

Chapter 1

John Knox and the Legacy of Religious Education

For the preservation of religion it is most expedient that scholes be universally erected in all cities and chief townes, the oversight whereof to be committed to the magistrates and godly learned men of the said cities and towns.

—John Knox, First Book of Discipline (1560)

John Knox (1514-1572): A Complex Character in a Complex Land

There is a popular characterisation in modern times of Scotland as a land, after achieving its own religious reformation in the mid-sixteenth century, in which its people were subjected to a cold and ruthless religious domination, brought from John Calvin's Geneva, which imposed a new theological slavery upon them. Some, like the late celebrated modern literary figure Tom Nairn, affirmed most of his life that Scotland would not be free until the last Church of Scotland (Presbyterian) minister was strangled by a copy of the *Sunday Post*, a popular and somewhat moralistic newspaper.

Calvinism undoubtedly had a severe and joyless aspect to it which in small quantities has lasted until modern times. A story is told in the mid-eighteenth century of two elders of the Kirk¹ who, faced

1. In Scotland the National Church is known colloquially as 'The Kirk'.

with an icy journey to attend worship on the Sabbath day, decided to skate there. Such seeming frivolity led to the two being paraded before their fellow elders and being asked to explain their behaviour and such desecration of the holiness of the Lord's Day. They admitted to the deed, but were exonerated when they solemnly declared that neither of them had derived any pleasure from the experience.

Undoubtedly the most influential religious figure in the second half of the sixteenth century in Scotland was a close friend and disciple of John Calvin of Geneva, John Knox. Knox was born in c.1514 in the town of Haddington, East Lothian. His father is most likely to have been a tenant farmer of the Earl of Bothwell, and John acknowledged the military service that several generations of Knox's had given in the conflict between Scotland and England, culminating for the time in the Battle of Flodden, months before he was born. Being raised in difficult times, with Haddington very much in the front line of further threats of invasion from the South, the young Knox, not having the privilege of being the oldest son in the family and inheriting land, followed that other current avenue for employment – a career in the church. He flourished at the 'Song School' attached to St Mary's Church in Haddington, and his aptitude in studies of liturgy and the Vulgate Bible propelled him towards the priesthood. He attended the University of St Andrews and was ordained a Roman Catholic priest in 1536.²

The Scotland within which Knox grew up was reckoned by many to be one of the most culturally backward nations in Western Europe. Certainly it contained in Glasgow, St Andrews and Aberdeen three of the five universities in what would shortly be the United Kingdoms of Scotland and England (the other two being Oxford and Cambridge). Yet the teaching of those who were able to attend these institutions was heavily prescribed and controlled by the Roman Catholic Church. What was different in Scotland was that, whereas Oxford and Cambridge selected their students on the basis of wealth or influence, Scottish universities from the start were places in which gifted young men could find a place, regardless of their ordinary birth.

Under the influence of Patrick Hamilton (1504-28) and George Wishart (1513-46), two early reformers who were later to pay for their allegiance with their lives, Knox became more disillusioned with the

2. Jane Dawson, *John Knox* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015) pp. 2-4. Professor Dawson's study of the Scottish Reformer has quickly been recognised as the definitive modern one.

Catholic Church. He produced fiery sermons, including one in St Andrews that compared the Pope to the Antichrist. After the murder of Cardinal Beaton in revenge for his execution of Wishart at the stake, the rebels protected Knox. However fortunes changed, and by 1547 St Andrews castle was besieged by the French on the invitation of Mary of Guise. For the next nineteen months John Knox, and other prisoners captured there, were condemned to serve as galley slaves on French ships.³

The Reformation in Europe

England had become officially Protestant under the regency of the boy king Edward VI, and on his release, Knox found employment as a priest of the Church of England. It was not a comfortable position, and in sermons in the court and country he sailed close to the wind by attempting to reform the Anglican Prayer Book, and outlawing the practice of kneeling at prayers. In 1554, with the accession of Mary Tudor and England's return to Roman Catholicism, John Knox sailed over the English channel to the continent of Europe.

His first significant encounter with Protestantism in Europe was a meeting with John Calvin in Geneva where, through the latter's influence, he was later to serve as minister of one of the new churches in the city. More immediately, he received an invitation to lead a congregation of English exiles in Frankfurt, something that Calvin encouraged. He found their adherence to the Book of Common Prayer not to his liking, and after he had published a pamphlet attacking the Holy Roman Emperor, in whose domain Frankfurt lay, he had to leave Germany and spent two years preaching and teaching in Geneva.

A brief return to Scotland was made in 1555 at the request of his wife Margery Bowes, who had not followed him into exile. Political power had shifted to Scottish nobles such as the Earls of Moray and Mar, both sympathetic to the Protestant cause, and Knox spent a great deal of time preaching and speaking about Calvinist doctrine. Despite attempts by the bishops to bring him to trial in Edinburgh, there was no action taken by the Queen Regent, to whom he sent a

3. This was a familiar fate for defeated enemies of little social status. Its harsh and unremitting conditions led to a very short lifespan as the same did for enslaved people on the plantations in the West Indies.

polite letter which she treated as a joke. It called on her to support the Reformation and dismiss all the bishops.⁴

Knox's time in Geneva prepared him for the kind of role he proposed to play in a Scotland riven with the rivalries of religious parties and the insecure position of Mary of Guise. In January 1559 he left Geneva, but took longer than usual to reach Scotland due to Queen Elizabeth of England's refusal, not for the first time, to issue him a passport to travel through England. Although he was an outlaw by the decree of the Queen Regent, he was well protected by growing Scottish support, and preached in St Andrews and St Giles Cathedral in Edinburgh. Mary of Guise called French and English troops to her aid, but after her death in June 1560 a peace treaty was signed in Edinburgh, foreign troops were sent away and the Protestants were firmly in the saddle of power.

Forging A New 'Godly Commonwealth'

Within days Parliament adopted the Scots Confession of Faith, condemned doctrine and practice contrary to the Reformed faith, revoked the jurisdiction in Scotland of the Pope and forbade celebration of the Mass.⁵ At Knox's moment of triumph his wife died, leaving him to care for two young children. This in no way cooled his zeal in challenging the young Mary Queen of Scots. On an early encounter, when she asked him whether subjects had a right to resist a ruler, he responded that if they exceeded their lawful limits, they might be resisted. Yet he qualified this by differentiating between active and passive resistance, and contended that madness or persecution in the behaviour of rulers justified rebellion. Some of the Protestant nobles, fearing that Knox's extremism might force a total breakdown of relationships between the Kirk and the Queen, cited Calvin as a source of the duty of obedience to the authorities. Knox for his part was disappointed not to get a response from his mentor in Geneva

4. G. MacGregor, *The Thundering Scot* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1957), pp. 81-83.

5. The Scots Confession of Faith 1560. This document and the First Book of Discipline were drawn up by a group of six ministers, all of whom happened to have John as their Christian names! Although Knox played a crucial role in determining the contents, he worked with colleagues as 'a voice among many'. Dawson, *John Knox*, p. 191.

to support his attempts to get Mary's private celebration of Mass forbidden, He asked Calvin 'whether that subjects might put to their hand to suppress the idolatry of their Prince?' Much has been made of the conflict between Knox and the young Queen Mary, but in fact despite these fierce clashes over religion, they were able to cooperate in many matters of state and once acted together as marriage advisers for some of the nobles.⁶

After the Scots Confession, the next major task for Knox and the reformers, was to draw up, for Parliament's approval, a manual for the good order of the Kirk (now the National Church in Scotland) and an outline for the Christian Commonwealth that he hoped it would become, with church and state working together. In 1560 he and colleagues presented to Parliament *The First Book of Discipline*. Much of it was devoted to education, available to all. It was a strong indication of the Genevan pattern that saw church and state combining within the reformed Christian framework, not just a set of rules for control or even punishment (though at all too many times it was that) but as a manual for church organisation and Christian education.⁷

It declared that to 'Promote the moral culture of every child and the highest good of the community; schools were held to be necessary to establish the Reformed faith.' Schools were to be established in every parish, with schoolmasters appointed by the Kirk, who would teach 'grammar and the Latin tongue' and work with the minister or a lay reader, whose task in this regard was 'take care over the children and youth of the parish' and instruct them in the Reformed Christian faith. Then followed a pattern to establish colleges in every town where the arts, 'at least logic and rhetoric together with the tongues', should be taught.

Above all this document was intended to be a manual, not just for the Kirk, but for what in the centuries after, and in the minds of influential later churchmen such as Thomas Chalmers, was envisioned

6. Dawson, *John Knox*, pp. 86-87, 139-40. The issue of resistance to an unjust ruler (or a heretical one) was discussed with Calvin, who advised caution and cited Romans 13 on 'obedience' to divinely appointed rulers, but admitted 'passive disobedience' was permissible. Knox went a great deal further and supported radical plans for a revolution against Mary Tudor in England in 1554.

7. The vision for education in a reformed Scottish nation applied in another cultural context, the African one, is explored by Professor Graham Duncan, 'John Knox and Education', HTS Theological Studies, Vol. 3, No 3 (University of Pretoria 2017). Not paginated -Open Access.

as ‘the Godly Commonwealth’ that was Knox’s vision for a Reformed Scotland. Although the freedom from the constrictions of the alliance of church and state in medieval Scotland was one of the attractions in Reformed Protestantism, Calvin’s Geneva saw a different yet equally restrictive alliance, between ministers and magistrates, rather than bishops and kings. The Scots Confession and Book of Discipline, however, allowed some freedom of dissent, and within the ‘Godly Commonwealth’ more recognition was given to individual expression.

Scottish and Transatlantic Legacy

Oliver Cromwell appropriated the title of ‘Commonwealth’ into his government of England, and clearly the Puritan tradition that led to many of the early settlements in North America held to that ideal, and to a freedom to establish such a rule, having fled in the seventeenth century from religious persecution in England. History is always a complex web of cause and effect and it is an irony that many of those whose lives were in mortal danger or who laboured under severe repression in Europe were not slow to practise genocide on other so-called ‘heathen’ original inhabitants, and to make chattels of those who crossed the ocean from Africa and their descendants.

John Knox died over two centuries before America broke away from what the colonists there, or a majority of them, saw as the tyranny of rule from Britain, and well before the enforced exodus of people from Africa in chains reached the flood that it would become in the eighteenth century. Knox was in no position to offer a theological response to chattel slavery. For those nineteen months between 1547 and 1549 he had tasted a similar experience as a rower on a French ship. The captives were chained by leg irons to their bench and when they went ashore they were denied shoes to prevent the success of any attempts to escape. The whip was used to ensure the level of production, and the food provided was inadequate to sustain them. Knox apparently made little mention of his time in captivity, but it had a serious effect on his health and throughout the rest of his life he suffered from digestive problems.⁸ Cynics might allege that it accounted for his short temper brought on by dyspepsia.

There is no doubt that one of his enduring legacies were the plan, later carried forward by his successors, for universal education, whose gradual implementation in the nation long after Knox’s death in

8. Dawson, *John Knox*, p. 53.

1572 made Scotland in later centuries one of the leading countries in Europe both in literacy and in knowledge of the scriptures. His own passion for the combination of education and evangelism to reach the humblest as much as the most elevated in the land was caught in places and centuries far from his own.

That vision and knowledge of the Christian faith and the scriptures could be easily perverted and used to justify so much human behaviour that was destructive. There was a coldness about the Calvinist legacy in Scotland, a harsh and dictatorial aspect to it, and all too often it was appropriated to justify some cruel and pitiless practices that were the antithesis of the master that adherents claimed to follow. Knox was a paradoxical man, perhaps reflecting the burgeoning Calvinist faith that he embraced, and in which he died. But despite that, and perhaps because of the fighting spirit in the man and his passion for the spread of the Christian faith, he was to leave in Scotland and amongst the farflung inheritors of his legacy, a desire to make the scriptures and other learning the means of and the tools for a new society, and for the salvation of souls. For those who needed to exercise total control over the lives of other men and women, such seeds through education could lead to a very profound threat to their domination.