

---

## The Reforming of the Aberdeen Friaries on 4th January 1559/60

DOUGLAS W. B. SOMERSET

We have shown in the previous article that the Reformation came to Aberdeen in a very different way from that which is generally supposed – not as something forced upon a reluctant burgh by an outside mob in January 1559/60 but apparently by ordinary democratic process three months earlier in October 1559.<sup>1</sup> The reforming of the Aberdeen friaries by the Angus and Mearns men on 4th January does not, therefore, have all the significance usually attached to it, but nevertheless it was a day of great importance for Aberdeen and one that merits close attention. In this paper we seek to examine the events of the day in detail.

As with the destruction of the Perth friaries eight months previously, there are several accounts of the reforming of the Aberdeen friaries which are not entirely consistent, and part of the interest is to try to harmonise these. Our main conclusions are that the reforming party, which consisted of men from Angus and the Mearns assisted by local Aberdonians, was efficient in destroying the Carmelite and Dominican friaries in New Aberdeen but probably did much less damage to St. Machar's cathedral in Old Aberdeen than is often stated. We are also highly doubtful about the assertion that the reforming party tried to destroy St. Nicholas' kirk in New Aberdeen.

The burgh received warning of the visit of the Angus and Mearns men on 29th December 1559 and the Franciscans (Grey Friars) immediately handed over their buildings to the burgh, naming David

---

<sup>1</sup> D. W. B. Somerset, "The 'Alteration of Religion' in Aberdeen in 1559: an ancient and persistent historical error", *Scottish Reformation Society Historical Journal*, Vol. 4 (2014), pp. 1-62.

Mar, the burgh Treasurer, as the person particularly entrusted with their care. The reforming party did not, however, arrive until six days later, probably because of bad weather. It is highly likely that they were sent by the Congregation at the instigation of the baillies of New Aberdeen who had realised that they were not strong enough to destroy the friaries unaided.<sup>2</sup> The parish church of St. Nicholas, and probably the various chapels in the burgh, had already been at least partly reformed, but the destroying of the four friaries (Dominican, Franciscan, Carmelite, and Trinitarian) was a more difficult step and for this the baillies needed help.<sup>3</sup> The ecclesiastical buildings in Old Aberdeen, meanwhile, remained completely unreformed. These included St. Machar's cathedral and the chapel of King's College. As events were to show, these buildings were also in the eyes of the reforming party.

## I. Discussion of the sources

Before describing the events of the day, it is useful to begin with a general discussion of the sources for the visit of the Angus and Mearns men. At first sight there are quite a number, but it turns out that several of them contribute little or nothing of originality. Generally, we quote what they have to say in full (giving a literal English translation where the original is in Latin): this may be somewhat repetitive, but it allows the reader to see the evidence available. A detailed discussion of the accuracy of these accounts will be given in the ensuing sections.

The first source to consider is the Aberdeen Council register. As we have mentioned elsewhere, the clerk at the time was John Kennedy, whose sympathies were apparently with the Roman Catholic side, so that if the record were biased in any way, it would be against the reforming party.<sup>4</sup> We doubt that there is any bias, however, and we give the relevant extract from the Council register in the appropriate place below.

Another near-contemporary source is the charter of June 1566 in which William Gordon, Bishop of Aberdeen, granted his summer palace,

---

<sup>2</sup> For background on the reformation in Aberdeen, see Allan White, "Religion, Politics and Society in Aberdeen, 1543-1593" (PhD Thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1985); Somerset, "The Alteration of Religion".

<sup>3</sup> "They [the town of Aberdeen] have already reformed their kirks, destroyed their altars, promised the destruction and abolition of the dens of idolatry, and quickly to join themselves with us" (24th December 1559), J. Stevenson (ed.), *Calendar of State Papers, Foreign, Elizabeth, 1559-60* (London, 1865), No. 485, p. 226.

<sup>4</sup> Somerset, "The Alteration of Religion", p. 25; White, "Religion, Politics and Society", p. 2.

Fetternear, to William Leslie of Balquhain.<sup>5</sup> Among the various reasons for the grant, the principal one was the defence of the cathedral by Leslie of Balquhain and his father John in 1559/60:

And also on account of various and divers reasons for gratitude and good favour towards umquhil John Leslie of Balquhane and the said William Leslie his son from us and our cathedral church aforesaid, for laying themselves out (impensa) on behalf of the president and canons thereof in this turbulent state and time of the ecclesiastical order; and particularly because the said umquhil John and William with a train of honourable followers and their family and relations, in order to guard [the church], made continual residence at the agreed time at our cathedral church at the instance and prayer of us and our Chapter; and they showed themselves prompt, ready, and valiant/strenuous in defence of our church seat and the clergy resident therein, persisting (instante) even against most serious and grave sedition [and] persecution of our church and seat on account of the catholic faith, with enemies on every side attacking/robbing.<sup>6</sup>

One other early source is John Lesley or Leslie (1527-96), who was appointed canonist of King's College in 1553 and Official (i.e. the Bishop's deputy in ecclesiastical cases) of the Diocese of Aberdeen in

---

<sup>5</sup> John Leslie, 8th laird of Balquhain, was Sheriff-Depute for Aberdeenshire in 1559-60. Though of Roman Catholic sympathies, he took the Leith band on 27th April 1560. He died in France on 15th February 1560/1. His second wife, Christian, was a daughter of Thomas Menzies of Pittfoddels. His son William, the 9th laird, was also Sheriff-Depute for a while, see D. Littlejohn (ed.), *Records of the Sheriff Court of Aberdeen* (3 vols., New Spalding Club, Aberdeen, 1904-7), Vol. 1, pp. 443-6. The Leslies of Balquhain and Fetternear were active in the promotion of Romanism into the 18th century, see H. G. Slade, "The House of Fetternear: a history and a description", *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, Vol. 103 (1970-1), pp. 178-191; P. Dransart and N. Q. Bogdan, "The material culture of recusancy at Fetternear: kin and religion in post-Reformation Scotland", *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, Vol. 134 (2004), pp. 457-470.

<sup>6</sup> Cosmo Innes (ed.), *Registrum Episcopatus Aberdonensis* (2 vols., Spalding Club, Edinburgh, 1845), Vol. 2, pp. 320-22: "Necnon propter varias et diversas gratitudines et benemerita per quondam Joannem Leslie de Balquhane et dictum Willelmum Leslie eius filium nobis nostreque ecclesie cathedral antedictae presidenti et canonicis eiusdem in hoc turbulento reipublice ecclesiastice statu et tempore impensa et precipue quia dictus quondam Jonannes ad Willelmum honesto comitatu ac familia ac consanguineis eorundem stipati continuam residentiam fecerunt hoc tempore transacto apud nostrum ecclesiam cathedralem ad nostrum et nostri capituli instantiam et supplicationem et seipsos promptos paratos et strenuos exhibuerunt in defensione nostre ecclesie sedis et clerici inibi residentis instante etiam seivissima et gravissima seditione persecutione nostre ecclesie et sedis per catholice fidei hostes undequo grassantes."

1558. In 1566 he became the (Roman Catholic) Bishop of Ross. About 1569, Lesley (we spell his name thus to distinguish him from Leslie of Balquhain above) wrote a vernacular *History of Scotland* which was presented to Mary Queen of Scots and was first printed in 1830. This does not mention the Aberdeen incident of January 1559/60. Subsequently he wrote a fuller Latin history, *De origine, moribus et rebus gestis Scotorum libri decem*, printed in Rome in 1578 and reprinted, probably in Amsterdam, in 1675. In this account, he indicates that he was present in Aberdeen on 4th January 1559/60, but he is disappointingly brief; furthermore, his writings have to be treated with caution, especially when he is describing his own actions.<sup>7</sup> Here, in translation, is his description of what happened:

When now the heretics had cast down all holy places almost everywhere, certain barons of the Mearns, partly through hatred of the Catholic religion, partly blinded through hope of spoil, at last the exceedingly beautiful houses of the Dominicans and Carmelites in Aberdeen, they not only spoiled of ornaments and substance, but, with certain Aberdonians also helping in the work, they utterly destroyed. When through the same fierceness they would have demolished the monasteries of the Minorites [Franciscans] and Trinitarians, their fury and madness was held back and utterly repressed by Leslie, Laird of Balquhain, at the order of the Earl of Huntly; not, however, that they were so able to restrain [them] that the church, which in Old Aberdeen (for thus we call that town which is adorned with the seats of the bishop, the canons, and the university) was of the utmost magnificence, should not be attacked, but yet lest they should spoil it in any way, the Bishop (near kinsman to the Earl of Huntly) and John Lesley the official of that place interposed: and thus so ardently contending for the practice of religion, that the one by his counsel, the other by his public preaching, and both through the authority and help of Huntly and of the Leslies, the use of the Catholic religion, after it was exterminated from almost the extent of

---

<sup>7</sup> "His Latin History *De Origine*, written with potential Catholic patrons in mind, credits him with saving the Kirk of Aberdeen from destruction by the fervor of his preaching. But this account is demonstrably so partisan that it is a highly unreliable source for his life, as distinct from his character," Margaret J. Beckett, "Counsellor, Conspirator, Polemicist, Historian: John Lesley, Bishop of Ross 1527-96", *Records of the Scottish Church History Society*, Vol. 39 (2009), p. 3.

Scotland, was in that place preserved for a long time whole and almost unbroken.<sup>8</sup>

The next two sources, whom we mention only to set aside, are Thomas Dempster (1579-1625) and David Chalmers or Camerarius (c. 1571-1641).<sup>9</sup> Both were Scottish Roman Catholics who spent much of their lives in exile abroad, Dempster as an academic and Chalmers as a priest. Dempster's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Scotorum* was first published in Bologna in 1627, while Camerarius' *De Scotorum fortitudine, doctrina, et pietate* was published in Paris in 1631. Both books refer to the Aberdeen reformation but both are so notoriously unreliable in their mixture of fact and invention that it is safest not to use them.<sup>10</sup> This is a pity because

---

<sup>8</sup> Lesley, *De Origine* (1675), pp. 520-1: "Cum sectarii jam omnia fere sacra loca undique prostravissent, Barones quidam Mernenses, partim religionis Catholicae odio, partim spe praedae obcoecati, Dominicanorum tandem ac Carmeliarum coenobia longe pulcherrima, Aberdoniae, non solum ornamentis et facultatibus spoliaverunt, verumetiam Aberdonensibus quibusdam opem ferentibus, plane exciderunt. Eadem feritate cum Minoritarum ac Trinitatis monasteria essent demolituri, illorum furor et amentia a D. Leslaeo de Balquhane Barone, Huntlaei Comitis jussu retardatur, et prorsus reprimitur, nec tamen poterant coerceri, quominus templum, quod in veteri Aberdonia (sic enim illam, quae Episcopi, Canonicorum, ac Academiae sedibus decoratur, vocamus) multo magnificentissimum erat, tentarent: verum ne ullo modo violarent, Episcopus Huntlaeo Comiti arctissima necessitudine devinctus, ac Ioannes Leslaeus ejusdem loci officialis obstiterunt: idque tam ardenti religionis propugnandae studio, ut ille consiliis, hic concionibus publice habitis, uterque auctoritate ac ope Huntlaei, et Leslaeorum religionis Catholicae usum, postquam e Scotiae pene finibus universis exterminates fuit, in illo loco integrum ac pene inviolatum diu post conservarint." An English (Scottish) translation of Lesley's 1578 work, executed by Father James Dalrymple in 1596, was published by the Scottish Text Society but it is not at all easy to follow, see E. G. Cody and W. Murison (eds.), *The Historie of Scotland wrytten first in Latin by the most reuerend and worthy Jhone Leslie* (2 vols., Edinburgh, 1888-95), Vol. 2, pp. 429-30.

<sup>9</sup> For the date of Camerarius' birth, see *Records of the Scottish Church History Society*, Vol. 28 (1998), p. 247.

<sup>10</sup> Extracts from Dempster and Camerarius bearing on the reformation in Aberdeen are given in J. Robertson (ed.), *Collections for a History of the Shires of Aberdeen and Banff* (Spalding Club, Aberdeen, 1843), pp. 200-4, 211-4. We quote part of the extract from Camerarius below. Anthony Ross puts up a spirited defence of Dempster and Camerarius in "Some Scottish Catholic Historians", *Innes Review*, Vol. 1 (1950), pp. 5-21. "It is possible," he says, "to use Dempster, with great caution, as a source of clues which may lead to something positive. . . . But in whatever way he is used, it must always be with caution amounting almost to constant suspicion. Nothing can rest on his authority securely." Camerarius, by contrast, he regards as "free from suspicion of deliberate invention," pp. 11-12. A more favourable view of Dempster is taken in John Durkan, "Thomas Dempster: a Scottish Baronius", *Innes Review*, Vol. 54 (2003), pp. 69-78. William Nicolson, quoting William Lloyd, Bishop of Asaph, says that Dempster, "though he was no Jesuit, stands fair for the remaining part of his Character, that he 'was as well inclin'd to believe a Lye as any Man in his time'; and was as well qualify'd to put it into a pretty Dress of Poetry", *The Scottish Historical Library* (London, 1702), p. 208. As far as the Aberdeen reformation is concerned, the main contribution of Dempster

Dempster was a grandson of William Leslie of Balquhain (the 9th laird above), so he might have been able to supply interesting details.<sup>11</sup>

The next source, in chronological order, is Andrew Strachan who became Professor of Divinity at King's College in 1634 but died in 1636. In 1631, when he was a regent, he published his Latin *Panegyricus* which contains the following account of Principal Alexander Anderson of King's College repelling the Angus and Mearns men:

For when those profane robbers and embezzlers (who turned the progress of the most blessed Reformation to their own private advantage) serving Mammon and not God, they so gaped after gold and silver, that they could not leave alone even cheaper metals, the lead which cloaked our College, and the bronze from which the bells were forged, this man repelled force with iron.<sup>12</sup>

The next source is Archbishop John Spottiswoode (1565-1639). He was writing between about 1620 and his death but he had access to official records and also to whatever he might have learnt from his father and others who were actors in the drama of 1559-60. His work was first published from a defective MS in 1655, and from his final MS in 1847-51. Spottiswoode is the first to state, mistakenly we think, that Huntly was personally present in Old Aberdeen:

and Camerarius is in describing the supposed martyrdom of Father Francis of the Trinitarians in 1559. It appears that no one presently believes in this martyrdom (see next footnote).

<sup>11</sup> A brief account of the Aberdeen reformation using Dempster and Camerarius can be found in Matthew A. Power (S.J.), *The Protomartyr of Scotland, Father Francis of Aberdeen: a glimpse of the Scottish Reformation, 1559* (Aberdeen, [1914]). D. McRoberts, "Three Bogus Trinitarian Pictures", *Innes Review*, Vol. 11 (1960), pp. 52-67, dismisses Power's book as "quite unscholarly and worthless" (p. 65), but this assessment seems excessively harsh. Father Power was careful to state his sources, and his main historical error was in failing to recognize the untrustworthiness of some of them (though Dempster, at least, he characterizes as an "incurable romancer and incorrigible liar", p. 14). His conclusions may be worthless but he brought a fresh mind to the subject and his comments on Thomas Menzies of Pitfoddels (quoted in Somerset, "The Alteration of Religion", pp. 29-30) and on the Earl of Huntly and others are not without interest. Father Power was presumably the "gigantic Jesuit" of that name with whom David Hay Fleming had more than one encounter, see "George Wishart the Martyr: A Reply to Father Power and Rev. W. L. Sime", *The Bulwark*, Vol. 73 (1923), pp. 56-9; *Were Cardinal Beaton and Archbishop Hamilton Not Libertines?* (Edinburgh, 1929), p. 17.

<sup>12</sup> *Panegyricus inauguralis, quo auctores, vindices, et evergetae illustris Universitatis Aberdonensis iustis elogiis ornabantur: publice dictus in auditorio maximo Collegii Regii* (Aberdeen, 1631), p. 27: "Cum enim profani illi praedones and depeculatores (qui sanctissimo Reformationis proposito ad sua private commoda abutebantur) Mammone, non Deo servientes, ita auro et argento inhiarent, ut ne vilioribus quidem metallis parcerent, plumbo quo Gymnasium nostrum contegitur, et aeri ex quo conflatae sunt Campanae, ipse ferro vim reppulit."

The earl of Huntley at the same time being advertised that the barons of Mearns were come to Aberdeen to make a reformation in that city, hastened thither to withstand their proceedings, and by his coming saved the cathedral church; the houses of the Dominicans, Carmelites, and of other religious being already demolished and cast down.<sup>13</sup>

Along with Spottiswoode, we consider Robert Keith (1681-1756) who published his *History* in 1734. He was working entirely from records but some of these appear to have perished, so he has become, to some extent, an original authority. He follows Spottiswoode quite closely in his account of events in Aberdeen but he corrects him on one point and furnishes some additional details. A comparison with Lesley, however, shows that this is where his extra information came from; and we can therefore disregard him:

Much about that time the gentlemen of the shire of Mearns that were of party with the Congregation, being flushed with the expectation of a speedy change in their affairs, went to Aberdeen, where, being assisted by some of the citizens, they quite demolished the Monasteries of the Dominican and Carmelite Friars; and proceeding next to treat the other religious houses, and the stately cathedral church of Old Aberdeen in the same manner, they were hardly withholden from acting their design, by some men belonging to the Earl of Huntly, and some of the Leslies headed by – Lesly, Laird of Balquhain, at the desire of this earl, who was nephew to the then Bishop of that See; and it is noted by Bishop Lesly, who was then official or commissary of that church, that the ancient form of worship was kept up there a long time after it was suppress almost in all other parts of the kingdom.<sup>14</sup>

Next in time is James Gordon of Rothiemay (1617-1686), writing in 1661.<sup>15</sup> The exactness of the dates that he gives suggests that he had

---

<sup>13</sup> John Spottiswoode, *History of the Church of Scotland* (3 vols., Bannatyne Club, Edinburgh, 1847-51), Vol. 1, pp. xli-xlii, 314-5.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Keith, *History of the Affairs of Church and State in Scotland, from the beginning of the Reformation to the year 1568* (3 vols., Spottiswoode Society, Edinburgh, 1844-50), Vol. 1, pp. 265-6.

<sup>15</sup> Sir James Balfour, *Historical Works* (4 vols., Edinburgh, 1824-5), compiled in the 1640s and '50s, refers to the reformation of Aberdeen in 1559 but does not add to the other sources (Vol. 1, pp. 320-1): "At this same tyme the congregation demolishe the

access to the Aberdeen Council register but he seems to have had a traditional account of events in his mind as well and he supplies some information not in the Council register:

It [the Greyfriars church] wes hardlie preserved from being rasi to the ground in the yeer 1560; and had not been that the Grey friers, upon the twentie thrie of Januarie that yeir, did resigne ther church, ther convent, and all the precinct, by a publict instrument into the hands of the tounsmen, gifting all to them, undoubtedlie it hade undergone the destruction which so many brave churches and religious houses fell under at that tyme; bot the citizens hindered its ruine, and afterwarde, by ane act of counsell, ordaynt that the church and all, should be kept up and enteir upon the public charges.

In the yeer 1560, it [St. Nicholas] went neer to have been overthrowne, hade not the citizens taken arms and gwarded it, and withstood the attempt of the congregatiōe lords.

That Convent of the Dominicans, together with ther church, was so industriously razed, Januarij 4, 1560, that now ther is nothing of that building to be seen. . . . At that pairt wher the brooke [the Denburn] entereth the river Dee, the Carmelites of old had a convent, whose church and quholl precinct of building wer leveled with the ground, that very day that the rest of the churches and convents of New Aberdeen wer destroyed.

To this church [St. Machar's in Old Aberdeen] lykewayes belonged a bibliotheck; bot about the yeer 1560 all wes taken away, or destroyed, or embaseled; the biblothec then burned, and no book spared, wher any reid letter wes to be seene. The spire of the great steeple was then uncovered, as the church was, and not many years afterwards, was overthrowne by the violence of a great storme of wind. The queere of the church was rased to the very fundatiōe.<sup>16</sup>

---

monasteries of the Carmelites and Dominicans, in the toune of Aberdeine, and burn and brecke their altars and images, etc. with other monuments of idolatrie ther." There is also a passing mention in Alexander Petrie, *Compendious History of the Catholick Church* (2 parts, Hague, 1662), Part 2, p. 217: "At that time the Barons of the Mearns were busy in the Reformation of Aberdien." A comparison shows that Petrie was following Spottiswoode in this part of his work.

<sup>16</sup> J. Gordon, *Abredoniae utriusque descriptio* (Spalding Club, Edinburgh, 1842), pp. 11, 15, 16, 22. This publication was of a contemporary translation of Gordon's Latin original. In the preface, Cosmo Innes, the editor, says: "The translator is not known. His work is



Lastly, there are various writers, Middleton, Hay, Ker, Orem, and Alexander Keith who refer in passing to the events in Old Aberdeen. Thomas Middleton (or whoever the author was) was a Scot living in London, an acquaintance of Gordon of Rothiemay, and an Episcopalian. His comment appears in the anonymous *Appendix* to the fourth edition of Spottiswoode's *History* of 1677, usually attributed to Middleton. He simply quotes Strachan: "Commendable he [Principal Anderson] was in one thing; for when some of the Reformers would have taken away the Lead and Bells, *repulit vim ferro*".<sup>17</sup>

Richard Augustine Hay (1661-1736) was a Roman priest and an antiquarian, spending much of his life in France. Extracts from his unpublished manuscripts, dated 1696-1700 and now in the National Library of Scotland, were included in the preface to *Registrum Episcopatus Aberdonensis*. Hay had some source of information, presumably traditional, which is not found in earlier writers:

In [Bishop William Gordon's] time, the glorious structure of the cathedrale, which had been near nine score of years in building, was defaced by a crew of sacrilegious church robbers; for in 1560 the barons of Mernes, accompanied with some of the townsmen of Aberdeen, having demolished the monasteries of the Black and Gray Friars, fell to rob the Cathedrale, which they spoiled of all its costly ornaments and jewels, and demolished the chancel; they shipped the lead, bells, and other utensils, intending to expose them to sale in Holland; but all this ill-gotten wealth sunk by the just judgment of God, not far from the Girdleness. The body of the Cathedral was preserved from utter ruine by the Earle of Huntly, and, in 1607, repaired and covered with slate at the charge of the parish, and so continues yet in pretty good order.<sup>18</sup>

---

everywhere rude, and with the idiom and constrained air of a version of an imperfectly understood original; while, in some places, he has plainly mistaken the meaning of the homely but vigorous Latin of James Gordon," pp. vi-vii. We will see below at least one instance where this translation is significantly incorrect. The Latin original was first published, with a more accurate translation, in Sir A. Mitchell (ed.), *Geographical Collections Relating to Scotland Made by Walter Macfarlane* (3 vols., Scottish History Society, 1906-8), Vol. 2, pp. 469-509.

<sup>17</sup> [T. Middleton], *Appendix to the History of the Church of Scotland* (London, 1677), p. 39 [misnumbered 25]. Our information about the author is taken from the work itself, which is attributed to "Mr. Middleton" by Bishop Nicolson, *The Scottish Historical Library*, p. 196.

<sup>18</sup> Innes, *Registrum Episcopatus Aberdonensis*, Vol. 1, p. lxvi. For Hay, see entry in *Dictionary Scottish Church History and Theology* (Edinburgh, 1993). David Easson characterizes Hay as "a hagiographer rather than a historian"; see I. B. Cowan and D. E. Easson, *Medieval*

John Ker (d. 1741) was a Jacobite sympathizer who became Professor of Greek at King's College, Aberdeen in 1717. In 1725 he published his Latin poem *Donaides* which contains a few lines on the destruction of buildings in Old Aberdeen, in 1559. He is the first writer to attribute the survival of the King's College archives to Principal Anderson:

Alas (for we who saw the thing must speak), a race not innocent, too little pious when roused by blind zeal, raged in the august citadel and shrine of Athena, whilst it sought to strip the lead from the sacred temple. It would have been a ghastly crime to do such bold deeds, deeds daringly done – a man may temper the account with tears! – except that the highminded Anderson came bravely upon the scene as protector of ourselves and of our holy places. Because of him, our archives, snatched and saved from death, display royal charters and many governmental documents.<sup>19</sup>

Thomas Orem (d. 1730) was resident in Old Aberdeen from 1698 until his death. From the attitude towards Presbyterians in his work, his sympathies appear to have been Episcopalian. His manuscript account of Old Aberdeen was compiled between about 1719 and 1728 and was first published in 1782. It was republished with additional material in 1791 (the first and all subsequent editions erroneously give his Christian name as William). As far as King's College is concerned, he repeats the exact words of Middleton and adds nothing to Strachan's information. "Commendable he [Anderson] was in one thing; for when some of the Reformers would have taken away the lead and bells, *repulit vim ferro*. . . . He kept on the lead upon the fabric and defended the college, *manu forti*, from being sacked in the time of the Reformation."<sup>20</sup> For St. Machar's cathedral, he copies Hay (or Hay's source) with a few minor additions:

---

*Religious Houses Scotland* (2nd edn., London, 1976), p. xxii (cf. 1st edition, 1957, p. xxviii), but Michael Turnbull esteems him more highly, *Rossllyn Chapel Revealed* (Stroud, 2009), pp. 18-29.

<sup>19</sup> J. Ker, *Donaides* (facsimile reprint, Los Angeles, 1978), pp. [4], [10] (English translation by Barrows Dunham). See also *Musa Latina Aberdonensis* (3 vols., New Spalding Club, Aberdeen, 1892-1910), Vol. 3, pp. 188-208; entry on Ker in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (ODNB).

<sup>20</sup> W. [i.e. T.] Orem, *Description of the Chanonry, Cathedral, and King's College of Old Aberdeen in the Years 1724 and 1725* (Aberdeen, 1791), pp. 143, 155. For an account of Thomas Orem, see entry in ODNB.

The glorious structure of the said cathedral-church, being near nine-score of years in building, did not remain twenty entire; when it was almost ruined by a crew of sacrilegious church-robbers. For anno 1560, the barons of the Mernis, accompanied with some of the townsmen of New Aberdeen, having demolished the monasteries of the Black-Friers in the School-hill of Aberdeen, and that of the Grey-Friars in the Green, &c. came to Old Aberdeen, and began to rob said church, which they spoiled of all its costly ornaments and jewels; except those which Huntly and the canons had got into their custody. They demolished the rest of the chancel, which was built close to the East end of the said cathedral. It had a large pretty quire, well furnished with seats and stalls, for accommodating the clergy at mass. In the end of the said chancel stood the high-altar, well adorned with windows, and finely glazed, as some write.

These robbers having shipped the lead, bells, and other utensils of said church and chancel, intending to expose them to sale in Holland, by one William Birnie; all said ill-gotten wealth sunk, by the just judgment of God upon sacrilege, not far from the Girdleness, with the said William Birnie, anno 1560.

The body of the said church was preserved from utter ruin by the Earle of Huntly; anno 1607, the said cathedral was repaired, and covered with slates, at the charge of the parishioners; and continued in good repair for the space of 81 years.<sup>21</sup>

Alexander Keith (1695-1763) was an Episcopal clergyman in Cruden, Aberdeenshire. His *View of the Diocese of Aberdeen* was completed in 1732 but not published till the following century. He seems largely to be following Spottiswoode and Hay (or whatever source Hay was relying on).

The third cathedral . . . stood not entire twenty years; for the rabble, at the Reformation, did so maim and disfigure it, that its original grandeur is long since lost. . . . It was saved from utter ruin by George, Earl of Huntly, A.D. MDLX, when the Mearnis rabble took the lead from the roof.

---

<sup>21</sup> Orem, *Description of the Chanonry, Cathedral, and King's College of Old Aberdeen*, pp. 104, 108.

The choir . . . was demolished barbarously, A.D. MDLX, by the Mernis rabble above named.

The north isle . . . built by Bishop Leighton, about A.D. MCCCCXXX, for his burial place; but broken down by the above-named rabble.

. . . fourteen bells, all gifted to it by Bishop Elphinstone, which were carried away by the rabble, A.D. MDLX, so often befor named.<sup>22</sup>

This concludes the catalogue of writers that we have seen quoted as original sources. In summary, our principal sources for New Aberdeen are the Council register, Lesley, Spottiswoode, and Gordon; and for Old Aberdeen, the 1566 charter, Lesley, Strachan, Spottiswoode, Gordon, Hay, Ker, Orem, and Keith.

It is observable that every single writer that we have mentioned (with the exception of Sir James Balfour and Alexander Petrie) was either Roman Catholic, Episcopalian, or Jacobite, so there is no danger of bias in favour of the reforming party in their accounts.

## II. The events of 4th January 1559/60 in New Aberdeen

Following the false or premature alarm of 29th December, the next information about the men of the Mearns is that on Thursday 4th January, David Mar, the burgh Treasurer and one of the leading Protestants in the town, summoned the Baillie Court and informed them (what they doubtless knew already) that the friaries had been spoiled of their contents and that the roofs of the friaries and churches were now being dismantled:

The said day, the whole town being warned, etc., it was expounded to them by the baillies, by the speech of David Mar, one of the baillies foresaid, and treasurer of this good town, elected for this present year, how that certain strangers, and some neighbours and indwellers of this burgh, have entered to the Black Friars and White Friars of this town, and spoiled their places, and taken away the gear and goods of the same, with the timber work and inside,

---

<sup>22</sup> Robertson, *Collections for a History of the Shires of Aberdeen and Banff*, pp. xi, 148-50 (we have omitted Keith's comments on the friaries in New Aberdeen because they appear to be based on Dempster and Camerarius, pp. 200-204); D. M. Bertie, *Scottish Episcopal Clergy 1689-2000* (Edinburgh, 2000), p 73.

together with the lead of the kirks, and now are entered upon the roofs of the kirks and buildings, and taking away the slates, timber, and stones thereof, applying the same to their own particular uses.<sup>23</sup>

Obviously the men of Angus and Mearns had at last arrived and commenced activities, and the first question is whether this was the day of their arrival. This is implied by Gordon and maintained by Allan White, and we see no reason to disagree with them.<sup>24</sup> It is virtually implied by Mar's speech above: "... have entered ... now are entered."

The various sources refer to the reforming party either as "Mearns" men and "Angus" men or as "the barons of the Mearns". Unfortunately we have no further information about the composition of the party. The barons of the Mearns who supported the Congregation were Sir John Wishart of Pittarrow, John Thornton, George Straiton of Lauriston, Archibald Douglas of Glenbervie, John Allardice, Robert Arbuthnott, and Robert Graham of Morphie.<sup>25</sup> None of these are mentioned in the accounts, however, and it seems unlikely that any of them were personally present. McRoberts, reasonably enough, regarded the party as being made up of the retainers of these barons.<sup>26</sup> Probably they numbered somewhere between fifty and a hundred; much more than this and they would have needed a leader which they do not appear to have had. Presumably the Aberdeen baillies had promised them reinforcements on arrival.

The reforming party is almost invariably described as a "mob" or "rabble", and its purpose is usually said to have been looting and vandalism.<sup>27</sup> Both these points need discussion. As far as the purpose of the expedition is concerned, the immediate aim was the destruction of the Aberdeen friaries. This was not vandalism from a

<sup>23</sup> J. Stuart (ed.), *Extracts from the Council Register of the Burgh of Aberdeen, 1398-1570* (Spalding Club, Aberdeen, 1844) (hereafter *ABR 1398-1570*), pp. 314-5.

<sup>24</sup> Gordon, *Abredoniae Vtriusque Descriptio*, p. 16; A. White, "The Reformation in Aberdeen", in J. S. Smith (ed.), *New Light on Mediaeval Aberdeen* (Aberdeen, 1985), pp. 58-66 (see p. 64).

<sup>25</sup> F. D. Bardgett, *Scotland Reformed: the Reformation in Angus and the Mearns* (Edinburgh, 1989), p. 79.

<sup>26</sup> D. McRoberts (ed.), *Essays on the Scottish Reformation, 1513-1625* (Glasgow, 1962), p. 459n.

<sup>27</sup> "A lawless band of spoilers and destroyers", J. Cooper, *Cartularium Ecclesiae Sancti Nicolai Aberdonensis* (2 vols., New Spalding Club, Aberdeen, 1888-92), Vol. 2, p. xl; "a mob out for easy loot", D. Stevenson, *King's College, Aberdeen, 1560-1641: from Protestant Reformation to Covenanting Revolution* (Aberdeen University Press, 1990), p. 8.

Protestant perspective but was a sensible and effective way of breaking the remaining strength of Romanism in Aberdeen by scattering the personnel, destroying the altars and images, and demolishing the buildings in which the friars lived.<sup>28</sup> It is doubtful that the reforming party was expecting much by way of loot from New Aberdeen. Had the friaries been taken by surprise on 29th December then possibly there might have been some valuables lying around, but by 4th January these had surely been removed.<sup>29</sup> Most of them had probably been dispersed months previously, going by the evidence in other parts of the country.<sup>30</sup> What chiefly remained was the timber, slate, lead, and stone which could not easily be transported out of Aberdeen. Some of the Aberdonians appear to have enriched themselves, but it is unlikely that the Angus and Mearns men made anything out of that part of the trip.

Old Aberdeen was a different matter, and it is probable that the reforming party did hope for spoil from King's College and perhaps from

<sup>28</sup> Thomas M'Crie, *Life of John Knox* (Edinburgh, 1855) pp. 135-6: "I look upon the destruction of these monuments as a piece of good policy, which contributed materially to the overthrow of the Roman Catholic religion and the prevention of its re-establishment. It was chiefly by the magnificence of its temples, and the splendid apparatus of its worship, that the Popish Church fascinated the senses and imaginations of the people. A more successful method of attacking it, therefore, could not be adopted than the demolition of what contributed so much to uphold and extend its influence. There is more wisdom than many seem to perceive in the maxim which Knox is said to have inculcated, 'that the best way to keep the rooks from returning, was to pull down their nests'. In demolishing, or rendering uninhabitable, all those buildings which had served for the maintenance of the ancient superstition (except what were requisite for the Protestant worship) the reformers only acted upon the principles of a prudent general, who dismantles or razes the fortifications which he is unable to keep, and which might afterwards be seized and employed against him by the enemy. Had they been allowed to remain in their former splendour, the popish clergy would not have ceased to indulge hopes, and to make efforts to be restored to them; occasions would have been taken to tamper with the credulous and inflame the minds of the superstitious; and the reformers might soon have found reason to repent their ill-judged forbearance." See also John Row, *History of the Kirk of Scotland* (Wodrow Society, Edinburgh, 1842), p. 12.

<sup>29</sup> The quotation from David Mar speaks of the "gear and goods" of the friaries being taken away. The word "gear" often has the technical sense of the religious valuables of a church (robes, chalices, etc.) but it seems most unlikely that these would still have been in the friaries after a week's warning.

<sup>30</sup> In the legal case in February-March 1559/60 between Lady Fleming and the Bishop of Dunblane, it was asserted that the Bishop was culpable in that he had hidden Lady Fleming's gold chain under a seat in his palace yard, whence it had been discovered and looted by the Congregation on 9th November preceding. Lady Fleming argued that the Bishop had hidden his most precious treasures outwith the palace, and he should have done the same with her chain. The chain was security for a loan of £250, which Lady Fleming was refusing to repay unless the chain was restored. See A. Laing, "An incident at the era of the Reformation", *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, Vol. 11 (1874-76), pp. 517-525; McRoberts, *Essays on the Scottish Reformation, 1513-1625*, pp. 435-6.

St. Machar's. Robert Pont, who at this stage was an elder on the St. Andrews Kirk Session, records that

Another thing fell out at that time [1559-60], which may be excused by reason of necessity; when as the lords, and some of the nobility, principal enterprisers of the Reformation, having to do with some of the Frenchmen, and many of their assisters of our own nation, enemies to these proceedings, were forced, not only to engage their own lands, and bestow whatsoever they were able to furnish of their own patrimony, for maintenance of men of war, and other charges, but also to take the lead and bells, with other jewels and ornaments of kirks, abbeys, and other places of superstition, to employ the same, and the prises [treasures] thereof to resist the enemies.<sup>31</sup>

As to whether the reforming party was a “mob” or “rabble”, there seems to be no justification (other than dislike of the reformers) for using such terms unless it can be shown that the reforming party went about its work of destruction in an ill-disciplined and disorderly way. David Mar's description of proceedings suggests the reverse; and the fact that they did not have a leader, apparently, and yet rapidly accomplished their purpose with regard to the Dominican and Carmelite friaries, indicates that they were efficient and well organised.<sup>32</sup>

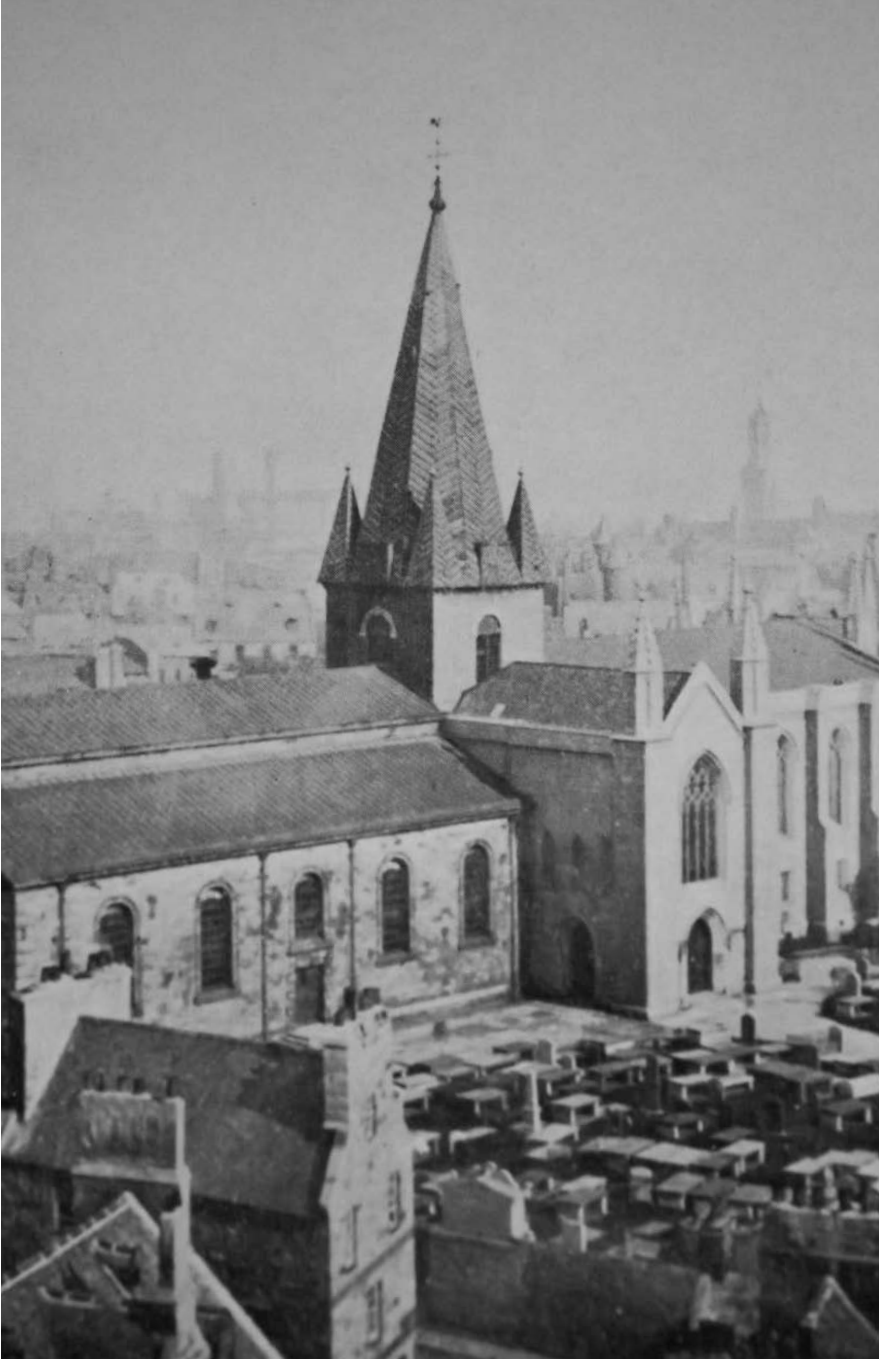
Accounts of 4th January usually begin with the Angus and Mearns men attempting to destroy St. Nicholas' church. The source for this is Gordon of Rothiemay: “In the year 1560, it [St. Nicholas] went near to have been overthrown, had not the citizens taken arms and guarded it, and withstood the attempt of the congregation lords.”<sup>33</sup> Gordon does not say that the reformers began by attacking St. Nicholas, but this

---

<sup>31</sup> Robert Pont, *Against Sacrilege* (Edinburgh, 1599), quoted in M'Crie, *Life of John Knox*, p. 363.

<sup>32</sup> Jane Dawson comments on the earlier destruction of the friaries in St. Andrews: “The friars were regarded as the main enemy of the Reformers and, as had recently happened in Perth, their houses were deliberately and ruthlessly removed. This was the only part of the process which aimed at the full-scale destruction of property and was intended to intimidate and subdue the friars. It was also specifically designed to neutralize the threat they represented and prevent any future activity by depriving them of the bases from which to work. The destruction was thorough, efficient, and executed in an orderly manner and under tight control by the Lords of the Congregation”; see “The Face of ane Perfytt Reformed Kyrk”, in J. Kirk (ed.), *Humanism and Reform* (Oxford, 1991), p. 417.

<sup>33</sup> Gordon, *Abredoniae Vtriusque Descriptio*, p. 15.



*The medieval spire of St. Nicholas' church before it was destroyed by fire in 1874.*



was how Kennedy (author of the influential *Annals of Aberdeen*) not unreasonably ordered events in his mind.<sup>34</sup>

Although Gordon's statement has been adopted by several modern writers, it is not supported by any of the other sources, and it raises grave difficulties. One is that it runs contrary to the usual practice of the Congregation. There was no attempt, for instance, to destroy St. John's church in Perth or Holy Trinity church in St. Andrews. As McRoberts says in his "Material destruction caused by the Scottish Reformation":

In general, we can distinguish two phases in the attack [on religious buildings]. At first, the altars and furnishings of the churches are destroyed and severe structural damage, except in the case of friaries, is unusual and possibly accidental. Then, in the second phase, after 1560, through public "official" action and through the "unofficial" activity of private persons, the greater buildings, cathedrals, abbeys and priories are unroofed and, in many cases, the actual fabric is extensively damaged.<sup>35</sup>

This is confirmed by Kirkcaldy of Grange's letter to Sir Henry Percy on 1st July 1559: "The manner of their proceedings in reformation is this. They pull down all manner of friaries and some abbeys which willingly receive not their reformation. As to parish churches, they clean them of images and all other monuments of idolatry and command that no masses be said in them."<sup>36</sup> The Reformers were well aware that they needed buildings in which to hold public worship, and their purpose was to reform parish churches rather than to destroy them.

---

<sup>34</sup> William Kennedy, *Annals of Aberdeen* (2 vols., London, 1818), Vol. 1, p. 112: "The magistrates on the alarm of their approach found it necessary in the first place to attend to the preservation of the town's archives and public records which were speedily removed along with the great eucharist and some other sacred utensils of silver from the repository in the church where they were kept to a place of safety. On the 29th of December a body of these reformers from Angus and Mearns entered the town and proceeded to the work of destruction. Their first attack was upon the great spire of the church which they attempted to pull down but the citizens having no inclination to see their place of worship destroyed beat them back and prevented further mischief being done to the fabric"; see also McRoberts, *Essays on the Scottish Reformation, 1513-1625*, p. 438; G. Donaldson, "Aberdeen University and the Reformation", *Northern Scotland*, Vol. 1 (1974), p. 135; I. B. Cowan, *Scottish Reformation* (London, 1982), p. 118; White, "Reformation in Aberdeen", p. 64; A. White, "The impact of the Reformation on a Burgh Community: the case of Aberdeen", in M. Lynch (ed.), *The Early Modern Town in Scotland* (London, 1987), p. 91.

<sup>35</sup> McRoberts, *Essays on the Scottish Reformation, 1513-1625*, p. 429.

<sup>36</sup> D. Laing (ed.), *Works of John Knox* (Wodrow Society, 6 vols., Edinburgh, 1846-64), Vol. 6, p. 34.

Notwithstanding this, it appears that a number of parish churches were destroyed at this stage of the conflict. The explanation for this is given by Robert Pont:

Yet, a great many, not only of the rascal sort, but sundry men of name and worldly reputation, joined themselves with the congregation of the reformers, not so much for zeal of religion, as to reap some earthly commodity, and to be enriched by the spoil of the kirks and abbey places. And when the preachers told them that such places of idolatry should be pulled down, they accepted gladly the enterprise; and rudely passing to work, pulled down all, both idols and places where they were found. Not making difference between these places of idolatry, and many parish kirks, where God's Word should have been preached in many parts where they resorted.<sup>37</sup>

These somewhat conflicting statements make it difficult to know how much credit to give to Gordon's assertion. St. Nicholas had already been at least partly reformed and had been a place of Protestant worship for the past two or three months, so clearly neither the Congregation nor the Aberdeen Protestants had any wish for their meeting-place to be destroyed. It is just possible, however, that there was some initial incident in which the Angus and Mearns men had to be dissuaded from further "reformation" of St. Nicholas, and that this was magnified by their enemies into a failed attempt to demolish the entire church. From Spalding's statement (Section III below) it appears that there was still a crucifix on the west end of St. Nicholas, and perhaps this attracted the attention of the reforming party. If so, then the people defending St. Nicholas were almost certainly allies of the Angus and Mearns men rather than opponents.

The baillies' counter-protest of 8th January, however, seems to indicate that there was no resistance to the activities of the Angus and Mearns men at this stage.<sup>38</sup> It is more likely, therefore, that there was no

---

<sup>37</sup> Pont, *Against Sacrilege*, quoted in M'Crie, *Life of John Knox*, pp. 362-3. Both Ninian Winzet and Archbishop Spottiswoode refer to the destruction of parish churches by the reformers, but both were speaking of events after 1560; see D. Hay Fleming, *The Reformation in Scotland* (London, 1910), pp. 411-14, 420; McRoberts, *Essays on the Scottish Reformation, 1513-1625*, pp. 441, 451. We are not aware of any specific parish church that can be identified as having been destroyed between May 1559 and July 1560. The church of Echt was burnt before January 1558/9 while the church of Restalrig was not "cast down" until after December 1560; see Hay Fleming, pp. 409-10; McRoberts, p. 440.

<sup>38</sup> *ABR 1398-1570*, pp. 316-7; see Somerset, "The Alteration of Religion", pp. 34-5.

attack on St. Nicholas, and that Gordon either mistakenly inferred such an attack from the undoubted later assault on St. Machar's, or else was relying on some traditional garbled account that was current in Aberdeen in his day.

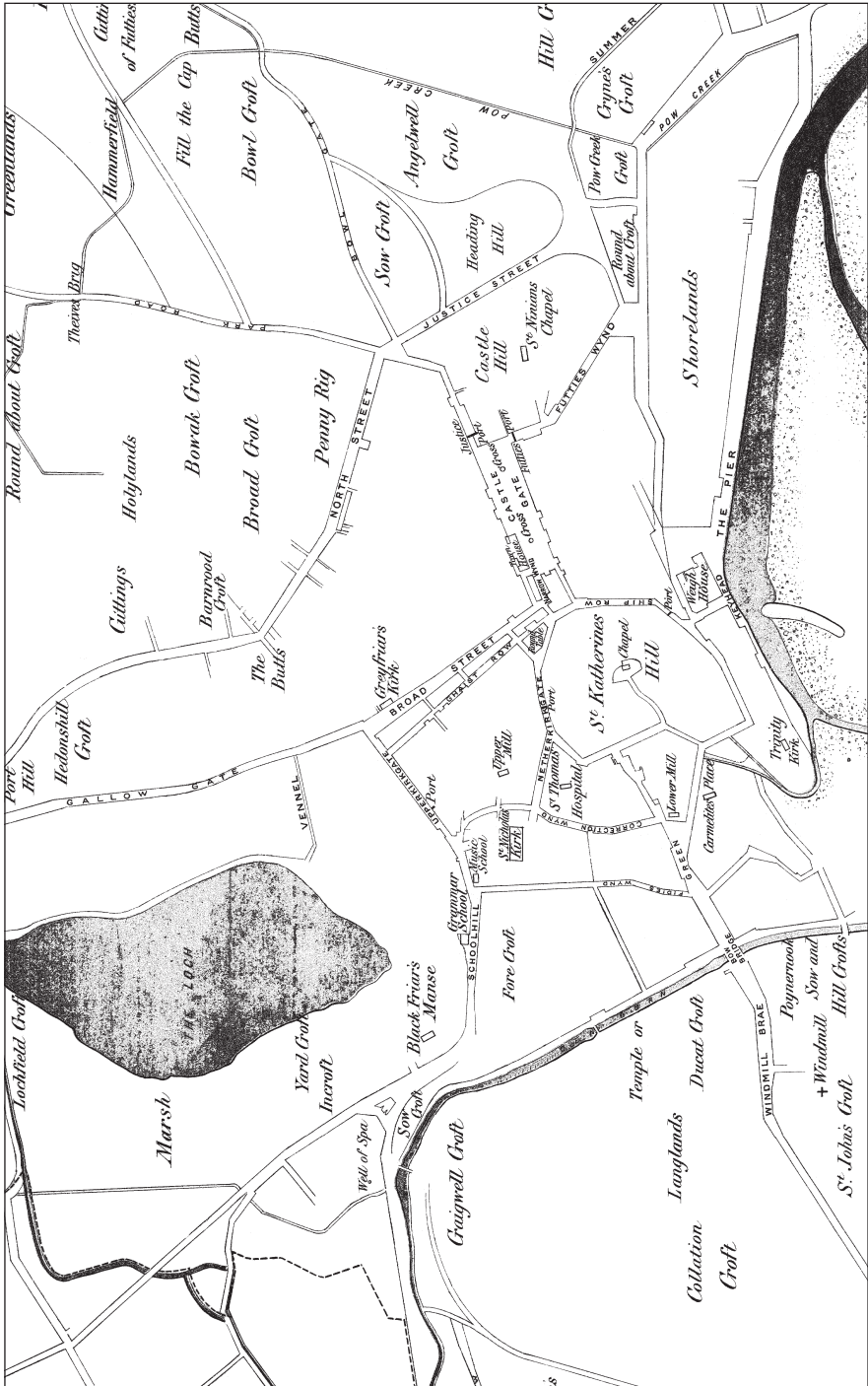
The next step, or more likely the first step, was the spoiling of the Carmelite and Dominican friaries. The Carmelite friary was on the south side of the Green and was one of the first buildings that the reforming party would have encountered after crossing the Den Burn. The Dominican friary was on the site of what is now Robert Gordon's College.

What probably happened is as follows. The Council meeting of 29th December had made it evident that no one in New Aberdeen was prepared to defend the friaries. The friars would have moved as much as possible on 29th December, and then had a few more days to clear whatever else they could. The Dominican prior, Andrew Abercrombie, for instance, collected the charters of the friary and subsequently fled with them to the Earl of Atholl in Dunkeld, whence they were recovered by Marischal College in July 1617.<sup>39</sup> Presumably, the books would have been removed, and a few of these have survived: four from the library of Abercrombie, at least two from the Dominican library, and two from the Carmelite library.<sup>40</sup> The reforming party would have found the friaries either empty or lightly guarded.<sup>41</sup> They began by removing the

<sup>39</sup> P. J. Anderson (ed.), *Fasti Academiae Mariscallanae Aberdonensis* (3 vols., New Spalding Club, Aberdeen, 1889-1898), Vol. 1, pp. 108-9; Cooper, *Cartularium*, Vol. 2, p. 297. One hundred and seven Carmelite charters have also survived and are now in the Aberdeen University Library, Richard Copey, "The Carmelite House in Aberdeen, 1273-1560", *Carmelus*, Vol. 42 (1995), pp. 44-111 (see p. 81). One wonders why the Dominicans and Carmelites did not follow the example of the Franciscans in resigning their buildings to the town or to some private individual, particularly as the Carmelite prior, John Fulford, had already done exactly that a few months previously with regard to the Banff friary.

<sup>40</sup> There are also five or six surviving books from the Franciscan library, one of which had previously belonged to the Dominicans; and a couple of books from the library of John Roger, warden of the Franciscans, see W. S. Mitchell, "The Common Library of New Aberdeen, 1585", *Libri*, Vol. 4 (1954), pp. 330-344 (numbers 12, 14-17, 45); W. S. Mitchell, *Catalogue of the Incunabula in Aberdeen University Library* (Edinburgh, 1968), (numbers 33, 177); J. Durkan and A. Ross, *Early Scottish Libraries* (Glasgow, 1961), pp. 66, 139-40, 151, 153, 154, 164; A. Ross, "Libraries of the Scottish Blackfriars: 1481-1560", *Innes Review*, Vol. 20 (1969), pp. 3-36 (especially p. 33); H. J. H. Drummond, *Short Title Catalogue of Books Printed on the Continent of Europe 1501-1600 in Aberdeen University Library* (Oxford, 1979), p. 309; C. Gascoigne, "Book Transmission in Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century North East Scotland: the Evidence of William Guild's Books", *Journal of the Edinburgh Bibliographical Society*, Vol. 4 (2009), pp. 32-48 (nos. 3, 160).

<sup>41</sup> The total number of Aberdonian friars at this time is uncertain but the names of at least twenty-three have survived. Of these, one was Dominican, eight were Carmelites, five were Franciscans, one was Trinitarian, and the other eight cannot be placed, but at



*Left: Map of Aberdeen at the Reformation.*

remaining furnishings and taking the glass and lead from the windows and the roof.<sup>42</sup> They then demolished the roofs of the churches and the residential buildings; other buildings, such as barns, malt-houses, and kilns, were spared. The intention was to render the friaries unusable for their original purpose.

According to Bishop Lesley, the reforming party, having secured its purpose with the Carmelite and Dominican friaries next tried to attack the Franciscan and Trinitarian ones: “When through the same fierceness they would have demolished the monasteries of the Minorites [Franciscans] and Trinitarians, their fury and madness was held back by Leslie, Laird of Balquhain, at the order of the Earl of Huntly.” It is difficult to know what to make of Lesley’s claim.<sup>43</sup> Possibly this is what

least one was Dominican and one Trinitarian, G. Donaldson (ed.), *Accounts of the Collectors of Thirds of Benefices, 1561-1572* (Scottish History Society, Edinburgh, 1949), pp. 97, 154, 219, 225; W. Moir Bryce, *The Scottish Grey Friars* (2 vols., Edinburgh, 1909), Vol. 1, p. 331; P. J. Anderson, *Aberdeen Friars, Red, Black, White, Grey* (Aberdeen, 1909), p. 91; *ABR 1398-1570*, pp. 364-5; Copsey, “The Carmelite House in Aberdeen, 1273-1560”, p. 106 (for Richard Garden). Copsey estimates the number of Carmelites in Aberdeen as around twenty in 1543, *ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>42</sup> For an account of the Aberdeen Carmelite friary and of excavations there in the 1980s, see J. A. Stones (ed.), *Three Scottish Carmelite Friaries* (Edinburgh, 1989). A further excavation in 1994 found “hundreds of painted and stained window glass fragments and lead window comes” in the demolition rubble, A. Cameron and D. I. Harding, “The Green (Aberdeen parish): Carmelite friary”, *Discovery & Excavation in Scotland* (1994), pp. 21-2 (accessible online).

<sup>43</sup> Hay Fleming exposes Lesley as lying “shamelessly” on one occasion, *Mary Queen of Scots* (London, 1897), pp. 161, 458-60. For a somewhat relevant example of the difficulties with Lesley’s history, consider his account of the feud between Huntly and the Earl of Atholl during the siege of Leith (which was from early April to early July 1560): “During this sege of Leith, thair was raised divers gret trubles in sindre partis of the realme, and principallie betuich the Erle of Huntlie and the Erle of Atholl, quhair thair was takin of men and doun casting of housses on ather syd, and gret preparatione maid by ather of thame to invaide utheris, and armeis in redines to pas in ather of thair cuntreis to that effect. Bot the samin was stayed be the laboris of Maister Alexander Gordoun than postulat of Galloway, Maister Johne Leslie officiall of Aberdene, and William Leslie young laird of Balquhane, quha appointed thame upoun all elistis, wrangis and controverseis, and caused thame meit and pas to atheris housses, and so contenowed in guid freindshipe eftirwart,” John Lesley, *The History of Scotland* (Bannatyne Club, Edinburgh, 1830), pp. 287-8. On the other hand, the following facts can easily be located in Joseph Bain (ed.), *Calendar of the State Papers Relating to Scotland and Mary Queen of Scots 1547-1603*, Vol. 1 (Edinburgh, 1898), nos. 713, 747, 794, etc.; and in G. Dickinson (ed.), *Two Missions of Jacques de la Brosse* (Scottish History Society, Edinburgh, 1942), pp. 169, 175. Alexander Gordon was in Edinburgh on 6th April. Huntly was in Edinburgh from 24th April at least until 28th May, and was closely monitored in the English despatches prior to his arrival, with no mention of these “trubles”. He visited the Queen Regent in Edinburgh Castle on 7th June and had left Edinburgh before the end of June. Atholl was

happened (history is full of strange events) but it seems less than likely. David Mar appears to have been the overseer of the reformers and it was not at all in his interests to destroy the Franciscan buildings, so recently entrusted by the friars to him on behalf of the burgh. Such a step would have been certain to provoke a backlash from Thomas Menzies and the anti-Congregation party and Mar would surely have countermanded any such attempt. But perhaps some of the Mearns men thought that they should demolish that friary too, to be on the safe side, and had to be prevented. We have very little information about what was obviously a complicated and eventful day in Aberdeen.<sup>44</sup>

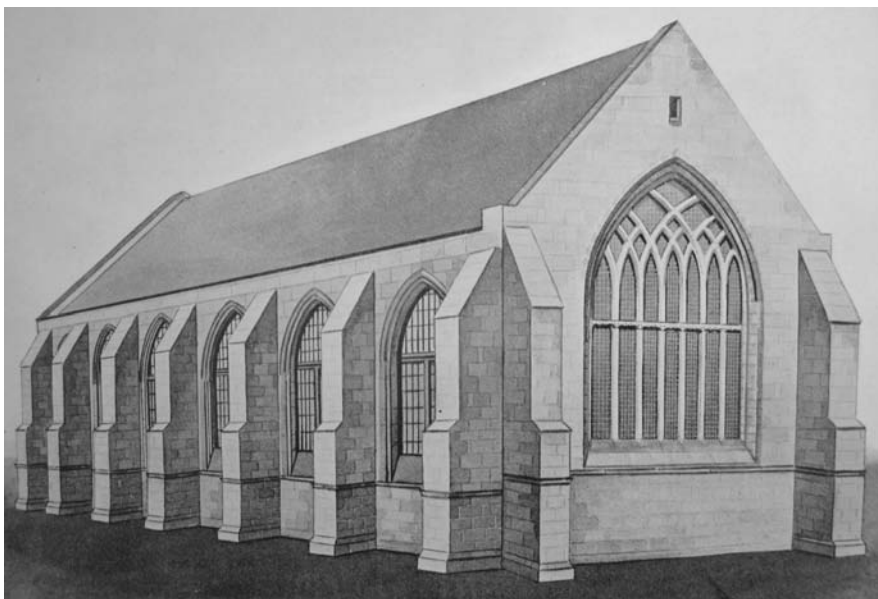
If we reject the testimony of Bishop Lesley, the survival of the Trinitarian friary presents something of a puzzle.<sup>45</sup> In September 1555 Robert Cunningham, Provincial of the order and “minister” (i.e. prior) of the Trinity Friars of Failford in Ayrshire and of Aberdeen, appointed Robert Lumsden of Clova his procurator and factor for the buildings in Aberdeen.<sup>46</sup> The buildings were in need of repair but a small community was still in existence. By 1559 the number of friars might have been down to one or two. The minister at the Reformation was John

with Lord James Stewart in Dunkeld at the beginning of June. The English dispatches mention private quarrels and strong ill-feeling between Huntly and Atholl on 6th June and again on 25th August, but no physical conflict. There was still significant distrust between them on 1st September. From this, it appears that the “trubles” were at the very end of the siege of Leith, if not afterwards; were almost certainly exaggerated by Lesley; and were not as happily resolved as he affirms. Certainly Lesley cannot be implicitly relied upon for details, even for incidents in which he was personally involved.

<sup>44</sup> In St. Andrews, the Franciscan friary was resigned to the town on 18th May 1559 but was nevertheless razed to the ground by the reformers on about 14th June, Hay Fleming, *Reformation in Scotland*, p. 371n.; Moir Bryce, *Scottish Grey Friars*, Vol. 2, pp. 202-3.

<sup>45</sup> B. McLennan states that “a part of the building was destroyed”, “The Reformation in the burgh of Aberdeen”, *Northern Scotland*, Vol. 2 (1976-7), p. 135, but his footnote shows that he was relying on Kennedy, who was relying on Alexander Keith (see *Annals of Aberdeen*, Vol. 1, pp. ix-x), who was relying on Dempster and Camerarius. The silence in the Aberdeen Council register indicates that the building was not damaged.

<sup>46</sup> *ABR 1398-1570*, p. 289. Robert Cunningham was purely a secular head – he had been married since 1546, M. H. B. Sanderson, *Ayrshire and the Reformation* (East Linton, 1997), p. 52. Robert Lumsden of Clova was a prominent lawyer and burgess. Like the Town Clerk John Kennedy, he seems to have accepted Protestantism after the Reformation and yet to have retained the friendship of determined Roman Catholics such as Bishop William Gordon. He died about 1586. With Kennedy and the minister of St. Nicholas, Peter Blackburn, he was one of the founders of the Common Library of Aberdeen (now part of the Aberdeen University Library), see Mitchell, “The Common Library of New Aberdeen, 1585”. Kennedy donated at least twenty books, two of which had come from the Dominican friary in Aberdeen and two from the Franciscan friary, while Lumsden donated at least six books, three of which had come from St. Machar’s cathedral library.



*The old Grey Friars church, which survived the Reformation but was demolished in 1903.*

Whitecross.<sup>47</sup> The buildings survived the Reformation and in September 1561 sasine was granted by Robert Cunningham, with the consent of John Whitecross, to Gilbert Menzies of Cowlie.<sup>48</sup>

One possibility is that the Trinitarians in Aberdeen had already accepted the Reformation. Their Provincial, Robert Cunningham, had probably done so. He was an illegitimate brother of Alexander, fourth Earl of Glencairn, one of the leading Protestant noblemen. Knox refers to Cunningham in 1563 as one “who then was halden an earnest professor of the Evangell”. It could be that the Trinitarian buildings in Aberdeen were spared on his account. The buildings at Failford were themselves “cast down” by order of the Privy Council in 1561, but perhaps they were regarded as posing more of a threat in the event of a Roman Catholic recovery.<sup>49</sup>

Another possibility is to accept Lesley’s testimony and to suppose that Leslie of Balquhain, hearing that the reforming party had arrived, left his guard at St. Machar’s and proceeded to New Aberdeen. Realising

<sup>47</sup> Whitecross had also been minister before Robert Cunningham in 1545, Anderson, *Aberdeen Friars, Red, Black, White, Grey*, p. 86.

<sup>48</sup> Anderson, *Aberdeen Friars, Red, Black, White, Grey*, p. 98.

<sup>49</sup> Laing, *Works of Knox*, Vol. 2, pp. 168, 397.

that it was too late to do anything for the Black Friars he might have left a party at the Grey Friars and gone down the Shiprow to help the Trinitarians. Meanwhile, the reforming party from the Black Friars might have gone along the Upperkirkgate to the Grey Friars and either tried unsuccessfully to assault the building, or else been warned off when in fact they had no intention of assaulting it.<sup>50</sup> They would then have headed to Old Aberdeen, soon to be pursued by the returning Leslie of Balquhain who caught them at St. Machar's. All this is speculation, but it shows that Bishop Lesley's account cannot be dismissed out of hand.

### III. Events of 4th January 1559/60 in Old Aberdeen

Having achieved their objective, or done as much as they could, in New Aberdeen, the reforming party turned their attention to Old Aberdeen. Here they encountered a different situation, with little or no local support and with formidable opposition. Their aims, probably, were to remove the altars and images from St. Machar's cathedral and King's College chapel and to gather some spoil to fund the Congregation's armed struggle against the French. It is possible that they also hoped to render the cathedral and the university buildings unusable, but this is far from certain. In any event, they had little success in this part of their expedition.

Coming from New Aberdeen, they would first have encountered King's, with St. Machar's half a mile further on. Perhaps some tried to assault King's while others passed on to St. Machar's. The earliest writers to mention the attack on King's are Strachan and, possibly, Camerarius. Camerarius describes the destruction of the library:

This College [King's] had been furnished with a most famous library; but (sad to relate) when, with heresy flourishing, everything religious was profaned, even this also was divided by the ministers of Satan, part being burned and part thrown into the common sewer.<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> On the strength of this, Leslie of Balquhain might have congratulated himself on saving the Grey friary, when perhaps the reformers had no purpose of damaging it. We have no statement of the intentions of the reforming party other than the inferences and probable exaggerations of those unfriendly to them.

<sup>51</sup> D. Camerarius, *De Scotorum fortitudine, doctrina, et pietate* (Paris, 1631), p. 57, quoted in Robertson, *Collections for a History of the Shires of Aberdeen and Banff*, p. 212: "Instructum erat olim hoc Collegium praeclarissima Bibliotheca; sed (quod dolendum est), cum, haeresi furenti, religiosa omnia profanata sint, et illa etiam a Sathanæ ministrellis, partim combusta, partim in cloacas iniecta cernitur."





*King's College in 1688.*

It is not clear, however, that Camerarius is speaking of 4th January 1559/60. He might well be referring to the visit of Lord James Stewart to the north in the summer of 1561.<sup>52</sup> In any case, it is not certain with such a writer that the event he is describing ever happened.<sup>53</sup>

Strachan refers to an attack by the reforming party on the lead and the bells but his elegant poetic “conceit” over the metals – gold, silver, lead, bronze, and iron – raises the suspicion that accuracy is being sacrificed to literary effect.<sup>54</sup> There were twelve bells in the tower, the

<sup>52</sup> See Laing, *Works of Knox*, Vol. 2, p. 168; W. Croft Dickinson, *John Knox's History of the Reformation in Scotland* (2 vols., Edinburgh, 1949), Vol. 1, p. 364; Hay Fleming, *Reformation in Scotland*, pp. 410-415.

<sup>53</sup> Gordon of Rothiemay blames the loss of the library on the negligence of librarians: “Coterminous with the church [King's College chapel] is the library, formerly stored with many volumes. Long ago, however, most of these were stolen away or lost by the negligence of librarians. These have been replaced in modern times by the munificence of private persons and their number has now been increased,” A. M. Munro (ed.), *Records of Old Aberdeen* (2 vols., New Spalding Club, Aberdeen, 1899-1909), Vol. 2, pp. 297-8.

<sup>54</sup> Strachan, *Panegyricus*, p. 27: “When . . . they so gaped after *gold* and *silver*, that they could not leave alone even cheaper metals, the *lead* which cloaked our College, and the *bronze* from which the bells were forged, this man [Anderson] repelled force with *iron*.”

heaviest, Trinity, weighing over two tons. Their installation had probably involved the removal of the roof and any attempt to interfere with the large ones would have been dangerous.<sup>55</sup> The reforming party might have wished to carry away the smaller bells but it is unlikely that they got anywhere near them. One would think that hanging bells are particularly difficult things to loot in the face of determined opposition.<sup>56</sup> The chapel was the natural place for the reformers to have started, and it was exposed on at least two sides, but there is no evidence that it was significantly damaged at that time.<sup>57</sup> It is probable, therefore, that there was only minor damage elsewhere. Anderson's party must have been strong enough to keep the reformers at bay.

In August 1562, the staff and students at King's numbered about twenty-five, and Anderson's party, even with servants, cannot have been much more than double this number.<sup>58</sup> Doubtless they armed themselves with staves or whatever they could find, but the reformers too would not have been trying to demolish roofs, altars, and images bare-handed. The earliest depictions of King's College date from the seventeenth century and show a well protected quadrangle, but the fact that the reforming party was not able to force its way in gives some idea of its comparatively small size.<sup>59</sup>

---

<sup>55</sup> Jane Geddes (ed.), *King's College Chapel, Aberdeen, 1500-2000* (Leeds, 2000), pp. 109-14. Ten of the twelve bells were still in position in 1661 and one still survives. See also Stevenson, *King's College*, pp. 8, 14, 127.

<sup>56</sup> There were instances further south of bells being taken away during the reformation period but probably in very different circumstances; see A. Maxwell, *Old Dundee, Ecclesiastical, Burghal, and Social Prior to the Reformation* (Edinburgh, 1891), p. 164.

<sup>57</sup> According to Gordon's description, some of the stained glass windows appear to have survived into the seventeenth century, *Records of Old Aberdeen*, Vol. 2, p. 297; and the medieval organ case likewise, Geddes, *King's College Chapel, Aberdeen, 1500-2000*, p. 175; John Spalding, *Memorials of the Troubles in Scotland* (2 vols., Spalding Club, Aberdeen, 1850-1), Vol. 2, p. 124. Orem says that the chapel "was spoiled of all its rich ornaments in the beginning of the Reformation", *Description of . . . Old Aberdeen*, p. 173, but this could refer to the possible visit from Lord James Stewart in the summer of 1561 or to the purge of King's College in 1569. Strachan says that Alexander Anderson "alienated and embezzled the most precious furnishings" of the College, presumably to keep them from Protestant hands ("Supellectilem pretiosissimam abalienavit et intervertit"), *Panegyricus*, p. 27. Middleton, likewise, says that Anderson "sold the ornaments, books, and other furniture belonging to the College", *Appendix to the History of the Church of Scotland*, p. 39 [misnumbered 25].

<sup>58</sup> Stevenson, *King's College*, p. 12. A full complement at King's would have been forty-two staff and students, Cowan, *Religious Houses*, p. 232. Probably there were about thirty staff and students in 1559/60.

<sup>59</sup> See Stevenson, *King's College*, pp. 3, 11; Geddes, *King's College Chapel, Aberdeen, 1500-2000*, p. 40. Ker (p. [4]) also credits Anderson with saving the charters from destruction at the

Frustrated at King's, the reformers moved on to St. Machar's where they received a second rebuff. Bishop Lesley's account says that while Leslie of Balquhain saved the Franciscan and Trinitarian friaries, it was he himself, with Bishop William Gordon, who interposed to save the cathedral.<sup>60</sup> His account becomes vague at the end, however, and it is not clear to what extent he is referring to the events of 4th January 1559/60 and to what extent the years that followed. William Gordon's 1566 charter, on the other hand, attributes the saving of the cathedral to Leslie of Balquhain and his son William; and this source is to be preferred as both more reliable and more plausible.<sup>61</sup> Bishop Lesley's history was published in Rome in 1578, whereas the charter was drawn up in Aberdeen in June 1566 in front of various witnesses, such as Robert Lumsden of Clova, who would have been well aware what had happened six years previously. Furthermore, as Sheriff-Depute for

---

hands of the reformers: "Because of him, our archives, snatched and saved from death, display royal charters and many governmental documents." Earlier, however, Strachan had blamed Anderson for destroying the charters; but as Cosmo Innes observed, "the present collection [of charters] . . . disproves part of what is laid to his charge", see *Fasti Aberdonenses* (Spalding Club, Aberdeen, 1854), p. xxviii note. It seems that much more serious damage to King's happened about a year later. In February 1560/1, Anderson was in Edinburgh and was asked to produce a charter for a case before the Court of Session. He replied that it had been in his chamber "when he last came from home", but that since that time "the said college and the houses thereof are broken up" (Stevenson, *King's College*, p. 10). Perhaps it was to this second attack that Camerarius was alluding. Gordon of Rothiemay says that the charters were carried away by thieves: "Next to the library is the record room, where the charters of the university are kept. Here formerly was preserved much valuable stuff, long ago carried off by thieves. In our time it has been replenished and it has been newly increased," *Records of Old Aberdeen*, Vol. 2, p. 298.

<sup>60</sup> Lesley, *De Origine*, pp. 520-1: "When through the same fierceness they would have demolished the monasteries of the Minorites and Trinitarians, their fury and madness was held back and utterly repressed by Leslie, Laird of Balquhain, at the order of the Earl of Huntly; not, however, that they were so able to restrain [them] that the church, which in Old Aberdeen . . . was of the utmost magnificence, should not be attacked, but yet lest they should spoil it in any way, the Bishop (near kinsman to the Earl of Huntly) and John Lesley the official of that place interposed: and thus so ardently contending for the practice of religion, that the one by his counsel, the other by his public preaching, and both through the authority and help of Huntly and of the Leslies, the use of the Catholic religion, after it was exterminated from almost the extent of Scotland, was in that place preserved for a long time whole and almost unbroken."

<sup>61</sup> Innes, *Registrum Episcopatus Aberdonensis*, Vol. 2, p. 320: "the said umquibil John and William with a train of honourable followers and their family and relations, in order to guard [the church], made continual residence at the agreed time at our cathedral church at the instance and prayer of us and our Chapter; and they showed themselves prompt, ready, and valiant/strenuous in defence of our church seat and the clergy resident therein, persisting (instante) even against most serious and grave sedition [and] persecution of our church and seat on account of the catholic faith, with enemies on every side attacking/robbing."



*The medieval wooden ceiling at St. Machar's cathedral.*

Aberdeenshire, repressing disorder was very much part of Leslie of Balquhain's duty.

It is generally asserted that the cathedral was extensively damaged by the reforming party. Here is one eloquent description:

But they [the reforming party] then moved on to St. Machar's and found the cathedral undefended. The precise extent of the destruction which followed is impossible to calculate, but undoubtedly

there was a great smashing of windows and woodwork, tearing down of images, altars and hangings, and defacing of paintings; and the cathedral library was destroyed. But before long the Earl of Huntly (sheriff of Aberdeen) and John Leslie of Balquhain (sheriff depute) arrived with their men and put an end to the orgy of vandalism. Their arrival must have followed that of the reforming mob fairly closely, for a surprising amount of what the most zealous of the reformers would have regarded as relics of "popery" and superstition survived. The elaborately carved back screen or reredos of St. Katherine's altar in the south transept, the carved wooden pulpit, an image of Virgin and Child, the heraldic ceiling of the nave, and (probably) the rood loft survived.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>62</sup> David Stevenson, *St Machar's Cathedral and the Reformation, 1560-1690* (Friends of St. Machar's Cathedral, Occasional Papers No. 7, Aberdeen, 1981), pp. 2-3. See also McRoberts, *Essays on the Scottish Reformation, 1513-1625*, p. 439.

The 1566 charter, on the other hand, shows that Leslie of Balquhain and his men were already guarding the cathedral (“stipati continuam residentiam fecerunt”) at the request (“instantiam et supplicationem”) of the Bishop and the chapter. It is possible, as we have mentioned, that Leslie was drawn away to New Aberdeen, but if he and his men were at the cathedral from the beginning, and if they were stronger than the reformers, then the damage to the cathedral must have been limited. The charter implies a struggle, so perhaps some windows were broken, but it is quite possible that the interior of the church was intact. This would fit in with Bishop Lesley’s account which does not refer to any damage. Furthermore, the fact that the Bishop of Aberdeen was so grateful for the preservation of the cathedral suggests that little had been destroyed.

One writer who at first sight gives an impression of immense damage is James Gordon of Rothiemay.

To this church [St. Machar’s] lykewayes belonged a bibliothek; bot about the yeer 1560 all wes taken away, or destroyed, or embaseled; the biblothec then burned, and no book spared, wher any reid letter wes to be seene. The spire of the great steeple was then uncovered, as the church was, and not many years afterwards, was overthrowne by the violence of a great storme of wind. The queere of the church was rased to the very fundatione.<sup>63</sup>

It should be noted, however, that Gordon (by contrast with his description of New Aberdeen) does not say that these things happened on 4th January but merely “about the year 1560”. As David Stevenson and others have observed, there is probably a substantial identification or confusion with what happened in February 1567/8 when the Privy Council ordered the lead to be stripped from St. Machar’s cathedral.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, the purging of the cathedral library must have been a later and more systematic incident. Gordon’s original Latin is “bibliotheca exusta ut plurimum nam cuicunque volumini aderat rubrica in illud tanquam superstitionem redolens”, which is more accurately translated: “the greater part of the library was burned for in almost every volume there

---

<sup>63</sup> Gordon, *Abredoniae Vtriusque Descriptio*, p. 22.

<sup>64</sup> Stevenson, *King’s College*, pp. 8, 15, 127; Geddes, *King’s College Chapel*, p. 189 n.2; J. Hill Burton (ed.), *Register of the Privy Council of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1877), Vol. 1 (A.D. 1545-1569), pp. 608-10. Similar confusion is apparent in the accounts of Father Hay, Thomas Orem, and Alexander Keith quoted in Section 1.

was a note against it as having an odour of superstition.”<sup>65</sup> The word “note” (“rubrica”) indicates that someone had looked through the books, putting a mark on the ones which were to be burned. It was probably at the same time as this that the interior of St. Machar’s was reformed, and we would suggest the visit of Lord James Stewart to the north in the summer of 1561 as the most likely occasion.

The objects that survived at both St. Nicholas and St. Machar’s show that the people who did the reforming were restrained in their work: these were not things that would have been spared by a vandalizing mob. In St. Nicholas, for instance, the choir stalls and the organ remained until 1574.<sup>66</sup>

Spalding’s description of St. Machar’s in 1640, when the Covenanters engaged in a similar work of reformation, is even more surprising:

Thereafter they came all riding up the get [way], came to Macher kirk, ordained our blessed Lord Jesus Christ his arms to be hewn out of the forefront of the pulpit thereof, and to take down the portrait of our blessed virgin Mary and her dear son baby Jesus in her arms, that had stand since the upputting thereof, in curious work, under the sylring [ceiling] at the west end of the pend [arch], whereon the great steeple stands, unmoved until now; and gave order to colonel, Master of Forbes, to see this done, which he with all diligence obeyed: and besides, where there was any crucifix set in glass windows, this he caused pull out in honest men’s houses. He caused a mason strike out Christ’s arms in hewn work on ilk end of bishop Gavin Dunbar’s tomb, and suchlike chisel out the name of Jesus, drawn cipher-wise, JHS, out of the timber wall on the foreside of Macher Aisle, anent the consistory door. The crucifix on the Old town cross dung down; the crucifix on the New town cross closed up, being loth to break the stone; the crucifix on

---

<sup>65</sup> *Records of Old Aberdeen*, Vol. 2, p. 294; see also *Macfarlane’s Geographical Collections*, Vol. 2, p. 505. Six books (comparatively devoid of the odour of superstition) survive from the St. Machar’s library: one by Chrysostom, one by Bede, and four on church law, see Mitchell, *Common Library of New Aberdeen* (nos. 8, 9, 11, 33, 38, 66). It is noteworthy that as many books are extant from the St. Machar’s library, apparently purged by the reformers, as are extant from the Aberdeen friary libraries which the reformers almost certainly did not damage.

<sup>66</sup> John Stuart (ed.), *Selections from the Records of the Kirk Session, Presbytery, and Synod of Aberdeen* (Spalding Club, Aberdeen, 1846), p. 19; Cooper, *Cartularium*, Vol. 2, pp. 384-5.

the west end of Saint Nicholas kirk in New Aberdeen dung down, which was never troubled before.<sup>67</sup>

Several writers have discussed the fate of the choir or chancel of St. Machar's cathedral. Macgibbon and Ross follow Orem in doubting that the new choir started by Bishop William Elphinstone was ever completed, but McRoberts argues that the choir and high altar furnishings listed in the inventory of 1549 show that it was.<sup>68</sup> In either case, there was some structure (either the new choir or the old choir and the unfinished new choir) extending at the east end of the church at the time of the Reformation, and the question is what happened to it. Hay and Orem affirm that it was demolished by the reforming party but Grub rejects this because it conflicts with Bishop Lesley's account. Hay Fleming understands Gordon as implying that it was the subsequent fall of the spire on top of the central tower that destroyed the choir: "The spire of the great steeple was . . . overthrowne by the violence of a great storme of wind. The queere of the church was rased to the very fundation" or "was completely wrecked". The fall of the spire would have been after the removal of the lead in February 1567/8 – perhaps about 1570. The central tower itself collapsed on 9th May 1688, damaging the west portion of the church but not the wooden ceiling of the nave. It seems unlikely that the fall of the spire was sufficient to demolish the chancel entirely; but perhaps the chancel, being substantially damaged by the fall, was left unrepaired and the townspeople gradually removed the stones for building. Indeed, a more accurate translation of Gordon reads: ". . . the choir of the church was removed to the foundation (templi chorus radicitus evulsus) . . . the hands of the townsmen can scarcely be kept off the ruin."<sup>69</sup>

<sup>67</sup> Spalding, *Memorialls of the Trubles in Scotland*, Vol. 1, p. 313; see also Vol. 2, p. 216.

<sup>68</sup> D. Macgibbon, T. Ross, *The Ecclesiastical Architecture of Scotland* (3 vols., Edinburgh, 1896-7) Vol. 3, p. 82; Orem, *Description of . . . Old Aberdeen*, pp. 28, 60; McRoberts, *Essays on the Scottish Reformation, 1513-1625*, p. 439n.; Innes, *Registrum Episcopatus Aberdonensis*, Vol. 2, pp. 179-199. See also Geddes, *King's College Chapel, Aberdeen, 1500-2000*, p. 140; E. P. Dennison, D. Ditchburn, M. Lynch (eds.), *Aberdeen before 1800: a New History* (East Linton, 2002), p. 27.

<sup>69</sup> Innes, *Registrum Episcopatus Aberdonensis*, Vol. 1, p. lxxvi; Orem, *Description of . . . Old Aberdeen*, pp. 104, 108-9; George Grub, *Ecclesiastical History of Scotland* (4 vols., Edinburgh, 1861), Vol. 2, p. 75n.; Hay Fleming, *Reformation in Scotland*, p. 385; *Records of Old Aberdeen*, Vol. 2, p. 294-5; *Macfarlane's Geographical Collections*, Vol. 2, p. 505. One of the reasons given for the removal of the lead in February 1567/8 was that much of it had already been stolen, *Register of the Privy Council of Scotland*, Vol. 1 (A.D. 1545-1569), p. 609. Probably King's College and St. Machar's cathedral were regarded as "fair game" for plunder after 1560.



*St. Machar's cathedral, immediately before the main tower collapsed in 1688.*

Spottiswoode, Father Hay, Orem, and Alexander Keith all say or imply that the Earl of Huntly was personally present at the defence of the cathedral, but this seems to be based on a misunderstanding of Bishop Lesley who merely says that Balquhain acted “at the order of the Earl of Huntly”. The 1566 charter makes it evident that Huntly was not present, and indeed on 26th December he was in Kinloss according to a letter that he sent to the Queen Regent. With the severe weather he was probably still in the northern part of his territory a week later.<sup>70</sup> If Leslie of Balquhain was indeed acting on his orders, then it is significant that St. Machar's cathedral was preserved but the friaries were left to

<sup>70</sup> Spottiswoode *History of the Church of Scotland*, Vol. 1, pp. 314-5; Innes, *Registrum Episcopatus Aberdonensis*, Vol. 1, p. lxvi; Robertson, *Collections for a History of the Shires of Aberdeen and Banff*, p. 149; A. I. Cameron (ed.), *Scottish Correspondence of Mary of Lorraine* (Scottish History Society, Edinburgh, 1927), pp. 431-2. On 13th January, Huntly was at Cairntully, see Stevenson, *Calendar of State Papers, Foreign, Elizabeth, 1559-60*, No. 594, p. 291. Presumably this was Grantully (i.e. Gartly, a few miles south of Huntly), see J. Kirk (ed.), *The Books of Assumption of the Thirds of Benefices* (Oxford, 1995), p. 466. George Barclay of Garntillie had been a cautioner for the Earl of Huntly when the latter received the valuables from St. Machar's on 13th November 1559, see Innes, *Registrum Episcopatus Aberdonensis*, Vol. 1, p. lxxxvi.



their fate. It would seem that Huntly was prepared to help his uncle, the Bishop, but was no more ready than Thomas Menzies, the Provost of Aberdeen, to give practical assistance to the friars.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

We have described the events of 4th January 1559/60 in detail, and have seen that the reforming party, with local assistance, rendered the Dominican and Carmelite friaries uninhabitable, but probably made no attempt to assault the Franciscan and Trinitarian friaries or St. Nicholas' kirk. In Old Aberdeen the reforming party was successfully resisted, first at King's College and then at St. Machar's. We doubt that they did much damage at either place. We noted that the Earl of Huntly was not present at St. Machar's.

We have seen, too, that, as far as the friaries were concerned, the assault by the reforming party was motivated, not by love of loot or vandalism, but by the religious views of those who had arranged the assault. They believed that Scotland should not have friars and friaries and they were implementing their beliefs in Aberdeen. This means that the morality of the expedition cannot be discussed independently of the religious aspect that underlies it. Historians are free to reflect on the morality of the expedition – and many have done so, in passing, by deploring it – but they should realize that in expressing such opinions they are entering into religious matters, and they cannot thereafter pretend to be impartial and neutral.

The encounters in Old Aberdeen are among the few recorded instances in which anyone tried to resist the Congregation in their work of reforming churches and friaries. Both attempts at resistance were successful, and it does not appear that great force was needed on either occasion. These successful encounters show what might have been done in New Aberdeen had the burgh been as strongly "Catholic" as is often claimed. The decisive factor seems to have been the local support for the reforming party in New Aberdeen and the lack of support in Old Aberdeen. This makes it natural to think that in other parts of the country, where relatively small groups of people were able to reform ecclesiastical buildings without opposition, there must have been local sympathy, if not active support, for the reformation.

