



Innes, S. and Reid, S. (2018) Expressions of faith: religious writing. In: Royan, N. (ed.) *The International Companion to Scottish Literature 1400-1650*. Series: International companions to Scottish literature (6). Scottish Literature International: Glasgow, pp. 60-78. ISBN 9781908980236.

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Deposited on: 10 August 2018

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Expressions of Faith: Religious Writing in Scotland

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Religious faith was the most prominent theme in literary discourse in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century, the bulk of which consists of theological tracts, biblical commentaries, and polemic. Concerned primarily with the nuanced exposition of scripture and the issues of liturgy and polity afflicting Scotland's fledgling Kirk, it mostly lacks the discussion of universal and timeless themes or the stylistic excellence that makes great literature. Moreover, the constant stream of vitriol poured forth against all those who were not part of the godly community, particularly the 'antichristian' forces of Catholicism, can be wearying and repugnant to read. However, as Knox points out in Book I of his *History of the Reformation in Scotland*, works like his serve a higher purpose than the purely literary:

This we wryte to lett the posteriteis to come understand, how potentlye God wrought in preserving and delivering of these that had butt a small knowledge of his trewth, and for the luif [love] of the same hasarded all; that yf that eyther we now in our dayis, having grettar lycht, or our posteriteis that shall follow us, shall see ane fearfull dispersioun of such as oppone [oppose] thame selfis to impietie ...nor yitt dispare, butt that the same God that dejectes, (for causes unknowin to us,) will raise up agane the personis dejected, to his glorye and thare conforthe.¹

The reformation century created several generations of writers, on both sides of the confessional divide, who like Knox were keen to document and disseminate their vision of Christianity as the one true path to salvation. The Reformation inadvertently contributed to significant shifts in the literary forms used by all three of early modern Scotland's major languages, albeit with differing levels of impact. While late-medieval Gaelic verse predominantly inhabited a pan-Gaelic context (incorporating both Scotland and Ireland), links can be made between religious poetry in both of Scotland's vernacular languages, although there are often considerable differences in form, reception and function. The advent of the Reformation saw certain topics fall out of favour in Protestant verse but it is noteworthy that religious verse from seemingly opposed confessional traditions continued to be shared and enjoyed in some contexts.

For Scots prose, by contrast, the Reformation arguably resulted in its arrival as a genre, as Catholics and Protestants alike wrote historical narratives to justify their faith and polemical works denouncing their opponents. In doing so, they moved away from the traditional use of Latin for religious writing in the hopes of attracting – and keeping – the interest of the common parishioner. The use of the vernacular and indeed an appropriate register of the vernacular were major concerns for Scottish writers of religious literature, in both Scots and Gaelic, after the Reformation. Collectively the works produced during this period of religious turmoil help explain why so many were willing to die, or suffer persecution and exile, for their own ‘true’ version of the church; individually, some transcend their immediate context and have a merited place in the Scottish canon.

Religious Verse in the Vernaculars

Religious practice and specific devotion are evident in a whole range of primarily non-religious verse in both Gaelic and Scots. In the elegy for her husband, Niall Òg MacNèill of Gigha (d. c. 1470), Aithbhreac inghean Coirceadail tells us that her grief is inspired by his Rosary.² The focus on the Rosary in this poem is somewhat reminiscent of another bardic elegy ‘A Chros thall ar an dtulaigh’ (‘O Cross yonder on the hill’) by the Irish poet Gofraidh Fionn Ó Dálaigh (d.1387) which begins with a similar address to the wooden cross at his son’s grave as cause of grief.³ The works of Sir David Lyndsay of the Mount (d. 1555) are full of descriptions of, and comment on, religious practice and Church governance, such as his verses on ‘Imageis maid with mennis hand’ in *The Monarche*.⁴ Richard Holland (d. c. 1483), priest and notary public, includes bird-minstrels singing thirty seven lines of praise to the Virgin at the banquet in ‘The Buke of the Howlat’. The entertainment at the banquet also includes the Ruke (Rook), as ‘a bard owt of Ireland’, reciting in Gaelic before being attacked by the Tuchet (Lapwing) and Golk (Cuckoo) as fools, much to the amusement of the assembly.⁵ Eachann Bacach’s ‘A’ Chnò Shamhna’ (‘The Halloween Nut’), a lament for Lachlan MacLean of Duart (d.1648), ends with a skilful religious seafaring analogy and perhaps also provides a glimpse of religious practice:

*Bha gràdh is eagal Mhic Dè ort
An àm sgrìobtair a leughadh
Ann ad chaisteal mun èireadh do bhòrd.
(‘You had the love and fear of the Son of God
when the Scripture was read
in your castle before your table arose.’)⁶*

The importance of the noble court is highlighted in both of these last examples. Much of the surviving late-medieval Scots religious verse which has received scholarly attention was written by poets with some attachment to the royal court of the Stewart kings. This is not true of Gaelic religious verse. In 1616, the Scottish Privy Council of King James VI & I, decreed that the 'vulgar Inglishe toung be universallie plantit and the Irische language, whilk is one of the chief and principall causis of the continewance of barbaritie and incivilitie amongis the inhabitantis of the Ilis and Heylandis, may be abolisheit and removit.'⁷ This was to be done in order to advance the cause of the 'trew religion'. It is estimated that somewhere between a third and a half of the population of Scotland would have been Gaelic-speaking during the period 1400-1650⁸ and the King had already made his feelings on his Gaelic subjects crystal clear in his *Basilicon Doron* (1599) stating that in his view the Gaels on the mainland were mostly barbarous and that the 'wolves or wild boars' of the Islands were beyond contempt.⁹ Given the strength of the King's hatred for the Highlands, and the notion that the existence of Gaelic somehow militated against the 'trew religion' it is perhaps remarkable that any religious works were printed in Gaelic at all. The King was of course choosing to ignore the fact that the 'incivilitie' of the Gaelic nobility included the support of all sorts of Gaelic scholarship during our period. He cannot have been unaware of this since there is some evidence that he himself might have provided patronage for the Irish poet Fearghal Óg Mac an Bhaird around 1581. For his part, Mac an Bhaird in the poem 'Dursan mh'Eachtra go hAlbuin' ('A Hardship my Journey to Scotland') appears to have been rather traumatized by the Reformed faith he witnessed in Scotland.¹⁰

The literary high register of Gaelic, which had been designed for the composition of *dán díreach* (bardic poetry in syllabic metres), was in use in Scotland and Ireland from the thirteenth century until the end of our period. This register is referred to as Early Modern Irish, or more commonly in Scotland as Classical Common Gaelic. This literary standard had to be taught and guides which demonstrated correct usage were produced. A late Scottish guide from c.1640 is thought to have been produced for a young Archibald Campbell (*Gilleasbaig Fionn*), the future 9th Earl of Argyll.¹¹ The use of this register allowed the learned orders to operate in Scotland and Ireland. This pan-Gaelic context is important for an understanding of Scottish religious literature in Gaelic, although clearly not the only context. A number of Gaelic manuscripts containing religious material provide evidence for further contexts and literacy in Scots and Latin. The

Murthly Hours (NLS, MS 21000) gives us an early glimpse of this multilingual setting since it includes instruction in Gaelic for the use of prayers, in Latin and Anglo-Norman French, as charms for healing. The Gaelic notes were added to the Murthly Hours around the beginning of the fifteenth century.¹² The Classical Gaelic manuscripts in the National Library of Scotland contain much religious material. These manuscripts range in date from the fifteenth century onwards and the vast majority appear to have originated in Ireland and then been added to in Scotland.¹³ They contain a whole range of different religious literary forms in Classical Gaelic: prayers and charms; religious verse; saints' lives; sermons; apocrypha; translations of *mirabilia*, such as the letter of Prester John; texts which seek to promote affective devotion, such as the *Dialogue of the Blessed Virgin and Anselm on the Passion*; and instructional tracts, such as one on the four reasons for prostration before the Cross. These kinds of religious writings, whether in Latin, Gaelic or Scots, often reflect the pan-European transmission of pre-Reformation devotional material and it can be difficult to ascertain how much of this we can claim as Scottish. Once again the multilingual setting is apparent, as well as the pan-Gaelic reality, of many of the Gaelic manuscripts. For instance, NLS, MS 72.1.2 is a medical compendium compiled by the Beatons in Mull, containing much material which has come from Ireland.¹⁴ It also includes a short tract on the periods of indulgence secured by the recitation of the *Saltair Mhuire* (Mary's Psalter) in Gaelic and a quatrain in Scots in the hand of Niall Beaton (*fl.* 1656):

In my defend God me defend
And bring my sauld to ane guid end. For
I am sik and leik to die
The Lord God sauld heve mercie of me.¹⁵

Our main source for late-medieval Classical Gaelic religious verse attributed to identifiably Scottish poets is the Book of the Dean of Lismore (NLS, MS 72.1.37), compiled 1512-42 by Seumas MacGregor, dean and notary public. It contains a large number of Classical Gaelic poems in bardic metres, as well as some items in Scots and Latin. This manuscript miscellany was compiled in Perthshire and contains around twenty bardic poems of a religious nature as well as five poems which satirize lascivious clergy. These twenty are a mix of Irish and Scottish items with some as old as the thirteenth century and others perhaps as recent as the lifetimes of the compilers. The post- 1400 Scottish poets of religious material are: Giolla-Críost Táilléar, thought to be poet to the fifteenth-century Stewarts of Rannoch; Maol-Domhnaigh mac Mhágghnais Mhuileadhaigh, thought to be an Ó Muirgheasáin; and similarly unidentified poets

such as Donnchadh Óg, Roibéard Mac Laghmainn, and An Bárd Mac an tSaoir. These poets provide us with Classical Gaelic poetry based on narratives drawn from Latin exempla collections such as the *Gesta Romanorum*, two of which are presented as Marian miracles¹⁶ and another as a dream-vision. There is a poem to a local Perthshire Gaelic saint and moral or didactic poems are also represented on recommended good deeds and the seven deadly sins.

Given these subject matters and source materials we can easily demonstrate some similarities between Gaelic and Scots religious verse, despite differences of convention. For instance, the use of exempla collections can also be demonstrated for Scots verse since 'The Bludy Serk' by Robert Henryson (d.c. 1490), is also based on a narrative from the *Gesta Romanorum*.¹⁷ A significant amount of poetry survives in Scots on the Virgin and the dream-vision was also very popular. William Dunbar (d. 1513x1530)'s poem on the Passion, 'Amang thir freiris, within ane cloister', and his poem on the seven deadly sins, 'Off Februar the fyiftene nycht', are both presented as dream-visions.¹⁸ The latter envisages Hell as full of Gaelic-speakers; even Mahoun (the Devil) who summons a Highland pageant is so deafened by their speech, which is again associated with the 'ruke', that he suffocates them with smoke!¹⁹ The religious dream-vision was to survive the Reformation since John Stewart of Baldynneis (d. c. 1605) uses it for 'Ane Schersing out of Trew Felicitie'.²⁰ 'Ane Schersing' was written for King James VI and is particularly sophisticated; while the importance of Biblical evidence is highlighted it does not concentrate on confessional identity.²¹ Elizabeth Melville (*fl.* 1599-1631) in *Ane Godlie Dreame* (1603), another dream-vision, describes the journey of a Calvinist elect soul.²² Christ assures the pilgrim that the 'Papists purging place, quhair ... sillie saulles do dwell' is a figment of man's imagination and that 'My blude alone did saif thy saull from sin.'²³ Alexander Montgomerie (d.1598) in his sonnet 'Iniquitie on earth is so increst' had previously subtly recast Catholics as the elect.²⁴ We can look for subtle Catholic discourse in the works of Montgomerie, including in his masterpiece 'The Cherrie and the Slae'. However, it has been suggested that we do well to remember that the sixteenth-century Catholic Council of Trent may have resulted in something of a shared Catholic and Protestant devotional poetic language; to the point where a translation of Psalm 23 and a lyric 'Supreme essence' have early attributions both to Montgomerie and to the Protestant divine James Melville of Kilrenny.²⁵

Religious verse in Scots also had recourse to more than one register. For instance, Scots with *aureate* or a large amount of Latinate vocabulary was used by a number of late-medieval

poets for religious poetry: 'Hale, Sterne Superne' to the Virgin by Dunbar is perhaps the most well-known example. Dunbar became a priest in 1504. His poem 'Rorate celi desuper!' calls upon all of creation to proclaim the Nativity; even the flowers are to 'lay out your levis lustely'.²⁶ This is illustrative of the ways in which pre-Reformation poets could not only use scripture as inspiration but also expand upon it in order to induce feelings of wonder, pity and love in the audience. The long poem in Scots with the title 'The Passioun of Crist' by Walter Kennedy (d. 1518?), apparently also a Gaelic speaker, is a good example of the extended description of the events of the Passion.²⁷ Inviting the audience to 'se' the events of the Passion and Resurrection was a common device in Scotland and beyond. For instance, the anonymous poem 'Off the Resurrectoun' from BL, MS Arundel 285 which begins 'Thow that in prayeris hes bene lent' instructs the audience to

Behald yi meik sueit Salviour
The to embrace how yat he bowis.
Se how he martirit wes with lowis.²⁸

Late-medieval verse in Scots provides more evidence than Gaelic for poetry which was intended to act as a devotional exercise. 'The Contemplacioun of Synnaris' by the Franciscan William of Touris (d. c. 1508), the original version of which may have been intended for King James IV, is split into separate sections meant for each day of the week.²⁹ However, certain sections of Classical Gaelic bardic poems use the first-person and it may be that they were also used as prayer. Translations of Latin religious lyrics into Scots, and versions in Scots of English lyrics are also relatively common.³⁰ Translation of whole lyrics like this appears to have been much less common in Gaelic.

Scotland had a rich tradition of verse satire which could include satire of priests. George Buchanan (d.1582), again thought to have also been a Gaelic speaker, was forced to flee to England as a result of his Latin satires of the Franciscans: *Somnium*, *Palinodiae*, and *Franciscanus* written in the 1530s.³¹ Satire on religious themes becomes even more vitriolic with the advent of the Reformation. *The Gude and Godlie Ballatis* (1565) includes some anti-catholic verse polemic among the psalms and other songs.³² The *Ballatis* contains many translations of Lutheran German originals. Robert Sempill (d. 1595?), in plain-style Scots, also used satire for the Reformist cause.³³ However, not all Protestant poetry is combative; William Drummond of Hawthornden (d. 1649), who wrote in English, published a collection of 'spirituall poems',

Flowres of Sion (1623). His religious poetry borders on the mystical and allows for some use of common medieval allegory. For instance, his poem 'If that the world doth in a maze remaine' invites the reader to 'powre fourth teares to him pour'd Blood for thee', through meditation on the pelican feeding her young with the blood of her breast.³⁴

Scotland saw some Protestant censorship of late-medieval verse. For instance, the Bannatyne Manuscript (NLS, Adv. MS 1.1.6), compiled in 1568 by George Bannatyne, includes a censored version of 'The Contemplacioun of Synnaris' but does however contain much pre-Reformation poetry which was apparently acceptable.³⁵ Such care is still evident a century later in the Fernaig Manuscript (Glasgow, University Library, MS Gen. 85/1 & 85/2) which provides another fascinating example of a collection which contains Protestant verse in Gaelic but also some carefully selected pre-Reformation material, as well as one poem from a distinctly Counter-Reformation context. It was compiled by Duncan MacRae of Inverinate (*Donnchadh nam Pìos*) (d. c.1700).³⁶ MacRae was Episcopalian; he includes a Gaelic translation of a poem which prays to be protected '*bho bhreugan Phresbiterian is Shagart*' ('from the lies of Presbyterians and Priests').³⁷ There are 59 poems in the collection and over two thirds of these are religious. These include poetry by northern Gaelic nobility such as MacCulloch of Park, Strathpeffer (*Fear na Pàirce*) (fl. late sixteenth / early seventeenth century); Alasdair, the 4th MacKenzie of Achilty (*Alasdair mac Mhurchaidh, Fear Àicheallaidh*) (d. 1642); and Alexander Munro, minister of Durness (d. c.1653). It has been said that over half of the poems in the collection are in bardic metres.³⁸ The majority of the verse from this collection is not concerned with confessional identity. Rather some continuity with pre-Reformation religious themes is evident, such as the struggle between body and soul and the futility of earthly pleasures. Biblical episodes provide the detail in a number of poems in the collection whereas apocryphal and exempla material was preferred in Gaelic pre-Reformation poetry. The poem from a Counter-Reformation context is 'Truagh cor chloinne Adhaimh' ('Sad the state of the children of Adam'); it is an adaptation of the popular medieval Latin lyric 'Cur Mundus Militat Sub Vana Gloria', adding the Gaelic hero Cù Chulainn to the list of classical heroes who have now perished.³⁹ The poem was composed by Giolla Brighde (Bonabhentura) Ó hEodhasa (d.1614), an Irish friar at Louvain. Once again we might see MacRae's inclusion of this poem as reflecting something of the shared devotional language and themes of some post-Reformation poetry.

The Franciscan College of St Anthony of Padua founded in 1607 at Louvain in Flanders became a refuge for Irish friars. They wrote and printed a great deal of Counter-Reformation material in Irish in the early seventeenth century at the College and are often explicit about their decision to simplify Classical Gaelic for religious prose for use in Ireland. Many of these friars came from poetic lineages and were themselves poets. Giolla Brighde Ó hEodhasa explains that it is wrong to further ornament the teachings of God in his *An Teagasg Críosaíde* ('The Christian Doctrine'), first printed at Antwerp in 1611.⁴⁰ However, this was not the first mention of appropriate language register for Gaelic religious literature in print. The issue had been discussed by John Carswell (*Carsualach Mòr Chàrn-Àsaraidh*) in his translation and adaptation of the *Book of Common Order of the Church of Scotland (1564)*, printed in 1567 as *Foirm na n-Urrnuidheadh* ('The Form of the Prayers'). One of his adaptations was the addition of a blessing for a ship. Carswell stated in the epistle to his patron, Archibald Campbell (*Gilleasbaig Donn*) the 5th Earl of Argyll (d.1573), that while there are those who know Classical Gaelic better than he, he is aware

nach a milis-bhriathruibh na bfeallsamh do cuireadh an sgrìobhtùir diadha, agus nach bfuil feidhm aige ar dhath breadhdha brégach na bfileadh do chur air. Oir is lór don fhírindé í féin mar fhiadhuise, gan brat oile do chur impe.
(‘that the words of the holy scripture are not framed in the sweet words of the philosophers, and that it does not need the fine false colour of the poets. For truth is a sufficient witness to itself, requiring no other covering.’)⁴¹

Yet, despite these words Carswell translated into Classical Gaelic, rather than something closer to the Scottish vernacular.⁴² Classical Gaelic was perhaps the natural choice for a work which the translator envisaged being used by both the Gaels of Scotland and Ireland. Also, since the language of much Gaelic scholarship continued to be Classical Gaelic, and since bardic poetry was still highly prized, a move to the vernacular may have been out of the question. Carswell includes his own dedicatory poem and the Lord’s Prayer, both in bardic metre, as well as two short carefully chosen excerpts from two pre-Reformation Irish religious bardic poems. Carswell’s choice of register was to some extent successful. The Anglican reformers in Ireland printed Seán Ó Cearnaigh’s *Aibidil Gaoidheilge & Caiticíosma* ('A B C of Gaelic & Catechism') in 1571; a primer which includes a translation of the catechism of the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*.⁴³ It is noteworthy that four of the ten prayers in the *Aibidil* are based on Carswell’s prayers in *Foirm na n-Urrnuidheadh*.⁴⁴

The high regard in which bardic poetry was held in Gaelic Scotland and Ireland is underlined by the activities of the Counter-Reformation missionaries from Louvain in Gaelic Scotland. Aodh Mac Cathmhaoil 'Mac Aingil' (Hugh MacCaghwell) (d.1626), the Irish Guardian of St Anthony's College, is presumably referring to Gaelic Scotland, and indulging in wishful thinking, when he refers to '*Éiri amháin & a hinghean ionmhuin Alba*' ('Ireland alone and her beloved daughter Scotland') as having the privilege of being uniquely free of heresy, in his *Scáthán Shacramuinte na hAithridhe* ('Mirror of the Sacrament of Penance')(1618).⁴⁵ There were a number of Scots at St Anthony's and the College sent groups of missionaries to the Highlands and Islands. In the reports the missionaries sent to the *Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* in Rome, they detail their great success and various miraculous happenings. The Irish missionary Conchobhair Mac an Bhaird (Cornelius Ward) gives us a fascinating insight into the regard the Highland nobility had for bardic poetry into the seventeenth century. In 1624 he writes of the way in which he was able to gain access to, and work towards the conversion of, John Campbell of Cawdor at Muckairn by:

*Simulandi me esse poetam Hybernum (hos inibi in maximo honore haberi solere novi) cumque unum poema encomiasticum in domini illius laudem composuerim, mox cum uno cytharoda, et cantore (ut moris erat) ingredior, et honorificentissime excipior ('pretending that I was an Irish poet – I knew it was the custom there to hold these in the greatest esteem – and when I composed a praise poem in that laird's praise, I straightaway went in, with a harper and, as was customary, a singer, and was most honourably received'.)*⁴⁶

Here we see that the nobility's regard for Gaelic literature could be used as a conversion tool, and as Counter-Reformation missionaries did elsewhere in Europe their reports suggest that they also promoted the miraculous, as well as the veneration of holy objects and local native saints which were all a part of the late-medieval geography of the sacred.⁴⁷ It has been postulated that the large amount of Gaelic religious oral literature collected in the Highlands in the nineteenth century by Alexander Carmichael may to some extent bear their imprint.⁴⁸

In Scotland the use of something resembling Scottish Gaelic for printed Reformed literature was not to take place until the 1640s and 50s. Classical Gaelic was still used for a translation of the Latin version of Calvin's *Catechismus Ecclesiae Genevensis* (1545), printed by Wreittoun in Edinburgh around the year 1631. This is known as *Adtimchiol an Chreidimh* ('Concerning the Faith') and it is thought that Niall MacEoghain of the Clann MhicEoghain (MacEwen) poets to the Campbells may have carried out the translation. Once again *Adtimchiol*

an Chreidimh included a number of poems in bardic metres. These include the *faoisid* ('confession') of Eòin Stiùbhart of Appin and two poems which may both be by Niall's father Athairne. The two poems by Athairne were known at Louvain as they appear in the Book of the O'Connor Don, a huge manuscript collection of bardic poetry compiled at Ostend in 1631 for Captain Somhairle Mac Domhnaill from the Glens of Antrim.⁴⁹ Therefore, the pan-Gaelic transmission (to and from Flanders) of some Classical Gaelic religious verse survives into the seventeenth century. However, vernacular Scottish Gaelic for religious printed literature was just on the horizon. Ministers of the Synod of Argyll, which covered a huge area, were extremely busy translating during the first half of the seventeenth century. Their *Foirceadul Aithghearr Cheasnuighe* ('A Brief Catechetical Lesson') of 1651, a translation of the Westminster Assembly Shorter Catechism, survives in its second edition print from 1659.⁵⁰ The language used in this is much closer to vernacular Scottish Gaelic.⁵¹ Also in 1659 their *An Ceud Chaogad do Shalmaibh Dhaibhidh*, the first fifty metrical Psalms, was printed in Glasgow. The Synod had also parceled out translation of the Old Testament to various ministers in the 1650s but it did not make it into print.⁵²

Classical Gaelic and Scots were thus used for religious verse throughout the late-medieval and early modern period, and poetry in both languages shared a number of key elements, including a common stock of tropes and themes and a flexibility of register. While the censorship and the need to address different audiences and polemical purposes caused by the arrival of the Reformation (processes which, indeed, were also seen at work within Protestantism as it split into a range of sects) fractured this shared heritage and its usage, it still remained as the basis for verse across all denominations. It was not until the seventeenth century that a more demotic register of Scottish Gaelic began to be used for printed religious works. This can be contrasted with the earlier and more extensive use of Scots form printed prose works, to which we now turn.

'Thus did light and darknes stryve within the realme of Scotland':⁵³ Religious Prose and Polemic

The *Breviarum Aberdonense* ('Aberdeen Breviary'), a liturgical calendar containing a plethora of prose *lectiones* (readings) for the feasts of many of Scotland's native saints, was finally printed in 1510 after some two decades of research by clerics working under Bishop William Elphinstone. It is testament to the existence of an earlier (and now largely lost) culture of Latin religious

prose writing, also reflected in Walter Bower's religious digressions in the *Scotichronicon* (1440s) on topics as diverse as traditions relating to the Virgin Mary and the meaning of the word 'ave'. However, vernacular prose expressing 'popular' piety and focused on matters theological only emerged in the very late fifteenth century, and rapidly grew in popularity.⁵⁴ John Ireland (c. 1440-1495), a theologian whose career included stints as a professor at the Sorbonne, as ambassador to the French court, and as confessor to James III, also produced the first vernacular treatise on religion, the *Meroure of Wyssdome*, an 'A B C of Christianitie' and advice manual for the young James IV.⁵⁵ Although its seventh 'book' has attracted most scholarly attention for its discussion of kingship and good governance and of the mutual obligations of responsibility that exist between God, the sovereign and his people,⁵⁶ the first six books are just as important for their portrayal of the major tenets of the Catholic faith so omnipresent in late-medieval Scottish life. Books one to three and six provide a straightforward exegesis of the Lord's Prayer, the Hail Mary, the Apostles' Creed and the Sacraments, while books four and five discuss the issues of faith and predestination in terms that, as we would expect, allow for man's free will and the place of good works and penance in his own salvation. The constant emphasis on the Virgin Mary and the life of Christ, notably the Passion, reflects similar preoccupations seen in material and cultural expressions of late-medieval Scottish piety such as the Confraternities of the Holy Blood and the Fetternear Banner.⁵⁷ The work shows the merest hint of a shift towards humanist modes of thought – sources cited include Seneca, Plato and Virgil alongside Aristotle, Augustine, Boethius, and Ockham, and there is a sense in Ireland's discussion of the preeminence of man above all created things that presupposes the renaissance view of the dignity of reason. However, although there are exhortations to James IV in the dedication to protect the church as 'meroure and exampil to all the pepil' and to 'put nocht jgnorant ore licht persounis and of euill lif jn benefice ore digniteis', there is little else to suggest Ireland desired a humanist reform of the church.⁵⁸

By the second quarter of the sixteenth century, when Lutheran ideas were starting to make their way into Scotland's religious and intellectual communities, vernacular prose pamphlets and manuals began to appear articulating the basic doctrines of evangelical Protestantism. These were all produced by Scots exposed to reforming ideas in Switzerland or Germany, and as these were functional texts aiming to ground the reader in basic Protestant theology they lack stylistic or literary flair. John Gau's *Richt Vay to the Kingdom of Hevine* (1533) was a translation of a Danish tract of the same name written by Christiern Pedersen in 1531 which offered a Lutheran

interpretation of the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer and the Angelic Salutation to the Virgin.⁵⁹ John Johnson's *An Comfortable Exhortation of our mooste Holy Christen faith and her Frutes written unto the Christen brethren in Scotland after the pure word of God* (1533) was a work of spiritual advice exhorting the reader to piety via a collection of scriptural quotations, mainly derived from Coverdale's English version of the New Testament.⁶⁰ During his Continental exile between 1539 and 1542, George Wishart produced a translation of the Helvetic Confession drawn up by Swiss reformers in 1536, which was posthumously published after his execution for heresy at St Andrews in 1546 as *The Confescion of the Fayth of the Sweserlandes* (London, 1548?). Each author emphasizes the importance of the doctrine of justification by faith and the primacy of scripture in the vernacular as the chief instrument of salvation for the common man. Gau describes the gospels as 'richt profetabil to reid and ramember apone', and Wishart describes scripture in the opening of the *Confession* as 'the moost perfyte and auncient science' which 'alone contayneth all godlynes and all sorte and maner of facyon of lyfe', and which is the judge of itself.⁶¹ While all three texts exhibit intense evangelical piety, there is no evidence yet of the polemical aggression prevalent in religious writing of the latter half of the sixteenth century. Instead, each writer focuses on the acceptance of suffering for the true invisible church of all believers, on advocating passive resistance to the ungodly magistrate rather than direct action, and on articulating these ideas in a direct and clear Scots.⁶²

Critics are sharply divided over the extent of John Knox's leadership of the early Kirk and the exact nature of his theological and intellectual outlook, but there is general agreement that his collection of writings represents the crucial cultural turn in the appropriation of prose for the purposes of religious polemic. Recent studies investigating Knox as a purely literary agent have been uniformly impressed with his command of a variety of genres, his ability to switch authorial voice, and his talent for producing arresting imagery and anecdotes that rhetorically enrich an otherwise plain and direct written style.⁶³ Turning his hand with equal ease to admonitory epistles to his parishioners and the Scottish ruling elite (*A Godly Letter of warning and Comfortable Epistles* (all 1554); *An Admonition to the Nobility* (1557)) and to theological and political tracts (most famously in the notorious *First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* (1558)), his greatest work is the *History of the Reformation in Scotland*, written between 1559 and 1567. Comprising four books written by Knox and a fifth written by an unknown 'continuator' (possibly his 'secretary', Richard Bannatyne), the *History* creates a

narrative that legitimizes the actions of the Lords of the Congregation during the Reformation Rebellion, and sharply delineates the sufferings of the 'constant' Protestant elect against the 'bloody beasts' of the Catholic hierarchy and the 'dontybours' ('full-bellies') and 'munzeons' (a play on *minion* and *monsieurs*) of the court. Books II and III, which give an account of the rebellion against Mary of Guise between 1558 and 1560 down to the return of Mary Stewart from France in the following year, were probably in train by late October 1559, and thus written almost contemporaneously with the events described. Interspersed with vast swathes of documentary and epistolary evidence, these two books are less a compelling personal account of the reformation than an urgent attempt to fashion a 'master narrative' that depicts the sweeping victory of Protestantism, complete with a self-contained collection of reference texts to prove it. Book I, which acts as a martyrology for Scottish Protestants down to 1558, and book IV, which narrates Knox's clashes with Mary Queen of Scots and her government between 1561 and 1564, were written during Knox's extended stay in Ayrshire in 1566. Relying more on Knox's immediate recollections, these flow far better in narrative terms than the other books and show his talent for lurid sound-bites at its sharpest. His graphic account of the six hours it took Patrick Hamilton to die when being burned for heresy in 1528, and of the Perth matron Helen Stirk, drowned on the order of Cardinal David Beaton in 1544 despite 'having ane suckin babe upon hir breast', contrast sharply with the sexual and moral depravities of Beaton himself, who in the account of his murder is found sleeping in after a night 'busy at his comptis [accounts]' with his mistress Marion Ogilvy as his assassins enter the castle.⁶⁴ However, Knox reserves his greatest opprobrium throughout for his most feared opponent, Mary of Guise. In a particularly arresting line he describes the placing of a crown on her head when she is appointed to the regency in 1554 as 'als seimlye a sight, (yf men had eis,) as to putt a saddil upoun the back of ane unwrely kow'.⁶⁵

Knox has been described as 'the first Scot to achieve literary mastery over English prose',⁶⁶ and there has been considerable debate over his frequent (but inconsistent) use of Anglicized word-forms and whether he, or the relative dearth of printed books in Scots compared to the ubiquity of Anglicised religious texts, played a greater role in the increasingly 'de-Scotticized' tendencies of Scottish literature in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁶⁷ This issue was one that the earliest Catholic respondents to his polemic gleefully exploited, and several engaged Knox and his supporters in public disputations (recorded in Knox's *History*) and in a series of printed pamphlets where the defence of a 'purer' form of Scots vernacular, free from Anglicized

Protestant tendencies, became a key issue. Archbishop John Hamilton tried to appeal, apparently with little success, to both Catholics and moderate evangelicals with the production of a *Catechism* in Scots at St Andrews in 1552, and a simplified exposition of doctrine in broadsheet format in 1558, known as the *Twopenny Faith* due to its purchase price.⁶⁸ However, the Abbot of Crossraguel, Quentin Kennedy, and the Linlithgow priest and schoolmaster Ninian Winzet rose to the challenge of defending the Catholic faith publicly at the height of the reformation. Kennedy's writings include the *Compendius Tractive conforme to the Scripturis of almychtie God* (1558), which argues that only the church fathers and a duly appointed council of church representatives have the right to judge scripture, and several tracts defending the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation.⁶⁹ His works are so centered on adducing scriptural and learned proof for Catholic theology that they largely ignore criticisms of the church posited by Scottish evangelicals, although *Ane litil brief tractait...prevand cleirlye the real body of Iesu Crist to be present in the sacrament of the altare* (1561) does take to task the opinions on the Eucharist of the German Johannes Oecolampadius.⁷⁰ However, Winzet's *Certane Tractatis for Reformatioun of Doctryne and maneris* (1562), *The Last Blast of the Trompet of Godis worde aganis the vsurpit auctoritie of Iohne Knox* (1562) and *The Buke of Four Scoir Thre Questions* (1563) combine impassioned rhetoric and acknowledgement of the failings of the pre-reformation Catholic church with a series of questions aimed at systematically undermining the theological and political claims of Knox and his supporters.⁷¹ In *The Buke of Four Scoir Thre Questions*, when justifying the liberal use of a broader Scots style, Winzet argues that religious truth requires 'familiar, and na curius nor affectat speche' and characterizes the Anglicizing tendencies of Scottish Protestants as 'a cloke of finzeit eloquence' used to entice the gullible.⁷² In a postscript added to the work in October 1563, Winzet directly lays this assertion at Knox's door, when he asks him:

Gif ze, throw curiositie of nouationis, hes forzet our auld plane Scottis quhilk zour mother lerit zou in tymes cuming, I sall wryte to zou my mynd in Latin, for I am nocht acqyntit with zour Southeroun.⁷³

Knox's *History* set several patterns for the wave of historical and biographical writings that emerged in the late sixteenth and seventeenth century, and which form a core strand of prose in post-reformation Scotland. These include James Melville's *Autobiography and Diary*, John Row's *History of the Kirk of Scotland from the Year 1558 to August 1637*, and David

Calderwood's multi-volume masterwork, *The History of the Church of Scotland*.⁷⁴ There is a gap of more than thirty years between the completion of Knox's text and the first of these later narratives (Melville's *Autobiography*, completed in 1601/02), but they are linked to his work through their shared aim of narrating the struggle of God's 'elect' people against the forces of tyranny. In Knox's case, the object of opprobrium is the forces of French-backed Catholicism; in the later narratives, it is the Episcopal and absolutist leanings of James VI and I in his (increasingly successful) attempts to control the church after assuming full political control in the mid-1580s. To a far greater extent than Knox, these later works engross a vast amount of documentary material – the entire proceedings of the general assembly, full parliamentary acts, the books of discipline, and religious tracts and letters – so they can seem like little more than disjointed collections of edited sources. However, in the same way that they expand Knox's 'master narrative' of the trials and tribulations of the suffering Kirk, they also develop several of the literary devices and strengths that make his work so effective, including the use of pithy anecdotes to attack the failings of James' 'courtly' bishops (described in such unflattering terms as 'dumb dogges' and 'bellie gods').

Melville's *Autobiography and Diary* is by far the most 'literary' of these histories. His narrative is interspersed with accounts of his own life – his education at St Andrews, meeting his wife, the births (and deaths) of his children, and his ministry at Anstruther – that make it eminently readable and appealing. It is also thanks to Melville that his uncle Andrew has come down to posterity with a mythic status similar to that of Knox as a leader of the chosen people. Melville's frequent clashes with royal authority, including his forced exile to England for inflammatory sermons between 1584 and 1586, his warding benorth Tay in 1587, and his imprisonment in the Tower of London between 1607 and 1611, are all portrayed as the actions of an 'intrepid' mouthpiece for the one true faith in Scotland. So too is his most infamous sound-bite from a confrontation with James VI at Falkland Palace in 1596 where he grabbed James by the sleeve and harangued him as 'God's sillie vassall'.⁷⁵ However, when James introduces Andrew to his readers at the very beginning of his narrative he waxes at length on his uncle's great patience: 'whowbeit he was verie hat in all questions, yit when it twitched his particular [his own private interest], no man could crab [enrage] him'.⁷⁶ There are also direct invocations of Melville as a prophet, including his almost supernatural ability to divine meaning from dreams – he foretells from the Glasgow regent Peter Blackburn's dream of two red toads climbing out of a 'cap full of barmie drink' that the college's legal action against its former accountants John Graham and

Archibald Beaton will be successful – and his ‘wounderfull sagacity and smelling out of men’s naturals and dispositiones’ so that he knew friends who were truly enemies and vice versa.⁷⁷

Although only a handful of tracts and histories were produced by Scottish Catholic spokesmen to combat the rising tide of Protestant literature in the later sixteenth century, it is notable that nearly all their authors wrote in Scots, despite their common complaint that the Protestants had overturned the sacredness of the bible by translating it into the vulgar tongue.⁷⁸ While clearly essential for putting the Catholic message across to the non-Latinate Scottish reader, this linguistic choice seems also to have been a conscious attempt to continue the image established by Ninian Winzet of the Catholic Church as a defender of Scotland’s traditional culture. John Knox attacked the letter sent to him by the Jesuit James Tyrie in his *An Answer to the Jesuit Tyrie* (1572) as seeming ‘rather scabrushly to haue translaitit that which he wrytis furth of Latin’, to which Tyrie responded in his *Refutation* (1573) that although his ‘language and orthographie’ are slightly rusty, he speaks so that he ‘salbe easalie vnderstand’.⁷⁹ The ex-St Andrews regent John Hamilton, who fled from St Mary’s College after revealing his Catholicism and who went on to enjoy great success as an academic at the University of Paris, published *Ane Catholik and Facile Treatise* at Paris in 1581 which ends with a similarly aggressive point about the increasing presence of English word-forms in Scotland’s religious life.⁸⁰ Directed at the *Negative Confession* drawn up by Robert Bruce and signed by King James and the royal household in the same year, Hamilton pointedly asks:

Giff king James the fyft var alive, quha hering ane of his subiectis knap suddrone, declarit him ane trateur: quhidder vald he declaire you triple traitoris, quha not onlie knappis suddrone in your negative confession, bot also hes causit it to be imprentit at London in contempt of our natiue language?⁸¹

Like Knox, Hamilton also displays a penchant for humour that adds to the polemic heat of his text, but which is recounted in earthy Scots. When discussing the nature of the Eucharist, he reels off a chain of scurrilous anecdotes about the misuse of communion wine in reformed parishes where they treat the sacrament as profanely ‘as scheraris ressauing thair denner on the harvest field’. Hamilton rehearses an anecdote by James Martine (the provost of St Salvator’s College St Andrews) about a minister who became so drunk on taking communion wine on an empty stomach that he fell asleep in the pulpit and woke up at the end of his allotted sermon time to a slightly bemused audience. He then recounts the tale of Katharene Lyon of Aberdeen,

who had 'maid guid cheir at hame' before a service and refused the communion loaf, 'saying scho had eitin sufficientlie at hame, and come to ressaue of thair drink'.⁸²

The extensive *De Origine, Moribus et Rebus Gestis Scotorum, libri decem* ('Ten Books on the Origin, Customs and Deeds of the Scots', Rome, 1578) produced by the Bishop of Ross, John Lesley, is the only narrative of the events of the reformation from a Catholic viewpoint.⁸³ Developed from an earlier and much shorter manuscript in Scots presented to Queen Mary in 1570, but written in Latin for the benefit of the international Catholic community, Lesley's *De Origine* was a full-scale epic covering the span of Scottish history along the lines of those written by Hector Boece and George Buchanan. The work had several deficiencies that greatly limited its value as a piece of polemic. It studiously ignored the events of the reformation until the final book on the reign of Mary Stewart (book X). Nor did it give the reformers due credit as a well-organised and widespread opposition, but rather treated them as a radical minority who seized power largely with luck and the aid of a cynical and opportunistic nobility.

Despite their plain style, Catholic tracts can be just as heavy to read as Protestant polemic, consisting as they so often do of impassioned but repetitive expositions of Catholic doctrine or the unpicking of the Protestant viewpoint in a series of questions, or both. However, several of these texts have features worthy of comment, and it is interesting to note that the devices they use often mirror those found in the polemic of their counterparts, not least in their affirmations of persecution at the hands of a cruel and corrupt Kirk. Adam King, a professor of philosophy and mathematics at Paris who returned to Scotland in later life to become an advocate (though it is unclear when or if he ever fully abandoned his Catholicism), used his astronomical learning to directly counter Protestant views of the liturgical calendar of worship. In Paris, he produced a translation of the lengthy *Cathechisme* (1581) by the Nimeguen Jesuit Peter Canisius (1521-1597), to which he appended a vernacular calendar of saint's feasts and a tide-table 'of Fvll Sey at all ye costes of Scotland', to counter a similar set of materials added to the Arbuthnot-Bassandyne Bible of 1579 by Robert Pont.⁸⁴ Nicol Burne was another ex-regent from St Andrews (this time from St Leonard's College) who revealed his conversion to Catholicism to the Paisley minister Thomas Smeaton, and naively offered to defend his faith before the General Assembly due to meet in October 1580. Smeaton instead arranged for his arrest, and Burne was held for over three months in the Tolbooth in Edinburgh. His *Disputation* of 1581 recounts two separate interrogations – one led in Edinburgh by Andrew Melville, and the other in Paisley by Thomas

Smeaton – where he is threatened because of his theological convictions.⁸⁵ The text ranges over many points of doctrine and shows Burne's considerable learning in patristic and philosophical writings. However, the *Disputation* is most effective as a persecution narrative, with Burne cast as a bold and unbroken spirit whose sinister captors attempt to have him executed, and then try to starve him to death by removing all access to alms (even resorting to cutting down a begging purse he hangs outside his cell window).⁸⁶ Burne is only saved by the dramatic intervention of James VI, and while this account may seem slightly over-wrought, the Jesuit missionary John Hay also alleged similar levels of persecution during a visit to Scotland in 1579 (albeit without the starvation and imprisonment) in his *Certain Demandes concerning the Christian religion and discipline* (1580) when recounting an interrogation by ministers before the Privy Council at Stirling.⁸⁷ It is fascinating to see how both these Catholic writers invert the images of suffering and persecution so successfully used by Knox less than thirty years earlier.

Conclusion

The wealth of religious literature produced in early modern Scotland, ranging from devotional lyric to heated polemic, clearly reflects the multilingual and highly fractured state of the nation throughout this period. The changes to (and in some cases advent of) a host of different genres within Scots and Gaelic are often contradictory and complex, and lack any particular rhyme or reason. Themes such as the dream-vision and devotion to Christ provided a slim thread of continuity across verse productions before and after the reformation, as did the fact that religious verse existed across a wide range of registers. By contrast, almost as soon as prose arrived as a genre it became the domain of history and polemic dictated by Scots Protestants of a particularly hard-line stripe. Although a small range of works by Catholic authors before and after the Reformation stand against this trend, it was only with the arrival of Scottish Gaelic religious prose in the mid-seventeenth century that this monopoly was challenged. At the same time, the increasingly fractured nature of discourse between and within confessions that emerged in the era of the Covenant and its aftermath meant that religious literature only became more fissiparous and venomous in tone as the century progressed.

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- ⁶⁰ J. K. Cameron, 'John Johnesone's An Confortable Exhortatioun of our mooste Holy Christen Faith and her Frutes: an early example of Scots Lutheran Piety', in D. Baker (ed.), *Reform and Reformation: England*

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⁶¹ 'The Confession of Faith of the Churches of Switzerland, translated from the Latin', by George Wishart, 1536, in David Laing (ed.), *The Miscellany of the Wodrow Society*, I (Edinburgh: Wodrow Society, 1844), pp. 1-23, at p. 11.

⁶² J. K. Cameron, 'Aspects of the Lutheran Contribution to the Scottish Reformation', *RSCHS* 22.1 (1984), pp. 1-12.

⁶³ Ronald D.S. Jack, 'The Prose of John Knox: A reassessment', *Prose Studies*, 4 (1981), pp. 239-51; Kenneth D. Farrow, *John Knox: Reformation Rhetoric and the Traditions of Scots Prose 1490-1570* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2004); Rudolph P. Almasy, 'John Knox and *A Godly Letter*: fashioning and refashioning the exilic 'I'', in Gribben and Mullen (eds), *Literature and the Scottish Reformation* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 95-110.

⁶⁴ Knox, ed. Laing, vol. 1, pp. 11-19, 118, 174-79; Knox, ed. Dickinson, vol. 1, pp. 11-14, 55, 76-8.

⁶⁵ Knox, ed. Laing, vol. 1, p. 242; Knox, ed. Dickinson, vol. 1, p. 116.

⁶⁶ Robert Crawford, *Scotland's Books* (London: Penguin, 2007), p. 122.

⁶⁷ See note 63 and Maria Dossena, 'Language Attitudes and Choice in the Scottish Reformation', in *Literature and the Scottish Reformation*, pp. 45-62, esp. pp. 48-55.

⁶⁸ For a full discussion of these texts and their context, see Alec Ryrie, 'Reform without Frontiers in the Last Years of Catholic Scotland', *The English Historical Review* 119 (2004), pp. 27-56, and Idem, *The Origins of the Scottish Reformation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), chapter 5.

⁶⁹ Quentin Kennedy, 'Ane Compendius Tractive conform to the Scripturis of almychtie GOD, resoun, and authoritie' (1558), in David Laing (ed.), *The Miscellany of the Wodrow Society*, I (Edinburgh: Wodrow Society, 1844), pp. 88-174 ('Ane Answer to the Compendius Tractive' (1563) by John Davidson, Principal of the University of Glasgow, follows at pp. 175-258); Cornelius Henry Kuipers, *Quentin Kennedy (1520-1564): Two Eucharistic Tracts* (n.p., 1964).

⁷⁰ Kuipers, p. 64.

⁷¹ Ninian Winzet, *Certain Tractates together with the Book of Four Score Three Questions and a Translation of Vincentius Lirinensis*, ed. James King Hewison (2 vols, Edinburgh: STS, 1888-90).

⁷² Winzet, *Certain Tractates*, vol. 1, pp. 60-61.

⁷³ Winzet, *Certain Tractates*, vol. 1, pp. 138.

⁷⁴ *The Autobiography and Diary of Mr James Melvill*, ed. R. Pitcairn (Edinburgh: Wodrow Society, 1842) [JMAD]; John Row, *The History of the Kirk of Scotland, from the year 1558 to August 1637*, ed. D. Laing (Edinburgh: Wodrow Society, 1842); David Calderwood, *The History of the Kirk of Scotland*, ed. T. Thomson and D. Laing (8 vols, Edinburgh: Wodrow Society, 1842-9).

⁷⁵ JMAD, pp. 369-371.

⁷⁶ JMAD, p. 65.

⁷⁷ JMAD, pp. 63-64.

⁷⁸ Thomas Graves Law (ed.), *Catholic Tractates of the Sixteenth Century, 1573-1600* (Edinburgh: STS, 1901).

⁷⁹ Law, p. 9.

⁸⁰ Law, pp. 93-105.

⁸¹ Law, p. 105.

⁸² Law, pp. 90-91.

⁸³ John Leslie, *History of Scotland*, ed. E. G. Cody, (2 vols, Edinburgh: STS, 1895).

⁸⁴ Law, pp. 173-216; table at pp. 204-205.

⁸⁵ Law, pp. 106-172.

⁸⁶ Law, pp. 109-117.

⁸⁷ Law, pp. 31-70, at pp. 33-4.

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