

## **REVIEW: CHRISTIAN SCOTLAND**

*Andrew R. Morton*

BBC Scotland (ed.), **The Sword and the Cross: Four Turbulent Episodes in the History of Christian Scotland**, Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2003, xiv + 150 pp. + over 100 full-colour illustrations, hb, £19.99, ISBN 0-7152-0809-8, with an Introduction by Richard Holloway and an Appendix comprising **The Scots Confession of Faith of 1560** (in Scots and English).

‘The book of the film’ precedes the film as its source, but the book of the TV series, like this one, accompanies or follows the series as either companion or substitute. If one has seen the series, it is difficult not to read the book through the televisual spectacles; but readers, who may have to take the book neat, need a reviewer to do likewise. In this case, that means foregoing the benefit of the spoken contributions to the TV series by several eminent Scottish historians. Their contributions are not explicitly incorporated in the book, nor can it be assumed that their scholarship is fairly represented by it; for whereas the ‘Introduction’ has an acknowledged author, Richard Holloway, who presented the series, the main text has none, except ‘BBC Scotland’. It is therefore not possible to know the sources or degree of authoritativeness of its material. This limitation is partially offset by a good bibliography that includes books by several of the said historians.

The sub-title says what the volume is about – **Four Turbulent Episodes in the History of Christian Scotland**. These are treated under the headings: ‘Columba, Warrior Abbot’; ‘John Knox: The Great Breaking’; ‘Covenanters: The Killing Times’; and ‘The Godly Commonwealth’. The four points of

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entry are the sixth, sixteenth, seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, with the first and last extended to the following centuries. In each case, a period is focused in a specific episode and usually on particular persons. Thus, the first chapter is about Columba and the influence of what he did and what later image-makers made of him, both to propagate Christianity and to create a united Scotland. The second is about John Knox and his part in the Reformation, with its effect on Christianity and on Scotland. The third is about religious elements in the civil-cum-international wars of the century that followed the Reformation and unfolded after the Union of the Crowns. The fourth is about the division of the Church of Scotland in the Disruption of 1843 and its consequences, together with a mixture of unitive and divisive developments in the twentieth century. The first two episodes are sharply focused on individuals, namely Columba and Knox, and the last also gives some prominence to Thomas Chalmers of the early nineteenth and John White of the early twentieth centuries. The accounts of Columba and Knox, which are probably as reliable as they could be (allowing for Columba's greater envelopment in the mists of time), will be illuminating to many. They dispel many of the myths that have distorted these figures and show their place along with others in wider movements. The account of the third episode sets out vividly the twists, turns and dilemmas of the Scottish-cum-English conflicts of crown, church and people in the seventeenth century. The fourth account links the Industrial Revolution, the 1843 Disruption, Irish migration to Scotland and the 1929 Reunion of the two largest Presbyterian denominations as one 'episode'; this is a tall order, and the connections made between the four developments are likely to be disputed.

So much for the elements of the book; what about the book as a whole? First, why are these four periods selected? The given answer is their 'turbulence'. This is not defined, and its meaning seems fluid. If it means violence, in the sense of battles, executions or murders, as the 'Sword' in the title may suggest, the four periods are dissimilar in their degree of it; with Columba it was 'offstage' in Ireland, in the Scottish Reformation it was limited, in the seventeenth century conflicts it was considerable, and in the Disruption it was non-existent. If 'turbulence' means powerful disagreement rather than violence, this was certainly a mark of Reformation, National Covenant and Disruption, but not of the early Christian expansion. However, if 'turbulence' means that these were historic turning-points, all four could be so described.

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Is there a further principle of selection or ‘big story’ holding together the four stories? There are hints of at least five. One is that this is a history of changing church-state relations, with cross and sword presumably their respective symbols. How the book interprets this is open to dispute. First, the use of the very terms ‘church’ and ‘state’ or ‘religion’ and ‘politics’ in relation to the sixth century may be questioned, given that the process of differentiation and reification of something called ‘religion’ and something else called ‘politics’ is relatively modern, and that the closeness of priests and kings is ancient and no Columban innovation. Secondly, the complexity and variety of understandings – Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed and other – of the relation between church and state or ecclesiastical and civil ‘magistracy’ is neglected. Thirdly, patronage, which was the central issue in the Disruption (and in the secessions of the preceding century, which receive no mention), is largely obscured, as is the fact that it was seen as a UK breach of the Treaty of Union with its guarantee of the distinctively Scottish church-state settlement.

A second and related theme is that ‘the assertion by the Church of spiritual lordship over earthly politics’ is particularly strong in Scotland. This claim is difficult to establish without more international comparison. A somewhat counter-claim could be made that the tradition which has strongly influenced Scotland, the Reformed or Calvinist, makes a highly nuanced distinction between the different roles of church and state. It might be wise to add that *all* ‘comprehensive doctrines’ or ideologies, religious and non-religious, tend to be imperious.

A third overarching theme is said to be the independence of the Scottish way of interpreting the Christian tradition. It is not clear whether this is the relatively uncontentious claim that all nations have their distinctive interpretation or the more contentious one that Scotland’s is more deviant than that of others.

A fourth big story is the relation of Scotland to Catholicism. This is presented starkly in the ‘Introduction’ as a drama in three acts: the coming of Catholicism in early centuries; its rejection in the sixteenth; and its return in the twentieth. Any such sweeping summaries are dangerous. Arguably this one understates the continuities, notably between Catholic and Protestant streams of tradition. It also omits early Eastern influence on Scotland before the major division between Orthodox East and Catholic West. It says nothing of the dynamic changes in Catholicism both before and after the

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Reformation, and it gives the general impression that traditions are static and monolithic corpuses rather than developing, pluriform and often internally contentious conversations. In particular, the description of the Reformation as the Great Breaking with Catholicism is questionable; the Reformers, like other reformers before and since, saw themselves as 'restoring the true face' of their inheritance, not rejecting it. Indeed, contrary to the book's claim, the Calvinists throughout Europe, including both Scotland and England, regarded themselves as no less, if not more, conserving of the catholic or universal tradition than the Lutherans (and not just in the sense of the saying that 'new presbyter is old priest writ large').

The particular treatment of the sectarianism associated with the racist response to Irish immigration shows how seriously the Church of Scotland was implicated in that racism. However, this treatment is rather distorted by the great prominence given to an extremist Edinburgh town councillor who aspired to be 'dictator of Edinburgh' and in 1935 led a large and menacing demo against a Catholic conference in Morningside. It is also implied that the union in 1929 between the Church of Scotland and the United Free Church (wrongly called the Free Church) was mainly motivated by a desire for Presbyterian dominance over the Catholic Church. This ignores the fact that both uniting churches had long been prominent participants in the international ecumenical movement seeking to advance church unity in the service of world unity, and had proposed, and in Edinburgh in 1910 hosted, the first great world Christian conference of modern time.

A fifth self-interpretation of the book, described on its last page as its 'lesson', is that 'religion can be toxic unless it is lightened with humour and practised with love'. Does this do justice to the baffling moral ambiguity of humanity and of all human institutions, including religion, which combine ennobling heights of creativity and appalling depths of destructivity, and in which the corruption of the best can be the worst?

This reviewer, who appreciates this book for its narratives but not its 'grand narrative', recommends it as a good appetiser for the more substantial meals offered in its bibliography.

*March 2004*