

Ian B. Cowan, *The Scottish Reformation: Church and Society in Sixteenth-Century Scotland* (Weidenfield and Nicolson, London, 1982), 244pp., £11.95.

This straightforward account seeks not only to advance the author's contribution to the debate about 'the causation and emergence of the Reformation in Scotland', but also to redress the concentration of recent studies on ecclesiastical organization by directing attention to the Reformation's impact on society. The first three chapters assess the 'vitality' of the late medieval Church, concluding that the secular clergy and the parish system were more obviously in need of reform than the monasteries. 'All in all monasticism in Scotland was in a better shape than has sometimes been allowed.' Yet the monks were of little relevance to the Reformation, for or against, compared with the Dominican and Franciscan friars, whom the Reformers could not ignore, even though the friars' services to the community benefited largely their own relatively prosperous middle-class circles to the disregard of the poor. Cathedrals and collegiate Churches in practice drained resources of finance and personnel away from the parishes. 'Parochial service and the manner in which it was carried out lay at the root of many of the problems facing the church in sixteenth-century Scotland.' Serious deficiencies of personal morality and education can justifiably be laid at the parochial clergy's door. In the circumstances the infrequency of popular hostility towards incumbents is surprising. In reviewing the contributions of the Church in society Cowan is particularly interested in activities which involved joint participation of clergy and laity. He claims that 'in its encouragement of music and the visual arts the church was fulfilling both the spiritual and temporal aspirations of contemporary society'. Nevertheless, in the century or so before the Reformation, the church's dominant role in education, administration of justice and patronage of the arts was under challenge from the secular authorities' growing provision, and the sacramental and vernacular preaching ministry which it alone could provide for the community, was increasingly neglected.

This is a commendably balanced picture of pre-Reformation Catholicism in Scotland. If anything the author portrays it in less gloomy colours than has often been the case, but in some respects such as monastic life and the quest for fraudulent relics Scotland was markedly less corrupt than England. Above all, the central focus on the inadequacies of parochial ministry exposes the clamant need for reform at the point where religion most closely touched popular life. This is borne out by David Lindsay's *Three Estates* which directs most of its satirical fire against the secular clergy. Cowan considers this work in a chapter on Catholic reform initiatives, whose ultimate failure, he believes, is attributable more to 'secular attitudes which had been bred within the church, coupled with even stronger manifestations of secularism outside its ranks' than to incipient Protestantism.

A particular strength of the heart of the book is the mapping of regional variations, both of the appearance of Protestant heresy in the 1540's and 1550's and of the consolidation of a Protestant ministry and the prevalence of Catholic recusancy after 1560. Here Cowan incorporates the substance of his valuable Historical Association pamphlet, *Regional Aspects of the Scottish Reformation* (1978). Never again will glib geographical generalizations about the Reformation in Scotland be pardonable, but, especially for the post-1560 period, the reader may well feel the lack of broad regional summaries to gather up the significance of what was happening so variously in numerous localities.

Cowan holds that as late as the 1540's an essentially Catholic ecclesiastical unity might have been preserved. A highly determinative role is ascribed to the Protestant lairds who at that time constituted only 'a tiny minority'. The change in 1558 was politically motivated. The fear of France and the influence of England enabled the militant Protestant minority, largely restricted to Kyle in Ayrshire and 'a closely demarcated area on the east coast', to secure the ascendancy. A question mark is placed against the frequent assertion of historians that the success of the Reformation depended on popular urban support. 'In most burghs support for protestantism stemmed initially from a small minority of the populace who were only permitted to seize the initiative and win over their fellow citizens through the intervention of the local lairds.' Cowan here leans towards a political explanation for the Reformation itself rather than for the timing of it. (The two possibilities are posed in Jenny Wormald's *Court, Kirk and Community: Scotland 1470-1625*, 1981, which appeared too late to be noted by Cowan.

On the Reformation settlement itself, so contested a battleground since Gordon Donaldson's *The Scottish Reformation*, Cowan takes issue with attempts like Donaldson's to drive a massive wedge between Knox and Melville, reformation and Presbyterianism, First and Second Books of Discipline. 'The redefinition of the Principles that governed the polity of the Scottish church [in the Second Book] may have led to some departures from the organizational plans of 1560, but such "innovations" were generally speaking merely a statement of existing practice.' Apart from claims for financial redistribution, 'the two books diverged very little on basic issues. The one constant, which governed all else, lay in their unanimous belief that church and state were separate and distinct entities.' So the author rejects Donaldson's view that the 1560 settlement envisaged nothing inconsistent with the supremacy of the godly prince in an episcopal Church. The General Assembly is obviously referred to in the First Book and was in essence an ecclesiastical, not a civil, body. 'The attempt to correlate

superintendence with episcopacy, in any meaningful sense of the word, breaks down entirely in terms of spiritual authority . . . Spiritually the minister and superintendent were one . . . Here too the second Book of Discipline only restated accepted theory in more positive terms.' This interpretation is balanced by the recognition that the presbytery constituted one example of the Kirk, even after the Second Book, 'adopting new stratagems to meet changing circumstances', it being compounded out of 'the exercise' and 'the common eldership' already propounded. Pursuing the book's special interest, Cowan concludes that 'the exercise of discipline [by the Kirk Session] brought an involvement between church and society that has never been surpassed. The indifference of the pre-Reformation church had been replaced by an intense interest in the lives of each individual member of society.'

A chapter on worship encompasses observances such as marriage. For today one might note that the Reformers saw no need for two wholly similar Sunday services. In this area also Cowan's interest lies in the way in which the changes of the Reformation overcame the earlier distancing of the Church from the people. Demonstrations of popular enthusiasm such as greeted John Durie's return to Edinburgh in 1582 were 'a far cry from the apathy and lassitude of the pre-Reformation church'.

The final chapter surveys the relation to Church and society in the post-Reformation years. It stresses the importance of bonding or banding for religious purposes, the increase of lay participation and the co-operation of laity and ministers as illustration of the practicality of the ideal of a covenanted people. Poor relief and educational aims and provision are also examined, but not the territory covered by Gordon Marshall's *Presbyteries and Profit: Calvinism and the Development of Capitalism in Scotland 1560-1707* (1980).

This is a most welcome book and must surely become the standard introduction to the Scottish Reformation. It is accurately produced. (A surplus negative has crept in towards the foot of p.53, some verbatim repetition occurs between pp.114 and 120 and 'inimicable' (p.177) should be 'inimical'.) The Bibliography could helpfully have been a little fuller. One or two omissions can be made good from the notes, but there is no mention of A.C. Cheyne's weighty review of Donaldson in *Scott. Journ. of Theol.* 16 (1963), pp.78-88. Michael Lynch's *Edinburgh and the Reformation* (1981) obviously appeared too late, but his earlier studies on the capital are also not listed, nor is Marshall's book mentioned earlier.

The Book's greatest lack is of course in theology, on which Cowan manages to be remarkably reticent. The simple labels 'Lutheran' and 'Calvinist' will no longer suffice to depict the developing theology of the Scottish Reformers. Continental links and influences are only briefly touched upon, and Zwingli makes no appearance (cf. G. Locher's 'Zwingli's Influence in England and Scotland', in his *Zwingli's Thought: New Perspectives* (1981), pp.340-383). While the author cannot be blamed for omitting what he never intended to include, 'Reformation without tarrying for theology' is bound to have its limitations. The historiography of the Scottish Reformation still remains somewhat undeveloped compared with the continental or English Reformation, and the cause must lie partly in the fact that its contributors have too often lacked that combination of historical and theological skills demanded by the subject. Dr Cowan is a Scottish historian. For all the merits of his scholarly and thorough volume, which fills so obvious a gap in the available literature, one is left wondering if justice can be done to the Scottish Reformation within a restrictedly Scottish historical perspective.

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