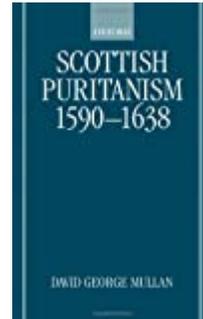




David George Mullan. *Scottish Puritanism, 1590-1638.* Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. xiv + 371 pp. \$99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-826997-7.



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Nobility Wins, Divinity Loses

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This is a tremendously learned and detailed book. David Mullan, an associate professor of history and religious studies at the University College of Cape Breton, already known for his work on the history of the idea of episcopacy in post-reformation Scotland, has immersed himself in the (rather nebulous) subject of Scottish “puritanism” (quotation marks mine) and all its ramifications, from the period of Jacobean presbyterian triumphalism in the late sixteenth century to the moment of covenanted presbyterian triumphalism in 1638. He appears to have read every tract and sermon, and prodded every tortured psyche from Robert Bruce (minister of Edinburgh) to Archibald Johnston of Wariston (advocate and co-author of the National Covenant of 1638). The result is a nuanced and, in places, brilliant exploration of a set of mentalities which seems to chug along with little in the way of a major thesis until one reaches 1637-38, when the bad guys, or at least the negative implications in a surprisingly versatile set of ideas, win out.

But first, a cautionary note: Mullan’s “puritanism” is big-tent puritanism. This allows it to transcend different

views on church polity (bringing in hardcore presbyterians and supporters of episcopacy), and liturgical practices, such as kneeling at Communion or private baptism. He defines it as a religious attitude “rooted in a shared understanding of the Bible and the immediacy of the Holy Spirit,” although the short life histories he offers of particular “puritans” also suggest the necessity of some sort of conversion experience (p. 44). Thus some of Mullan’s “puritans” supported the Five Articles of Perth or (like William Cowper) became bishops. One, John Welsh, laird’s son and eventually minister of Ayr who was exiled to France for his participation in the banned General Assembly at Aberdeen in 1605, became the subject of a series of hagiographical miracle stories which sit rather uneasily in the Calvinist tradition—in France he was even said to have raised the dead. Nevertheless, Mullan sees a broad consensus on essential matters within Scottish divinity during the period under consideration. That consensus included many unresolved contradictions, such as those which surrounded the relationships between the Covenant of Grace, baptism and election, or a desire for order in society coupled with demands for freedom in the pulpit.

Mullan writes that this book began as an effort “to evaluate the presence of Arminianism in Scotland c. 1638” (p. vi). This evaluation has led him down many other paths, but he ultimately concludes that if there was an Arminian movement in Scotland, “even in 1638 that movement had scarcely begun” (p. 240). He writes that those who are quick to see “anti-Calvinism” lurking behind every tree (perhaps historians who take too many clues from the likes of David Calderwood) should not assume its existence “wherever men accepted the liturgy and did not otherwise make explicit statement of their acceptance of a suitable predestinarian doctrine” (p. 233). Mullan claims there was, however, a “schism” developing in the period between the Five Articles of Perth (1617) and the National Covenant (1638). One side, called “Arminian” (or “popish”) by foes, preferred the Church Fathers to recent protestant theologians, while the other side saw the doctrine of Calvin and some like-minded reformers as “purer” (pp. 237-9). Meanwhile (or even earlier), the notion of covenanting had been depoliticized—the Negative Confession of 1581 had carried a clear political agenda of ridding the court of Catholics, crypto- or open, but the covenants which followed in 1590 and 1596 had downplayed the political (pp. 192-3). As a result, the politicization of church polity, theology, and liturgy in 1637-8 was a major departure from recent practice. Who was behind this? The nobility and a few leading “puritans,” such as Robert Baillie, Alexander Henderson, Johnston of Wariston, and Samuel Rutherford were the culprits, according to Mullan.

And they were culprits indeed. Mullan sees them as having forgotten the healthy suspicion of the nobility, and worldly powers in general, harbored by most divines: “in the end, their suspicion of the ruling classes was submerged beneath a total attraction to the agenda of the Scottish nobility” (p. 284). He is not (nor does he claim to be) the first historian to see the nobility as the driving force behind the covenanting rebellion, but

his criticisms of the ministers who grabbed hold of one thread of puritan divinity and threw away the others is particularly withering. “The voice of renunciation had fallen silent; triumphalism was in the ascendant; the face of piety and theology was being reconstructed in a paroxysm of power” (p. 285). The point is driven home (in a strategy of guilt by association) with an epigraphic 1996 quotation from Ian Paisley. Henderson and “religious cranks” like Wariston “could no longer see the better qualities of their own doctrines” (p. 312). But why did they do this? Here Mullan is not as strong. We are presented with a charge, lots of circumstantial evidence, but no motive which would tie it all together as a convincing case for the prosecution. Was it simply a case of opportunism and lust for power? If so, one must question the depths of the “puritan” consciousness so painstakingly plumbed by Mullan, which seems to have been so skeptical of political solutions.

There are some other less noticeable weaknesses in this otherwise excellent book. Chapter 5—“The Ambiguity of the Feminine”—seems pasted in, without much connection to the other material in the book, and is particularly inconclusive. When, in downplaying resistance theory within Scottish Calvinism between Buchanan and the National Covenant, Mullan writes that “at most” one unpublished commentary might have offered “in a strictly theoretical environment, a rather mundane resistance theory,” it would be nice to have a footnote to the manuscript in question (p. 254). The omission seems particularly glaring in a book which contains so many footnotes.

Perhaps this is where Oxford University Press should be commended; given its specialist nature, this book is not likely to sell a great many copies. Nevertheless, it is graced with a full scholarly apparatus, including a lengthy bibliography. The latter in particular is becoming an endangered species in some parts, but, thankfully, this is not the case here.

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