an uniquely significant achievement within the Reformation tradition. Why it was that this sense of unique religious achievement, which seemed so astonishing to outside observers, should have developed in Scottish society may well be explained by geographic and social isolation. But, surely, some part of the explanation must be found, as the late Professor W.C. Dickinson suggested more than thirty-five years ago, in the curious origins of the Scottish Reformation. From the beginning, he pointed out in his introduction to John Knox’s *History* (Edinburgh, 1949), the Scottish reformers found themselves in permanent rebellion not simply against the medieval church but against the state as well. “So, in Scotland,” he wrote, “came that long struggle between Church and State, a struggle between the ‘Divine Right of Kings’ and the ‘Divine Right of Presbyteries’, a conflict between government by the Council of the King and government by counsel of God. That struggle was to endure for more than one hundred bitter years, and was to lead to many a tragic death on lonely moors and windswept hills” (p. liv). To a very large degree also the extent to which, at various periods, the kirk came close to subverting the authority of the crown as it did during the childhood of James VI and I and during the Covenanting period contributed to the sense of historical justification that convinced many Scots from the days of John Knox and Andrew Melville onward that theirs was “the best reformit kirk in Christendom” and that those like James VI and I and Charles I who tried to restructure it and, in doing so, challenged the pretensions of its most extreme supporters were guilty of “ane hudge deformation”.

This it was that this great struggle with its apocalyptic undertones came to dominate the writing of seventeenth Scotsmen. They were, as they saw it dealing with the greatest of all themes in Christian history, namely, the relationship of the human with the divine, of Christ’s kingdom in this world with the everlasting kingdom. For them, as the century advanced, their faith in Scotland’s peculiar role in the Christian *schema* continually struggled against the events of a secular world which seemed increasingly to belie their expectations.

What is striking about this great concern of the Scottish intellectual community was its all-embracing, all-consuming absorption of talent. Indeed, it was this almost complete absorption that outside observers found so nearly, unbelievable and which, to later generations, seems to make the period so aridly uninteresting. It is nor surprising, therefore, that in terms of what makes for lasting literary fame only four of the twenty authors chosen for this anthology have a reputation that transcends the Scottish experience; and no one of these may be said to have been a major literary figure in the way that
many contemporary English writers were. Robert Baillie, the diarist, Drummond of Hawthornden, Sir Thomas Urquhart of Cromarty (famed more as the seventeenth-century translator of Rabelais than for any writing of his own), Bishop Gilbert Burnet, the historian, these are the only names likely to be known outside a Scottish context. Most of them are marginal to the field of literature.

One cannot cavil, therefore, at the editor's choices, for he has chosen will from the material available to him. The fact that the work hardly meets the standards of a "literary" anthology does not deprive it of extrinsic interest. If the selections do not appeal to a wide twentieth-century readership, they, nevertheless, must continue to stimulate the interest of those who would know something of the intellectual folkways of a remarkable society in a remarkable period of its history.

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