

Reformed discipline in an early modern Scottish burgh

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A review of

Margo Todd (ed.), *The Perth Kirk Session Book, 1577-1590* (Woodbridge: Scottish History Society, 2012) ISBN 978-0-906-24531-6, Hardback, x + 574pp., £40.

This volume is a welcome addition to the publication list of the Scottish History Society. Covering one of the earliest extant documents pertaining to the Reformation in the important burgh of Perth, a town of some five to six thousand inhabitants in this era, the volume covers a critical period of reception of reformed ideas. The document, produced by the lowest rung of the Reformed ecclesiastical structure, the kirk session, provides an array of moral offences defined by the established Kirk system. It is helpful to see this volume as part of a wider revision in the historiography of the Scottish Reformation. The editor is unapologetic in her assertion that narratives of a 'top-down', government-led, Scottish Reformation are 'truncated' (1). Instead, Todd prefers to see the Reformation as a process, 'a parochial endeavour', predicated on lay interest and action (2). The dazzling array of detail contained within the minutes encourages such a nuanced, parochial, approach.

The volume certainly throws up cases pertaining to a variety of topics. In the introduction, the editor lists a great many of these, from 'the ravages of plague' to 'quarrels and gossip' (4). The 1583 case of a dead child being found during the digging of a grave provides a level of detail that few other documents can achieve (260). Such insights provide an almost unparalleled insight into the mundane and the extraordinary in early modern Scotland. One cannot deny the intriguing possibilities such cases raise. However, one would have liked to see the editor, at least in the extensive footnotes or useful introduction, to also delineate some of the deficiencies of such documents. Although it is absurd to argue from silence, research into Reformed communities in the Low Countries has illuminated 'off the record' cases, where certain misdemeanours were not recorded. The fact that Todd's magisterial work *The Culture of Protestantism in Early Modern Scotland*, noted this problem makes its omission here, or the lack of emphasis, all the more puzzling.

The editor should be applauded for her excellent knowledge of the layout of the burgh. The level of depth Todd provides on the spatial layout of Perth shows how Reformed structures were heavily influenced by their setting. Indeed, Todd notes that the plethora of additional information available to the historian of Perth encouraged the production of the volume, as the session minutes 'need to be read with...the material structures of the town clearly in mind' (13). While this detail helps the reader appreciate the Kirk's ownership of, or involvement in, a number of properties dotted throughout the burgh, such as the Hospital, it also shows how certain areas, such as the meadows at the north and south limits of the burgh, could be troublesome to the authorities and magnets for unedifying activities.

The contents of the session book presents the Kirk as less intransigent and more flexible than one may normally assume. The 1579 case of John Scott and Alexander Finlayson being temporarily excused from their public show of repentance, until the strangers present at the burgh market had left town, is particularly interesting and shows (in Todd's words) the 'limitations to the embarrassment that penitents must undergo' (136). The 1581 case that invited engaged couples to attend the kirk at night to be taught the catechism prior to marriage indicates that despite the importance of doctrinal knowledge, local kirk authorities were more than willing to provide people with opportunities to learn (182). Such local cases

begin to suggest the local variation and negotiation inherent in the application of reformed discipline.

The editor's extensive knowledge of early modern Perth is used to excellent effect in identifying the session elders. Appendix I is a research project in its own right, listing the extant biographical information of all the burgh session elders from 1576-90. The amount of research involved in the process of identification is impressive and establishes a standard for other scholars in the future. One has to ask, however, if documents that lack this corroborating evidence are as useful as this session book? In enmeshing the Perth session book into its cultural milieu, surviving session books that lack credible supporting material to identify elders or common offenders with precision may be undermined.

The volume benefits from a sympathetic editorial style. Unlike previous editions pioneered by Victorian antiquaries, Todd has chosen to present the minute books in full and without omission. This allows readers to follow disciplinary cases until their closure (one reason Todd chose to include the first forty-five folios of the 1590 manuscript was to allow 'some of the more salient stories...to reach their conclusions' (5)). More practically, the editorial method preserves the original vernacular spelling peculiar to the early modern Scots dialect.

This volume is a satisfying product of the excellent recent work done on the Scottish Reformation. As Todd is a leading exemplar of the nuanced, local, approach to the process of Protestant reform in Scotland, it is unsurprising that she is also at the forefront of making such local materials available to a wider readership. Although one must ask how representative Perth can possibly be in our understanding of the Reformation, this volume allows future local studies, in Scotland and other reformed territories, to compare and contrast their findings. Furthermore, the informative introduction, the pleasing footnotes and the sensitivity of editing shows how more work of this type can help move us away from an over reliance on the, occasionally selective, transcriptions of the late nineteenth century.