

# H-Net Reviews

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**Roger A. Mason, ed.** *John Knox and the British Reformations*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998. xvi + 297 pp. \$94.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84014-600-4.

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“Poor John Knox.”(241) Not a valediction one would expect to read in a volume of essays on Knox and his place in the British Reformations, but with it Jennie Wormald catches the tone of much of this book. Edited by Roger Mason, who has authored and edited a number of works on and by Knox, this volume brings together a number of leading historians in a search for Knox’s nature and influence. Though a potent symbol and icon of the Scottish Reformation, the man John Knox was a difficult friend and worse enemy who, by writing his own history of the Reformation in Scotland, cast himself as the leader of a movement he neither started nor controlled much of the time. His conviction that he was a prophet called by God to reprove the sinful made him a poor politician, and his frequent exiles undermined his influence. Meanwhile, the Scots nobles got on with Reformation, often with the tacit support of Knox’s archenemy, Mary Queen of Scots. Only after her flight to England did he come into his own.

The articles in this book are the product of a conference held to commemorate the 450th anniversary of Knox’s first public sermon, bringing together leading experts to explore the intellectual, political and social contexts in which he operated. It begins with an excellent treatise on the historiography of Knox by James Kirk, setting the stage for the articles that follow by reviewing the ways in which Knox has been treated, neglected, and distorted in histories denominational or dispassionate, nationalist or mythical. Knox, he notes, has been recruited into many different arguments, standing as a “slogan for a baffling diversity of attitudes and beliefs which were frequently alien to his outlook.” The best way to find the real Knox is to put him into the atmosphere in which he functioned and to connect him to contemporaries. Carol Edington, Euan Cameron and Patrick Collinson begin the task by exploring his call to preach, as well as his experi-

ences in England and on the continent before his return to Scotland late in 1559.

Edington is interested in the place and way Knox received his calling to preach. It came from the small group of leading reformers holed up in St. Andrews Castle in 1547 after they had murdered Cardinal Beaton and called for English aid to establish the Reformation. As a group they emphasized the centrality of the Word of God and believed in preaching as the highest work. Balnaves, Lindsay of the Mount and Rough called Knox to take up this work, which he did, as St. Paul had done, with the Spirit of God. He accepted it, because he had come to agree with the men who made it about the nature of the church and the duty of the preacher. Obviously, Knox changed the story to improve on his own role in his *History*, but the core of his beliefs about his calling and the centrality of Bible do seem to have been fixed in the Castle in 1547.

Of course he did not remain in Scotland long after he began his preaching career, going into exile first to Berwick and then, on Mary’s accession, to Frankfurt, where he became a major player in the “Troubles” that wracked the English exile community. Euan Cameron recounts Knox’s role in this, and its impact on him. Siding with those English who wished to adapt the Prayer Book to match the Calvinist liturgy of the French exile church, Knox developed a coherent set of arguments for his preferences in matters of worship. Convinced that any form of worship created by humans was a gateway to idolatry, he opposed the Book of Common Prayer, resisting any attempt to create fixed forms of prayer, fearing that these formulas would come to be seen as divine, forming a new superstition. Knox, the consummate preacher who worked best in a world of stark opposites, was, Cameron

asserts, “in truth, an English reformer.” In the same mold as Hooper and Whittingham, he opposed those in the mold of Cranmer. Thus, Knox’s experiences, though certainly influenced by Calvinism, are best understood in the context of English exile theologies. His was not a position that could flourish in the Tudor state’s moderate, reforming monarchy, but which worked very well in the Stuart context of a weak monarchy and strong nobility.

If Knox’s style was not congenial to female rulers, he nonetheless appealed to some English women, as Patrick Collinson points out in his piece on “Knox, the Church and the Women of England.” Like Cameron, he reminds us that Knox was a very “British” person whose wife was English, and who had many friends among English women, most notably Anne Locke. Collinson’s Knox is hardly a misogynist, addressing the spiritual concerns of his female friends with sympathy, rather than asserting his patriarchal superiority over them. At the same time, his spiritual advice encouraged them to be resolute against compromise with the Prayer Book. He suggests, on the evidence of Knox’s letters, that Anne Locke was the first documented Elizabethan separatist. In short, Knox’s influence continued to be felt in England in the 1560s. Collinson even speculates that the six-month hole in Knox’s autobiography, the time he spent away from Edinburgh while the Darnley crisis unfolded, was spent in England in connection with the Vestiarian controversy.

John Knox was not a systematic theologian. A preacher and polemicist, he left no coherent body of theology, but the second part of the book tries to induce his system. David Wright examines Knox’s use of the Fathers, and J.H. Burns dissects Knox’s use of canon law and scholastic method.

David Wright’s search for Knox’s uses of the Father’s demonstrates that he was primarily a polemicist rather than a scholar of Christian antiquity. Coming late in the Reformation, he did not have to search the Fathers as earlier reformers had. Moreover, he did not seem anxious to read them, relying instead on theologians like Calvin who cited the Fathers in their works. A bibli-cist, he cared about scripture alone, taking no part in the “humanist Catholic-evangelical culture of Calvin, Bucer, Beza, Melancthon, and Cranmer.” (115) Though he believed in the primitive church, his definition of it was hardly precise. This article is particularly telling because it displays Knox as a consumer of reformed theology who used it for his own purposes, rather than an original theologian.

The real formation of John Knox’s mind was, if J.H. Burns is to be believed, his training in canon law. The only advanced education Knox had received was as a notary apostolic. Although little can be discovered about his early formation, Burns demonstrates that Knox had the maxims and the method of the scholastic system of canon law burned into him, reacting violently against the canon law yet shaped by it. In particular, he knew canon law on papal supremacy, and its claims fueled his apocalyptic view of the Catholic Church as Antichrist.

Knox’s place in the history of resistance theory prompts Jane Dawson and Roger Mason to put him into the contexts of his relationship to the more radical Christopher Goodman and of his reactions to the English royal supremacy. Bedeviling reformers of their stripe, Roman 13’s command to obey magistrates as one obeys God seemed to prevent resistance, but Goodman and Knox found a way around it. In their formulation, the right to punish idolaters justified the resistance of the people of a covenanted nation to evil rulers. They reached this conclusion by asserting the necessity of a positive scriptural command to justify all aspects of true religion. There were, Knox concluded, no *adi-aphora*. Anything invented by man, without scriptural warrant, is idolatry, and idolatry must always and everywhere be opposed. Consequently, they could not tolerate Nicodemites; there could be no compromise with idolatry, and when it was embodied in an idolatrous monarch there was need for resistance. Goodman’s radicalism went further and was more precise than Knox’s, but their resistance theory springs from the same root: the belief that a nation is a covenanted people which, as a group, must resist idolatry and punish idolaters.

Which is why Knox had so much trouble with the concept of a royal supremacy over the church, says Roger Mason. In Knox’s conception church and people are coextensive, a covenanted nation. The covenanted nation should be led by a Godly prince, like King Edward VI, but that prince cannot be supreme over the community in the covenant, which has authority greater than that of the magistrate. By the late 1550s Knox was denouncing Henry VIII as a “deformer” of the church, a “Åmonstrous bore [pig] who must needs be called the Head of the Church.” Not surprisingly, then, the *First Book of Discipline* empowered the Church to draw the sword received from God, while the Scots monarch did not get supreme authority over the church. In a sense, says Mason, Knox had defined the political magistracy as an enemy to true religion, too ready to compromise, too worldly to be trusted.

The last article in this section, Ian Hazlett's piece on Knox's use of fasting in 1565-56 attempts to bring his theology down to the ground of application, showing how Knox's covenant theology prompted him to toy with withdrawal from any sort of national church into the elite of the elect by urging the faithful to resist their backsliding Protestant leaders as well as Catholics. All of these articles show how his Old Testament covenant theology informed the way in which he related to the political world around him.

The last section of the work is called "The Scottish Reformation." Though it is looking at Knox post-1560, it might have been called "Knox the Politician," or, better yet, "Knox the Inept Politician." All the authors in this section attempt to discover the reality beneath Knox's self-celebrating *History of the Reformation in Scotland*. Clearly, by writing his own account of affairs Knox exalted his own role in a history in which he did not have the starring role he claimed.

Stephen Alford looks at Knox's relations with William Cecil and the "Britishness" of religious reform. Knox and Cecil were truly British figures, with an interest and role in both Reformations. Sharing a desire to see the Reformation succeed and warring against the dark forces of Antichrist, they had different views of how to accomplish their common end. Knox was consistent, though politically naive, in his desire for a common religious settlement. Cecil, however, was distracted by the claims of Mary to Elizabeth's throne, and his allegiance to his Queen. Alford's article is an account as much of Cecil's policies as Knox's activities, and it appears from it, though Alford does not directly draw this moral, that Cecil was happily manipulating Knox. The master politician was, no matter his own beliefs, speaking the language of reform in order to keep Scotland weak and confused, and Knox was a tool in his policy. Cecil wanted Britain for the Tudor regime; Knox wanted it for God.

Jenny Wormald's examination of Knox's relations with Mary Queen of Scots is enlightening. Knox, she shows, was contesting with a monster of his own invention. Mary was, to him, the agent of Antichrist, so he never saw her laughing at him. Nor did he grasp the political possibility of working with her to achieve a Protestant settlement. Mary, Moray, and Lethington did not see him as he saw himself, as a prophet of God. Their opinion of Knox was that he was "a profound irritant, a huge and buzzing fly – a pest." (238) As her biographer, Wormald is not fond of Mary Queen of Scots, but she has to admit that Knox was a trial to the Queen, whose political abil-

ities were greater than his. Knox deluded himself into believing he had influence, while the Queen laughed at him.

Michael Lynch looks at Knox as Minister of Edinburgh and Commissioner of the Kirk in the early 1560s, reexamining some of his earlier conclusions in his *Edinburgh and the Reformation*. He now sees Edinburgh as in the midst of an economic crisis, and the Reformation as part of a conservative reaction trying to control the mob. "Once again," he writes, "we arrive at the conclusion that civic humanism rather than religious radicalism was the keynote of this Reformation." (258) In this context, he concludes that Knox was not very effective as a leader because of absences and intransigence. Frequently serving as a Commissioner [visitor] he was often absent, without appointing a replacement, and even when he was in Edinburgh he was physically unable to preach as many sermons as he must if he was to fulfill his role as Minister. Worse, his enthusiasm for hunting papists promoted the Palm Sunday Riot of 1565, and nearly triggered a civil war. Knox, says Lynch, actually provoked a Catholic revival.

Michael Graham forces us to see the reality of Knox as a disciplinarian, demonstrating that the discipline of the Kirk in the sixteenth century was neither as repressive nor effective as the Knoxian myth would suggest, or as Knox himself desired. Believing that Old Testament discipline was necessary, and influenced by the Genevan model of reform, Knox wanted a discipline he could not sell his countrymen. The elders of the Kirk sessions were also the burghers of the towns, and they had little political interest in using the Kirk as a repressive instrument, making the church courts look more like borough courts. Their interest in good order was shared by burghers across Europe, of all faiths. Consequently, Knox was bitterly disappointed at the slow development of discipline.

Taken together this collection is an excellent exploration of Knox in context, and it should be known to students of the British Reformations. The picture that emerges in its pages is of a Knox who was overwhelming committed to his role as preacher and prophet, hating idolatry and *adiaphora*, insistent on the primacy of scripture, and unwilling to compromise his religion for political gain. At the same time, he is shown to be less the master of the Scottish Reformation than his own *History*, modestly written in the third person, suggests. Moreover, he emerges as a reformer embroiled in the issues of the English church more than the Scottish Kirk, resisting

the royal supremacy and agitating against the use of the Prayer Book. As Knox's stock as the creator of the Scottish Reformation falls, so the Scottish Reformation, like all the others, looks to be more the work of local elites than of a single reformer, even one who could preach as well as John Knox.

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