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Published in:
Reformed Theological Journal

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:
Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal

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TELLING TALES

A Survey of Scottish Covenanter Historiography

David G. Whitla

David G. Whitla is a minister of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in North America, and a PhD candidate at Queens University Belfast.

Recent years have witnessed a remarkable renewal of scholarly interest in the political and religious history of seventeenth-century Scotland. The Scottish Covenanters have been traditionally viewed by ‘the academy’ as religious bigots whose story was kept alive exclusively by their ideological descendants, the most narrow-minded of Presbyterian hagiographers. This perception is now slowly changing, and it is an important moment for historians in sympathy with the subject to join the academic conversation.

The purpose of this article is twofold. First, to supply a brief chronological overview and analysis of Covenanter historiography from the late 17th century to the present. This is admittedly a rather ambitious and potentially onerous task, but it is a necessary starting point for fresh studies in the field, and given the renewed interest, it is hoped, a timely one. It is surely the task of any Christian historian to examine the historical evidence in as even-handed a manner as possible, and then to ‘set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us’ (Luke 1:1). Of course, historical evidence must be interpreted, and this is where the historian’s sympathies are inevitably revealed, even as he seeks to ‘write an orderly account’ (Luke 1:3). Historiography is to history what hermeneutics is to Scripture. If there can be no neutrality in the historiographical task, then there can and must be objectivity. The narrative published by an historian of the Covenanters, or of any other subject, is not inspired like the Lucan narrative in Scripture, but it must reflect an honest, contextual reading and interpretation of extant sources. It has been all too easy for secular scholars simply to dismiss as ‘biased’ any studies of early modern Scottish religious history that come from writers who are unapologetically sympathetic to the Covenanters; however, this attitude has not been the exclusive preserve of the secular historian.

The second purpose of the article is to provide a tool that might help a new generation of Covenanter historians to produce fresh and balanced studies of the subject, by prudently engaging with not only classic works on the subject (many of which need to undergo some scrutiny themselves), but in particular what has often previously been dismissed by them as ‘biased’ or ‘secular’ scholarship, and thus of no particular value. Certainly, upon evaluation, these latter studies may indeed prove to be precisely that, but an honest historian with a firm commitment to Christ as Lord of history and a belief in his providential involvement in the story of nations in both judgment and revival, may actually be surprised by the even-handedness and favourable reassessment that is emerging, especially in some recent studies by historians who would eschew any such commitments as beyond the pale of academic respectability. He may of course draw very different conclusions from the same evidence, but how often has critical primary source material been overlooked by a latter-day

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1 For the purposes of this article, we will consider the Covenanting period to be from 1638-1688, incorporating the Early Covenanter movement in its ascendency (1638-51), under Cromwellian rule (1651-60) and the later Covenanting period, best known for its martyrs (1660-88).
Covenanter historian through a refusal to engage with the secular scholar who unearthed it from the rich seams of his own church’s archives in the first place?

In surveying studies both sympathetic and unsympathetic to the subject, I have of necessity needed to be selective, but in outlining the main historiographical schools and their proponents in as objective a way as possible, it is hoped that the Christian historian may be introduced to the main names and texts he will encounter in his task, have a better understanding of the historiographical context in which they wrote, and so use their works with greater discernment and care. While not simply an annotated bibliography (which would make for even drier reading!), the footnotes nevertheless supply an extensive reading list that it is hoped will increase this article’s usefulness, providing a current survey of the state of scholarship in the field.

One caution should be borne in mind before proceeding. There is a contemporary phenomenon common among many younger Reformed historians (and the Christian blogosphere is replete with examples) of undertaking the task of reassessing cherished historiographical narratives with what can only be described as deconstructivist glee. Revelling in the newfound liberty of freedom from the historiographical straight-jacket of one’s traditional party line on the church’s past, their primary goal appears to be the joyful toppling of denominational sacred cows. Such tends to be the overreaction to well-worn denominational histories that are often admittedly replete with hagiography, the simplistic reductionism of complex contextual factors, and embarrassing inaccuracies.

While this article urges a measured, discerning interaction with all the materials available to denominational historians, it is not the intent of the writer to give any comfort to such wrecking-ball historiography. Ancient boundary-markers should not be lightly removed (Proverbs 22:28). Hagiography is not history, and we do not honour our heroes by whitewashing them, neither should we take pleasure in the necessary task of revealing the personal faults and theological miscalculations of our honoured martyrs and witnesses – lessons the Bible’s own historical honesty teaches us. Rather, the task should be undertaken with a due sense of humility and respect for the subject itself, and indeed, the men and women and movements of the past that we cherish. Our heart’s motives will determine the spirit in which this task is undertaken, which must at the very least include a commitment to the ninth commandment in our historical methodology.

**Early Interpretations: Two ‘Party Lines’**

Ever since the Restoration of Charles II in 1660, popular interpretations of the Covenanters and their vision of British covenanted uniformity may be classified into what may be crudely called two ‘party lines’ – the echoes of which may be heard in more scholarly interpretive schools in subsequent centuries.

The first popular ‘party line’ was the one initially promoted by the restored Stuart government, which was formally enshrined in the works of the King’s advocate, Sir George Mackenzie, notably his *Vindication of the government in Scotland during the reign of King Charles II*, which branded the Covenanter movement as ‘a Rebellion [in which]…Covenants
were entred into by a part of the Subjects, and by them impos’d imperiously upon the rest’. ²
In summarizing this approach Laura Stewart writes,

That Covenanters were responsible for bringing disaster down upon not only their
native land, but also the entire archipelago, was asserted as political orthodoxy
after Charles II…was restored to his British throne. People were encouraged to
remember Covenanted government not as a comparatively representative and
accountable regime that committed itself to meaningful parliamentary oversight,
but as tyranny by committee.³

The brutal efforts to suppress the ‘whig rebels’ north of the border throughout the reigns
of Charles II and James II had ensured a regular flow of similar anti-Covenanter satire at a
popular level from Aphra Behn, George Hickes and others, that ingrained in the British
imagination the trope of ‘phanatical Protestants’.⁴

At the other popular extreme, of course, was the ‘party line’ embraced by those very
‘phanatics’ – the inheritors of the Covenanters’ political and theological legacy, many of
whom laid down their lives for the Covenanter cause under Stuart tyranny. This perspective
was enshrined in the many declarations of the Cameronian ‘United Societies’ towards the end
of the Stuart era. These explanations of Covenanter history perpetuated the old
historiographical tradition of Buchanan, Calderwood and Row, bringing these first-generation
histories of the Reformation up to date, to include the high watermark of Covenanter rule
(1638-51) and the subsequent sufferings of a godly remnant (1660-88) in one seamless
narrative of God’s providence towards the godly nation of Scotland.

While the former ‘party line’ which stereotyped the dour Scottish Calvinist has ever remained
a favourite subject of popular, and at times, ‘scholarly’ derision, the latter historiographical
tradition has also proved remarkably resilient. In the eighteenth century, the dissenting
remnant of Covenanters denominations on both sides of the Atlantic – the Reformed
Presbyterian Churches – were bound to this particular interpretative strain in a series of
‘Historical Testimonies’ to which members subscribed.⁵ Such an approach interpreted the

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⁴ Aphra Behn, The Roundheads; or, the Good Old Cause, a comedy (London, 1682); George Hickes, The Spirit
of Popery Speaking out of the mouths of phanatical-Protestants (London, 1680). See Janette Currie, ‘History,
hagiography, and fakestory: representations of the Scottish Covenanters in non-fictional and fictional texts from
1638 to 1835’ (PhD thesis, University of Stirling, 1999), p1-56.
⁵ The most notable examples are The Act, Declaration and Testimony for the Whole of Our Covenanted
Reformation (1761), sometimes known as the Ploughlandhead Testimony, which became the formal testimony
of the Reformed Presbytery in Scotland (1761) and Ireland (1763), and the ‘Historical Testimony’ section of
Reformation Principles Exhibited (Philadelphia, 1806), which performed the same function for Covenanter
emigrants in America. For scholarly studies of the Covenanter tradition in America, see Joseph S Moore,
Founding Sins: How a group of antislavery radicals fought to put Christ into the Constitution (Oxford, 2015), in
Ireland, Thomas Charles Donachie, Irish Covenanters: Politics and Society in the Nineteenth Century (Belfast,
2016), and in Canada, Eldon Hay, The Covenanters in Canada: Reformed Presbyterianism from 1820 to the
Present Day (Montreal, 2012). While the precise binding nature of an ‘historical testimony’ has been disputed
by contemporary Covenanters, it seems clear that these documents nevertheless helpfully enshrined for
Reformed Presbyterians an ‘official historiography’ which embodied their witness to the past as a grounds for a
distinctive stand on a number of issues in the present. This practice of formal historic testimony-bearing has
been discontinued (with the exception of minority groups like the Steelites), though the importance of historical
period of the ‘Second Reformation’ through a theological, often eschatological prism, and maintained that the Covenants were perpetually binding upon the three kingdoms, committing its adherents to continue the struggle for a Covenanted Reformation.6

Martyrologies that recorded the sufferings of the early and later Covenanting periods soon emerged, epitomized by two justly famous works: Robert Wodrow’s History of the Sufferings of the Church of Scotland, from the Restoration to the Revolution (1721) and John Howie’s Biographia Scoticana (1775, later reprinted as The Scots Worthies), both of which saw many successive editions, and remain in print. An antiquarian of remarkable productivity, Wodrow imbibed a similar interpretation of Providence in his multi-volume History, a Presbyterian apologia written in the context of aggressive Episcopalian revisionism,7 and the emerging Scottish Enlightenment, ‘when’, he wrote, ‘Providence itself is openly attacked by Satan’s emissaries, the Deists and the Freethinkers upon the one hand, and the true godly are at so low an ebb in their practical improvement of the sweet management of Providence’.8 While the History has been criticized for its hagiographic qualities and pre-critical approach to historical documents, its inclusion of massive quantities of unedited manuscripts and eyewitness accounts mean that its source materials continue to hold crucial value to the historian, and no serious student of the period can afford to neglect it.9 In a similar vein, Howie’s Scots Worthies, while containing much sentiment that contemporary scholars reasonably dismiss as hagiography, nonetheless ‘performed valuable service by rescuing from oblivion much important material which, without his painstaking efforts, would certainly have perished’.10

rootedness and legacy is maintained by the publications and activities of historical committees of the respective synods.


10 Maurice Grant, ‘Howie, John’ in Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology (1993), p.414. The Scots Worthies is maintained in print by the Banner of Truth Trust. Some other noteworthy volumes in this genre that are essential resources include the anonymous work The Cloud of Witnesses for the Royal Prerogatives of Jesus Christ: Being the Last Speeches and Testimonies of Those who Suffered for the Truth in Scotland Since the Year 1680 (Edinburgh, 1714), Patrick Walker’s 1727 work, Six Saints of the Covenant, (ed. David Hay Fleming, London, 1901); The Secret and True History of the Church of Scotland from the Restoration to the Year 1678 (Edinburgh, 1817), by James Kirkton (1628-99). The former two have been reprinted by Sprinkle Publications (1989) and Blue Banner (1995) respectively, but Kirkton remains difficult to find. Scanned copies of all these titles are nonetheless available at Google Books and the Internet Archive. The value of these texts lies in the use of eyewitness interviews (especially in the case of Walker), and their
The ‘Whig’ Historiography

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the story of the Covenanters became increasingly subsumed into what is commonly called a broader Scottish ‘whig’ historiography, influenced by the Enlightenment – a ‘history of liberty’, in which their conflict with the Stuart kings was presented as a glorious episode in the story of Scotland’s progressive quest for constitutional autonomy from English political tyranny. The whig school mainstreamed an interpretive tendency that has been ascendant until fairly recently, by significantly downplaying the religious and theological concerns that were central to the Covenanter worldview, and instead viewing them as champions of a particular political ideology. Colin Kidd has demonstrated how the political and theological moderatism of the Scottish whig school conveniently overlooked or reinterpreted many of the severer religious policies of the Covenanters that were less palatable to Victorian sensibilities, and less problematic for their construction of a post-union Scottish national identity. Consequently, celebrated historians from William Robertson to P. Hume Brown offered a somewhat sanitized and two-dimensional account of an age of great political and religious complexity and controversy. In so doing, they fell into what Herbert Butterfield called the ‘historian’s pathetic fallacy’: ‘the practice of abstracting things from their historical context and judging them apart from their context – estimating them and organizing the historical story by a system of direct reference to the present’. Butterfield elaborates on this tendency:

The whig historian … is in possession of a principle of exclusion which enables him to leave out the most troublesome element in the complexity [of history]. By seizing upon those personages and parties in the past whose ideas seem the more analogous to our own, and by setting all these out in contrast with the rest of the stuff of history, he has his organization and abridgement of history ready-made and has a clean path through the complexity.

Such an approach has unfortunately marred many later studies of the Covenanters. There is unquestionably great practical value in applying the struggles of the past to the church’s similar struggles today, and it is certainly true that ‘there is nothing new under the sun’ (Ecclesiastes 1:9) – the same sinful human nature, stratagems of the Devil, and resultant heresies can be found in all ages. The persecuted church of today can learn great lessons from those who suffered in the past, and those called to tackle error in the church today must seek insight from the precedent of the theological debates of the past: such is the value of church history as a pastoral and theological discipline. Nevertheless, the Christian historian

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11 (Kidd, 1993), p.109
12 (Kidd, 1993), p.270
14 Herbert Butterfield, The Whig Interpretation of History (London, 1973), p.29. In literary theory, the ‘pathetic fallacy’ ascribes to inanimate objects human emotions we experience, but which naturally do not pertain to the object to which they are ascribed. Butterfield is arguing that in an analogous way, the historian in his writing may take a contemporary issue he experiences – say, gender equality – and impose is as an interpretive paradigm on an historical setting – say, the Puritan family – to which it does not pertain.
15 Ibid., p.28-9. As a Christian historian himself, Butterfield’s critique (first published in 1931), of what were for him comparatively recent Evangelical histories is nothing if not honest.
should be careful. A highly selective and simplistic reading of the past to suit present concerns may lead him to misrepresent that past by a reductionist interpretation of a very complex historical context that he doesn’t really understand, explained in terms of the present context that he does.

This whig tendency to impose modern values of nationalism and progressivism on early modern Scotland was evident in many histories and biographies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For example, John Morison’s brief work on Johnston of Wariston (1611-63, co-author of the National Covenant) in the Famous Scots Series (1901), afforded Wariston ‘a place in the front rank of those Scottish patriots who, by their resistance to the absolutism of Charles I, saved the liberties of their own nation and largely helped to secure those of the whole kingdom’.

In this case, it can be argued that Wariston’s legacy has been anachronistically reinterpreted by Morison to conform with his late nineteenth century assumptions of what constitutes civil liberty and Scottish patriotism. To be clear, with hindsight we may indeed conclude that the Covenanters’ valiant testimony to the crown rights of Christ did indeed play a key role in establishing civil and religious liberties in these islands. The question we are asking, however, is whether the historiographical model used to draw this conclusion is a sound one: whether a modern understanding of civil and religious liberty ought to be imputed anachronistically to the early modern vision of Covenanted Britain espoused by Wariston and his colleagues. By reading modern ideals of a tolerant, even pluralistic, constitutionalism into the work of one of the chief architects of the Covenantter Revolution, we have arguably not arrived at a better historical understanding of the Covenantter vision, but have perhaps recruited him for a contemporary cause which he himself would not have felt at home with at all.

**The Evangelical Historiography**

As we have seen, one of the unfortunate casualties of the whig approach was a balanced assessment of the key role played by theology in the Covenanting movement. While proponents of this ‘desacralized’ historiography viewed the Covenanters selectively through the lens of Enlightenment Progressivism, in the nineteenth century there emerged in reaction what might be called a ‘sacred’ whig historiography, emanating from Scottish Presbyterian churches, and identified with Evangelicalism. The determinist reshaping of the Reformation and Covenanting past had been just one of many disastrous Enlightenment inroads into the Church of Scotland, and added another ingredient to the tensions that produced the Great Disruption in 1843. While the Reformed Presbyterian Churches had always maintained their historical testimonies to the Covenanting heritage, it was now the turn of the Evangelical party in the mainline Presbyterian churches, who responded to their moderate opponents’ embrace of the new historiography with a fresh interpretive foray of their own into their professed Covenanting roots – one that restored a much-needed emphasis on early modern Scottish theology and piety. In the vein of Wodrow, dissenting Scottish Presbyterians of the Free Church, the Seceder churches and their cousins in the Synod of Ulster published a flurry of new histories and martyrologies, the most notable being those of Thomas M’Crie and James Seaton Reid, who inspired a new generation of evangelical Presbyterian historians.

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17 McCrie’s most influential histories were *The Life of John Knox* (1812) and *The Life of Andrew Melville* (1819). Though not himself a minister of the Church of Scotland, McCrie’s works were extremely influential within it.

18 Reid’s *magnum opus* was his *History of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland* (3 volumes, 1834, 1837, 1854).
Andrew Holmes has argued with some merit that these works provided an expression of self-identity for emerging evangelical Presbyterian denominations, each eager to demonstrate their unbroken theological succession with the Scottish Reformations. They also functioned as a polemic against their moderate Presbyterian, Roman Catholic and Episcopalian opponents, providing an historical precursor of their own struggle for religious liberty against the Covenanter’s foes in a new guise. However, the tendency of this ‘sacred’ whig historiography to interpret Covenanter history from the perspective and presuppositions of their own present ecclesio-political struggles likewise tended towards Butterfield’s ‘pathetic fallacy’. The Evangelical historiography could be just as lucid in imposing contemporary theological debates and questions of Presbyterian identity onto the seventeenth century as their moderate opponents were in imposing their secular concerns of progress and national identity. Richard Muller has helpfully summarized the problem:

There has been … a fundamental tendency in theological and philosophical historiography to identify what is important in a past era on the basis of the seeming importance, influence, or relevance of a person, idea, or event to the present-day self-understanding of the writer or the society, rather than asking the documents of the past era what persons, ideas, or events were then understood as important or influential – or, indeed, rather than asking the documents themselves what concepts, language, and contexts are requisite to the understanding of the documents! To apply Muller’s insightful critique, the Victorian Evangelical histories may have restored to the forefront the theological concerns that drove the likes of Rutherford, Guthrie and Cameron, but did so selectively. They frequently emphasized those aspects of the Covenanting movement which they and their readers shared: a common evangelical piety, Presbyterian ecclesiology and subscription to the robust Calvinist theology of the Westminster Standards. But they also unfortunately tended to simplify the religious complexity of the era into a bitter ‘Presbyterian vs. Episcopalian’ feud, overlooking the remarkable consensus of Calvinist theology and Puritan piety between these two parties, which revisionists like David Mullan have called ‘a vibrant evangelicalism which crossed the

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19 Representative examples of this school include Thomas M’Crie (the Younger), *Sketches of Scottish Church History* (1841); James Aikman, *Annals of the Persecution in Scotland* (2 volumes, 1842); William Hetherington, *History of the Church of Scotland from the Introduction of Christianity to the Period of the Disruption, May 18, 1843* (1843); J.A. Wylie, *History of Protestantism* (3 volumes, 1878); Alexander Smellie, *Men of the Covenant* (1909). These writers invariably built on the archival works of previous generations, notably Wodrow, Burnet and Kirkton, occasionally drawing out fresh perspectives, but regrettably did not always contribute much by way of original documentary research. One exception which makes excellent use of archive sources and remains of considerable value, though overlooked by many historians, is James King Hewison, *The Covenanters: A History of the Church in Scotland from the Reformation to the Revolution in Two Volumes* (Glasgow, 1913).


divisions of ecclesiological definition’. Much was thus understated or excluded from these histories: the unpleasant realities of the bitter Protester-Resolutioner controversy, the often vitriolic polemic of many Covenanter pamphlets and treatises, and the temperamental ferocity of several Covenanter heroes, which was often mollified by drawing attention to their undoubted piety. In such ways, the Evangelical historian’s account of the Covenanters and their times often demonstrated a proclivity for the whiggish ‘principle of exclusion which enables him to leave out the most troublesome element in the complexity [of history].

The most enduring legacy of this ‘principle of exclusion’ can be found in the flood of popular Covenanter hagiography in the nineteenth century, extending to art, literature and the dozens of covenanting memorials that dot the landscape of the Scottish lowlands to this day. While important ‘Ebenezers’ to keep alive the memory of God’s former gracious work in our nation and church, many of these memorials nevertheless characterize the Covenanters as vindicated by the Glorious Revolution and its subsequent Act of Toleration, suffering in a quest for a form of civil and religious liberty which most of their heirs ironically anathematized and refused to submit to.

It is this kind of popular romanticizing that in part prompted such a revisionist backlash from twentieth-century historians like Hugh Trevor-Roper and Edward Cowan. But while one can find straw men aplenty among the more melodramatic exponents of the ‘sacred’ whig historiography, the more sober historians of this school like M’Crie and Reid still serve the contemporary historian of the period in important ways. For one thing, it should be noted that much of their source work was based on the essentially sound archival groundwork laid

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22 David George Mullan, Protestant Piety in Early-modern Scotland: Letters, Lives and Covenants, 1650-1712 (Edinburgh, 2008), p.1. Mullan’s careful use of the term ‘evangelicalism’ to describe early modern Scottish religion is telling, and calls into question David Bebbington’s thesis that Evangelicalism emerged in conjunction with the Enlightenment in the 1730s, instead showing a continuity of theology and practice that was essentially ‘evangelical’ extending back into the seventeenth century. See David W. Bebbington, Evangelicalism in modern Britain: a history from the 1730s to the 1980s (London, 1993), and Michael A.G. Haykin and Kenneth J. Stewart (eds), The Emergence of Evangelicalism - Exploring Historical Continuities (Nottingham, 2008).

23 It is noteworthy how many popular Evangelical histories of the Covenanters offer a remarkable abridgement of the Covenanter’s ‘Waterloo’, the Battle of Dunbar (1651), and the subsequent Cromwellian occupation (1651-60). This gap has been filled recently with an important work by R. Scott Spurlock, Cromwell and Scotland, Conquest and Religion, 1650-1660 (Edinburgh, 2007). This is the first in-depth study of the Cromwellian religious policy in Scotland, complementing the standard political and military histories by Frances Dow, Cromwellian Scotland, 1651-60 (1st ed., Edinburgh, 1979) and John D Grainger, Cromwell Against the Scots: the Last Anglo-Scottish War, 1650-1652 (East Linton, 1997). The most thorough study to date of the Protester-Resolutioner controversy is Kyle Holfelder, ‘Factionalism in the Kirk during the Cromwellian Invasion and Occupation of Scotland, 1650 to 1660: The Protester-Resolutioner Controversy’ (PhD Thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1998). The key primary source to consult is William Stephen (ed.), Register of the Consultations of the Ministers of Edinburgh and Some Other Brethren of the Ministry Vol 1: 1652-1657 and Vol 2: 1657-1660 (Edinburgh, 1930).


by Wodrow and Howie, to say nothing of their own exhaustive archival work.27 Understandably, for contemporary secular historians emphasizing exclusively materialist explanations for the Covenanters – economic, social, political – such works are dismissed as an example of idealist reductionism: Victorian Evangelicals writing from the same revivalist-confessional tradition as their subject, whose interpretations will be incorrigibly tainted with their own contextual biases.28 But when read with due sensitivity to their own nineteenth century ecclesiastical and theological context, it can be argued in their defence that by focussing on the religious and intellectual facets of the Covenanter movement, these historians supplied something that is usually altogether lacking in the material reductionism of more recent studies: a window into the Covenanters’ spiritual world, a mysterious and often disturbing place for those who, unlike the Evangelical historians, do not share their Calvinist theology, experience of affective piety or sheer saturation with Scripture.29 The Christian historian understands that, ‘The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned’ (1 Corinthians 2:14). The secular academic is thus at the deepest level at a loss when he stands puzzling over the passionate pulpit pleadings of a Renwick, the soul-searching soliloquies of Wariston’s Diary or the pastoral letters of a Rutherford. John Coffey’s point is salient: ‘Early modern writers were intimately versed in the Bible, and by virtue of their grammar school education they were equally soaked in Latin texts. Modern intellectual historians often lack their subjects’ intimate familiarity with the Bible or the classics (or both!), and thus tend to provide rather partial accounts of their writings’.30 By thus failing to engage sensitively with the Covenanters’ intellectual world, and being unable to spiritually discern the Christian experience of their inner man, the secular historian will frequently affirm their fanatical credentials in the popular imagination, but do little to add to our understanding of their worldview.

The Deconstruction of the Whig Consensus

Despite this welcome return to an appreciation of the Covenanters’ theological impetus in nineteenth century studies, Covenanter historiography since then has shown a gradual scholarly trend away from a religious to a political focus. For some historians, though, a restoration of scholarly balance in favour of non-religious factors did not go far enough; what

27 Even Ian Cowan notes, ‘Of earlier writers, some like McCrie, while undoubtedly biased in their commentaries, frequently quote extensively from original sources, and should not be entirely overlooked’. ‘The Covenanters: A Revision Article’ in The Scottish Historical Review, xlvii, no. 143 (1968), p.36, fn 8.
29 As a case in point, it is not uncommon to find contemporary historians excoriating Covenanters for vitriolic language in their letters, speeches and diaries, apparently oblivious to the fact that they are actually quoting directly from Scripture. For example, Edward J. Cowan claims that Wariston’s journals ‘almost defy scholarly investigation’, noting that ‘the reader is frequently drawn up short, as when Johnston solemnly reports, “the Lord remembered me to remember him back again”, a neat allusion to a temporary lapse in omniscience’. ‘The Making of the National Covenant’ in John Morrill (ed.), The Scottish National Covenant in its British Context, ed. John Morrill (Edinburgh, 1990), p.76. Of course, Wariston’s comment was nothing of the sort, for as the earlier Evangelical historians would at once recognize, he was employing a common anthropomorphic phrase from the Psalter (see e.g. Psalm 42:6; 78:35, 39, 42; 98:3; 105:8; 105:42, Geneva Bible). Another favourite example selected from Covenanter sermons and speeches is the threat of ‘breaking of the malignants teith’ and wishing to ‘breke ther jaws’ – not, as is presumably implied, an ominous threat of physical violence, but a metaphor drawn from Psalm 3:7 and 58:6-7 (Geneva Bible): see e.g. John R. Young, The Scottish Parliament, 1659-1661: a Political and Constitutional Analysis (Edinburgh, 1996), p.220.
was needed was an aggressive deconstructing and desacralizing of the formerly predominant whig historiographies. Foremost among this school was Hugh Trevor-Roper. In critical essays such as ‘Scotland and the Puritan Revolution’ (1963) and his influential book, *The Crisis of the Seventeenth Century* (1967), he portrayed Scotland (and other Calvinist ‘success stories’: Geneva, Holland, France) as under the cruel grip of unenlightened, repressive clergics, who prevented the march of humanist progress, and whom he memorably dismissed as ‘a gallery of intolerant bigots, narrow-minded martinet, timid conservative defenders of repellent dogmas, instant assailants of every new or liberal idea, inquisitors and witch-burners!’  

Thus, the Enlightenment of Northern Europe was held at bay by the backwardness of Calvinist dogma, and was liberated by the eventually victorious Arminian and Socinian ‘heretics’. His representation of early modern Scotland as a ‘backward countr[y]…where an educated, independent laity hardly existed’ has since been convincingly laid to rest by the subsequent work of David Stevenson, Margo Todd, and others. With Trevor-Roper the pendulum had swung to the opposite extreme from the hagiography of the previous century, but it is questionable whether his approach contributed significantly to our understanding of the so-called ‘repellent dogmas’ themselves, or the worldview of the ‘intolerant bigots’ who defended them. The field of early modern Scottish theology and piety and its outworking in the public sphere has sorely needed far more nuanced studies that avoid all such sacred and secular progressivism, and in the words of Quentin Skinner, ‘use the ordinary techniques of historical enquiry to grasp their concepts, to follow their distinctions, to appreciate their beliefs and, so far as possible, to see things their way’.

**Recent Political Histories**

By the mid-twentieth century, historians like Ian Cowan bemoaned ‘the absence of Scottish works’, on the early modern period. That all changed in the last three decades of the twentieth century, which saw a flurry of scholarly publications from Scottish historians, recovering particularly the early Covenanter period from relative scholarly obscurity.

The most prolific writer in the field remains David Stevenson, whose many works continued the scholarly trend away from predominantly religious studies. He described his mission as follows:

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32 Trevor-Roper (2001), p.179-219. ‘Arminianism or Socinianism, not Calvinism, was the religion of the pre-Enlightenment. Calvinism, that fierce and narrow re-creation of medieval scholasticism, was its enemy: the last enemy which died in the last ditches of Holland, England, Switzerland, Scotland’. Ibid., p.199.
36 Ian Cowan (1968), p.35-52. It should be noted that the massive influence of the Marxist school in English Civil War studies – in many respects the twentieth century heirs of the progressivism of the whig historiography – recognized the key role of the Scots, but did not produce any major studies that focused on the Covenanters. Trevor-Roper makes a compelling case that Marxist progressivism is the twentieth century successor of the whig schools. Trevor-Roper (2001), p.179-80.
My starting point in research was to try to take a fresh look at the covenanting movement without assuming that religion was the only thing worth studying. Secular history for a secular age, perhaps, but I was well aware that it would be folly to take that too far. Obviously religious motivation was central to what happened, but I wanted to see what else there was...so I set out to “modernize” the historical approach to the covenanters, and to the whole century.  

His seminal works, *The Scottish Revolution, 1637-44* (1973) and *Revolution and Counter-Revolution, 1644-51* (1977) remain standard reference works, demonstrating that early modern Scotland was a place ‘where religious considerations were indeed often of paramount importance, but where political rivalries, greed, ambition, nationalism, folly and other human concerns have their part’.  

Another important contribution to our knowledge of the subject came with *The Scottish National Covenant in its British Context, 1638-51* (1990), edited by John Morrill. While addressing very different aspects of the Scottish Revolution, the contributors were unanimous in two respects. First, they cemented the then-emergent revisionist approach to study of the Scottish Covenanters which situated them in a British context, exploring the complex dynamics of their political, social and military connections with England and Ireland, and opening a wide field of study beyond the limitations of the traditional Anglo-centric perspective. Secondly, they were united in their hermeneutical emphasis, which may be summarized in the words of one contributor, ‘In the first instance, the primacy must be accorded to the political process, not to ecclesiastical issues’. Thus, though these essays have retained considerable value for students of the political and social history of the Covenanters, the religious concerns of their subject either take a back seat, or are dealt with in a superficial way. Likewise, Peter Donald’s work, *An Uncounselled King: Charles I and the Scottish Troubles, 1637-1641* (1990) and Allan Macinnes, in *Charles I and the Making of the Covenanting Movement, 1625-1641* (1991) have unearthed many valuable manuscripts that shed much light on these critical years from the English perspective of the king and his counsellors. While these are important scholarly works to consult, they again are all explicitly political histories.

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41 Allan I. Macinnes, ‘The Scottish Constitution, 1638-51: The Rise and Fall of Oligarchic Centralism’, *ibid.*, p. 107. Macinnes’ subsequent comment that this was ‘a primacy upheld by the leading ideologues among the ministers of the Kirk’ has been soundly challenged by new biographical reassessments of some of these very ministers like Rutherford and Gillespie.
42 This is regrettably borne out even in Margaret Steele’s contribution, ‘The “Politick Christian”: the Theological Background to the National Covenant’, which has been roundly criticized by Stevenson for its multiple factual errors. David Stevenson, ‘Solomon and Son, British Style’ in *The Historical Journal*, xxxv, no. 1 (1992), p.209.
This cursory survey of twentieth-century political histories shows that there is a solid groundwork of contextual studies in place for new research into the Covenants, and that significant work in particular needs to be done addressing the centrality of their vibrant faith.

Confessionalization and ‘British History’

With the exception of a few of the essays in the Morrill volume above, these recent histories of the Covenants have addressed Cowan’s concerns about an ‘absence of Scottish works’, and the interpretive imbalance which tended to put Scotland on the periphery of an Anglo-centric historiography.\(^{43}\) Continuing in this vein, the most recent scholarship on the Scottish Covenanters’ historical context incorporates them into a much broader story: that of ‘British’ political history, and the formation of early modern European states. New historians in the field will need to familiarize themselves with this important conversation and consider what light this perspective might cast on their subject.

For several decades now, this discussion has centered on the theme of ‘confessionalization’: the process whereby political and clerical elites on a national and local level enforced national conformity to specific forms of religious doctrine (usually codified in written confessions), through various agents of social discipline. These agents might include influential individuals (such as at Calvin’s Geneva), church courts and hierarchies, a ‘professionalized’ clergy educated through the state’s universities, political elites and Parliaments – all of which might employ the printing press to enforce their particular reformation (or counter reformation) ‘from above’. Thus, social change was accomplished through “the cultural, intellectual, social, and political functions of religion and confession within the early modern social order”.\(^{44}\) In recent years, however, this hermeneutic has been tempered by studies calling for a more nuanced confessionalization process that properly reflect the complexities of early modern state formation. Most significantly, the original stress on the role of elites – especially within the body politic – has been tempered by a balancing focus on the role of the masses. This has been tentatively called ‘confessionalization from below’.\(^{45}\)

It is from this vantage point that the most significant reassessment of the Covenanters to date has been written: Laura Stewart’s *Rethinking the Scottish Revolution, 1637-51* (2016).\(^{46}\) Stewart’s socio-political reinterpretation considers the Scottish Revolution as a state-building experiment in which multiple social groups – and not just the social elites and clergy, where the earlier studies focused – negotiated their respective power relations as part of a confessionalization process. The covenanted state that resulted, while integrating the masses as a newly formed ‘public’ into the political conversation, nevertheless retained its executive power in a fragile alliance of clerical and landed elites, with clearly defined and separate

\(^{43}\) Over the past fifty years, J.G.A. Pocock of the so-called ‘Cambridge School’ has championed the cause of ‘British history’ in early modern studies, attempting to overcome a writing of history so Anglocentric that “British history” itself has in the past denoted nothing much more than “English history” with occasional transitory additions’. John G. A. Pocock, ‘The Atlantic Archipelago and the War of the three Kingdoms’ in John Bradshaw, Brendan; Morrill (ed.), *The British Problem, c. 1534-1707: State Formation in the Atlantic Archipelago* (Basingstoke, 1996), p.172.


\(^{45}\) See Ibid., p.8.

jurisdictions. Stewart thus brings to the study of the Scottish revolution a discussion that has hitherto been largely the preserve of historians of the English revolution, with the added benefit of some forty years’ reflection on the shortcomings of the Marxist school that once dominated it.

While wary of the Presbyterian interpretive tradition which she sees stretching back to the employment of Reformation history as a propaganda tool, Stewart is equally dismissive of the enduring post-Restoration narrative we have encountered, that would have us ‘remember Covenanted government not as a comparatively representative and accountable regime that committed itself to meaningful parliamentary oversight, but as tyranny by committee’.47 In a break with most of the preceding political histories, she dismisses as facile the description of the Covenanter government as a theocracy,48 downplaying the compulsive powers of the Kirk as a serious rival to the state. Instead, the Covenanter regime emerges as a remarkably successful confessional government, legitimized (albeit begrudgingly) by the king in the 1641 parliamentary settlement; one which incorporated a much wider range of social groupings (including women) into the political dialogue than any Scottish executive before it, or for several generations thereafter. Indeed, she shows that by the parliamentary settlement of 1641, “the Covenants had created a stable, viable regime, headed by leaders now possessing control over the enhanced organizational capacity of an autonomous state”.

Thus, in recovering the reputation of the Covenanter state, Stewart concludes with the remarkable paradigm-shifting statement that it differed from the Anglo-centric ‘republican and royalist regimes bookending its existence because it was conciliar, participatory, and comparatively transparent’.50 This is a remarkable claim that challenges the prevailing consensus we have noted above, that views godly rule in Scotland as a backward step, much less an advance, in early modern state formation.

Stewart ends by issuing a challenge: ‘It is time to examine the social, cultural, and religious legacy of Covenanted Scotland in greater detail’ – an invitation to fresh scholarly work in the field that Reformed Presbyterians would do well to heed.51

This brief survey of recent scholarship reveals that Stevenson’s ‘political history’ approach has dominated Covenanter studies until fairly recently, providing much helpful analysis of the constitutional history of the period. While echoes of Trevor-Roper’s disdain for the Covenanting party can still be heard, this generation of historians engaged, if not more sympathetically, at least more systematically with their subjects with sensitivity to their own intellectual contexts. They avoided at least the overt ‘secularizing teleology’52 of Trevor-Roper, and engaged thoughtfully with the sources. However, the unfortunate result of this

47 Ibid., p.25.
48 Ibid., p.20.
49 Ibid., p. 308. While Stewart catalogues several aspects of this ‘organizational capacity’, it was particularly effective in its fiscal and military endeavours, successfully funding and launching three invasions of England and one of Ireland, and repelling the counter-insurgency of Montrose, before finally succumbing to Cromwell’s invasion in 1651. Even after Dunbar and Worcester, the strength of the Covenanter government is reflected in the fact that it took the Commonwealth some fourteen months to dismantle, and even then, the occupying power resorted to using much of the infrastructure the Covenanters had successfully established – something the Restoration government would also continue.
50 Ibid., p.313.
51 Ibid., p.314. Italics mine.
52 The term is Coffey and Chapman’s. Coffey and Chapman, (2009), p.3.
overwhelmingly political approach has been a tendency to simply dismiss the Covenants as religious fanatics comparable to the adepts of Islamist fundamentalism.53

But if recent Covenanter history has been written as a political narrative, first and foremost, then without new, scholarly studies of Covenanter theology and spirituality inevitably, the political historian will be tempted to fall back on the usual caricatures of Scottish Calvinism that have been purveyed for centuries. The now ample supply of political histories must be balanced by a sensitivity to historical theology, and that will mean a better grasp of how their subjects understood themselves and their world from the perspective of their own worldview, not that of our twenty-first century post-Christian world.

A few scholars have led the way in drawing attention to this deficit, attempting to recover this balance, and it is to this literature of recent religious reassessments of the Covenants that we now turn.

The Mullan Thesis: ‘Scottish Puritanism’?

A major step forward in the scholarly study of the theology and spirituality of the Scottish Covenanters came with the publication of David George Mullan’s provocatively-titled *Scottish Puritanism, 1590-1638* (2000). Mullan’s goal was ‘to open a new level of discussion about Scotland in this period’,54 building on the work of the political historians of the previous decades, and issuing a call for fresh studies in Scottish religious history:

> Recent work which has illuminated our appreciation of the political aspects of the covenanting movement needs to be supplemented by a detailed and nuanced portrait of Scottish divinity; without this our picture of events is bound to be skewed’. 55

Mullan challenged the simplistic Presbyterian vs. Episcopalian bifurcation that characterized the traditional historiographies by arguing for a pre-revolutionary consensus in Calvinist federal theology and affective piety in Scotland, that was both ‘Augustinian’ and ‘Puritan’. By extending his research beyond the already plundered sources of official church pronouncements and polemical publications, and delving into the sermons and correspondence of laypeople and clergy alike, he revealed a kirk that generally shared a common commitment to the centrality of the preached word, a Genevan federal theology and a decidedly ‘Puritan’ piety, before the consensus unravelled in the run-up to the civil wars. Like their English counterparts, the Scottish Puritans practised an intense introspective piety, marked by an often dramatic conversion experience, a strict spiritual discipline of prayer and

53 Drawing parallels between the Covenanters and contemporary Islamic fundamentalism – whether in the Iranian Revolution of the 1970s or of ISIS-affiliated groups globally – has been a popular trope in both the scholarly and popular press. For the former see e.g. Marty Martin and Scott Appleby, *Fundamentalisms and the State: Remaking Politics, Economies, and Militance* (Chicago, 1996), p.16; for the latter see e.g. Chris Bambery, ‘Terrorism and fanaticism: Were the early Calvinists Scotland’s Daesh?’, *The National*, 1 December 2015. [http://www.thenational.scot/culture/14858701.Terrorism_and_fanaticism__Were_the_early_Calvinists_Scotlands_Daesh_/](http://www.thenational.scot/culture/14858701.Terrorism_and_fanaticism__Were_the_early_Calvinists_Scotlands_Daesh_/) (Accessed 2 March 2017).


fasting. Bible study and meditation for both the individual and family, a complex casuistry governing practical aspects of godly living, often worked out in conference with like-minded believers in conventicles, and of course a pious devotion to the public ordinances of the Church on her Sabbaths.

For Mullan, two decades of Episcopalian impositions upon the kirk, from the 1618 Articles of Perth to the Laudian liturgy preceding the Scottish Revolution certainly played a significant role in the collapse of this consensus – a subject he dealt with in his previous work, *Episcopacy in Scotland*[^56]. However, heavier blame still is attributed to the reaction of the ‘radical Presbyterians’ who rose to defend and expand the Reformation, culminating in the 1638 National Covenant and the political and religious upheavals in Britain that followed. Strikingly, Mullan contended that the Covenanters’ contribution to the collapse of the consensus lay fundamentally in an emerging theological development within covenant theology. While there had been general unanimity among Puritans that covenant theology was primarily soteriological, and applied to the salvation of the godly individual, he argues that in the National Covenant, it came to be applied to the godly nation as a body politic – a supposedly schismatic application of an otherwise unifying doctrine[^57]. In carefully charting this theological progression from the works of Knox, Rollock and Bruce, and the Scottish bands of 1581 and 1596, Mullan concluded that the triumph of Wariston’s national covenanting vision in 1638 was not a natural organic development, but rather a radical subversion of the covenant theology that had formerly united the kirk[^58].

In summary, Mullan’s thesis essentially proposed a Scottish version of the English ‘Calvinist consensus’ posited by the revisionist school of Patrick Collinson, Nicholas Tyacke and Peter Lake[^59], implicitly opening the door to incorporate an established historiographical conversation about English Puritanism into Scottish religious history[^60].

Mullan’s thesis has of course met with a mixed reaction[^61]. Most critiques have addressed the vexed question of taxonomy – taking exception to the use of the term ‘Puritan’ in a Scottish context[^62]. While not ignoring the important caveats on the semantic range of a contentious term, historians have nonetheless generally embraced the possibilities that Mullan’s thesis


[^57]: While a number of other political historians have discussed the development of a Scottish covenanting tradition, none had hitherto explored the conceptual links with a nascent federal theology to the same extent as Mullan. See principally, Arthur H. Williamson, *Scottish National Consciousness in the Age of James VI: The Apocalypse, the Union and the Shaping of Scotland's Public Culture* (Edinburgh: Donald, 1979), p.64-85 and Steele (1990), p.31-67.


offers students of early modern Scotland, opening a door to explore the formation of a distinctly British Puritanism.

The Todd Thesis: A ‘Puritan Nation’?

If Mullan’s thesis opened up the field to a more nuanced study of Scottish divinity as it filtered down from the pulpit and the universities, then Margo Todd has supplied historians with a magisterial study of Scottish spirituality between 1560 and the 1650s from the perspective of the congregation, with her work, The Culture of Protestantism in Early Modern Scotland (2002). Like Mullan, she successfully draws the lines of historical enquiry into post-Reformation Scottish religion away from the old historiographical concentration on the formal polity debates of the higher church courts, to the spirituality of the person in the pew. In so doing, Todd has supplied historians with a remarkably comprehensive, regionally-diverse examination of local kirk session minute books – a source that the older writers largely overlooked – and which provide an impressive composite picture of the experience of religion in early modern Scotland. Yet, while side-stepping the macro-level debates by which the Covenanter leaders led Scotland to revolution in 1637, Todd’s micro-level explorations into the religious world of the masses have in fact supplied historians with an unsurpassed picture of the religious context of that revolution. Although a more nuanced picture of Scottish religious experience emerges – one that was more multivalent than uniform at the local level – Todd nonetheless concludes that Scotland had in fact become a ‘Puritan nation’ by 1637, and it was this national ‘Puritan’ consciousness, embraced by moderate conformist Calvinists and ‘radicals’ alike, that explains popular resistance to the ‘ecclesiastical imperialism’ of the Five Articles of Perth (1618), the Laudian Liturgy (1637) and, it might be added, of the post-Restoration of prelacy (1661).

Todd’s research confirms Mullan’s thesis of a broad Calvinist consensus within the semi-episcopal Jacobean kirk, but has also compelled historians to reconsider many cherished assumptions about the religious identity of the early and later Covenanters. While they would never acknowledge the dramatic work of the Holy Spirit in reviving Scotland, such historians nevertheless are now conceding that the picture which emerges from their sources is of a nation displaying remarkable personal attachment to and affection for the simple Presbyterian ritual of the ordinary means of grace, and the powerful preaching of the Calvinistic Gospel of grace. This consideration must now be borne in mind when they try to explain the popular response to Laudian innovations in 1637, and the resolute convictions of the martyrs of the Killing Times, and it should temper, e.g. Cowan’s confident assertion

63 There are a few exceptions. Andrew Edgar, Old Church Life in Scotland: Lectures on Kirk-Session and Presbytery Records (Paisley, 1886), which supplies a remarkably balanced ‘view from the pew’, using session minutes from Mauchline, Galston, Fenwick and Rothesay parishes, the minutes of the presbytery of Ayr, and other original manuscripts to present a composite picture remarkably similar to that of Todd, though not nearly as comprehensive. More recently, Walter Roland Foster, The Church Before the Covenants: the Church of Scotland, 1596-1638 (Edinburgh; London, 1975), also provides a helpful overview, but leans significantly more towards an analysis of the institutions of the Kirk, leaving only one chapter to examine parish life in Scotland. A more extensive use of the minutes of sessions and presbyteries can be found in the Marxist historian Walter Makey’s, The Church of the Covenant, 1637-1651 (Edinburgh, 1979).


67 Todd’s own explanation for the dramatic reshaping of Scotland is based on the social anthropological hypotheses of Clifford Geertz and others.
that religion was merely ‘a convenient pretext for...the constitutional remoulding of the small world that was Scotland’. Todd’s examination of session records also reveals that the clergy’s reputation for being repressive, paternalistic killjoys in the iconoclastic atmosphere of Reformation Scotland has been grossly overstated. In reality, local clergy chose their battles wisely, turning a blind eye to much traditional merrymaking, issuing comparatively lenient ecclesiastical penalties (except where they led to violence or serious sin), and redistributing fines from the wealthy among the poor. Thus, ‘clearly, Presbyterian Scotland was not in practice the grim and joyless place of modern stereotype’ and ‘if not as merry as we might like, was nowhere near as dour as its reputation would have it’.

By 1638, this ‘Puritan nation’ that Todd has been honest enough to reveal is a nation that would make England’s Puritans envious. But in Todd’s final analysis, England’s failure to implement such a program in her own national Church in the 1640s and ’50s would founder on her inability to implement anything approaching Scotland’s network of local kirk sessions – one of the goals of the Solemn League and Covenant (1643). In other words, England’s lack of a national network of functioning Presbyterian church courts led to the collapse of the Covenanters’ British vision, and the restoration of persecuting Stuart prelacy in 1660.

**Intellectual Biography**

Finally, one of the best evidences of a renewed scholarly interest in the Scottish Covenanters has been the emergence of a number of intellectual biographies that are sensitive to the historiographical dynamics discussed above, and avoid the hagiography of former centuries.

Foremost among these is John Coffey’s seminal work on Samuel Rutherford, *Politics, Religion and the British Revolutions* (1997). Coffey examined Rutherford within a British context, carefully avoiding the narrowly reductionist ‘secular’ and ‘sacred’ whig representations of Rutherford as exclusively a Scottish patriot or Evangelical poet. The often-paradoxical interplay between Rutherford’s rigid scholastic theology and passionate spirituality was explored with a due sensitivity to his historical and confessional context, and his work became a benchmark study for others to follow. For the same reasons, L. Charles Jackson’s biography of Alexander Henderson (2015) is of considerable value, following Coffey’s lead in expressing a debt to the Cambridge School’s contextual approach to intellectual history, and offering a thorough analysis of the theology, piety and politics of the co-author of the National Covenant and commissioner to the Westminster Assembly. This recent work presents a valuable study and a good example of the kind of inter-disciplinary

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68 Cowan (1990), p.70. See also Todd (2002), p.102, 103, 118, 119, 122.
69 Todd (2002), p.221, 226. Todd’s example has been followed by John MacCallum’s in-depth study, *Reforming the Scottish Parish: The Reformation in Fife, 1560–1640* (Farnham, 2010). Like Todd’s *Culture of Protestantism*, MacCallum’s careful study of the most rigorous Calvinist region of the British Isles challenges many common assumptions about Presbyterian Scotland, such as an alleged obsession with witch hunts, and a disciplinary system bordering on the misogynistic.
71 There are other biographies that are useful as contextual studies, but which do not make use of the most recently available sources. Among these are F.N. McCoy, *Robert Baillie and the Second Scots Reformation* (Berkeley, 1974); Edward J. Cowan, *Montrose: For Covenant and King* (Edinburgh, 1995).
study that deftly weaves together a theological and historical narrative of a key ‘Scottish Puritan’.

Allan Macinnes has also recently produced the only scholarly biography of Archibald Campbell, Marquis of Argyll, *The British Confederate* (2014). Argyll was arguably the leader of the Covenanting party in the revolutionary years (1637-40) and the period of ‘kirk party’ rule (1648-51), the first Covenanter martyr (1661), and another prime mover in executing the Covenanters’ vision for a British confessional state, as the title of Macinnes’ biography implies. Though concentrating on his remarkable political career, rather than his religious convictions, this work provides another important study, offering much fresh research into the complex period 1638-61.

As we have seen, the later Covenanting period has been especially rich in the hagiography of the popular martyrologies, but relatively sparse in the way of serious scholarly study. Yet, even here there have been a number of important contributions in recent decades, especially those of a biographic nature. Foremost among them is the Maurice Grant trilogy: scholarly yet accessible biographies of the three great Cameronian field preachers, Donald Cargill, Richard Cameron and James Renwick. One of the deficiencies of many of the popular-level martyrologies has been a lack of interaction with primary sources, and a virtual absence of fresh archival work, instead depending exclusively (and often regurgitating in modern language), the customary sources of Wodrow, Howie and Walker. While not neglecting these important works, Grant pieced together significant new data from the archives to compile works that are more sure-footed and balanced than many of the older studies.

**Conclusion**

The contention of this article has been that if the Churches are to promote fresh scholarship in the field of Covenanter history, then they need to be prepared to engage thoughtfully and honestly with a wide range of scholarship, sympathetic and unsympathetic, old and recent. It is hoped that this broad survey of the field of Covenant historiography may be a small step in that direction, bringing us up to date with the latest scholarly developments, and where they stand in relation to the interpretive schools of the past four centuries.

Once again, our purpose has not been to ‘topple sacred cows’, much less fudge a commitment to the sovereign Lord of history, who often employs social, economic and political factors in addition to the regenerating power of his Spirit to accomplish his Church-building goal (Matthew 16:18). Rather, it has been to soberly assess the relative merits of the historiographical approaches that underlie the varied and often conflicting representations of the Covenanters, both in the revered annals of the Church and the less forgiving halls of

75 Maurice Grant, *No King but Christ: The Story of Donald Cargill* (Darlington, 1993); *The Lion of the Covenant* (Darlington, 1997); *Preacher to the Remnant: The Story of James Renwick* (Edinburgh, 2009).
76 Mention might also be made of a number of significant unpublished doctoral theses that address the later Covenanters and United Societies, several of which may be obtained online. Of particular note is Mark Jardine’s study of the United Societies, and Neil Forsyth’s work on the later Covenanters: Mark Jardine, ‘Militancy, Martyrdom and the Presbyterian Movement in Late-Restoration Scotland, 1679 to 1688’ (PhD Thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2009). It can be accessed online at https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/279523.pdf; Neil Forsyth, ‘Saints and Subverters: The Later Covenanters in Scotland, c. 1648-1682’ (PhD Thesis, University of Strathclyde, 2016). It can be accessed with an EThOS subscription from the British Library: www.ethos.bl.uk
academia. To discover that our heroes too had feet of clay, and that some of their principles (or their application) have in subsequent centuries been wisely modified by the courts of the churches that descended from them, should not undermine our respect for them, but help us towards a deeper understanding and appreciation of their faithful witness in their difficult age.

The devotional nature of much popular literature on the Covenanters will doubtless continue to hold value in stirring hearts and spurring on a sleepy generation of Christians facing contemporary dangers to the Church’s spiritual autonomy. But the story of the Covenanters will surely benefit and serve future generations of the Church even more when read with a discerning evaluation of the dispassionate verdicts of scholars whose grasp of their world (if sadly not their faith) often exceeds our own. When this balanced historical approach is taken, the tales will still be fondly told, and at the same time, we will not be found to be telling tales.