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Dissent in Scotland, 1689-1828

Stewart J. Brown

The Revolution of 1688-89 brought the re-establishment of Presbyterianism within the national established Church of Scotland. For Presbyterians, it ended decades of persecution and suffering, and opened the prospect of making Scotland a godly nation. From 1662 to 1689, the established national Church of Scotland had been an Episcopal Church, governed by bishops and recognising the king as the supreme governor of the Church. The Stuart monarchs had conducted a brutal campaign to suppress Presbyterianism. The state had harried the Presbyterians, especially those Scots who remained loyal to the Covenants of 1638 and 1643, by which members of the Scottish national Church had pledged themselves before God to maintain the Presbyterian and Reformed religion as the purest form of the Christian faith. Under persecution, the Covenanters had formed conventicles for clandestine worship, meeting on hillsides or in secluded glens. There had been two armed Presbyterian risings, in 1666 and 1679, both of them crushed by superior military force. During the 'killing times' of the early and mid 1680s, dragoons summarily executed Presbyterians suspected of participating in illegal worship in the hills. The numbers executed had probably been fewer than 200, but they had included some barbaric incidents, such as that of John Brown of Priesthill, shot in 1684 by dragoons at his home in front of his wife and children, or the alleged judicial killing of two women in 1685 in Wigtown (the facts are disputed), believed by many to have been staked and drowned in the incoming tide. Stories of the martyred Covenanters became part of Scottish folk culture.

The persecution of Presbyterians eased after 1687, as most Presbyterians accepted the Stuart monarch's declaration of indulgence of that year and received considerable freedom of worship and organisation within their churches. None the less, when news that the Stuart

monarch had fled from London to France reached Scotland in late December 1688, Presbyterians viewed it as an act of God. Presbyterian crowds, some of them made up predominantly of women, in different parts of the country sought revenge for three decades of persecution by ‘rabbling’ or forcing the Episcopal clergy out of their churches and manse.¹ In March 1689, a Convention of Estates met in Edinburgh and in April it offered the Scottish Crown to William and Mary. The Estates, which declared itself a Parliament in June 1689, further promised to establish in Scotland the form of Church government that would be ‘most agreeable to the inclinations of the people’. It is unclear whether the majority of the Scottish people in 1689 supported Presbyterianism or Episcopacy.² The new king William, a Dutch Calvinist but also a pragmatist, was largely uninformed about the religious situation in Scotland. He would have been content for the Church of Scotland to remain Episcopalian, so that all three of his kingdoms – England, Ireland and Scotland – would have established Churches with a similar ecclesiastical structure. However, the Scottish Bishops were openly hostile to the new regime, and many Episcopalians supported Viscount Dundee’s ill-fated military campaign in the summer of 1689 to restore James to the Scottish throne. So in 1690, the Scottish Parliament established Presbyterianism as the government of Scotland’s national Church and the Calvinist Westminster Confession as the standard of faith.³ Scotland was now to be Presbyterian, and some 60 ‘Antediluvians’, elderly Presbyterian ministers driven from their churches in 1662, were restored to their parishes. But significantly Parliament did not revive the Covenants, and William instructed the Presbyterian Church establishment to show ‘moderation’ in its policies. ‘Moderation’, he wrote to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in October 1690, ‘is what religion

¹ Alasdair Raffe, The Culture of Controversy: Religious Arguments in Scotland, 1660-1714 (Woodbridge, 2012), pp. 218-33.

² A. C. Cheyne, Studies in Scottish Church History (Edinburgh, 1999), p. 61.

³ L. K. J. Glassey, ‘William II and the Settlement of Religion in Scotland, 1688–1690’, Records of the Scottish Church History Society [hereafter RSCHS], 23 (1989), pp. 317–29.

enjoins, neighbouring churches expect from you, and we recommend to you'.⁴ The seventeenth century had been for Scotland a time of religious strife and religiously-motivated civil war, and the new king now wanted peace in his northern kingdom. Although William was unsuccessful in 1692 in securing the Episcopalian ministers a share in the government of the established Church, a sense of toleration none the less emerged in Scotland, largely because the monarchical state, in its commitment to political stability, was now less committed to enforcing religious uniformity.⁵ This in turn allowed the growth and diversification of Protestant dissent.

The Cameronians or Societies

One of the first dissenting bodies to emerge in Scotland following the Revolution of 1688-89 was made up of uncompromising Covenanters. They were sometimes referred to as Cameronians – after the Covenanting field-preacher, Richard Cameron, killed by dragoons in 1680 – or sometimes simply as the ‘Societies’ or the ‘hillmen’.⁶ The Society people refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of the Revolution settlement, in part because there had not been a renewal of the Covenants and in part because the post-1690 political and ecclesiastical order included many who had been among their persecutors during the ‘killing times’. They had suffered too much for the Covenants for them now to accept the compromises being made for the sake of peace. The uncovenanted Scottish state, they believed, was an offence before God. Their most influential field preacher, the kind-hearted James Renwick, had been captured and executed by the Stuart state in February 1688. The three surviving ministers of the Societies, William Boyd, Alexander Shields and Thomas Lining, joined the re-established

⁴ A. L. Drummond and J. Bulloch, The Scottish Church 1688–1843: The Age of the Moderates. (Edinburgh, 1973), p. 10.

⁵ R. Buick Knox, ‘Establishment and Toleration during the Reigns of William, Mary and Anne’, RSCHS, 23 (1989), pp. 330-60.

⁶ Matthew Hutchison, The Reformed Presbyterian Church in Scotland: Its Origin and History 1680-1876 (Paisley, 1893), pp. 48-183; Raffe, Culture of Controversy, pp. 196-207.

Church of Scotland in 1690. But many of the Society people, who were spread across much of the Lowlands, continued after 1690 to meet regularly in their conventicles on remote hillsides or in the glens for prayer, Bible reading, Psalm singing, and emotional support, and to honour the memories of the Covenanting martyrs. Lay activism was crucial to their survival. Refusing to recognise the uncovenanted state, they would not pay taxes, take oaths of loyalty, make use of the law courts, be married in, or have their children baptised in, parish churches.

In 1706, eighteen years after Renwick's execution, the Society people finally found a minister when James Macmillan (1669-1753), Church of Scotland minister of Balmaghie, embraced their cause and accepted their call. Over the following decades, Macmillan travelled through the Lowlands, preaching, catechising and baptising among the scattered groups of Society people – whose adherents ebbed and flowed but could on occasion number as many as 10,000. In 1712, the Societies held a gathering in the moorlands of Upper Clydesdale, to swear anew their allegiance to the Covenants. Macmillan administered Holy Communion in the field, the Societies' first celebration of the sacrament since their refusal to recognise the Revolution settlement. After some thirty-seven years as the Societies' sole minister, Macmillan was joined in 1743 by Thomas Nairn, who had been ordained in the Church of Scotland. Nairn's arrival was vital because the Societies, as strict Presbyterians, had not believed that it was permissible to form a presbytery with only one minister. Macmillan and Nairn now formed a Reformed Presbytery, and as a presbytery they ordained some other ministers, including Macmillan's son. Nairn soon returned to the ministry of the established Church, but the Reformed Presbytery was secure. The Reformed Presbyterian outdoor Communion celebration in 1761 at Sandhills in Galloway was said to have been attended by some 10,000.⁷ Throughout the eighteenth century, Reformed Presbyterians

⁷ Hutchison, Reformed Presbyterian Church, p. 228.

remained strict Calvinists, oath-bound to the Covenants, viewing religious toleration as sinful, refusing to pay taxes, use the law courts, serve as magistrates or soldiers, take oaths of allegiance, or to recognise in any way the uncovenanted state.

The Episcopalians

A second, and very different, Protestant dissenting denomination developed among the Episcopalians who were unable to accept the re-established Presbyterian order in the established Church. The situation for the Episcopalians in Scotland was fluid and uncertain in the years after the Revolution. While many Episcopal clergy were ‘rabbed’ out of their churches and manses in 1688-89, others were allowed to remain in their parish churches and retain their incomes, provided that they took no part in church government and did not attempt to subvert the new Presbyterian system. This was in part because of a shortage of ministers. Also many parish communities, especially in the northeast, forcibly resisted attempts to remove well-loved Episcopalian ministers and replace them with Presbyterian ministers. As late as 1707, there were still 165 Episcopalian parish ministers, out of a total of about 930 parish ministers, in the Church of Scotland.⁸ As Alasdair Raffe has shown, from the later seventeenth-century Scottish Episcopalians were increasingly influenced by Anglican worship and theology, and they grew more and more distinct from the Presbyterianism. By the early eighteenth century, Episcopalians were shifting towards Arminian attitudes (at a time when Presbyterians were insisting with greater rigour on subscription to the Calvinist Westminster Confession), growing critical of what they perceived as a Presbyterian piety emphasising conversion, and embracing more liturgical forms of worship.⁹ Episcopalian congregations began building their own meeting houses, in

⁸ Frederick Goldie, *A Short History of the Episcopal Church in Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1976 edn.), p. 35.

⁹ Alasdair Raffe, ‘Presbyterians and Episcopalians: the Formation of Confessional Cultures in Scotland, 1660–1715’, *English Historical Review*, 125 (2010), pp. 570-98.

which they conducted services according to either the Scottish or English Prayer Book. The Presbyterian establishment called on the magistrates to suppress such illegal Episcopalian meetings houses, and Episcopal clergy were sometimes fined or imprisoned for conducting worship.

The sporadic persecution of Scottish Episcopalians was viewed with discomfort by many in the established Church of England. This was especially the case after the Act of Union of 1707. Was it right in the new United Kingdom, asked many Anglicans, for Episcopalian clergy to be fined and imprisoned in Scotland for worshipping according to the English Prayer Book, or for English residents in Scotland to be deprived of Episcopal services and sacraments? Was it right that members of the established Church in England could be persecuted for their beliefs in another part of the United Kingdom? Matters were brought to a head when in 1709 an Episcopal curate, James Greenshields, was imprisoned for four months for conducting worship in Edinburgh according to the English Prayer Book. Greenshields appealed against his sentence to the House of Lords, which in 1711 found in his favour. Parliament then responded in 1712 by passing a Toleration Act for Scotland, which allowed Episcopalians to conduct worship according to the English Prayer Book, provided that they abjured the Jacobite claimant to the throne, left the chapel doors unlocked and prayed for Queen Anne and the Hanoverian succession. Those who accepted these conditions included many English residents in Scotland; they became known as the 'Qualifying' Episcopalians. Those who did not – and the majority of Scottish Episcopalians could not in conscience accept the conditions – were the 'non-jurors', and they continued to be harried by the law.

Leaders of the Presbyterian established Church, meanwhile, were outraged by the Toleration Act. For them it was an infringement of guarantees given when the Act of Union was passed that the British Parliament would not interfere with the religious settlement in

Scotland. Most Presbyterians viewed toleration of the ‘prelatists’ and their errors as a sin. Nor had they forgotten the persecution of the Presbyterians between 1662 and 1688; indeed, many feared that the Toleration Act was a step towards the re-establishment of Episcopacy in Scotland. Such a prospect, however, was remote, unless there were to be a Jacobite restoration. The majority of Scottish Episcopalians did remain Jacobite in sympathy, and opposed to the Hanoverian succession. Jacobites embraced a doctrine of sacred kingship, and believed that the Stuart ‘king over the water’ represented God’s anointed sovereign. They further believed that God’s favour had been withdrawn from a corrupt and sinful Scottish people for their disloyalty to His righteous order, and that divine favour would not return until the Stuarts were restored to the throne.¹⁰ Scottish Episcopalian loyalties were demonstrated at the Jacobite rising of 1715, when large numbers of Episcopalian clergy, especially in the north, openly supported the Jacobite cause with prayers, sermons and petitions. The rising was quickly suppressed, and the non-juring Episcopalians were subjected to intensified harassment, including the shutting of meeting houses and fines and imprisonment for the clergy.

After 1715, the Scottish Episcopal Church began to develop forms of independent synodical Church government. Episcopalians continued to hope for the return of the Stuart monarchs and their restoration as supreme governors of the Scottish national Church. But it was not clear when ‘the king over the water’ would return. There were, meanwhile, pressing needs within the Episcopal Church that had to be addressed. These included disagreements over liturgy, difficulties with providing priests and meeting houses for the faithful, and diocesan supervision of the approximately 150 remaining clergy. In 1727 and again in 1743, the bishops met quietly as a synod in Edinburgh, and amid considerable debate, adopted a set

¹⁰ M. G. H. Pittock, The Invention of Scotland: The Stuart Myth and the Scottish Identity, 1638 to the Present (London, 1991), 7–72.

of canons for their Church, which included the revival of diocesan bishoprics, rules for the election of bishops, definitions of episcopal authority, and perhaps most significant, government through regular synods. The bishops were clear that they regarded this development of independent synodical government in their Church as a temporary expedient, until they were restored as the national established Church. But in the process they were creating the constitution for an independent Protestant Episcopal Church.

During the Jacobite rebellion of 1745-46, most Scottish Episcopalians, viewing the prospects of success as slim, avoided open support. None the less, Episcopalians were branded as traitors and they suffered a new wave of persecution. It made little difference whether or not clergy and congregations had 'qualified' under the terms of the Toleration Act. In its march north in pursuit of the retreating Jacobites, the Duke of Cumberland's Hanoverian army destroyed all the Episcopalian chapels it could find, and the policy of destroying Episcopal chapels continued after the destruction of the Jacobite army at Culloden. In 1746 and 1748, Parliament passed new penal laws, with yet harsher punishments for Episcopalian clergy who failed to take oaths of loyalty or pray for the Hanoverian monarch at all worship services. The acts, moreover, provided that only Episcopalian clergymen ordained by Church of England or Church of Ireland bishops could officiate at services attended by more than five persons in Scotland. Episcopal clergy were forced to conduct worship quietly in private houses or backstreet meeting houses, under continual threat of imprisonment, and congregations dwindled in numbers. However, what Sir Walter Scott described as the 'poor and suffering Episcopal Church' abided. Under persecution, Episcopalians became more deeply attached to their forms of worship, especially the Scottish Communion Office, a liturgy based on the Scottish Prayer Book of 1637 and formally agreed by the Scottish Episcopal synod in 1764.

As fears of another Jacobite rising waned, the persecution of the Scottish Episcopalians eased. By the 1780s, they had been, in Sir Walter Scott's phrase, 'reduced to a mere shadow of a shade', with four bishops and about forty clergy.¹¹ In 1784, the Scottish Episcopal Church performed a memorable service for the Anglican Communion when three of its bishops consecrated Samuel Seabury as bishop of Connecticut, following the American war of independence. As a citizen of the new American republic, Seabury had been unable to take the oath of loyalty to the British monarch, and thus could not be consecrated by bishops of the Church of England. Seabury's consecration by Scottish non-juring bishops ensured the apostolic succession for the American Protestant Episcopal Church. In 1792, Parliament repealed the penal acts imposed on Scottish Episcopalians, which led to a new sense of security and confidence. Leading members of the Scottish gentry and aristocracy, and many urban professionals – especially those with English family connections – began attending the Episcopal Church. It remained, however, a small denomination, representing only about 3% of Scottish churchgoers in 1851.¹²

The Secession Churches

The most significant event for eighteenth-century Scottish Protestant Dissent occurred in 1733, with the secession of several Presbyterian ministers from the Church of Scotland, including the influential brothers, Ebenezer and Ralph Erskine. The Secession of 1733 would, over the course of a few decades, swell the numbers of Scottish Protestant Dissenters and gravely weaken the influence and authority of the national Church of Scotland. The Seceders were staunch Presbyterians, strongly committed to the doctrinal standards of the

¹¹ George Grub, *An Ecclesiastical History of Scotland*, 4 vols. (Edinburgh, 1861), IV, p. 91.

¹² Callum G. Brown, *Religion and Society in Scotland since 1707* (Edinburgh, 1997), p. 45.

Westminster Confession of Faith. But they were convinced that the established Presbyterian Church had become corrupted by worldly interests.

There were two main sets of factors leading to the Secession. First, there was a growing concern among some Presbyterians over what was perceived as a moderate or half-hearted adherence to the standards of the Reformed faith taking hold in the universities and among Church leaders. This laxness was demonstrated, many believed, in the lenient treatment of the heterodox John Simson, professor of Divinity at Glasgow University, who was only suspended from his chair after lengthy proceedings between 1714 and 1729, and even then was allowed to retain his full salary for life. It was also demonstrated in the General Assembly's condemnation, for doctrinal errors, of a work of emotive seventeenth-century Puritan devotion, the Marrow of Modern Divinity, which was republished in 1718 by Church of Scotland evangelicals who valued its message of salvation by divine grace alone. When a group of evangelical ministers protested, and defended the Marrow before the Assembly, they were in 1722 formally rebuked and admonished.¹³ For many conservative Reformed ministers, the 'prevailing party' in the Church courts seemed intent on suppressing gospel preaching while winking at heresy in the universities.

This suspicion was strengthened by a second set of factors, related to the re-imposition in 1712 of lay patronage in the appointment of Church of Scotland ministers. Patronage had first emerged in the medieval Church; it allowed the original founder of a parish church, and the founder's descendants, to present the clergyman to that church. Patronage had a tempestuous history in the Reformed Church, with the Crown and landed classes, who held nearly all patronage rights, supporting patronage, and zealous Presbyterians – with their emphasis on the spiritual independence of the Church and the rights of congregations to have a voice in choosing their ministers – strongly opposing it. The Scottish

¹³ D. C. Lachman, The Marrow Controversy 1718-1723 (Edinburgh, 1988), pp. 409-75.

Parliament abolished patronage in 1690, replacing it with a system of election by kirk-sessions and heritors (the principal landholders in a parish). Its re-imposition by the new British Parliament in 1712 was felt as a blow against Presbyterianism. Most lay patrons exercised caution and declined to exercise their rights during the next two decades; kirk-sessions and heritors continued to choose ministers in consultation with the congregations. However, by the late 1720s, patrons began presenting ministers to the churches in their gift – recognising the value of church patronage in settling younger sons into livings, rewarding political supporters, or ensuring the appointment of moderate men who would support property and the subordination of ranks from the pulpits. Lay patrons tended to present ‘moderate’ ministers, who were less committed to ‘gospel preaching’. For zealous Presbyterians, the intrusion of such ‘worldly’ ministers into parishes was undermining Scotland’s Reformation heritage, and there was occasional popular violence in parishes aimed at blocking the induction of patrons’ candidates. In response, the governing classes insisted that the Church courts must rigorously enforce patronage rights as a matter of public order. The ‘prevailing party’ in the Church courts showed that it was prepared to do this.

In October 1732, a Church of Scotland parish minister and moderator of the Synod of Perth and Stirling, Ebenezer Erskine, gave a sermon to the Synod in which he strongly criticised the Church’s failure to resist the reintroduction of patronage or defend the rights of congregations to choose their ministers. Christ, he insisted, ‘is rejected in His poor members, and the rich of this world are put in their room’. The Church, he added, must ‘beware of being swayed in the matters of Christ with the favour of great men’.¹⁴ For this sermon, he was summoned before the bar of the General Assembly, rebuked and admonished. But Erskine, the son of a Covenanting field preacher, a supporter of the Marrow of Modern Divinity, and a minister of considerable influence, was not a man to back down. Rather, with

¹⁴ A. R. MacEwen, The Erskines (Edinburgh, 1900), p. 72.

the support of three other ministers, he submitted a formal protest to the Assembly against his rebuke. When the four ministers refused to withdraw their protest, the Commission of the General Assembly, meeting in November, deposed them from the ministry. It was a crude demonstration of power, intended to silence opposition to patronage among the clergy. But instead of being silenced, Erskine and his three colleagues met in the village of Gairney Bridge in central Fife, where they were joined by two other ministers, including Erskine's brother, Ralph, a gifted poet and popular preacher. They announced their secession from the Church of Scotland, and they formed themselves into an 'Associate Presbytery'. Their congregations on the whole remained loyal to them and they invited others in the established Church to join them.

And others did come. Reflecting dissatisfaction with patronage and the behaviour of the Church courts, a growing number of Church of Scotland adherents, sometimes whole congregations, asked to join the Associate Presbytery, or 'Secession Church', as it was popularly known. It was a difficult decision for people to step out of the parish structures of the national Church, with all the time-honoured associations. The Seceders were generally sturdy farmers, trades-people, and skilled artisans – men and women of substance, uncompromising Reformed faith, and strict consciences, who were prepared to contribute to the support of their own churches and ministers, rather than have ministers imposed on them by upper-class patrons. The General Assembly soon recognised its error, rescinded its decision to depose Erskine and his fellow ministers, and asked them to return, but to no avail.

By 1740, there were 8 ministers and some 30 Secession congregations; by 1746, there were 45 congregations.¹⁵ In 1737, the Secession Church set up a small divinity hall in Perth, in the manse of one of their ministers and initially with six students, for the training of ministers. In 1742, the hall moved to Abernethy, and the number of students increased to

¹⁵ Drummond and Bulloch, The Scottish Church 1688-1843, p. 51.

about 30.¹⁶ Their theology was firmly rooted in the Westminster Confession, they were Presbyterian in organisation and they believed in the unity of Church and state, even if they separated themselves from what they viewed as the corrupt Church of Scotland. Beginning in 1744, Secession congregations adopted a practice of renewing the Covenants, identifying themselves as Scotland's true national Church. Renewal of the Covenants generally took place on the fast day before the celebration of communion (a biannual event in most congregations) and it involved the people standing and swearing allegiance to the Covenants of 1638 and 1643.¹⁷ The Seceders made swearing allegiance to the Covenants a term of communion.¹⁸ At the same time, the Secession Church affirmed the duty to obey the civil rulers, even though those rulers did not maintain the Covenants.¹⁹ This meant that the Seceders rejected any connection with what they called the 'anti-government' hillmen or Society people. For the Seceders, they alone were God's covenanted people in Scotland.

Their strict consciences and uncompromising attitudes soon led to a division in the Secession Church. While all Scottish towns required their citizens to demonstrate loyalty to the regime by taking a Burgess Oath, three towns, Edinburgh, Glasgow and Perth, required a Burgess Oath with a religious clause, expressing allegiance to the 'true religion presently professed with this realm'. Refusal to take the oath could entail a heavy fine. Some Seceders interpreted the phrase 'true religion' to refer to the 'corrupt' established Church of Scotland, and they insisted that no genuine Christian could take the oath. Other Seceders, including Ebenezer and Ralph Erskine, interpreted 'true religion' to refer more generally to Protestantism and believed that it was possible for Seceders to take the oath and participate in municipal government. Debates over the Burgess Oath in 1745 and 1746 grew heated,

¹⁶ Jack C. Whytock, 'An Educated Clergy': Scottish Theological Education and Training in the Kirk and Secession, 1560-1850 (Milton Keynes, 2007), pp. 172-83.

¹⁷ John McKerrrow, History of the Secession Church (Edinburgh, 1854 edn.), pp. 192-5.

¹⁸ David Woodside, The Soul of a Scottish Church: The Contribution of the United Presbyterian Church to Scottish Life and Religion (Edinburgh, [1918]), p. 55.

¹⁹ Grub, Ecclesiastical History of Scotland, IV, p. 74.

positions became entrenched, relations soured, and in 1747 the Secession Church split – with 19 ministers opposed to the Burgess Oath breaking away to form themselves into the General Associate Synod, and severing all communion with the remaining 12 ministers in the Associate Synod.²⁰ In popular parlance, the two Churches were known simply as the ‘Antiburgher Church’ and the ‘Burgher Church’, and the division proved deep, bitter and prolonged. The Antiburghers were the more militant and uncompromising of the two; indeed their Synod solemnly excommunicated Ebenezer and Ralph Erskine and declared them to be among the heathens. For all its acrimony, the ‘breach’, as it was called, did not halt the growth of the Secession Churches. By 1773, the Antiburghers had 97 congregations with ministers, and another 16 congregations seeking ministers, while the Burghers 42 congregations with ministers and 17 congregations seeking ministers.²¹ Some claimed that the Seceders now had some 100,000 adherents, or about 7% of the Scottish population. Both Churches maintained divinity halls for the training of ministers, and they sent ministers to the North American colonies.

Whitefield, Wesley and the Methodist Movement

Until about 1740, Protestant dissenters in Scotland were nearly all committed to the ideal of Scotland as a uniform Christian commonwealth, with an alliance of Church and state, and a single established Church. The different sects believed themselves to be the only true Church in Scotland, and they waited on God to restore the righteous order in Church and state. However, from about 1740, new attitudes began influencing Scottish dissent. These attitudes were connected to the Protestant Awakening movement occurring throughout the North Atlantic world, a movement that had less to do with national Churches and more with

²⁰ William Law Mathieson, *Scotland and the Union: A History of Scotland from 1695-1747* (Glasgow, 1905), p. 273.

²¹ Gavin Struthers, *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Principles of the Relief Church* (Glasgow, 1843), pp. 224, 569-71.

personal conversion and voluntary associations of the faithful. The Protestant Awakening included the movement known as Methodism, under the leadership of the evangelical Anglicans, John Wesley and George Whitefield.

George Whitefield made his first visit to Scotland in the summer of 1741, shortly after returning from his second preaching tour in the American colonies. He had been preaching with compelling power on both sides of the Atlantic, and he was invited to Scotland by Ralph and Ebenezer Erskine, who hoped that his preaching would invigorate the new Secession movement. They made it clear to Whitefield that he should restrict his preaching to Secession congregations, for to preach to Church of Scotland congregations would be to countenance the corrupt national Church. It was not true, as Whitefield reported, that Ralph Erskine had told him to preach only to the Seceders because ‘they were the Lord’s people’, though such expressions were used by other Secession leaders. The Seceders also hoped to educate the youthful Whitefield, an ordained Church of England clergyman, in the truths of the Presbyterian system. Whitefield, however, refused to restrict his preaching to the Seceders or to embrace Presbyterianism; rather he insisted on preaching in established churches, in churchyards or in the fields – wherever he could find hearers. He was in consequence disowned by the Seceders, but his three-month preaching tour in 1741 had an immense impact.²²

He returned to Scotland the following year. Now his impassioned preaching contributed significantly to the revival movement which had begun a few months earlier in the Church of Scotland parish of Cambuslang. Attending the Communion celebration at Cambuslang in July 1742, Whitefield preached to an estimated 20,000 gathered in the fields. In August, he spent three weeks in Cambuslang and nearby Kilsyth, preaching to vast, highly emotional crowds. The revival movement spread across Scotland, claiming thousands of

²² D. Butler, John Wesley and George Whitefield in Scotland (Edinburgh, 1898), pp. 11-34.

converts.²³ The Seceders were furious over this ‘Cambuslang Wark’. The Associate Presbytery held a day of fasting and humiliation in all their congregations in response to the revival, which they denounced as ‘the delusions of Satan’. ‘It is obvious’, they proclaimed, ‘that bitter outcryings, faintings, severe bodily pains, convulsions, voices, visions and revelations, are the usual symptoms of a delusive spirit’.²⁴ But many others in Scotland were profoundly affected by these emotive expressions of a personal, conversionist piety, associated with the trans-Atlantic Awakening movement. Whitefield went on to make fourteen preaching visits to Scotland, with the last in 1768, though his later Scottish tours did not arouse the enthusiasm of the visits of 1741 and 1742.

John Wesley also sought to contribute to the Awakening to Scotland. The English Methodist leader visited Scotland no fewer than twenty-two times and sent a number of itinerant preachers. His first visit was in 1751. The Calvinist Whitefield had discouraged him, observing that ‘you have no business there’.²⁵ Whitefield would have known that Wesley’s Arminian theology and especially his doctrine of perfection would find little favour in Scotland. But Wesley persevered. By the early 1760s his preaching and organisational powers were beginning to gain Scottish support, and a number of Methodist societies were formed. Methodist hymns were proving especially popular among the Scots. Then came a Presbyterian backlash. In 1765, Wesley had published a revised version of James Hervey’s Theron and Aspasia, a popular evangelical tract that challenged Calvinist teachings on election. The respected Edinburgh Church of Scotland evangelical minister, and strict Calvinist, John Erskine, responded to this with a fierce attack on Wesley’s doctrine and the whole Methodist movement. Neither, Erskine insisted, was welcome in Calvinist Presbyterian Scotland. Erskine’s denunciation of Wesley had an element of personal

²³ Ibid., pp. 34-43.

²⁴ McKerrow, History of the Secession Church, pp. 166-7.

²⁵ Margaret Batty, Scotland’s Methodists 1750-2000 (Edinburgh, 2010), p. 4.

rancour; he was denounced as an English intruder, a prelatist with Anglican ordination. Other Presbyterian polemicists joined in the assault, and Wesley and his itinerant preachers were thrown on the defensive in Scotland.²⁶ At the time of Wesley's death in 1791, there were in Scotland only sixteen Methodist preachers and about 1,200 members, divided among several meeting houses.²⁷ Yet while eighteenth-century Scottish Methodist numbers remained small, Whitefield and Wesley had contributed to the growth of more emotional, personal, conversionist forms of piety in Scotland, as expressed in part through the new popularity of hymns.

The Relief Church

There was another reason for the weakness of Methodism in Scotland from the 1760s. This was connected with a further secession from the established Church of Scotland – a secession movement that was Presbyterian and Calvinist, but that did not look back to the Covenants, was more tolerant of other Protestant beliefs, and shared many of the evangelical approaches of Whitefield and Wesley. The origins of this secession were to be found in the ongoing popular resistance to lay patronage within the parishes of the Church of Scotland. In 1751, the General Assembly instructed the Presbytery of Dunfermline to ordain a patron's candidate to the ministry of Inverkeithing, against the strong wishes of the parish community. When a majority of ministers in the Presbytery refused to ordain the patron's man, the General Assembly, under pressure from Scotland's governing elite, decided to make an example. It would depose one minister in the Presbytery, depriving him of his church, manse, income and status. This example, the Assembly believed, would intimidate other ministers from further resistance to the patronage law. For their victim, the Assembly chose

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 14-19; Jonathan M. Yeager, Enlightened Evangelicalism: The Life and Thought of John Erskine (New York, 2011), pp. 113-26.

²⁷ Batty, Scotland's Methodists, p. 35.

Thomas Gillespie (1708-1774), the evangelical minister of Carnock, who had, unusually for a Scot at this time, been educated at the English Dissenting Academy at Northampton and who had also been active in the Cambuslang Revival of 1742. Gillespie accepted his sentence with humility, though many viewed the proceedings as disgraceful. ‘It is wonderful’, wrote the American evangelical, Jonathan Edwards, from Massachusetts in November 1752 on learning the news, ‘that a church which has itself suffered so much by persecution should be guilty of so much persecution’. Others predicted positive effects. ‘I expect great good will come out of these confusions’, observed Whitefield. ‘Mr. Gillespie will do more good in one week now than before in a year’.²⁸ His supporters purchased a meeting house for him in nearby Dunfermline, where he continued to minister to a large congregation. Although driven out of the established Church, he did not seek to join the Seceders, whose stern and rigid religion did not appeal to him. He retained his Presbyterian and Reformed convictions, though with a refreshing liberality of spirit, which included inviting all Christians to join him in the sacrament of Holy Communion. ‘I hold communion’, he proclaimed as his motto, ‘with all that visibly hold the Head [Christ]’.²⁹

Gillespie ministered to his Dunfermline congregation for several years without ministerial colleagues. But in time other Church of Scotland ministers and congregations, opposed to patronage but not sharing the rigid doctrines and attitudes of the Seceders, connected themselves with Gillespie’s congregation. They included Thomas Boston, whose father was a well-loved Church of Scotland minister and author of the influential devotional treatise, Human Nature in its Fourfold State. The younger Boston and his Jedburgh congregation had withdrawn from the Church of Scotland after a patronage dispute. In 1761, Gillespie, Boston and another minister formed themselves into a presbytery ‘for the relief of

²⁸ Struthers, History of the Relief Church, pp. 111, 98-9.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

Christians oppressed in their Christian privileges' by patronage; this became the foundation of a new 'Relief Church'. Scotland now had a fourth dissenting Presbyterian denomination, alongside the Reformed Presbyterian, the Burgher and the Antiburgher Secession Churches. By the time of Gillespie's death in 1774, there were 19 Relief Church congregations organized into two presbyteries.³⁰ The outlook of the Relief Church was liberal evangelical. The Relief Church officially adopted a policy of opposition to the slave trade in 1788, when its synod appointed a committee to co-ordinate anti-slavery activity.³¹ It was active in home mission, especially among those outside any church connection, and it began sending itinerant evangelists to the Highlands in 1797. By 1800, their numbers had increased to 60 congregations and perhaps 36,000 adherents.³²

Quakers, Glassites, Old Independents and Scotch Baptists

There had been Independents, Baptists and Quakers in mid seventeenth-century Scotland, connected with English soldiers and families in the Cromwellian army of occupation. Following the withdrawal of the Cromwellian army in the late 1650s, the Independents and Baptists had disappeared. The Quakers, however, abided in small meetings in some of the principal Scottish towns. They had experienced considerable persecution in later seventeenth-century Scotland, and a number had been imprisoned. When the British Parliament passed an Affirmation Act for Scotland in 1714 – allowing Quakers to affirm rather than take oaths in courts of law – conditions for Quakers improved. But the Society of Friends did not flourish in eighteenth-century Presbyterian Scotland, and their numbers remained small at about 1,500 adherents. Following a series of visits of the prominent

³⁰ Kenneth B. E. Roxburgh, Thomas Gillespie and the Origins of the Relief Church in 18th Century Scotland (Bern, Switzerland, 1999), p. 173.

³¹ Struthers, History of the Relief Church, p. 348.

³² Roxburgh, Thomas Gillespie, p. 237.

English Quaker reformers, Elizabeth Fry and Joseph Gurney, from 1818, Scottish Quakers became increasingly active in prison reform.³³

In the 1720s, a distinctively Scottish Independent or Congregational Church emerged, associated with John Glas (1695-1773), the Church of Scotland minister of Tealing, near Dundee. In the 1720s, Glas had come to reject the Presbyterian system and the alliance of Church and state, while arguing that there was no basis for the Covenants in the New Testament. A number of his parishioners accepted his views, and he formed in 1725 a small Congregational church, with about 100 members, within his parish (though he continued to claim his income and status as a minister of the established Church). His congregation held monthly communion, instituted a fund for the poor and had their own system of church discipline. When summoned before the Church of Scotland courts on charges of rejecting the Church's Presbyterian government and teachings, Glas appealed to Scripture, insisting that congregationalism was the practice of the primitive church and should therefore be permissible in the established Church. The General Assembly of the established Church did not agree and deposed him from his ministerial charge in 1730.³⁴

Soon after, Glas moved to Dundee where he established a second Independent congregation, while he also continued to preach regularly to the Tealing congregation. He became convinced that in primitive Christianity there had been several preaching elders in each congregation, while Scripture made no reference to university education or linguistic ability as qualifications for the eldership. So Glassite congregations appointed a plurality of preachers based solely on sound doctrine and ability to preach. Additional Glassite churches were formed in Perth in 1733, in Edinburgh in 1734, and then in several other towns. Each church was self-governing, and the preaching elders supported themselves as artisans or

³³ George B. Burnet, *The Story of Quakerism in Scotland 1650-1850* (London, 1952), pp. 13-173

³⁴ J. T. Hornsby, 'The Case of Mr John Glas', *RSCHS*, VI (1938), pp. 115-37;

tradesmen. Glas exercised a general supervision, ensuring that the churches shared a common Calvinist theology, and similar practices in discipline and worship. By the mid 1760s, the Glassites had developed what for Scotland was an innovative liturgy, with weekly communions, the singing of hymns, the kiss of charity (the subject of much ribaldry from critics), while lengthy sermons were replaced by shorter exhortations. Lists of the occupations of male members from the early 1770s show them to have been largely artisans – weavers, bleachers, tailors, shoemakers, tanners, blacksmiths, and printers – though with some small manufacturers and shopkeepers. Glas’s son-in-law, Robert Sandeman (1718-1771) carried his congregational model to England, Wales and New England, promoting the spread of what became known as Sandemanian churches. In Scotland, the Glassite movement was weakened by internal dissensions and a lack of evangelical fervour, and its membership remained very small.³⁵

The later 1760s saw the emergence of another group of Scottish congregational churches, known as the Old Scottish Independents. It began with two Church of Scotland ministers, James Smith and Robert Ferrier, who had ministered to neighbouring parishes in Fife and had come under Glassite influence. Like the Glassites, they could find no Scriptural warrant for Presbyterianism, and in 1768 they left the Church of Scotland and founded a congregational church in the ancient Fife village of Balchristie, which tradition held had been the site of one of Scotland’s first Christian churches. Their church resembled the Glassite churches, with a similar liturgy and organisation, including a plurality of pastors, though they were less exclusive and did not accept Glas’s leadership. A second Independent church was established in Glasgow in 1768; its chapel was built by a wealthy candlemaker and became known as the ‘Candle Kirk’. Ferrier moved to Glasgow to become one of the elders, and

³⁵ J. T. Hornsby, ‘John Glas: His Later Life and Work’, *RSCHS*, VII (1941), pp. 94-113; Derek B. Murray, ‘The Influence of John Glas’, *RSCHS*, XXII; 1 (1984), pp. 45-56.

David Dale (1739-1806), a successful textile merchant, was ordained as a second elder. Dale did much to win public acceptance in Glasgow for this small Independent church. A highly successful entrepreneur, he moved from importing textiles into producing cotton cloth, opening the New Lanark Mills in 1786. He developed a reputation as a benevolent master, providing decent housing and conditions for the workers, and establishing many of the programmes that would later be associated with his son-in-law, the early socialist, Robert Owen. Dale was also a partner in the establishment of the Blantyre cotton mills, where the Scottish Congregationalist and missionary, David Livingstone, worked as a child and benefited from the educational opportunities. Dale became renowned as a philanthropist, donating large sums to charity, and importing grain to be sold cheaply to the poor during dearth years. And for over three decades he was an elder at the Candle Kirk, preaching regularly on Sundays and learning Greek and Hebrew to enrich his understanding of Scripture.³⁶ Several more Old Independent churches were formed by 1790. Another sect of Independents developed in central Scotland around the ministry of John Barclay (1734-1798), who left the Church of Scotland with his congregation over a patronage dispute in 1773. Barclay helped to form several congregations in Scotland as well as in England. They took the name 'Bereans', after the early Christians at Berea who searched the Scriptures daily (Acts 17:12), and they sought to return to primitive Christian practices in all things. In 1823, the Bereans had congregations in Glasgow, Stirling and Crieff.³⁷

A small denomination known as Scotch Baptists developed in the 1760s, largely from former members of Glassite or Old Independent churches, who had become convinced of the doctrine of believer's baptism through English influences. A Scotch Baptist communion was formed in Edinburgh in 1765, when several members of the Old Independent church there

³⁶ Harry Escott, A History of Scottish Congregationalism (Glasgow, 1960), pp.24-36; Donald Beaton, 'The Old Scots Independents', RSCHS, III (1929), pp, 135-45.

³⁷ Escott, History of Scottish Congregationalism, pp. 37-42.

were baptised by Robert Carmichael, an elder in the church, in the Water of Leith. Centres of Scotch Baptist worship emerged in Dundee in 1769, Montrose and Glasgow in 1770, and then in several other towns, where there were already Glassite or Old Independent churches. The Scotch Baptists, like the Quakers, Glassites, Old Independents, and Bereans, remained small in numbers and influence until the early nineteenth century.³⁸ All these churches were made up of people of independent minds, strong convictions and often eccentric characters, who had taken a step not only out of the parish communities of the established Church, but also out of the dominant Presbyterianism of Scotland, and who insisted on their right to do so.

Religion in the Revolutionary Era

The social and political ferment of the 1790s, associated with the influences of the French Revolution and the social dislocations of early industrialisation, contributed to the rapid growth of dissent in Scotland. The democratic ideas associated with the French Revolution – including ideas of human equality, human rights and personal autonomy – strengthened the notion that individuals should be free to worship and express their beliefs in their own manner, without deference to the authority of the Church by law established. These same democratic ideas encouraged new efforts to evangelise among the common people, to respect their human worth as beings with eternal possibilities, and to bring them to a genuine, life-changing Christian faith, as opposed to a nominal church adherence. The social dislocations of early industrialisation, moreover, contributed to the growth of manufacturing districts with enlarged populations that were outside the influence of existing parish churches. The new industrial labouring classes, experiencing often horrendous social conditions, could be deeply hostile to the established clergy, viewing them as too closely aligned with wealth and power

³⁸ D. B. Murray, 'The Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries' in D. W. Bebbington (ed.), The Baptists in Scotland: A History (Glasgow, 1988), pp. 9-25.

in an unjust social order. For many working people, the dissenting churches offered consolation, mutual support, independence, and hope for social betterment that were not to be found in the parish churches of the establishment.

The 1790s saw the birth of a vigorous new Scottish movement of evangelical dissent associated with the Haldane brothers and the Congregational and Baptist churches. Robert (1764-1842) and James Haldane (1768-1851) were members of a Scottish landed family, and both had brief experience as naval officers. Robert was the eldest brother and inherited the large family estate near Stirling. Both brothers had conversion experiences in 1795 through the influence of the prominent English Independent minister, David Bogue. Robert had then wanted to lead a party of missionaries to India, but the East India Company discouraged missionary activity and the British government would not support him, as he was suspect for his liberal political views. So instead the Haldane brothers embraced the cause of home mission in Scotland. In 1797, James and two others, inspired by the work of English dissenters, toured the Highlands and Islands, preaching in churches when open to them, or at market crosses, on roadsides or in fields. James, who was handsome with a powerful voice and commanding personality, proved an effective lay preacher; his status as a gentleman attracted attention and his services gathered crowds of up to 4,000. He made a number of preaching tours of Scotland in the coming years. In early 1798, he and his supporters formed the Society for Propagating the Gospel at Home, a non-denominational evangelical association which supported itinerant evangelists, promoted Sunday schools, and distributed tracts. Robert sold a substantial part of the family estate and used the money to support home mission activity. In 1798, he formed he purchased a former theatre in Edinburgh and turned it into a non-denominational preaching hall, or 'Tabernacle', with free sittings and different preachers. Robert himself began lay preaching in the spring of 1798. The Edinburgh Tabernacle attracted large congregations, and Robert established similar Tabernacles in

Glasgow, Dundee, Perth, Elgin and Caithness.³⁹ Initially indifferent to denominational differences, the Haldanes and their close supporters, including the former Church of Scotland minister, Greville Ewing, became Congregationalists in late 1798, and their revival movement contributed to a major expansion of Scottish Congregationalism. Between 1800 and 1807, the number of Congregational churches in Scotland grew from 14 to 85.⁴⁰ Then in 1808, the Haldanes, ever restless and developing their theology as they went along, embraced a belief in adult baptism, and became Baptists. There was now a painful division in their revival movement, as the Haldanes forced Congregationalists out of the churches they supported financially. But at the same time, the Haldanes re-energised the Baptist movement in Scotland. There were 41 Baptist churches in Scotland by 1810, 23 of them, over half, formed between 1808 and 1810. The Baptists became active in home mission, establishing the Baptist Home Missionary Society for Scotland in 1827.⁴¹

Within the Presbyterian Secession and Relief Churches, the revolutionary ferment, including the spread of liberal and egalitarian ideas, also contributed to growth and diversification. Many members of the Secession and Relief Churches initially welcomed the French Revolution (though they later turned from its violent excesses); in the early 1790s the Government regarded their loyalty as suspect.⁴² The Secession and Relief Churches developed more evangelical attitudes and their numbers grew. By 1799, there were said to be 55,000 in the Burgher Secession synod, 55,000 in the Antiburgher Secession synod, and 36,000 in the Relief Church – in a Scottish population of about 1,526,000.⁴³ Within the Secession Churches, many developed new ideas – or as they put it, received ‘new light’ –

³⁹ A. Haldane, The Lives of Robert Haldane of Airthey, and of his Brother, James Alexander Haldane (Edinburgh, 1855 edn.), pp. 25-288.

⁴⁰ Escott, History of Scottish Congregationalism, p. 76.

⁴¹ D. E. Meek and D. B. Murray, ‘The Early Nineteenth Century’ in Bebbington (ed.), Baptists in Scotland, pp. 32, 37.

⁴² Emma Vincent [Macleod], ‘The Responses of Scottish Churchmen to the French Revolution, 1789-1802’, Scottish Historical Review, LXXIII; 2 (1994), pp. 206-7; Henry W. Meikle, Scotland and the French Revolution (Edinburgh, 1912), pp. 198-9.

⁴³ Struthers, History of the Relief Church, p. 408.

concerning the teachings of the Westminster Confession of Faith on the civil magistrate and alliance of Church and state. Those receiving ‘new light’ became convinced, in part through the example of the new constitution in the United States, that the Covenants were outdated, that there should be a separation of Church and state, that toleration was a virtue, and that religious adherence should be ‘voluntary’, based on the decision of the believer. Their ‘old light’ opponents continued to believe in the Covenants and in the ideal of a close alliance of Church and state, even if they could not be part of the present ‘corrupt’ established Church. But the new light party gained a majority in the Burgher synod, which in 1799 embraced the ‘voluntary’ position. In consequence, the old light minority seceded – with the result that there was now a New Light Burgh Synod and an Old Light Burgher Synod. A similar new light movement gained dominance within the Antiburgher Synod, and the old light party seceded in 1806.⁴⁴

The New Light Burgher Synod and New Light Antiburgher Synod united in 1820 to form the United Secession Church. The United Secession Church was Presbyterian and Calvinist, but also voluntary – believing that there should be a separation of Church and state, that church membership should be voluntary, that religion should be largely a matter of individual conscience, and that all denominations should be equal under the law. This was a profound change from the position of the Secession fathers in 1733. The United Secession Church became increasingly liberal in its politics. In 1829, the Glasgow United Secession minister, Andrew Marshall, delivered and subsequently published an influential sermon, in which he openly denounced the principle of religious establishments and called for the disestablishment of the Church of Scotland. This was the opening salvo of what became known in Scotland as the ‘Voluntary controversy’ and the beginning of the prolonged nineteenth-century Scottish movement for disestablishment.

⁴⁴ MacKerrow, History of the Secession Church, pp. 578-613.

Scotland was a far more religiously diverse society in 1829 than it had been in 1690. At the end of the seventeenth century, virtually all Scots had been adherents of the national Church, the Church by law established. There had been little sense that dissent should be permitted or that toleration was a virtue. With the gradual suppression of the Episcopalians, moreover, Scotland had become almost exclusively Presbyterian. Until about 1740s, nearly all Scottish dissenters had held to an ideal of a religiously uniform state, and had made subscription to the seventeenth-century Covenants a term of communion. By the end of the 1820s, however, the circumstances, composition and attitudes of Scottish dissent were very different. The social historian Callum Brown has determined that some 29 per cent of the entire Scottish population, and 32 per cent of the Scottish Lowland population, were now outside the established Church. In some towns, levels of dissent were much higher. In Jedburgh, for example, some 70 per cent of the population were dissenters by the 1790s.⁴⁵ While most dissenters were Presbyterian, there were now a growing choice of dissenting Presbyterian denominations – United Secession Church, Relief Church, Old Light Burghers, Old Light Antiburghers, and Reformed Presbyterians. There were also denominations of Congregationalists, Baptists, Methodists, Episcopalians, and Quakers. Adherence to the Covenants had waned and Scottish dissent was increasingly voluntary. Men and women found that, if unhappy with their parish minister or the discipline of their parish church, they could step out of the parish community and join a dissenting church without loss of social status or respectability. Indeed, to be outside the established Church could show strength of character, courage of convictions, an unbending conscience and an independent mind – traits highly respected in Scotland. The growth of eighteenth-century dissent reflected the growing prosperity of Scotland, as more and more artisans, tradesmen, clerks and small farmers could

⁴⁵ Brown, Religion and Society in Scotland since 1707, p. 20.

now afford to contribute to the maintenance of their own churches. The competition among the churches, especially in the towns and cities, contributed to a dynamic in nineteenth-century Scottish religion. The established Church of Scotland continued to command considerable influence and authority, and it underwent a revival in its pastoral care and mission from about 1810. But even so it proved unable to revive the old idea of Scotland as a unified Christian commonwealth, or reverse the eighteenth-century growth and diversification of dissent.

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