JOHN KNOX[1]

FEW men have ever tested the vocabularies of friend and foe more severely than the leader of the Scottish Reformation. Over sixty years ago, in one English periodical, Thomas Carlyle hailed him as " a heaven-inspired seer and heroic leader of men "; two months ago, in another, he was branded as an " old Scotch termagant " and as " the busy, fanatic, meddling, obstinate John Knox ".

It is a hard task for a biographer to approach either the man or his period with the requisite historical detachment, with the determination to come to grips with the man's thoughts and his problems as the dominant interest in his research. So far as one can gather, this has been Lord Eustace Percy's objective. And he has emerged from prolonged study of the writings of Knox with the evident conviction that he has been unjustly maligned because words of his have been wrested from their context, not simply in a documentary sense, but through sheer failure to see the whole European situation as it loomed before his eyes. No man of his age saw his own national problem so clearly in the light of the critical position of Protestantism all over Europe: no leader was so acutely conscious of the threatening clouds, at times no bigger than a man's hand, which lowered and gloomed across the North Sea. He saw Scotland as the key-position of a world struggle and even in the high moments of his own local success, his mind was perturbed by his concern for the whole battle-front. At times, to the consternation of his hearers who came to listen to exultations, his sermons were an urgent call to strenuous watchfulness and sacrificial readiness. The supreme service of this biography from outside, is that it corrects the tendency of Knox's own day, and of many Scottish historians since, to limit the outlook to Scotland itself, and to neglect the wider horizons. Lord Eustace Percy has depicted for us a big figure in a world setting.

[1] *John Knox*. By Lord Eustace Percy. London, Hodder & Stoughton. pp. 439. 20*s*.

His biography is divided into six sections:

I. Prologue in Scotland.
II. The European Scene.
III. England, Dieppe and Frankfurt. The Making of a Revolutionary.
IV. Geneva and Scotland. The Founding of the Congregation.
V. Scotland. The Patch of Glory.
VI. Scotland. The Barren Years.

This division indicates that Lord Eustace Percy is not one of those historians who reckon it unscientific to be readable. It is the most adroitly written of all the major biographies of Knox. He has deliberately omitted footnotes which, he says " the scholar will not need and the general reader cannot verify ". The numerous quotations from Knox are modernized and printed in italics. Though he warns us that there are omissions in them, I have found no case in which the omissions affect the sense. But in one case, (p. 140) the sense is obscured through a printing mishap (a line having got into its wrong place) and in another (p. 30) " laid " is surely not a sound modernization of " lyne ". With an attractive layout, a simplified method, and an English style of real distinction, the volume, long as it is, can be devoured at a sitting. But it also repays re-reading.

Lord Eustace Percy's primary interest is not institutional religion, nor is it theology. The reader will search in vain for any full discussion either of the *First Book of Discipline* or of the Scots Confession. But the book is full of evidence of first-hand thinking on central theological problems. The pages on the real issues between Rome and the Reformers have a freshness not too frequent in such discussions, and they close with this discriminating verdict on excommunication. " The Calvinist minister, no less than the Roman priest, might excommunicate the unfaithful member of his flock, but he did not claim to hold the keys of heaven. His sentence might be a social tyranny, but his very insistence on the irrevocability of God's election robbed it of its spiritual terrors. In the hands of the old Church, on the other hand, excommunication was not an act of institutional discipline, but a sentence of spiritual death."

The author's prime interests are rather the religion of John Knox and the development of his political principles. For the heart of his religion, Lord Eustace Percy goes to the passage Knox listened to on his death bed, when, in response to his request to read where he first cast anchor, his wife read the " 17th of John's Evangel ". " Here, in the Last Supper, in the teaching that followed it, and above all in the prayer of intercession that followed the teaching, he found the secret of all human worship and of all human hope ". Confirmation of this is found even in his one major theological writing. The only living passage in it, asserts Lord Eustace in a too sweeping verdict, is the one in which he quotes this chapter of St. John. (One wonders which of the two passages, pp. 51f. or pp. 72f. in Laing's edition the author refers to.) He finds further confirmation in the stress laid by Knox on the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, manifest in his one great missionary campaign in Scotland; in the glow and depth of religious feeling which suffuse the doctrinal statement regarding it in the Scots Confession, and in his hatred of the Mass as a corruption of the truth. John Knox can never be fully known by those who ignore this " mystic " or " quietist " or devotional strain as the basis of all his activity.

But it is the development of his political principles which has the lion's share of Lord Eustace Percy's attention. And here he is much more critical. He shows Knox starting from sound Christian principles, but led step by step to overpassing the limits permissible to a Christian citizen. He finds the root of the mistake in Calvin—not in his direct teaching on the subject, but in his conception of the Purpose of God, which was coloured by Jewish history. " It traced the development of the Purpose, not in terms of a ' new creation ', but in terms of human history. God raised up His ministers, age after age, not to re-initiate men into a life-giving communion with Him, but to re-establish a godly polity. They must not themselves use violence to that end, but they could be sure that God would always find violent executors of His judgments outside the number of His elect. Even so had the anabaptists spoken, until, losing their foothold on this narrow distinction, Melchior's militant disciples began to teach that, once God's judgments had been made plain, the faithful must assist in their execution. We shall see Knox stumbling on the same brink and sliding into the same fall."

All his early utterances, however, on the duty of political subordination are sound. He confines the right of rebellion within limits justifiable to the most sensitive Christian conscience. He defines the " lesser authorities " to whom, when there is flagrant violation of the just laws of the realm, appeal may be made. His almost inexplicable retreats from situations which seemed promising, like the Scotland of 1556, are motived by his desire not to be implicated in illegitimate rebellion. All his actions in the great year of crisis go no further than the situation demands. But in the midst of his troubles he uttered words which transferred the emphasis from the just laws of the realm to the Law Moral—to God's unchangeable decrees, as revealed in Scripture. " The idolator shall die the death " was the most pointed of them. The author admits, of course, that Knox and his immediate successors are singularly free from persecuting practice. But the words became the charter of sporadic violence. And out of them was born the Covenanter.

" Those who appeal to force for the limited ends of mere social order can limit their use of it—not so the man who appeals to it as an instrument of perfection. The man who takes that sword is happy if he can perish by it; if he lives, he will be bound slave to it all his days."

This is a very condensed summary of a lengthy argument and it is necessarily over-simplified when divorced from the stark and grim realities of the problems of the day—to which the author does full justice. And, while it is fascinating to watch in these thrilling pages the development of a theory, one wonders how far it is possible to extract a theory from utterances adapted to a scene of conflict changing every day. One can never forget that, in the darkest hour of the year of crisis, when Knox preached at Stirling to the dispirited Lords of the Congregation, when this political theory might have been exploited for their heartening, he sounded instead a very pointed appeal for individual repentance, and found his assurance in God. " Whatsoever shall become of us and of our mortal carcasses, I doubt not but that this cause, in despite of Satan, shall prevail in the realm: for, as it is the eternal truth of the Eternal God, so shall it once prevail, howsoever for a time it be impugned ".

It is somewhat remarkable that, although Christopher Goodman appears several times in the narrative, no mention is

made of his *How Superior Powers Ought to be Obeyd* in which, some months before Knox's *Appellation* his closest associate at the moment, with a mind more interested in abstract issues, went further in his theorizing. " And though it appears at the first sight a great disorder that the people should take unto them the punishment of transgression, yet when the magistrates and other officers cease to do their duty, they are, as it were, without officers, yea worse than if they had none at all, and then God giveth the sword into the people's hand and He Himself is become immediately their head (if they will seek the accomplishment of His laws) and hath promised to defend them and bless them ".

Was Knox's mind permeated by his colleague's theory? If so, it never attains to such explicit statement. And it certainly is never the dominating force in his outlook on the situation. No man was less theory-ridden.

Further, is not the author's notion of the Covenant coloured by England's experience of the Solemn League and Covenant? Is there anything in the National Covenant itself or in the circumstances that gave it birth which suggests realizing an ideal by repressive measures or justifying sporadic violence? Is there any belittlement of the just laws of the realm in its lengthened recapitulation of them? But this, while relevant to the issues he raised, is leading away from Knox.

In his biography, Lord Eustace Percy has given the reader much food for thought. And I have no doubt that, through it, many will come to see in John Knox a real religious force wrestling with mighty problems; and, in his generation, live men handling the gravest of issues, and grappling, not unworthily, with the tasks set by the crumbling into ruins of an old world order.

One criticism of the general scheme may be appended. One can hardly say that with the reconstruction of 1561, Lord Eustace Percy's interest fades away, but it certainly is diminished. To call the last eleven years of Knox's life " The Barren Years " and to dismiss them in sixty-one pages may be a useful corrective to studies of the period which concentrate on these years, but it is surely out of proportion. In them Knox's mind may be occupied with other interests, but he did not cease to see them in their European relation. If Lord Eustace had

expanded this section by a hundred pages, our debt to him would have been all the greater.

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Some queries as to details have been noted:

On p. 30 is "a translation to be approved" correct? Was not the translation actually before the Estates and discussed?

On p. 200 should not the words "of 1636" be inserted after canons?

At the foot of the portrait oppsite p. 208 should it not be Torpihchen?

On p. 298 should not Munross by Montrose?

On p. 331 is there not considerable confusion about the numbers of the Council of State and the mode of their selection?

On p. 335 why is John Douglas omitted?

On p. 344. In what sense is Eglinton in the North?