

**TWO BOOKS FOR 1960**

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SOME periods of history are seen chiefly through the eyes of one man who has succeeded in impressing his view of his age, and of himself, upon later generations. So Petrarch has dominated the picture of fourteenth-century learning until recently, and in Scotland the genius of John Knox has long focussed attention upon the year 1560 and upon himself as the national prophet leading God's people from bondage, from moral and intellectual darkness into the light of the Gospel and so, eventually, into the modern world. One book has impressed his self-portrait and his view of the Scottish reformation upon almost all later Scottish historiography, his *History of the Reformation of Religion within the Realm of Scotland*. 'What I have been to my country', he wrote, 'albeit this unthankful age will not know, yet the ages to come will be compelled to bear witness to the truth.' One may wonder what these ages would have said, if he had not written for their information; he was so short a time at the centre of events and contemporary sources say so little about him. He felt keenly this lack of recognition by his own 'unthankful age' and his failure to control the revolution in Scotland; the bitter disappointment coloured his writing but through the power of that writing he has since eclipsed all his contemporaries in Scotland except one person, the woman who is perhaps an even larger figure in national legend than himself, Mary Stuart.

Yet there are probably few people directly familiar with Knox's *History* except for some quoted passages describing such stirring events as the deaths of Patrick Hamilton and Cardinal Beaton, the riot in Edinburgh on a Feast of St Giles, or the struggle for precedence at a cathedral door between the two greatest prelates in the kingdom. Such passages well illustrate the vigorous style and deft comic description of which Knox was a master. They do not illustrate the dark passion and narrow hatred which also mark his work, the brutality which led some of his friends to consider altering his manuscript after his death and which led the Protestant Archbishop Spottiswoode to refuse to accept it as the authentic work of Knox. It was not printed in

fact until long after his death. An attempted printing about 1586 was suppressed and, although it was read in manuscript by some significant people, the first edition available to the general public only appeared in 1644. The date is important, for religious war was back in Britain, and in Scotland Knox and the spirit of the extreme Covenanters were to go well together. It was then that he came most truly into his own, the many facets of his own zeal reflected again in the prophets of the Covenant.

Since then his book has been one of those more honoured perhaps than read, except in abbreviated popular editions. The standard edition by David Laing, published as long ago as 1846-8, is too erudite for most and too tedious even for scholars, except the most pertinacious, because of the oddity of Knox's spelling which Laing retained. There is now, however, an attractively produced, pleasantly legible edition<sup>1</sup> which is a valuable working tool for students of Scottish history and which can be recommended to all who are interested in the quatercentenary to be celebrated next year. Professor Dickinson does not claim to have produced a critical edition, nor does he profess to be a specialist in Scottish ecclesiastical history. Nevertheless he has given us a reliable text from which to work, sufficiently modernized to be open to the general reader and leaving the historian with no excuse for ignorance of its contents.

The introduction and the explanatory notes are an unassuming collation, for the most part, of the better historians of Knox and the reformation, with a valuable bibliographical note based on Professor Dickinson's own study of the earliest manuscript. The account of the progress of events in Scotland which occupies a good deal of the introduction might well have been shorter, since so much of it is little more than paraphrase or even quotation from Knox himself and readers might be well advised to jump much of this and go straight to the text.

Special mention should be made of an ample biographical index which again makes no claim to research but is based on existing works dealing with the period. It is useful to have so much material brought together; it serves as a starting point in closer study of the *History*, and at the same time illustrates the limitations of the works on which it is based. Knox's account has

<sup>1</sup> *John Knox's History of the Reformation in Scotland*. Edited by William Croft Dickinson. 2 vols. Nelson; 84s.

been too easily accepted and not enough has been done to investigate the history of the people whose names occur in his pages as subjects of censure or of praise. There is still no adequate study of so central a figure as Mary of Lorraine! And unsatisfactory references in the biographical index to Scottish members of religious orders remind us of how much work needs to be done not only on Scottish monks and friars in the sixteenth century but on the whole matter of monasticism in Scotland.

Here again, however, there is a recent work which can be recommended as a starting-point for serious study. The late Dr Easson's book<sup>2</sup> is open to many criticisms but it is nevertheless the only book of its kind worth buying; it is indeed indispensable in the present state of Scottish studies. The author was not only a minister with pastoral duties to carry out, but a sick man who worked against time, in sight of death, and handicapped by the inaccessibility of materials necessary to his investigations. He was humble in discussing his own achievement and touchingly hesitant about asking assistance which might seem to take advantage of other men's labours for the completion of his own. His death was a great loss to Scottish medieval studies.

The elimination of spurious religious foundations was one of the most valuable parts of Dr Easson's work. Leaving aside the section of his book which discusses medieval hospitals, and which will bear much revision, we have a catalogue not likely to be much altered by addition or subtraction—although the very first Benedictine house which he gives must be rejected as spurious. (See *Innes Review*, Vol. IX, p. 220.) It must be stressed, however, that the dates given for secularization or dissolution of religious foundations are highly artificial, referring as they do rather to definitive disposition of church property than to the suppression of religious life and the recognized forms of Catholic worship, the celebration of the Mass and the recitation of the Divine Office. It must also be remarked that the selection of material to illustrate the activities of the various religious foundations is not always satisfactory. The 'significant features of their history' are not simply economic or political transactions. Had Dr Easson a blind spot, it may be wondered, that he has so little to illustrate intellectual and pastoral interests? A caveat should be entered also

<sup>2</sup> *Medieval Religious Houses: Scotland*. By D. E. Easson, with a Foreword by David Knowles and Maps by R. Neville Hadcock. Longmans; 45s.

with regard to some of the introductory material in the volume which shows traces of Dr Easson's working under pressure and shortage of time. There is need for a more critical examination of eighteenth-century Scottish historical collections than Dr Easson appears to have made.

In view of the approaching quatercentenary of the Scottish reformation one use of *Medieval Religious Houses: Scotland* may be suggested to the reader as exceptionally interesting and illuminating. He may compile statistics of religious foundations and relate them to the estimated Scottish population at the time, about 400,000 at most. He will no doubt also note the concentration of religious houses in those parts of the country most ravaged by English armies in the fifth decade of the century; the paucity of foundations north of the Highland Line; the way foundations of friars jostled each other in what were in fact very small towns; the enormous wealth of the great abbeys in what was an impoverished country with a financially strained government. A list of those religious houses actually attacked by Knox's 'rascal multitude' will also prove highly suggestive, especially if placed alongside a list of great houses which were apparently not attacked.

These two books are part of the fruit of a revival in Scottish historical studies which promises great things for the future. There is a notable increase in actual research, accompanied by higher standards of scholarship and an increasing freedom from that partisan spirit which has vitiated so much historical writing in Scotland and has disposed people to consider so many questions as settled which indeed had scarcely been properly opened. Catholic and Protestant scholars are working together and even if not wholly untouched by emotion from the past would agree, with Leo XIII, that 'The first law of history is not to tell a lie, the second is not to be afraid to tell the truth'.