

The Covenanters

The historical background to their struggle

by

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What follows is an attempt to give a very brief account of the turbulent times in Scotland between the Reformation and the Revolution Settlement of 1690 when Presbyterianism finally became the official religion of the Church of Scotland. This has been done in the hope that visitors to Lochgoin and Fenwick museum will try and work out for themselves what it was that made these Covenanters, mainly ordinary men and women of no great education, or none, risk their homes, their liberty and in some 18,000 cases give their lives.

During much of the Middle Ages the Church was the most important factor in Scottish life in that it ministered to the needy, restrained the wicked and promoted Christian culture and virtue. But by the beginning of the 15th century it had become degenerate and abuses were rife. 'Pigge's bones' were sold to the gullible as Saints' relicts; almost any crime could be hushed up by gifts to the church; clerical offices could be bought and sold; benefices such as abbacies and bishoprics were conferred on the natural sons of Kings and Nobles and illiterate laymen were allowed to become parish priests.

There were many good men in the church who were appalled by this state of affairs and wanted to reform the church from within, but they were neither sufficiently powerful nor numerous to change things. The situation went from bad to worse until in 1517 Martin Luther, a German Augustinian monk, nailed his famous 'Protest' to the church door in Wittenberg. The protest movement-hence the name Protestant-spread and eventually in 1560 Protestantism was adopted by the Scottish Parliament. Its keynote was simplicity with a return to the ways of the early Christian church and the fundamental doctrine of the 'Priesthood of all Believers'. This was achieved despite a strongly fought rearguard action by the Queen Mother, (Mary of Guise, widow of King James V) who was Regent during the time her daughter Mary was in France. The Regent's party upheld the 'Auld Alliance' with France which still adhered to the Roman Catholic faith, whereas the Protestant forces turned, albeit reluctantly, to the 'auld enemy' England, mainly because England under King Henry VIII had broken with the Pope.

In 1547 John Knox emerged as a preacher of reformation doctrines and became embroiled in the religious politics of the time. When the French fleet attacked St. Andrews he was taken prisoner and spent 19 months as a galley slave. On his release he lived for several years in England. When Queen Mary of England (Bloody Mary) came to the throne in 1553, however, Knox escaped to the continent where in Geneva he came under the influence of the French reformer John Calvin. His system of Presbytery, where graded courts administered church government differed from that of Martin Luther where bishops ruled the church and which found favour in England under Henry VIII.

On her return to Scotland in 1561, Mary Queen of Scots, whose marriage to Francis II of France had ended with his death in 1560 tried hard to promote her Roman Catholic faith and had many a wordy battle with John Knox, who by now, was the leader of the Presbyterian movement. One great benefit of the new faith was the opportunity to read the Bible and worship in their own language. Between Queen Mary's abdication in 1567 when her son James was only a baby and the time when he came to the throne in 1578 as King James VI there for four short lived and very troubled Regencies which did nothing to promote stability. James, although brought up in the new Presbyterian faith, held that Kings were anointed by God and were therefore answerable only to Him and not the people. Because of this theory of the 'Divine Right of Kings' he found that Episcopacy, with its rule by bishops, suited him better than Presbytery which rigidly accepted only Jesus Christ as Head of the Church and had an independent and democratic spirit of which the equality of all ministers was a very important factor. From James' point of view it was easier to manipulate one or two men than a series of courts or committees. James VI's insistence on the Divine Right of Kings, in which his successors also believed, was to bedevil the Scottish scene for over 100 years and during this time neither side was able to establish a permanent superiority. James, however, was content to stay in hand until his accession to the English throne in 1603. As Queen Elizabeth of England left no heir, James was the nearest claimant because his great grandfather, King James IV of Scotland, had married Margaret Tudor, daughter of King Henry VII of England. In 1610 the years of Presbyterian rule were brought to an end and Episcopacy was established as the religion of the Scottish church. However, this did not greatly affect the lives of the people, for the law was not strictly enforced and James, who had been called 'The Wisest Fool in Christendom', was wise enough not to pursue his policy of religious uniformity.

James' son, Charles, who came to the throne in 1625, did not understand Scotland, nor did he possess his father's political acumen, which in the main consisted in playing one faction off against another. He tried to force an undiluted Episcopacy on the Scots people who were afraid that this was the thin end of the wedge to restore Roman Catholicism. His marriage to the Roman Catholic Henrietta Maria and her subsequent influence over him in the promotion of Roman Catholics to positions of importance in government and her reception of the Papal Envoy at Whitehall further increased the Scots' fears.

As a result of an attempt in 1637 by Charles to impose Archbishop Laud's new Scots Liturgy (which was modelled on the English one) at St. Giles in Edinburgh, the Scots people, both high and low, rose in anger at such high-handed methods. In 1638 in Greyfriars Kirkyard, Edinburgh, thousands signed, some with their own blood, the 'National Covenant' to 'Defend the true religion and recover the purity and liberty of the Gospel'. The leaders of this movement were Alexander Henderson, minister of Leuchars in Fife, and Archibald Johnstone, Lord Warriston, an eminent lawyer. Among the nobility was the Marquis of Montrose who later on, when he considered that the covenanting party had gone too far, espoused the King's cause, but not the King's religion. Later that year at a notable General Assembly in Glasgow, of which Alexander Henderson was Moderator, Episcopacy was swept away and the bishops were deposed.

In 1642 the English Civil War broke out between Charles and his Parliament, and both sides sought Scotland's help in their struggle. In return for the despatch of a Scots army, which fought on the Parliamentarians' (Roundheads) side until the conclusive battle of Naseby in 1645, the Scottish and English Parliaments in 1643 entered into a 'Solemn League and Covenant', whereby Presbytery would be the uniform system of doctrine, ritual and government in the Churches of Scotland, England and Ireland. Pressure was put on the English Parliament to agree as success on the battlefield still depended upon Scottish support. Whereas the 'National Covenant' only 5 years earlier had sought to bind Scots together in defence against having an alien English form of worship thrust upon them, the 'Solemn League and Covenant' tried to force an alien Scottish form of worship on England and Ireland. This turned out to be counter productive, since when it suited Oliver Cromwell and his independents, who disliked Presbytery as much as they disliked Episcopacy, departed from the agreement. Cromwell came to fame during the English Civil War as a brilliant soldier whose prowess eventually turned the tide for the Parliamentarians against King Charles' army; he subsequently became 'President' of the English Commonwealth until his death in 1658.

When the Scots, who had handed Charles over to the Parliamentary forces, heard of his execution in 1649 they had feelings of guilt and revulsion. Suffice to say that as soon as his son, Charles, had been persuaded to sign both the Covenants, he was crowned King at Scone, Perthshire in 1650. His reign, however, was short-lived as Cromwell, who was in charge of English affairs, invaded a battle weary Scotland and easily absorbed it into his new Commonwealth imposing an ecclesiastical peace, if not exactly ecclesiastical harmony. For the next decade Scotland was basically Presbyterian, but dissatisfaction with the leading extreme faction in the Church grew to such an extent that the restoration of monarchy in the form of King Charles II in 1660 was welcomed, even though it meant the certain return of Episcopacy.

Charles II, who like his forebears found that Episcopacy best suited his idea of absolute monarchy, missed a golden opportunity of extending it to Scotland persuasively and peacefully. Had he been as tactful as his grandfather, James VI of Scotland and I of England, much of the blood sweat and tears shed between 1660 and 1688 might well have been avoided. Unfortunately, Charles soon showed that he had no intention of honouring his signing of the Covenants; in fact he set out to destroy Presbyterianism in Scotland by cancelling the twenty-three years of Presbyterian legislation since the time of the 'National Covenant' in 1638. It was, however, a modified form of Episcopacy, which was imposed, differing from the English type in almost everything except for bishops. Charles, determined to secure his grip on the church, insisted that all ministers, if they wished to remain in office, apply for readmission to their parish from their bishop and from the patron, usually the local landowner or laird; this question of 'Patronage' was to bedevil the Church of Scotland on and off for much of the 18th and 19th centuries. Greatly to the surprise of the authorities some 300 ministers chose to leave their parishes rather than submit to what they regarded as totally unjustifiable demands. These men came mainly from the south west of Scotland and from Fife, and it was in the hill country of these areas that they continued to hold their church services, called Coventicles, which were supported by large numbers of their former parishioners. Their places in their old

parishes were taken by 'Curates' who were described by one of the Scottish bishops, Gilbert Burnet, as being 'a disgrace to their cloth and indeed the dregs and refuse of the northern parts'.

These harsh measures were met with an angry and stubborn defiance and before long a small rising took place at Rullion Green, which lies at the foot of the Pentland Hills to the south west of Edinburgh. Sir Thomas Dalziel of Binns suppressed this with a cruelty, which was abhorrent even to many of the Episcopal clergy. Having won the battle the authorities then introduced more draconian measures. Field Preaching-the holding of Coverticles-became a capital offence and it was illegal to be absent from church on three successive Sundays. At the close of the service the roll was called and the curate reported the absentees to the commander of the nearest troop of dragoons under the overall command of sir James Turner. Yet another offence was for the outed minister to live within 20 miles of his old parish.

In 1679 the Covenanters took up arms at Drumclog, 6 miles south west of Strathaven in Lanarkshire, and won their only victory. They then marches to Bothwell Bridge, near Hamilton in Lanarkshire, but largely because of dissension among themselves-an old Covenanting failing-they were soundly defeated by the Duke of Monmouth's greatly superior forces.

In 1680 Richard Cameron sealed his own fate by riding into Sanquhar, Dumfriesshire, and, posting a proclamation declaring war against King Charles as an enemy of the Covenants. Soon afterwards Cameron was killed by a party of Dragoons in a skirmish at Airds Moss (north east of Cumnock in Ayrshire). Cameron gave his name to the Cameronian Regiment that subsequently fought for King William (of Orange) at the Battle of Dunkeld in 1689 where they repelled a Jacobite Highland army fresh from their recent victory at Killiecrankie in Perthshire. The name 'Cameronian' was taken by the more extreme Covenanters.

The persecutions and killings continued unabated and things worsened when the death penalty was imposed for even attending a Coverticle. This meant that any Presbyterians who continued to practice their faith, however discreetly and without harming anyone else, automatically became rebels. Any attempt to give an accused a fair trial was abandoned, dispensation over life and death being delegated to the soldiers on the spot who made good use of it; this period of history often being referred to as 'The Killing Time'.

In 1685 Charles died and was succeeded by his brother, King James VII of Scotland and II of England, an open and avowed Roman Catholic who was determined to restore that faith in England as well as in Scotland. Before long both countries were seething with discontent and in 1688 William of Orange (nephew and son-in-law of James) was invited to take the throne. James fled and there was great rejoicing throughout the land.

In 1690 the Revolution Settlement ensured that for the future the Church of Scotland was Presbyterian; this was further guaranteed in the Articles of Union between Scotland and England in 1707.

The Covenanters have often been described as narrow minded and bigoted and intolerant and on the whole that cannot be denied. Toleration, however, was not a 17th century virtue and was certainly not possessed by their opponents who were in the commanding position of having the army on their side. A man with a gun has a distinct advantage over a man, woman or child without one, so we come back to the question posed at the beginning: What made the Covenanters tick?

At the risk of oversimplification could it be that their struggle was not so much against the form that Episcopacy took, but the power which that form of church government gave to an unscrupulous monarch? Nowadays we know the harm that the modern equivalent, a dictator, can do once he has achieved absolute power. In a relatively undemocratic period of our history perhaps the Covenanters were really fighting for Democracy.

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