
Jane Dawson’s impressive biography of Knox, first released in cloth covers in 2015, is now available in paper covers at a more modest price. That this edition has followed so rapidly after first publication is an indication of the demand for the biography, penned by the Reformation historian of New College, Edinburgh. This biography is noteworthy not because it is the first life of Knox to be written by a female writer: that honor belongs to Elizabeth Whitley, whose The Plain Mr. Knox appeared in 1960 (and is happily still in print). But Dawson’s work is the first major biography of the Scottish Reformer written by an academic historian since 1974, the year when the Canadian historian, W. Stanford Reid, released his Trumpeter of God.

Does the elapse of forty years, by itself, warrant a new biography of this famous Scot? The drastic numerical decline of the Church of Scotland in those intervening decades would suggest a diminished interest in the biography of this man about whom Scots have long been deeply divided. Yet, there are two reasons for insisting that the appearance of Dawson’s Knox is especially noteworthy.

The first is that it represents ‘part two’ of a writing project that commenced with Dawson’s release of a volume in the ‘New Edinburgh History of Scotland’: Scotland Re-formed: 1488-1587 (2007). There she displayed a comprehensive grasp of the political, military, and religious history of Scotland in this period. Her John Knox both benefits from and reflects the spadework in the earlier volume. Has a Knox biographer ever come to the task better prepared? There is also a second reason.

It is that there is fresh discovery serving as the basis for the release of this new volume; Jane Dawson happily discovered a trove of documents which were the possession of Knox’s former associate, Christopher Goodman (1519-1603). Goodman was the English Marian exile theological professor
with whom Knox – also a Marian exile – became fast friends at Geneva in the years when English Protestant leaders who remained in England were being tried and burned. Goodman had returned to Scotland with Knox and served at Ayr and St. Andrews before being forced to return to his native England in 1565. Their friendship, forged in shared adversity, resulted in a literary legacy only recently discovered by Dawson at Chester, England. This Goodman material shed considerable fresh light on Knox – both as a fugitive in Europe – and as leader in Scotland’s tempestuous early Protestant years.

The reader of Dawson’s Knox will plow through more than three hundred pages of text. It is worth noting that the smaller page size of the paperback edition (pagination is standard) does make the reading more arduous. As one reads, he or she experiences a pendulum-swing of reaction at the Knox presented by Dawson; he is alternately fierce and yet vulnerable, bombastic and yet capable of being tender. It is the very assiduity of Dawson in drawing on so many original sources (among which are Knox’s own tracts and his History) which gives the reader the sense of being overwhelmed with detail about Knox. But there is not only detail beyond what we could imagine or ask for (e.g. about Knox’s role as chaplain in the religious war which secured the Reformation by August, 1560, or as minister of St. Giles in the civil war that fragmented the nation later that decade over the divisive course pursued by Queen Mary); there is also interpretation and it here that different readers will judge Dawson differently.

Dawson cannot fairly be reckoned an admirer of Knox; recall that she is a female historian investigating the one who is remembered for his First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women (1558). She makes no apologies for Knox, who with his friend, Goodman, was definitely a misogynist as to female rule. The question then becomes one of whether, in her determination to be thorough (an aim at which she succeeds admirably), Dawson also portrays Knox in a judicious way. This reviewer concludes that Dawson has been judicious. No one will say that she has “buffed” the legacy of Knox; but most should grant that she gives us a Knox who – rather than appearing in black and white – appears in many shades of tint.

I appreciated several features of Dawson’s Knox above others. She shows that Knox’s English ministry in the years 1549-1553 were years in which he had already taken up the stance of a nonconforming Anglican. The conflicts over ministerial costume and adherence to the Book of Common Prayer – having begun in England – were merely continued in a kind of “round two” in exile at Frankfort. Again, Knox (with Goodman) as co-pastors among the Marian exiles at Geneva are portrayed as the detailed preparers of the very service book and Psalm book which will be put to use in Scotland from 1560 onward. Knox and Goodman are depicted as being definitely schooled at Geneva in the matter of how the reformation of a compact region such as Geneva can possibly serve as the template for the reformation of the nation of the Scots. Knox and Goodman were in this sense like the French pastors-in-training who were at Geneva awaiting assignments in Catholic France. Most
profundely, Knox is shown from his 1549 period onward to be the Reformed preacher who consciously prefers the gathered church of the like-minded rather than the folk-church embracing the totality of the population.

Dawson’s Knox provides an up-to-date and complex portrayal of what may be known today about Knox and Scotland’s early Reformation era. It will not easily be surpassed.

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Karin Maag is a fine scholar of the 16th century and one with an amazing ability to communicate that scholarship in a comprehensible manner. She currently serves as the director for the H. Henry Meeter Center for Calvin Studies and is professor of history at Calvin College, Grand Rapids. For readers of 16th-century Reformed thought and practice, Maag has furnished us with a most engaging and well researched text.

This volume is part of The Church at Worship: Case Studies from Christian History. This series ranges very widely with current studies and forthcoming volumes dealing with a variety of worship case studies both ancient, (for example, 4th century Jerusalem) and contemporary, (for example, Anaheim Vineyard Fellowship).

The series dictates much of the form and thus a standard structure emerges, one which must be added is very well thought-out by the editors and will be most helpful for classroom work, not just personal study. As specific case studies the goal is to allow “specific trees” in the “forest” of liturgical history to speak and not present a full forest perspective, as there are many other works which endeavour to do such.

The chief features of each volume are to first orient readers as to the time frame of the particular case study, including cautionary advisement; next, focus is upon the participation of that entire church community in worship (the key word here being “participation”); then follows primary sources, un-