

JOHN KNOX AFTER FOUR HUNDRED YEARS

by W. Stanford Reid

The year 1972 is the year in which we commemorate the death of John Knox, the Scottish Reformer. For this reason it is probably a good thing to look back over the intervening centuries to gain perspective on his work. In estimating his achievements and attempting to understand them, we may well learn something, not only of him but also of ourselves. Indeed, we may even gain some knowledge that will help us in our own endeavours in the latter part of the twentieth century.

Interpretations of Knox since 1572

Ever since Knox's own day many different interpretations of him and his work have been made. Some have been strongly in his favor, apparently with the view that he could do nothing wrong. Others have been just as far in the opposite direction, with the attitude that he could do nothing right. A few have attempted to occupy a middle ground, but they have not been entirely successful in convincing either his foes or his friends, for Knox, as during his life time, has evoked strong emotions that incline to be extreme rather than moderate. In the case of the reformer, neutrality has been almost unknown.

Those who were against him in his own day adopted this stance sometimes because of his very brusqueness, even violence of language and policy. As Sir Thomas Randolph reported to Sir William Cecil in 1562 when it was rumored that Queen Mary would become an Anglican:

I have not conferred with Mr. Knox in these matters, as shortly I must, who, upon Sunday last, gave the Cross and Candle such a wipe that as wise and learned as himself wished him to have held his peace. 1

Also his statements in this day of Women's Lib. to and about Mary Tudor, Elizabeth and Mary Stewart all won him enemies, even among some who claimed to be Protestants. But probably the thing that brought him the most opposition was his strong Calvinism with which many disagreed, even Calvin at times having to restrain his zealous disciple.² Theological differences were undoubtedly the principle causes of anti-Knoxian thought and action.

These attitudes have continued down to the present day. We still find the same anti-Knoxian arguments appearing in post 16th century writings. Archbishop Spottiswood recorded a good many of them and they still crop up in the most recent references to him. One only has to look at the views expressed by Knox's successor in St. Giles, Dr. Charles Warr, revealed in the recent biography by Jasper Ridlely, and Professor Hugh in Trevor-Roper's review of that work, or in current accounts of Mary, Queen of Scots, such as that written by Antonia Fraser, to realize how strongly many dislike Knox, and to encounter the arguments with which they support their attitude.³

On the other hand, in his own day he had many admirers and supporters. Some saw him primarily as an anti-French and pro-English, but nationalist, leader who favored Scottish independence, both political and ecclesiastical. Some also regarded him as the opponent of despotism both episcopal and royal. To them he represented freedom from religious persecution and political oppression. But probably most important of all, his followers looked to him as the man who succeeded in leading Scotland back to a true knowledge and appreciation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Repeatedly we find statements to this effect in the writings of men such as James Melville, Richard Bannatyne and others.⁴ He was to them the apostle of Scotland.

From the days of Andrew Melville who was really his successor down to

the present time, many have held the same opinion. Not until Dr. Thomas M'Crie at the beginning of the nineteenth century and David Laing in the 1860s, worked intensively on Knox's life and writings, however, was much attention devoted to him by those who agreed basically with him. From the time of the publication of his works by Laing in 1864 down to the present time a considerable number of biographies as well as histories of the Scottish Reformation have appeared which have had a favorable attitude to the one whom Geddes MacGregor has termed "The Thundering Scot." Usually those who are prepared to support Knox have been those who have agreed with him theologically and/or politically, and not infrequently, despite all that Knox had to say on the subject of his own shortcomings, have tended to think of him as without blemish or fault.⁵

What is needed, therefore, is a balanced approach to the subject, since Knox rouses such strong feelings in both those who favor and those who dislike him. While objectivity is never entirely possible, we should try to obtain as unbiased an appreciation as possible. This we can best do, I believe, by looking first at the balance of forces in the Scotland of his day, and then by attempting to see what he accomplished.

The Balance of Forces in Knox's Scotland

In seeking to understand Knox's situation and to evaluate his achievements, we must first look rather carefully at the situation in which he found himself, and at the forces which both opposed and favored his attempt to reform the whole of Scottish life. Moreover, since Knox, himself, as well as the Scottish Reformation as a whole, was closely connected with the European movement, we must also take into consideration the European context and conflicts which influenced his thought and action.

The 1540's saw Scotland in a state of near political disintegration. Since the early fifteenth century the country had been constantly plagued with repeated eruptions of feudal lawlessness which brought the kingdom to the brink of civil war. From 1542, the year in which the English defeated a large Scottish invading force, indirectly bringing about the death of James V, down to 1560 the year in which the Reformation officially took place, Scotland's political state was even worse. Although the French interest succeeded in dominating the country, the English were constantly interfering and from 1545 to 1551 were actually occupying parts of the kingdom. The resultant effect was at times one approaching total anarchy.

When we keep in mind that the French party was also the Roman Catholic party, while the pro-English group represented, at least during the reign of Edward VI, the Protestant interest, we can see that more than politics entered the picture. French and English were in conflict in Scotland for both political and religious reasons. Yet although the French element dominated the scene generally, they were not able to destroy the English-Protestant group, partially because of the government's weakness and partially because of English support of the Protestant group, even to the seizure of such strongholds as Broughty Craef, Haddington and Eyemouth.⁶

Yet the Protestants by themselves were able to give little support to the English or to maintain their independence by their own strength. For one thing, they lacked strong leadership. Throughout the 1540's the leader of the pro-English party was in fact a Roman Catholic, the Earl of Angus, although most of his supporters seem to have been Protestant. Even later when the Lords of the Congregation set themselves up in 1557 they appear to have been able to accomplish little until Knox arrived from France to give some sense of purpose and coherence. Thus

political tension was one of the chief characteristics of Scottish life, with the constant threat of civil war hanging over everything.

Yet despite their difficulties the Protestants were increasing in number and influence. Knox's account in his history of the growth of the movement is well borne out by the records of the day, which tell of the vigorous efforts of the church authorities to stem the rising tide by various means. While Mary of Guise, who had become regent in 1554, had for a time appeared complaisant, largely because she did not have the force to do otherwise, once the Treaty of Cateau Cambresis had been signed between France and Spain in 1558, she prepared to take the necessary action with the support of French troops, to wipe out the obnoxious religious movement.⁷

Her hopes and plans were too late, however, not only because of the growth of the Protestants, but because of the condition of the church itself. True, to all outward appearances it was in a very strong position. Owing probably more than half of the country's real estate, headed by Archbishop James Hamilton, half-brother of James Hamilton, Earl of Arran and Duc de Châtelherault, former regent, its position seemed virtually impregnable.⁸ Furthermore, because it represented the element which was devoted to the French cause, it had the hearty backing of Mary of Guise, James V's widow, and a typical representative of the fanatically Roman Catholic family of the Dukes of Lorraine who later organized the Massacre of St. Bartholomew's Eve (1572). From all this, one could hardly have contemplated an easy overthrow of the Roman Church's power in Scotland, though it might happen in England or Germany.

Even these very appearances of strength, however, were in the long run causes of its downfall. For one thing, as in the case of all monopolies, it had become corrupt. Morally it was in a sad state, as anyone may see who reads the acts of the "reforming" councils of the 1550's. Furthermore it was in a low

state intellectually as is shown by a perusal of the introduction to Archbishop Hamilton's catechism. Little or no preaching was done, since the majority of the clergy seem to have been virtually illiterate. There were some scholars such as John Major, Hector Boece and others but they were either teaching a few students in the universities or were serving the crown as government officials. At the level of the average man the church was having relatively little influence beyond the carrying out of certain ceremonies, most of which were in Latin, incomprehensible to the rank and file of the faithful.⁹

This reflected the condition of society as a whole. While the Scots were probably no worse than the English, the French or the Germans, they seem to have been a more openly immoral and violent people. One only has to read through the remissions for murder and other crimes recorded in the Register of the Secret Seal, to obtain some understanding of the social mores of the time. Along with this there was the discontent that was particularly noticeable among both the lairds and the burgesses of the towns. Not only did they have no great interest in the church, but they seem to have felt that they were the exploited element in society. The burgesses were being repeatedly taxed by the crown for its own purposes, often to finance attacks on England, while the lairds were supposed to take part in these attacks as members of the feudal levy. Added to this, inflation was just beginning to take its toll, with the result that the lairds in particular were beginning to feel the pinch. While the great nobles could weather the storm by obtaining royal favors or ecclesiastical benefices for their relatives, neither the gentry nor the townspeople had the same advantages. The result was that this "middle group" were prepared for reform, not merely of the church, but of society as a whole.¹⁰

Yet if reform were to take place, it would need more than a merely negative

attitude toward the government or the church. Some positive program or ideas were needed. Furthermore, leadership also had to be provided, for without someone who would give some moral force to the demand for reform, nothing much would happen, except perhaps an outbreak of terrorism such as that which manifested itself in the murder of Cardinal Beaton in 1548. Reform needed direction. It was this that John Knox provided, and to understand what he did we must glance first at the background out of which he came and then at what he believed he should do.

With regard to his background, we must keep in mind that he came from Lothian, the burgh of Haddington to be exact, an area constantly overrun by the English and often oppressed by the Earl of Bothwell, from nearby Hailes Castle, or by the Earl of Douglas, from Tantallon. The constant threat to life and property suffered by the lairds of this area bred a race tough in fibre and quick in revenge. They did not mince matters. Linked with this group were the burgesses of Haddington and Edinburgh, men who had suffered because of the constant fighting with the English who had actually occupied Haddington and burned Edinburgh to the ground during the "rough wooing" of the late '40's. Knox spoke both for and to these people, the rural and urban "middle class" of the area. Because of this fact they became and remained his most vigorous and faithful backers. To them were joined, also, the burgesses of Perth, Dundee, Montrose, St. Andrews and other urban centers as well as the lairds of Fife, Angus, Mearns and the southwest. His appeal was to the people of the "middling sort" who wanted reform in many aspects of Scottish life.

The nobles, on the other hand, did not seem to have had the same desire to follow his lead. For one thing he was of a low social status, since his father was probably only a farmer. He was not an aristocrat, nor even an aspiring

laird such as Maitland of Lethington. Furthermore, he had few of the "graces" of the aristocracy. He was far too much inclined to speak his mind in terms that might win the support of the burgesses and bonnet lairds, but which would only offend the more polite, if less honest, nobles. Consequently only a few of the nobles ever gave him their full support. Among those who did were the Earl of Glencairn, the Earl of Rothes, Lord Ruthven and a few others. Even the fifth Earl of Argyll and the Earl of Moray, who became regent on Marv's abdication in 1567, turned away from him at least for a time. One might put Queen Mary in the same category, for when she summoned him to her presence to rebuke him for some of the things he had said, he refused to back down although he always remained polite but plain spoken. The result was that both the Queen and the "politiques" around her became his determined enemies. His directness and at times bluntness, did not appeal to Mary's close advisers such as William Maitland of Lethington and others of that ilk.¹¹

But it was not just Knox's social background that shaped his attitudes and expression. He had a deep sense of his calling to be a preacher of the Gospel. He had been summoned by the congregation in St. Andrews to enter the ministry in 1548, which left with him a conviction that this was his life's occupation. As he put it in the introduction to one of the few sermons that he published:

For considering my selfe rather cald of my God to instruct the ignorant comfort the sorowfull, confirme the weak, and rebuke the proud, by tong and lively voyce in these most corrupt dayes, than to compose bokes for the age to come, seeing that so much is written ..., and yet so little well observed; I decreed to containe my selfe within the bondes of that vocation, wherunto I found my selfe especially called.¹²

It was this conviction that enabled him to carry on, despite all opposition and when his cause seemed almost lost, to encourage and stimulate his supporters to continue their struggle to bring about a radical reform in both church and state.

He had his own experiences of doubt and misgivings which led to retreats at times, it is true, but always he returned to his task with vigor fortified by the consciousness that this was the work to which God had called him. We may not agree with his assurance or his actions, but we can hardly doubt his belief in his own calling.

Added to both his background and his sense of calling were the experiences through which he went during the twelve years before his return to Scotland from Geneva in 1559. On one hand, some of his experiences had been negative in character. In England he had been brought face to face with the manoeuvrings of the great nobles of the realm who often supported the Reformation for their own particular economic ends. He had sympathized with the Protector Somerset, but felt that he proved lukewarm in the Gospel. He had, however, apparently come to distrust the Duke of Northumberland completely as only a feigned Protestant. Furthermore, he had known from personal experience what it meant to come under persecution for the faith. He had served nineteen months in a French galley as a slave tugging at an oar. He had seen something of the persecution of the Protestants in England under Mary Tudor, and had heard with anguish the story of the burning of such men as John Hooper, Hugh Latimer, Nicholas Ridley and Thomas Cranmer. He had also read Chandieu's account of the persecution of the Huguenots in Paris, and may even have seen French Protestants burnt at the stake. Consequently when he returned to Scotland he came with certain doubts about the nobility coupled with a deep hatred of the Roman Catholic Church.

On the other hand, he had also reaped some positive benefits from his experiences in England and on the Continent. For one thing he had spent considerable time on both sides of the channel as pastor of congregations. In England he had ministered to the churches in Berwick-on-Tweed and Newcastle-on-Tyne. On the Continent

he had had the unfortunate experience of being the leader of the English refugee congregation in Frankfort during its most difficult days. When forced out of that city he had been called to the English congregation in Geneva; and just before returning to Scotland he had for some months acted as the co-pastor of the French congregation in Dieppe. In all of these churches he had learned something new. He had come to see the best method of organizing such groups. He had helped to prepare confessions, to translate the Bible into plain English and to deal with the various problems which face every shepherd of souls. He had learned much in twelve years.¹³

On his return to Scotland in 1559, therefore, he did not do so as an inexperienced scholar who had only theories in his head. He landed in Leith on May 3rd, a man who had learned how to lead, a man who had been hardened in the fires of persecution and conflict, a man who knew what he wanted in the way of reform and who was prepared to fight for it. At the same time, he was also convinced that he had been called of God to do this work: a man of faith and prayer. Here was the individual who could pull the Protestant forces together to give them encouragement and strength to oppose the dominant forces of France and Roman Catholicism.

Knox's Achievements

At times we may feel that Knox was overly rigid and even harsh in his judgments and actions. But when we consider the forces against which he was fighting both in Scotland and on the Continent, we may be forced to admit that had he not taken the strong stand that he did, he would have accomplished little or nothing. As it was, despite the opposition of the old church, of most of the upper nobility and of the crown, he succeeded in leading the Protestant

forces to victory. True, he had his problems after victory seemed assured in 1560, but he did achieve much more than might have been expected, although not nearly as much as he had hoped.

Probably his most notable accomplishment immediately on his return to Scotland was his restoring of morale to the Protestant forces. Things had not been going well with them. Many had become discouraged and with the set-backs which they suffered in the period just about the time of his landing, they seemed about ready to give up. Repeatedly, however, it was his voice with its clarion call which stimulated them to go on in the name of the Lord. Randolph the English ambassador, spoke of his voice as putting more courage into the Protestants' hearts than the sound of five hundred trumpets continually "blustering in our ears." In this way, Knox laid down the foundation for the ultimate success of the Protestants, by giving them the confidence that ultimately the victory was theirs.¹⁴

His influence, however, was more than purely psychological. He brought to the Scots something that he had imbibed when in Geneva: the concept that the whole of life was to be lived to the glory of God. His view of his own calling to the ministry he repeatedly expressed to both friend and foe alike, but in so doing he also spoke in terms of the calling of others to their work. He did not hesitate to point out to the two queens, Mary and Elizabeth, that they were called to serve God in their sphere. Likewise he repeatedly stressed the same idea to the nobles and to the people in general. His words reported by his servant Robert Bannatyne: "So long as I live, let me live, O Lord, to thy glorie" represent well what he felt all men should do.¹⁵ This point of view he succeeded in impressing on a few, at least, who were to carry on his tradition. He gave the Scots a new pattern of life, a new sense of personal responsibility.

At the more mundane level, he gave them a new church organization with this term being taken in its broadest sense. Largely responsible for the Scots' Confession and the Book of Discipline, he helped to lay down the basic principles upon which the Reformed church in Scotland was to be constructed. True he did not work out all the organizational details, but he sought to make the church as thoroughly Reformed as he possibly could. In this endeavour he was constantly blocked the Roman Catholic opposition, but even by some of those who professed to agree with his views, but who would suffer economically if his plans for the church's financial support were implemented. Nevertheless in 1566 he could assert

For as touching the doctrine taught by our ministers, and as touching the administration of the Sacraments used in our Churches, we are bold to affirm that there is no realm this day upon the face of the earth that hath them in greater purity; yea there is none that hath them in like purity.

His hopes, he felt, had at least been partially realized.¹⁶

His plans and purposes did not stop with the church, for he believed that only a well educated populace would be spiritually sound and mature. Consequently he was very much interested in establishing a school system which would give all Scots adequate training for the service of God and the commonwealth. The Book of Discipline laid down plans for a system of education which would eventually enable those with the necessary mental equipment to attend university. It took a considerable time for this design to be implemented, but eventually it did, so that G. M. Trevelyan could comment that in the Union of 1707 England joined with the best educated nation in Europe.¹⁷

One other influence which Knox had was in the matter of care for the poor. This had always been one of his concerns, so we need hardly be surprised that in the Book of Discipline it also appears. He had seen what a problem

poverty had been to the authorities in Edinburgh, a problem intensified by the depression which was affecting Europe as a whole in the 1560's. But it was not just because of a temporary situation that he insisted on some form of poor relief. He constantly maintained that it was the Christian's duty to care for his brother's economic needs in this world. He had already advised congregations that they should take up collections for the poor at their services of worship, and when he had the opportunity he repeatedly pressed home on the government the importance of its doing something to alleviate the misery of poverty which was so prevalent in Scotland. On numerous occasions he raised the question in the General Assembly of the church to persuade that body to take action to persuade parliament or the Privy Council to attend to the matter. He was by no means always successful, but he undoubtedly had considerable influence in this regard.¹⁸

John Knox, much as he may be disliked in some quarters, undoubtedly exercised a major influence on Scotland - even among those who disagreed with him. By his preaching and his leadership in other ways he undoubtedly affected Scottish character. Even such an anti-Calvinist as Robert Louis Stevenson has to admit this, whether he will or not. Furthermore, he laid down the basis for the later development of Presbyterianism under Andrew Melville which led on to the Covenanters of the 17th century, the seceders of the 18th and the Disruption of 1843. Whether one likes him or not, one cannot but admit that he has had a powerful impact on Scotland.

When we go on to think of the Scottish influence outside of Scotland, we must also admit that Knox has also made his mark abroad, especially in the United States and Canada. The Scots who migrated did not come primarily as mercenary soldiers as they had gone to Europe in the 15th and 16th centuries. They came rather as pioneer settlers whether to North

Carolina, Nova Scotia or the backlands of Ontario. Wherever one turns one finds relics of their advent to this continent, indicating their influence in every sphere of activity and endeavour. The same could be said of Australia and New Zealand and even Africa and the Orient. And with them they took the characteristics which had been moulded and formed from their inheritance of Knoxian Calvinism.

Whether we think of him as a difficult and abrasive individual or even as a figure of fun, we have to acknowledge that Knox achieved much in his own day and generation. Moreover, he did so against great odds and strong opposition. We may learn, moreover, from his experience that despite all opposition a man of Christian faith who has the power to communicate his ideas to people, can do much to change and stimulate even a whole nation to follow new paths and to serve God in its day of opportunity.

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FOOTNOTES

1. J. Knox, WORKS, D. Laing, ed., (Edinburgh, 1864), VI, 139.
2. IBID., VI, 94ff: II, 26f; IV, 354.
3. C. L. Warr, THE PRESBYTERIAN TRADITION, (London, 1933), pp. 250 ff, cf. D. MacKinnon DR. CHARLES L. WARR ON JOHN KNOX, A CRITICISM, (Edinburgh, 1954); J. Ridley JOHN KNOX, (New York, 1968), pp. 465ff; li. Trevor-Roper, JOHN KNOX, THE LISTENER, 80 (1968), 745 ff; A. Fraser, MARY QUEEN OF SCOTS, (New York, 1970), part 2.
4. R. Bannatyne, A JOURNAL OF THE TRANSACTION IN SCOTLAND, (Edinburgh, 1806), pp. 427ff; J. Melville, DIARY, (Edinburgh, 1829), p. 21.
5. T. M'Crie, LIFE OF JOHN KNOX, (Edinburgh, 1806); G. MacGregor, THE THUNDERING SCOT, (Philadelphia, n.d.).
6. Ridley, OP.CIT., chap.I; M.H. Merriman, "The assured Scots: Scottish collaboration with England during the Rough Wooing," SCOTTISH HISTORICAL REVIEW, XLVII (1968) 10ff; J. N. Charteris, The Rise of the English Party in Scotland (1524-43) [Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, McGill, Montreal], passim.
7. JOHN KNOX'S HISTORY OF THE REFORMATION IN SCOTLAND, W.C. Dickinson, ed., (Edinburgh, 1949), I, 42ff.
8. ACCOUNTS OF THE COLLECTORS OF THE THIRDS OF BENEFICES, 1561-1572, G. Donaldson, ed., (Edinburgh: Scottish Hist. Soc., 1949), p.viif; W. L. Mathieson, POLITICS AND RELIGION, Glasgow, 1902), pp. 27ff; I.F. Grant, SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF SCOTLAND BEFORE 1603, (Edinburgh, 1930), pp.223ff.
9. STATUTES OF THE SCOTTISH CHURCH 1225-1559, D. Patrick, ed., (Edinburgh: S.H.S., 1907), pp. 84ff; THE CATECHISM OF JOHN HAMILTON, , T.G. Law, ed., (Oxford, 1884), Introduction and Preface; D. H. Fleming, THE REFORMATION IN SCOTLAND, (London, 1910), pp.39ff.
10. Grant, OP.CIT., pp. 384ff; W.S. Reid, SKIPPER FROM LEITH, (Philadelphia, 1962), passim; W.S. Reid, "The coming of the Reformation to Edinburgh," CHURCH HISTORY, 42, (1973), pp. 27ff.

11. Knox, HISTORY, II, 13ff, 43f, 72ff, 93, 108ff; 134f.
12. Knox, WORKS, VI, 229.
13. In order to gain an understanding of the impact which these various experiences had on Knox it is necessary to read through most of the six volumes of his collected works.
14. Knox, HISTORY, I, 265ff; CALENDAR OF SCOTTISH PAPERS, J. Bain, ed., (Edinburgh, 1898), I, no. 1017.
15. Bannatyne, OP.CIT., (Edinburgh, 1836), p. 16.
16. Knox, HISTORY, II, 3, I, 343ff.
17. IBID., II, 295ff.; G.M. Trevelyan, A SHORTENED HISTORY OF ENGLAND, (London, 1942), p.342.
18. Knox OP.CIT., II, 290f, 302f.