TERCENTENARY OF THE SOLEMN LEAGUE AND COVENANT

THREE hundred years ago, in 1643, the Solemn League and Covenant was accepted by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland and the Convention of the Scottish Estates (August 17) and ordered by the English Houses of Parliament to be publicly taken (September 22). This document combined with the National Covenant of 1638 to bring into use the name " Covenanter ", one of the most celebrated and cherished words in Scottish national history.

Ever since the days of the National Covenant, necessitated by Laud's unhappy intrusion into Scottish ecclesiastical affairs, Scots had been seriously worried by the possibility of renewed English attacks upon Scottish religious ways. In the summer of 1640 Alexander Henderson and his fellow commissioners in London were proposing " unity in religion and uniformity in Church government as a special means to conserving the peace between the two countries ". The Assembly noted a year later, " What danger and contagion in matters of Kirk-government, of divine worship and of doctrine, may come from the one Kirk to the other ", and next year uniformity of Church government and unity in religion were specially mentioned in correspondence with the King and with Parliament. The letter sent north from the Parliament in August 1642 suggested an Assembly of Divines and invited Scottish representatives to attend with a view to uniformity of Church government, and, as foreshadowed by the Scottish Assembly, one Confession of Faith, one form of worship and one Catechism.

At an early stage in its sittings the Long Parliament (1640) showed unanimous opposition to the acts and canons of a recent ecclesiastical convocation, and protested that the convocation had no right to bind clergy or laity without consent of Parliament. Hierarchical rule with its possibilities of tyranny was rousing hostility, though no objection to Episcopacy as such was necessarily involved in this. Some Puritans, it is true, adopted a more extreme position. Sir Henry Vane, for example, while denouncing the bishops chiefly on political grounds as prejudicing civil liberty by supporting " the doctrine of arbitrary

power ", and by " falling in with the plots and combinations that have been entered into against this present Parliament ", was prepared to state that Episcopacy " was brought in by Anti-Christ ". At the same time he shared the opinion that Presbyter was but Priest writ large. Rapin plainly exaggerates the amount of support that at this time could be found in England for Presbyterianism. Gilbert Burnet and the Earl of Clarendon judged more truly, and King Charles's estimate would appear to have been sound when he wrote to Scotland that he was confident " that the most considerable persons in both Houses of Parliament, and those who make the fairest pretensions to you of uniformity in Church government, will no sooner embrace a presbyterial than you an episcopal ". We may accept Neal's statement, that when Parliament was obliged to seek Scottish assistance, they still could never be induced to establish Presbyterian discipline in England, and there was amongst the ministers no conviction as to the divine right of Presbyterianism, and when the Scots went home, the Presbyterian cause dwindled " till it was almost totally eclipsed by the rising greatness of the Independents ".

Things were going badly with the military efforts of the Parliament, and Scottish help was absolutely imperative. Later events make it plain that the Scots saved the situation, and enabled the new army of Cromwell to be trained. In February 1643 Scottish commissioners were endeavouring to mediate between the conflicting parties in England; but they failed, and a petition to the King from the General Assembly received what was regarded as an entirely unsatisfactory reply. This laid Scotland open to an approach from Parliament, and deputies went north " to negotiate a treaty of assistance ", reaching Leith on August 7, 1643. The visitors included Sir Henry Vane (one of the chief leaders on the side of the Parliament, characterised by Robert Baillie as " one of the gravest and ablest of that nation "), three other members of Parliament and the ministers Stephen Marshall (who called himself a Presbyterian and who was one of the best preachers of his day) and Philip Nye, his son-in-law, who had recently returned from exile at Arnhem in Holland, and who was an avowed Independent. They were received by the Earl of Lindsay and Sir Archibald Johnston of Wariston; and they treated with both Assembly and Convention through small committees of these bodies, though

"as private spectators" they were welcome any day at the Assembly. Baillie says that the ministers and elders "were exhorted to be more grave than ordinary". Alexander Henderson was well able to maintain the dignity of the moderatorial office, which was his for the third time. The commissioners from England were most anxious to make an immediate arrangement. By all accounts the King was rapidly improving his position in England. They made little difficulty, therefore, about the Scottish terms, agreeing to the religious covenant which the Scots proposed rather than the mere civil league which was their main purpose in appealing to the Scots.

The Solemn League and Covenant is a brief and forthright document, setting out from the conception of the glory of God, then immediately expressing zeal for the honour of the King, and thereafter referring to the dangers and difficulties of the time.

The first article envisages the preservation of the existing Scottish religious position, and the reformation of religion in England and Ireland "according to the Word of God, and the example of the best reformed churches", and the establishment of uniformity in doctrine, worship and government throughout the realm. The reference to the Word of God was introduced through the influence of Sir Henry Vane in order to leave open the door to Independency. The clause was one which the Scots could not well refuse, and with regard to which they could always hope that their interpretation would prevail. They were as hostile to Independency as to Episcopacy. The second article proposes the extirpation of popery and prelacy. The English Parliament modified this by inserting a gloss directing the objection against the existing English Episcopal system rather than against Episcopacy itself. In England there was no strong feeling against bishops though much against the direction of their recent activities. Toleration was also creeping into recognition. It was in 1644 that Milton's *Areopagitica* first appeared, and the spirit of this may be contrasted with what Gillespie and Rutherfurd were soon to produce against Liberty of Conscience. The third article pledges all concerned to preserve the rights and privileges of Parliament and the liberties of the kingdom. This is, of course, vague and indefinite, and the ordinary Scot had no evidence to guide him as to the possible implications. The fourth article requires the arrest and punishment of all opponents of the League and Covenant. Here we have the

persecuting element which in those days seemed to accompany sincere religious conviction as inevitably as in the political world it was associated with declaration of war. The fifth article idealistically looks forward to the continuance of peace and union after the existing troubles shall be over. The sixth demands of the signatories active support for the cause of the Solemn League and Covenant, and binds them not to fall away from their agreement. The conclusion gives pious expression to the conviction of sinfulness, confesses the unworthiness at the root of the troubles of the period, professes penitence, promises amendment, and pleads for divine assistance and blessing.

Both Robert Baillie and Robert Blair mention the great enthusiasm with which the Solemn League and Covenant was received in the Assembly; and the former does not conceal that the reason of it was the Covenant's plain purpose of propagating Presbyterianism in England. There can be no doubt that Scots assistance to England was given in the hope of safeguarding Scottish Presbyterianism for all time by two things—the destruction of Absolutism and the defeat of Anglicanism in England. Henry Guthry, who was present at the Assembly, mentions that there was some desire to have time to think over the terms of the proposed League and Covenant, but this suggestion was indignantly overruled. Gilbert Burnet, with reference to the speed and eagerness with which the matter went through, says: "It was thought strange to see all their consciences of such a size, so exactly to agree as the several wheels of a clock; which made all apprehend, there was some first mover that directed all those other motions: this by the one party was imputed to God's extraordinary providence, but by others to the power and policy of the leaders, and the simplicity and fear of the rest." There can be no doubt that the Scots were much deluded as to the chances of success for their missionary programme, though one need not go so far as to think they were "cozened" by Vane, as Clarendon suggests, still less agree with John Buchan that "for the sake of an ecclesiastical whimsy the bulk of the nation chose the path of civic dishonour".

On September 25 the English Commons and Divines officially assembled in St. Margaret's, Westminster, and with some ceremony swore to the League and Covenant. As representing the Scottish commissioners who were present, Alexander Henderson had the honour of briefly addressing the gathering.

"It is the best work of faith," he said, "to join in covenant with God, the best work of love and Christian communion, to join in covenant with the people of God; the best work of the best zeal, to join in covenant for reformation, against the enemies of God and religion; the best work of true loyalty, to join in covenant for the preservation of our king and superiors; and the best proof of natural affection . . . to join in covenant for defence of our native country, liberties and laws: such as from these necessary ends do withdraw, and are not willing to enter into covenant, have reason to enter into their own hearts, and to look into their faith, love, zeal, loyalty and natural affection." A prominent part was played by Philip Nye, who at this stage seemed very hearty in his advocacy of the agreement.

Steps were at once taken to have the Solemn League and Covenant subscribed throughout the part of the country subject to parliamentary authority. Preachers delivered lengthy sermons, expounding the League and Covenant and answering possible objections. Thus Thomas Case in London dealt patiently with the difficulty that people were being asked to swear to maintain religion as reformed in Scotland when they did not know what that was, and when there was a suspicion that presbyterial discipline might be "as much tyrannical and more anti-Christian than that of prelacy which we swear to extirpate". The success which attended the National Covenant in Scotland he declared to have been "very remarkable", the people having been recovered "when all the physicians in Christendom had given them over", while "the dagon of the bishops' service book broke its neck before this ark of the covenant". He looked for similar results from the new League and Covenant. Another preacher spoke of the League and Covenant as "a shibboleth to distinguish Ephraimites from Gileadites", and it was indeed applied as a test, thus assisting in the removal of many conscientious clergymen from their livings. A zealous London minister encouraged subscription by the publication of a work entitled: *The Efficacy and Extent of the Solemn League and Covenant Asserted*, though a pamphlet bearing the title *Covenanter Vindicated* made it evident that some divergency of view remained as to whether signature implied a belief that "the classical coercive presbyterian government of churches be *jure divino*"; and such a publication as *Anti-confederacy, or a discovery of the iniquity and hypocrisy of the*

Solemn League and Covenant represents another opinion strongly maintained.

Rushworth prints a list of members of Parliament said to have signed the Solemn League and Covenant on September 22; but the date should be September 25, and the names include that of Sir Henry Vane who was then still in Scotland, and that of Oliver Cromwell who was at that time very much engaged with military affairs in the north, and who, though he did play a part in enforcing the League and Covenant in the Ely district, did not himself actually sign till February 1644. Cromwell never cared for the League and Covenant, and was later to suggest to the Scots that " there may be a covenant made with death and hell ". He strongly opposed the Scottish interpretation of the document. In England there was naturally no very great enthusiasm anywhere about the Solemn League and Covenant. It was a necessary political measure, and not the first in their experience to be put forward in a religious form; but there was nothing spontaneous about its acceptance. Alexander Henderson expressed the hope that the arrival of the Scottish army might stimulate interest in the League and Covenant. But Independency increased rapidly and the Scots complained that even their friend Sir Henry Vane was " prolixly, earnestly and passionately " upholding toleration and liberty of conscience as against the Scottish demand for uniformity. The proceedings of the Westminster Assembly and the ultimate failure of its documents to obtain a hold in England show how divergent were the outlooks of the two contracting parties when the document was first accepted. In 1647 the Heads of the Proposals offered by the Army contained a clause " that the taking of the Covenant be not enforced upon any, nor any penalties imposed on the refusers ". The Scots certainly did not obtain what they sought amongst the English, and the League and Covenant at first widened the difference between the King and the Parliament, and later the difference between Parliament and the Army.

In Scotland the Solemn League and Covenant was sworn and subscribed on October 13, 1643, at St. Giles's, Edinburgh, by those in authority in Church and State; and thereafter both civil and ecclesiastical powers ordained its general adoption throughout the country. A number of copies with signatures of this date are extant, as, for example, those of the parishes of

St. Andrews; Newbattle; West Church, Edinburgh; Edzell. Spalding reports how the League and Covenant was taken at Aberdeen. Cullen Kirk-session records state that "the said day the League was publicly subscribed by all the parishioners after the forenoon's service betwixt the same and the blessing". At Falkirk a table was placed in front of the pulpit, and elders were appointed to regulate the movement of the members from all parts of the church in order to sign. The minister at Carnock in Fife preached on Josiah's Covenant, and thereafter the men who could write subscribed the Solemn League and Covenant, and a notary public signed for the rest "touching his pen with their hands". In the parish of Balmerino, and indeed generally, the document was read over on one Sunday and explained from the pulpit, and then on the following Sunday it was read again and subscribed. Women were nowhere required, or permitted, to sign, though they were expected to swear by holding up their right hands. We hear of one man who in enthusiasm insisted on holding up both hands. Dunfermline records a payment of 46 shillings Scots "given for binding the Covenant and a new cover thereto".

At the Presbytery of Paisley in January 1644, "all the brethren present declare that none within their several parishes had refused to subscribe". There was, however, a certain amount of opposition. When the Solemn League and Covenant was read out in church, the severe penalties for not signing were stated, and James Guthry later complained that "many did take the Solemn League and Covenant for fear; because the refusing to take it was attended both with ecclesiastical and civil censures". It was a time of war, for Scotland at once collected troops and sent an army of 20,000 into England; and in war enemies are enemies and have to be treated as such, and in those days little skill was exercised in discriminating between the political and the ecclesiastical. Thus individuals underwent church discipline for what appear to have been largely political offences. Kirkcaldy Session dealt with men who had joined Montrose against the League and Covenant in 1644.

Montrose was, indeed, the centre of the opposition. He had taken the National Covenant with some enthusiasm and adhered to it; but his opinion of the new measure is revealed by his words as reported by one contemporary: "When the King had granted you all your desires, and you were everyone

sitting under his vine and under his fig-tree, that then you should have taken a party in England by the hand, and entered into a league and covenant with them against the King, was the thing I judged it my duty to oppose to the yondmost." Another account of his attitude says: "As for that second league and covenant, I thank Almighty God that I never approved it, never acknowledged it as lawful and honourable. . . . What profit it has been to the cause of religion, thereby rent into so many shameful sects, what terrible tragedies it has occasioned, these three distracted kingdoms can witness."

John Forbes of Corse, Professor of Divinity at King's College, Aberdeen, was another obstinate opponent. Like the other Aberdeen Doctors and those of the Huntly faction, he had been in difficulties over the National Covenant, and had been deprived of his Chair in April 1641. It was, however, only the Solemn League and Covenant that actually drove him from the country into that Dutch exile of which his Diary gives such an interesting account. Lord Ogilvy was in trouble with Alyth Kirk-session in 1651 "for his sinful miscarriages against the Covenant"; and there were other sufferers for conscience' sake.

In 1648 in connection with the important difference of temper brought out by the Engagement, the stricter party in Church and State enforced a renewal of the Solemn League and Covenant, and session records in various parts of the land note the procedure. At Dalgety the minute contains the significant sentence: "It is seriously recommended to the elders to try if there be any that have absented themselves or refuse to renew the Solemn League and Covenant."

After this period the National Covenant and the Solemn League and Covenant were scarcely distinguished from one another in people's minds. They spoke of "the Covenants". As Dr. Hector Macpherson declares: "The Covenants became almost fetishes." The Martyrs made special reference to them in their last words. Dean Stanley remarks that the Solemn League and Covenant "inspired a rapture seemingly as pure and heavenly as if it had been the Imitatio Christi". Above all the Covenants continued as tests, for example in the case of Charles II, who was obliged to take the Covenants "voluntarily" in 1650 and 1651, whom the Protesters would only follow as a covenanted king, but whose sincerity they had no reason to assume. It was an unhappy episode with unhappy results.

A point much emphasised by the Covenanters was the perpetual obligation of the Covenants. Repeatedly both in Scotland and in England the words were quoted from Jeremiah l. 5: " Come, and let us join ourselves to the Lord in a perpetual covenant that shall not be forgotten." The Covenants were regarded as perpetually binding upon those who took them, and James Guthry regarded backsliding and defection from the Covenants as amongst " the causes of the Lord's wrath against Scotland ", but in his dying testimony he further declared: " These sacred, solemn, public oaths of God, I believe, can be loosed nor dispensed with by no person, or party or power upon earth, but are still binding upon these kingdoms and will be for ever hereafter." Alexander Jamieson in 1677 announced: " They remain in force on us and this church, either to the duties contained in them, or else to the judgments and plagues denounced in the Word of God against covenant-breakers." Alexander Shields in *A Hind Let Loose*, speaking of the Solemn League and Covenant as " comprehending the purpose of all prior, and the pattern of all posterior covenants ", says that it was subscribed " for themselves and posterity ", and this covenant " no power on earth can disannul, disable or dispense ".

The first Seceders in their Testimony of 1733 took exception (like the Cameronians) to the ignoring of the Covenants in the Revolution Settlement of 1690, and asserted the obligation of the Covenants and " their binding force upon posterity ", while admitting that this had " never been expressly asserted by any particular Act of our Assemblies ". They consequently renewed the Covenants with much solemnity at Abernethy in July 1744, and Alexander Moncrieff who was minister there reminded his hearers of various Old Testament Covenants which had all been regarded as binding upon the posterity of those who participated in them. The Covenants had been renewed at Lanark in 1666 by the armed band of Covenanters soon afterwards defeated at Rullion Green; and also by the Society People at Auchinsaugh in 1712, the Covenants continuing to be " a term of Communion " for more than a hundred years from that date. Secession ministers had to take the Covenants before ordination. The Relief Church was, on the other hand, somewhat impatient of the Covenants, and in the Church of Scotland little reference occurs to them until the nineteenth

century Evangelical Revival brought them back to popularity with the "prevailing party".

While the Covenanters in the days of persecution thought of the Covenants as in the same class as those of the Bible, Government regarded them as politically treasonous, and they were accordingly denounced and prohibited; they were declared to be unlawful oaths, and all persons in public trust were obliged to renounce them. The Solemn League and Covenant has generally been recognised to be on a lower plane than the National Covenant. The Free Church historian, W. M. Hetherington, was not indeed of this opinion, for he speaks of the Solemn League and Covenant as giving to "any calm, unprejudiced, thoughtful and religious man" "an overawing sense of its sublimity and sacredness", and he holds it as self-evident that it is "the wisest, the sublimest and the most sacred document ever framed by uninspired men". But the strong political and temporary elements in it have rendered it unsuitable according to modern ideas for use as a standard, a test, or a term of communion, and in the Basis of Union of 1929, amongst the documents named as "held in honour as having an important place in the history of Scottish Presbyterianism", the Covenants are not even mentioned.

The Solemn League and Covenant certainly had much to do with giving Scotland its present subordinate standards, the Westminster documents. At the same time, it came to be associated after the Act of Classes, with a certain theological outlook and the possibility of ecclesiastical tyranny, and so led directly to the restoration of Episcopacy. Above all there was the intolerant and persecuting element in it, an element which indeed soon became disagreeable to its supporters, so that in 1805 the Seceders who renewed the Covenant utterly disclaimed "all obligation to use any methods inconsistent with liberty of conscience in prosecuting the ends of it".

The Solemn League and Covenant has made an occasional appearance in literature, being mentioned by "Hudibras" Butler with sarcasm and scornfulness, by Dean Swift with virulent spite, by Robert Burns in a friendly though unintelligent quatrain, by Walter Scott in a manner that is critical but not unjust though he dates it 1640; and by Thomas Carlyle as: "A very solemn Covenant, and Vow of all the people; of the awfulness of which, we, in these days of Customhouse

oaths and loose regardless talk, cannot form the smallest notion."

We in Scotland are proud of the Covenanter tradition, and looking back over three centuries may record with thankfulness that the Solemn League and Covenant, with all its limitations, was the work of men who were prepared at whatever cost to champion their convictions, men who must be placed amongst the most sincere upholders of spiritual independence, and men who dreamt of, and groped after and longed for a unity wherein, according to their own words, " we and our posterity after us may, as brethren, live in faith and love, and the Lord may delight to dwell in the midst of us".

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