

James Walters. *The National Covenant and the Solemn League and Covenant, 1660–1696*

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We are amidst something of a golden age of scholarship on the Scottish Covenanters. In recent years, historians have offered reappraisals on their sixteenth-century antecedents, their military achievements (or lack thereof), their predilection for witch trials, and even their role in the abolition of the slave trade. Scholars have also explored their impact on not only Scottish history, but English, Irish, European, and even American history as well. Yet amid this surge of interest in the Covenanters, comparatively little attention has been paid to the documents that gave them their name. It is this oversight that James Walters has set out to address in his bold new monograph, in which he offers a synthetic appraisal of the origins, heyday, and intellectual afterlife of the National Covenant of 1638 and the Solemn League and Covenant of 1643.

Walters begins by offering a persuasive history of the Covenants that argues that the framers of the National Covenant in 1638 understood it as a political document and not simply an ecclesiastical statement. Although it was a response to religious reforms initiated by Charles I, Walters highlights that the document reprinted the Negative Confession, an oath sworn by the teenage James VI in 1581 to uphold the Scottish Reformation. This inclusion, Walters argues, meant the National Covenant was reaffirming a legal precedent that the monarch could be bound by oaths to defend the established religion in Scotland, and that when Scots subscribed to the National Covenant, they were endorsing the argument that Charles I had violated this oath. The Covenanters extended this constitutional interpretation to England and Ireland in 1643, when they agreed the Solemn League and Covenant with the English Parliament in return for military aid during the Civil Wars. In this telling, the Covenants were a statement of “civil religion” defined by the constitutional supremacy of the established church over the monarchy (2). The belief that Scottish Presbyterianism was a divinely inspired form of church governance was thus an explicit rejection of royal supremacy over the church.

Walters relies on this interpretation to make two distinct but related arguments. First, he argues that the Covenants remained relevant in Scottish—and crucially, English—political thought long after the military defeat of the Covenanters in 1651. In this telling, the Covenants—and particularly the Solemn League and Covenant, which Walters gives more attention than the National Covenant—were an important reference point during five moments of constitutional crisis in late seventeenth-century England. For the Restoration in 1660, for example, he carefully analyzes how two pamphleteers—the Anglican bishop John Gauden, and the Irish Covenanter Zachary Crofton—used the Solemn League and Covenant to argue about whether Charles II could claim the royal supremacy, and whether Presbyterians in England were required to accept this. Following the Act of Uniformity in 1662, when dissenters were expelled from the Church of England in an aggressive re-assertion of the royal supremacy, Walters argues that Erastian clergy used the Covenants to paint opponents of the Act as seditious rebels. Indeed, his most persuasive argument in this vein is that Anglicans loyal to the King successfully used the Covenants as a scare tactic to suppress dissent against the established

church. During the tripartite crisis of plague, fire, and war in 1666, they raised the specter of the Covenants as a model upon which dissenting supporters of the Dutch sought to remake the British state (albeit, he concludes, without evidence anyone actually advocated for this). His careful analysis of political and theological debates in Restoration England makes clear that the Covenants continued to be cited during moments of constitutional and ecclesiastical upheaval.

As Walters turns his attention to the last two constitutional crises in his narrative—the Exclusion Crisis of 1678–81, and the Glorious Revolution of 1688—his argument shifts from emphasizing the relevance of the Covenants to proposing that they introduced Scottish political ideas about “limited monarchy, contractual kingship, and the settlement of religion under the law, separate from royal authority” into the English political mainstream (177). He argues that during the Exclusion Crisis, English Whigs who supported the Earl of Shaftesbury in opposing the future James II (and VII’s) succession to the throne were comparable to those who subscribed to the Covenants, because both eschewed a divinely inspired program of religious reform in favor of limiting the power of the Crown over the church. Following the Glorious Revolution, this same program inspired resistance to James II (and VII), especially during the widespread subscriptions to a public association against Jacobites in 1696. In both cases, however, he acknowledges that although some English Whigs cited the Covenants approvingly, “references to Scottish contractual kingship are often outnumbered by references to English and Hebraic history” (159). Indeed, this conclusion verges on crediting the Covenanters with inspiring the model of constitutional monarchy so intrinsic to English political history, but does so without reference to English precedents ranging from the Magna Carta to opposition to the royal supremacy during the reigns of Mary I and Elizabeth I. That the English Parliament was the signatory to the Solemn League and Covenant in 1643, rather than the King, also looms large over this argument.

Walters walks on firmer ground when discussing how the Covenants legitimated resistance to the monarchy when the Crown was believed to have broken a contract. He persuasively demonstrates that the English Reformation established that the monarch could only be bound by oaths, not constitutional limits. But in Scotland, both Mary Queen of Scots and James VI had accepted contractual limits on their ecclesiastical and political powers, albeit under duress. Walters analyzes James Stewart of Goodtrees, a Presbyterian lawyer who cited the Covenants in his argument that *not* resisting the concept of royal supremacy was heresy against the divinely ordained Presbyterian Church model. That English leaders cited this argument approvingly to justify resistance against James II and his purported popish intentions in England is perhaps the most enduring legacy of the Covenants offered in this fascinating study.

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