

### **'Half the story?'**

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A review of

**Alasdair Raffe, *The Culture of Controversy. Religious Arguments in Scotland, 1660–1714***

(Studies in Modern British Religious History, Boydell Press: Woodbridge, 2012). ISBN 978-1-84383-729-9, Hardback, 289pp+xv, 2 maps, 4 figures, £55.

The Restoration remains an understudied subject in Scottish history, as does early-modern Scotland's religious complexity. In this, his first monograph, Raffe makes a valuable contribution to both. Attempting to draw on a Habermasian framework, the book addresses the processes involved in 'constructing a public', but as the author himself notes, the scarcity of sources for late-seventeenth-century Scotland means that the study relies heavily on printed and manuscript polemics. While these are indicative of their authors' ambitions, they do not necessarily give insight into their reception by or influence upon the broader public and can only provide limited glimpses of a 'public sphere'.

Through three sections the book sets out first, in the lengthy introduction, a typology of religious identity. The second section, gives an account of the affects persecution and polemic had on creating previously non-existent divisions, exemplified by the rise of fanaticism and assaults on clerical reputations. The final substantive section deals with patterns of nonconformity and crowd violence, both Presbyterians against unwanted episcopal intrusions in the 1660s and Episcopalian resistance to the 1690 reestablishment of Presbyterianism. Raffe's thesis is that the bitterness of religious division was created and exacerbated between 1660 and the 1690s and perhaps, of equal importance, theological distinctions were developed and articulated. While his assessment of political material is highly commendable, the study highlights the limitations of a strict period study.

Raffe essentially argues that little religious division existed in Scotland at the Restoration. The overwhelming majority of Scots – at least two-thirds (p. 33) – conformed to Episcopacy after 1662. The nature of this conformity varied from person to person, but he argues that for most people this entailed at least occasional attendance at church and dissent was episodic in nature. Because the details of individual opinions have not been preserved he draws the conclusion that it makes 'little sense to describe' those who regularly attended their parish churches after 1662, even if only occasionally, as Presbyterians before 1687. As a result, Raffe terms those that conform, even if unenthusiastically, 'episcopal' and those that did not 'presbyterian' (p. 34). These assertions are highly significant, not least because it claims a widespread conformity that challenges existing historiography. Yet more importantly, it allows Raffe to argue that 'the essential uniformity of mid-seventeenth-century religious culture' (p. 45) extended beyond the covenanting period into the Restoration and to claim the crux of his argument: the delineation between Presbyterian and Episcopalian parties was created between 1662 and 1714. This later claim, however, fails to take into account the previous century of Scottish church history. Both David Stevenson and Laura Stewart have shown Scots were polarised over these issues from the 1610s through the 1640s while David Mullan and Margo Todd have argued that, while both of these camps may have tended toward the more Calvinist end of the seventeenth-century British theological spectrum, these divisions ran deep. In this respect Raffe's study explains the swing of the pendulum back to a prior status quo without explaining the important paradigm shift in between.

The crucial issue that remains unaddressed in this book is not how Presbyterianism re-emerged in late-seventeenth-century Scotland, but rather why the masses abandoned it almost overnight at the Restoration. The answer rests, to a large degree, on two key factors that get little attention in the book. First, the sense of dejection brought about the failure of the Covenanting revolution led not only to a fragmentation of Scottish Presbyterianism (which Raffe identifies as less 'serious' than the later division between Presbyterians and Episcopalians, p. 33), but also to some significant criticism of the covenants. In fact, divisions ran so deep that (as Raffe notes) the majority of Scots chose to accept the Restoration settlement. Second, the form of episcopacy that Scots chose to submit themselves to at the Restoration was not completely other. While bishops were reintroduced, much of the rest of Scotland's ecclesiastical structures remained, including kirk sessions, presbyteries and

synods, albeit in moderated forms. Raffe gives little credence to Walter Foster's *Bishop and Presbytery* (1958), which emphasises the continuance of kirk sessions permitted sustained lay participation, if to a lesser degree than under a Presbyterian system. In this regard, the milieu out of which Raffe's culture of controversy developed needs to be more fully contextualised.

As Raffe notes radical dissent increased over time and this drew on the covenants, but it was the appropriation of covenanting ideals by a younger generation who had not experienced the disappointment of the failed Covenanting revolution first hand that fuelled hardening dissent, particularly among the United Societies. These individuals remained a minority and even at the re-establishment of a Presbyterian state church in 1690, their ideals were rejected. The fact that the re-establishment of the Presbyterian kirk was based on the precepts of the Westminster Assembly and not on the covenants highlighted the significant transition that had occurred. Yet, as Raffe expresses in his book, the issue of discarding the covenants was a tricky task. However recent research has demonstrated that the increase of hard-line religious dissent coincided with a shift away from an emphasis on corporate election and the rise of Evangelicalism and an increased emphasis on personal conversion.<sup>1</sup> This transition is theologically very significant, for conversion required a degree of personal agency that the theology of the early covenanting period did not allow for. In this sense, the shift in focus away from the corporate to the individual is important and its significance within the dissenting tradition needs to be further explained.

Overall, Raffe's book addresses many of the processes at work during the latter half of the seventeenth century, but his starting point skews the overall picture. The Restoration did not take place in a society that was theologically apathetic or ignorant of the distinctions between Episcopalian and Presbyterian forms of state church. Nor was the controversy that arose in the period motivated primarily by popular factors. Rather, the legacy of the previous twenty years had traumatised the people of Scotland and left deep scars. The widespread conformity to the Restoration church represented a means for dealing with the failure of covenanted presbyterianism rather than ignorance or indifference towards the two forms of church government and the theological traditions that accompanied them. But where Raffe does indicate a shift in theological traditions among Episcopalians, he is right to note that it was a shift towards an anglicised Episcopal tradition. As such, the polemics produced by ideologues advocating the movement away from the Restoration settlement, as well as the heavy handed tactics of the state to maintain it, served to polarise a public which in 1662 was weary of what such processes had produced in previous decades. The hardening Presbyterian position among a confident generation that had not themselves experienced the covenanting experiment, on the one hand, and the bold anglicisation of Episcopalians, on the other, led to the resurgence of culture of controversy rather than its invention. While Raffe's book is a very well-researched and clearly presented study of polemics during the period studied, it is difficult to address the second half of the seventeenth century without taking into account the culture of controversy that shaped the first.

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<sup>1</sup> David G. Mullan, *Narratives of the Religious Self in Early-Modern Scotland* (Farnham, 2010).