The Early Scottish Reformation in Recent Research:
Literature Since 1960

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The Church of Scotland, the major representative of the Protestant Reformation in that nation has, over the past sixty years declined from a membership of 1,319,5741 to a current 352,912.2 While the focus of this paper is not ecclesiology, but historiography, this alarming trend does provide the backdrop to our study. Our purpose is to explore and explain the ebb and flow of writing on the early Scottish Reformation in the period since 1960. We choose that year as a point of departure because it was celebrated as the four hundredth anniversary of the formal adoption of the Reformed religion by Scotland’s Parliament in 1560. This essay will group writing about Scotland’s early Reformation under six categories which are broadly chronological. We may begin by first speaking of…

I. Ecclesiastical History at the Fourth Centenary of the Scottish Reformation (1960)

Sixty years ago, writing about the Scottish Reformation – while not ignored by social historians within Scotland – was still chiefly the occupation of church leaders and ecclesiastical historians. If one wanted to learn about Scotland’s Reformation era, one might still have relied on the early 20th century work of the Glasgow ecclesiastical historian T.M. Lindsay in two volumes, History of the Reformation.3 Yet in connection with the Reformation centennial of 1960, Edinburgh ecclesiastical historian J.H.S. Burleigh produced the handsome volume A Church History of Scotland, chapters of which reflected mid-20th century understandings of Scotland’s reform.4 The

3 Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1906. T&T Clark was reprinting Lindsay as recently as 1964.
Church of Scotland also drew attention to great leaders of the Reformation era in the commendable volume *Fathers of the Kirk*, edited by Ronald Selby Wright. Similarly representative of a churchly approach to the national Reformation was the Stuart Louden volume *The True Face of the Kirk*, an exploration of 16th-century church organization and life, and Duncan Shaw’s *The General Assemblies of the Church of Scotland 1560-1600*, a study of Scottish Presbyterianism’s national assembly. In this period, Church of Scotland writers produced two studies of John Knox: Elizabeth Whitley’s *Plain Mr. Knox*, a sympathetic biography, and James S. McEwen’s historical-theological study, *The Faith of John Knox*. It would be fair to classify with them the 1974 Knox biography, *Trumpeter of God* by the Canadian Presbyterian writer W. Stanford Reid.

By my reckoning, this largely ‘ecclesiastical’ curation of Scotland’s Reformation era continued into the mid-1970s. On the one hand, it included a collection of largely Roman Catholic essays bearing on the Reformation era taken from the *Innes Review* and published as *Essays on the Scottish Reformations: 1513-1625* edited by David McRoberts. On the other hand, it entailed a study of the Scottish Reformed Church’s sacramental life: G. B. Burnett’s *The Holy Communion in the Reformed Church of Scotland*. A fest-schrift for the former Edinburgh ecclesiastical historian Hugh Watt, *Reformation and Revolution* (1967), contained important character studies of some sixteenth century leaders. By the end of this period, the St. Andrews ecclesiastical historian James K. Cameron had produced an impressive scholarly edition of the *First Book of Discipline of 1560*. This period of ecclesiastical curation was showing signs of being overtaken by a new approach symbolized by the publication in 1975 of another volume intended to mark a milestone, *John Knox: A Quatercentenary Re-Appraisal*. This volume, though edited by a Church of Scotland minister-scholar, gave wide berth to a corrective approach to this pillar-figure of the Reformation era and to the period itself. So we may speak, second of

II. Corrective Approaches, Generated Primarily from Within the Scottish History Faculties

The Scottish university history faculties had not been oblivious to the Reformation era in the first half of the 20th century. Scottish historians such

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as Peter Hume Brown and John D. Mackie had both given attention to the Reformation period in that era. But Scottish history as a subject of university research and writing was a late-bloomer, emerging only as the 19th century gave way to the 20th. The nation’s Reformation history was a strand of national life only beginning to gain the attention of the universities. That they had begun to do so by mid-20th century was illustrated by the Edinburgh historian W. Croft Dickinson’s production in 1949 of the critical edition of John Knox’s History of the Reformation. Dickinson, in addition to compiling what is still the best collection of Scottish historical documents in A Source Book of Scottish History, had also turned his attention to the Reformation era in his contribution of volume one of the New History of Scotland. But the real indicator of the dawn of a new era of interest in the Reformation period within the History faculties had already been served in the commemorative year of 1960. Gordon Donaldson, a protégé of Dickinson at Edinburgh since 1947, had drawn fresh attention by the 1960 publication of his book, The Scottish Reformation. Here was a fresh, intensely-researched approach to the subject; it was quickly recognized as an interpretation that stressed the importance of initiatives taken by Tudor England to advance Reformation in Scotland as a means of cementing cross-border relations. On Donaldson’s reading, the Reformation in Scotland was intended to have resembled that in England to a very high degree.

The stage had been set by Donaldson’s work of 1960 for much more widespread Reformation–era work by Scotland’s historians. Edinburgh economic historian T.C. Smout did so with the first of two volumes surveying the nation’s history: A History of the Scottish People: 1560-1830. Here, the emphasis was upon the fabric of society rather than on pillar figures in the Church. The Glasgow social historian Jenny Wormald dealt with the Reformation period in her 1981 volume in the ‘New History of Scotland’, Court, Kirk and Community 1470-1625. In this same period, Wormald’s Glasgow colleague (and a former Gordon Donaldson postgraduate student) James Kirk

16 P. Hume Brown, Scotland Before 1700 (1893); John Knox: a Biography (1895).
18 A fascinating account of the struggles faced by Scottish history to assert itself as a discipline is provided in Marinell Ash, The Strange Death of Scottish History (Edinburgh: Ramsay Head Press, 1980).
22 Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960. The lectures on which the chapters of the book were based had been earlier delivered at Cambridge.
Haddington House Journal 2017

released a massively-researched edition of the *Second Book of Discipline* of 1576.²⁵ Now both of the early books of Scottish Reformed polity were accessible to students again. What made Kirk’s work especially noteworthy was that it took issue with the interpretation of the national Reformation put forward in 1960 by his former ‘doktorvater’ at Edinburgh, Gordon Donaldson. Kirk opposed Donaldson’s proposal that the development of a more detailed Presbyterian polity in the 1570s, after the decease of John Knox in 1572, represented a departure from an original quasi-Episcopalian trajectory. Kirk also eventually released a volume of related essays on Scotland’s 16th century Reform, *Patterns of Reform*, in the year 2000.²⁶ Meanwhile, yet another Glasgow historian, Ian B. Cowan – a medievalist, released a strikingly independent analysis of the Reformation period, stressing continuities and discontinuities with the period preceding. His, *The Scottish Reformation: Church and Society in Sixteenth Century Scotland*²⁷, is a sympathetic volume which exercises independent judgment through extensive reliance on archival materials. The Edinburgh historian Michael Lynch provided a stimulating essay on “Calvinism in Scotland: 1559-1638” in the important 1985 volume, *International Calvinism 1541-1715*.²⁸

The History faculties within Scotland were really only in the early stages of what was becoming a flood. In that same period, they edited and contributed to festschrifts in honor of two senior scholars: each collection focused on the Renaissance and Reformation era. These were *The Renaissance and Reformation in Scotland: Essays in Honour of Gordon Donaldson*, edited by Ian B. Cowan²⁹ and *Humanism and Reform: The Church in Europe, England and Scotland 1400-1643* in honor of James K. Cameron, edited by James Kirk.³⁰ All this momentum had developed within Scottish history departments in advance of the launch (in 1993) of the St. Andrews Reformation Studies Institute, which as of this writing has led to the publication of one hundred volumes on the Reformation period (a good portion of which were focused on Scotland).³¹

This almost forty-year period, in which Scottish Reformation studies were largely taken over and curated by members of history departments (rather than departments of Divinity), may be said to have made a lasting change. Reformation history-writing in Scotland a half-century earlier had still centered on ‘great men’. Yet, over time it had been established that intensive archival research and a close consideration of socio-political conditions was of paramount importance in proper assessments of this period.

III. The Emergence of Urban and Regional Reformation History

In the same decades that Scottish University History departments were making the Renaissance and Reformation period a more important focus of their research, there was another development in historical method gathering momentum: the expansion of studies in urban and regional history. As applied to Reformation-era studies, this development seems to have first manifested itself in the small volume of Bernd Moeller, *Imperial Cities and the Reformation*\(^{32}\) (E.T. 1972). It soon became widespread, as illustrated in the volume of Stephen Ozment of 1975, *The Reformation in the Cities*.\(^{33}\) Ozment (of Yale) made plain that this emphasis on urban and regional history reflected a turn away from the pursuit of Reformation studies from the standpoint of intellectual history (which had concentrated on questions of the continuity and discontinuity of ideas) to social history (which found its subject matter by ‘drilling down’ into the public records which societies had preserved for posterity).\(^{34}\)

It is clear what has unfolded in subsequent decades. There rapidly appeared studies of the Reformation as it expressed itself in the urban settings of Basel,\(^{35}\) Zurich,\(^{36}\) Strasbourg,\(^{37}\) and Geneva.\(^{38}\) At least one volume explored the advance of the Reformation in English towns.\(^{39}\) As this methodology began to be utilized in Scottish history, it yielded studies of how the Reformation established itself in Angus and Mearns,\(^{40}\) in Edinburgh,\(^{41}\) in Ayrshire,\(^{42}\) in Perth\(^{43}\) and in Fife.\(^{44}\) These studies highlighted which locations

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\(^{34}\) See the discussion in his *Reformation in the Cities*, 1-14.

\(^{35}\) Hans R. Guggisberg, *Basel in the Sixteenth Century: Aspects of the City Republic before, during and after the Reformation* (St Louis: Center for Reformation Research, 1982).

\(^{36}\) Robert C. Walton, *Zwingli’s Theocracy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967).\(^{36}\)


were most susceptible to religious change (those with access to the North
Sea), which social classes were most likely to support religious change
(craftsmen and the mercantile class in support), and the utter dependency of
early Scottish Protestantism upon the landed aristocrats, whom Knox had
called the “Lords of the Congregation”, for its establishment in particular
locales. It was not Edinburgh but Dundee that had first been called the “Ge-
neva of Scotland”. And not Edinburgh but Perth was the first to overthrow
the Roman religion. Those who published such regional researches had im-
mersed themselves in local as well as national archives and demonstrated
how local trends both converged with and differed from religious trends at
large in the nation. Though this methodology was not devised in connection
with the St. Andrews Reformation Studies Institute, such regional and urban
Reformation studies are still continuing there.

The same ‘drilling down’ so as to understand the social change that the
Reformation brought about for people at town-level was manifest in this pe-
riod in two volumes which – though not focused on particular locales – still
sought to portray what religious reform meant for ordinary folk at what we
might call a ‘local’ level. One was reckoned to be an outstanding volume for
its year 2002: American historian Margo Todd’s The Culture of Protestant-
tism in Early Modern Scotland.\(^45\) A similar investigation of the Reformation-
era piety and practices of ordinary people, not limited to Scotland, was soon-
after published by Alec Ryrie: Being Protestant in Reformation Britain.\(^46\)

IV. Trans-national Reformation Studies

Coinciding with this turn to conduct Reformation studies from an urban
and regional standpoint was a second development unfolding in the same
decades: the effort to depict local and regional Reformation movements as
parts of a larger trans-European whole. The trend itself got underway with a
1992 volume edited by Andrew Pettegree, The Early Reformation in Eu-
rope.\(^47\) No one had earlier denied that the Reformation had manifested itself
across national boundaries; yet such treatments of the period had either been
provided by single authors writing about single nations or else single authors
surveying the whole trans-European movement. But now, collegial historians
– each expert in their own region – combined their efforts in anthologies of
essays. Yet, though this 1992 volume was initially produced for use by un-
dergraduates at the University of St. Andrews and though at least three co-
tributors had Scottish connections, it contained no chapter regarding Sco-
otland’s reform. Scotland’s was not an early Reformation.\(^48\)

\(^47\) Andrew Pettegree, ed. The Early Reformation in Europe (Cambridge: Cambridge University
\(^48\) One reason for Scotland’s non-inclusion in this volume is, however, that its official Re-
formation came late.
This lack was made good in two subsequent volumes. In 1994, Robert Scribner produced a similar volume on the Reformation era. *The Reformation in National Context* sought to show how this one movement had expressed itself regionally in neighboring European societies.49 Julian Goodare of the University of Edinburgh was the historian describing Scotland’s age of Reform. Andrew Pettegree returned to the field in the year 2000 with another edited volume, *The Reformation World.*50 This volume offered chapters surveying cultural and religious forces in early modern Europe, as well as a country-by-country examination of the unfolding of the Reformation. The chapter on Scotland was the work of an American historian, Michael Graham of Akron, OH.

In a variation on this trans-national approach, two volumes appeared early in the same year of this new century: both were single-author and of identical name: *The Reformation in Britain and Ireland.* The authors, Felicity Heal and Ian Hazlett51, each attempted to depict in one volume the Reformations of the adjacent nations of England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales in their inter-relationships. Their books reflect a fresh approach by U.K. historians which was gaining ground in those same years; it went by the name “four nations history”.52 This methodology reflects the resurgence of regional consciousness in the various regions of a formerly more unified United Kingdom. Yet in spite of their considerable commonalities (e.g. titles, year of publication), the two historians wrote two very different books. Hazlett, then professor of Ecclesiastical History at the University of Glasgow, wrote a compact book in which the parallel Reformations of England, Ireland, Wales, and Scotland were given distinct chapter-length treatments. Of course, commonalities and interdependencies were acknowledged across national boundaries, yet care was taken to ensure that the narratives regarding each nation were discrete. Heal’s approach, by contrast (and reflecting her standpoint at Oxford in the larger, wealthier nation), puts forward England’s Reformation as the master-narrative of which the regional movements of Wales, Scotland, and Ireland are to be understood as adaptations. In Heal’s approach, one could recognize echoes of the line of interpretation taken by Gordon Donaldson in 1960.

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V. New Character Studies

We have come a fair distance from the hey-day of the 1960s, when it was so much in vogue for ecclesiastical historians to focus attention on John Knox and his circle of co-religionists. Yet the subsequent shift of focus to social and regional history did not mean that Scottish Reformation leaders had been utterly neglected. Though it was by no means focused chiefly on the Reformation period, the publication in 1993 of the *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology* provided up-to-date articles with then-current bibliographies. Patrick Hamilton, early Scottish disciple of Luther, has been made the object of fresh research. Another Scottish Lutheran, Alexander Alesius, has been researched in a series of insightful articles since 1964. The mentor of Knox, George Wishart, has recently been re-examined in a volume of conference papers edited by the American historian, Martin Holt Dotterweich. Two American writers, Richard L. Greaves and John Kyle, devoted considerable energies in the period since 1980 to researching the thought of John Knox. In 1999, Knox was again the subject of a major volume of essays, this one edited by Roger Mason: *John Knox and the British Reformations*. More recently, two works have given attention to the career of the one deemed to have been John Knox’s successor: Andrew Melville. A 2011 volume by Ernest Holloway focused on Melville as a late Renaissance humanist educator in both Glasgow and St. Andrews. A 2014 conference volume, *Andrew Melville (1545-1622): Writings, Reception, and Reputation* gave this major late Reformation character wider consideration. No major examination of Melville’s career had been undertaken since 1819. Most recently has come the groundbreaking Knox study of 2015 by New

62 This was the work of Thomas M’Crie (1772-1835).
College, Edinburgh ecclesiastical historian Jane Dawson; this work capitalized on the author’s discovery of manuscripts left by the associate of Knox, Christopher Goodman.\(^{63}\)

**VI. Renewed Ecclesiastical History**

Ecclesiastical historians never forgot about the Scottish Reformation, but in the situation presented in a Scotland which was steadily less Christian, the past half-century was a period in which the theme of Protestant origins received steadily less attention. This was perhaps a reflection of retrenchment within the faculties of divinity. But that this generalization requires qualification is illustrated by the Jane Dawson *Knox* biography, just noted. Dawson is drawing a steady stream of research students for such investigations. The Scottish Divinity faculties have still been able to produce such valuable studies as *Studies in the History of Worship in Scotland*; the volume sheds light on Scottish worship practices from the 16\(^{th}\) century forward.\(^{64}\) The late David F. Wright left an important chapter on Scottish Reformation thought in the *Cambridge Companion to Reformation Theology*.\(^{65}\) The question of the liturgical indebtedness of the Scottish Protestant Reformation to the antecedent era of Catholic reforming efforts has recently been explored by Stephen Mark Holmes in *Sacred Signs in Reformation Scotland*.\(^{66}\) Ian Hazlett, former occupant of the chair of Ecclesiastical History at Glasgow, is as I write this, assembling an important anthology of essays, *Companion to the Scottish Reformation*.\(^{67}\) An even more ambitious project is underway under the general editorship of Professors David Fergusson of New College, Edinburgh, and Mark Elliot of St. Andrews. The three-volume *History of Theology in Scotland* is to deal with Scottish theological developments across the centuries, with the first volume (to 1680 A.D.) giving thorough attention to Scotland’s Reformation era. The project involves contributors from both the U.K. and North America.\(^{68}\)

With this noted, we may now remark that a trend in recent decades is the production of quality research on the early Scottish Reformation by scholars not resident in or teaching in that country. The two comprehensive anthologies of essays just named both demonstrate this development in their lists of contributors. Beyond this, we can name in passing such studies as the 2006 *Origins of the Scottish Reformation* by Durham University ecclesiastical his-

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\(^{64}\) Duncan B. Forrester and Douglas B. Murray, eds. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1984).


\(^{67}\) Forthcoming, Brill, 2018.

\(^{68}\) Forthcoming, Oxford University Press, 2019. Details are available here: https://www.historyscottishtheology.div.ed.ac.uk/.
torian Alec Ryrie. The Canadian church historian Jack C. Whytock has produced the only modern history of Scottish theological education since Reformation times: *An Educated Clergy: Scottish Theological Education and Training in the Kirk and Secession 1560-1850*. This was followed by the release of the same author’s study on the First Book of Discipline. Another Canadian, David G. Mullan, has produced two important studies: *Episcopacy in Scotland: 1560-1638* and *Scottish Puritanism 1590-1638*. The American church historian Aaron Clay Denlinger has recently edited and contributed to the valuable collection *Reformed Orthodoxy in Scotland: Essays in Scottish Theology 1560-1775* and followed it up with the release of an anthology of the writings of Robert Rollock (1555-1599).

In light of these recent trends, one is entitled to wonder whether future Scottish Reformation research will not be driven as much by the questions and concerns of Christian historians outside Scotland as by those still arising in the ‘fatherland’. Perhaps Christian historians of the Presbyterian ‘diaspora’ – with their constituencies – maintain an earnestness and curiosity which will serve as an ‘engine’ driving an ongoing desire to understand and to appropriate from Scotland’s Reformation when that curiosity is retreating in the land of origin.

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