SCOTTISH CALVINISM: A DARK, REPRESSIVE FORCE?

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INTRODUCTION

'Scottish Calvinism has been a dark, repressive force.' The thesis is a common one; almost, indeed, an axiom. Few seem to realise, however, that the thesis cannot be true without its corollary: the Scots are a repressed people, lacking the confidence to express themselves and living in fear of their sixteenth-century Super Ego.

The corollary, in turn, immediately faces a paradox. Scotland has never been frightened to criticise Calvinism. This is particularly true of our national literature. John Knox has been the object of relentless opprobrium, the Covenanters have been pilloried as epitomes of bigotry and intolerance, Thomas Boston portrayed as a moron, the Seceders as kill-joys and Wee Frees as antinomian Thought Police. The phenomenon is unparalleled in the literature of any other part of the United Kingdom. There has been no comparable English assault on Anglicanism. Nor has there been a similar Irish critique of Catholicism. Scotland has been unique in the ferocity with which its literature has turned on its religion. The Kirk's brood may have been rebellious. They have certainly not been repressed.

DETRACTORS

The most influential detractor was, of course, Walter Scott, whose heroic, well-rounded Cavaliers and Jacobites contrast vividly with his narrow, bigoted Presbyterians and Covenanters. But Scott was not the first. Robert Burns had already set the agenda. In *Holy Willie's Prayer*, for example, he stereotypes and lampoons the 'typical' Calvinist elder, famed only for his polemical cant, tippling orthodoxy and blind hypocrisy. His God,

> Sends ane to heaven an' ten to hell
> A' for thy glory!
> And no for ony gude or ill
> they've done afore thee.

He himself, of course, will go to heaven, 'a chosen sample, To shew thy grace is great and ample'. But his heavenly destiny is totally divorced from any kind of saintly life-style. He is a compulsive fornicator; and he knows it. It is easy, however, to fit his weakness into God's over-all purpose of grace:

> Maybe thou lets this fleshly thorn
> Buffet thy servant e'en and morn
> Lest he owre proud and high shou'd turn
> That he's sae gifted:
> If sae, thy hand maun e'en be borne
> Until thou lift it.

On the other hand, the lesser weaknesses of his adversary, Gavin Hamilton, admit of no such gracious interpretation:

> Lord, mind Gawn Hamilton's deserts;
> He drinks, an' swears, an' plays at cartes
> ....
> Curse thou his basket and his store
> Kail an' potatoes.

There have been, and still are, such Calvinist elders, as there are drunken priests and gay bishops. The falsehood lies in the relentless insinuation that every one of the class is of the same type.

Burns followed the same tack in *The Holy Fair*, a satirical portrayal of the 'sacramental occasion' at Mauchline in Ayrshire. It was a sunny, summer morning and the whole environment glowed with vitality and beauty: 'The rising sun, owre Galston muirs, Wi' glorious light was glintin.' The hares were hirpling, the larks were singing and the whole creation was proclaiming it bliss to be alive. The carefree young, too, were in their element, 'Fu' gay' and 'in the fashion shining'.

But not the communicants! They were dressed in 'doleful black', 'Their visage wither'd, lang an' thin.' In church they would sit, 'Wi' screw'd-up, grace-proud faces', sighing and praying and thinking on their sins. The sermon had nothing but 'tidings of damnation'; and the expression on the face of Moodie, the minister, was such that if Hornie, the Devil himself, had chanced in upon the service,

> 'The vera sight o' Moodie's face
> To's ain het hame had sent him
> Wi' fright that day.'

The Burns-Scott tradition of anti-Calvinism reasserted itself with all its old virulence in the work of Orcadian poet, Edwin Muir (1887-1959), perhaps because he himself flirted with revivalist religion in his youth and experienced several evangelical 'conversions'. Even so, the persistent, almost obsessional bitterness of Muir, who never lived in any community which could be remotely called Calvinist, is hard to understand. In his *Autobiography*, there is a revealing insight into the background to his biography of Knox: 'As I read about him in the British Museum I came to dislike him more and more, and understood why every Scottish writer since the beginning of the eighteenth century had detested him: Hume, Boswell, Burns, Scott, Hogg, Stevenson; everyone except Carlyle, who like Knox, admired power.'[1]

Whatever the source of Muir's knowledge of Calvinism, it scarcely inspires confidence that he can describe as 'distasteful to Calvinists' the idea that man in his fallen state retained 'a little of that knowledge and power with the which he was endowed by God'.[2] That, surely, is a core Calvinist belief, following from the doctrine of Common Grace. Such niceties apart, however, Calvinism, according to Muir, 'turned Scotland into a Puritan country, to remain so until this day'.[3] It also gave it 120 years of civil turmoil and persecution, probably because while it was pitiless to its enemies it was wantonly severe on its followers.[4] It had no place, Muir concludes, for the merciful or the generous and 'could no more have produced a figure like Saint Francis than it could have produced one like Socrates. Judged by the best in humanity, its figures seem narrow, sick and almost pathological.'[5]

The same venom appears in the poets of the Gaelic Renaissance, who can at least claim to have seen Calvinism at close quarters in their own Hebridean childhoods. Donald MacAulay, for example, can appreciate the evocative cadences of Gaelic psalmody ('transporting us on a tide/as mysterious as Maol Duin's') and the extemporaneous eloquence of village elders at prayer ('my people's access to poetry'). But when it came to the sermon,

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1 Edwin Muir, *An Autobiography* (Edinburgh, 1993), p. 226.
2 Edwin Muir, *John Knox: Portrait of a Calvinist* (London, 1930), p. 98.
3 Ibid., p. 100.
4 Ibid., p. 106.
5 Ibid., p. 116.

the fires of hell are in fashion –
vicious, alien threats
that filled the house with confusion and terror.[6]

In *The Scarecrow*, Derek Thomson strikes a similar note. When the Calvinist scarecrow (the Evangelical clergy) came to the ceilidh-house, the words of the folktale froze on the seanachie's lips and the music of the singer lost its power:

But he did not leave us empty-handed:
he gave us a new song,
and tales from the Middle East
and fragments of the philosophy of Geneva
and he swept the fire from the centre of the floor
and set a searing bonfire in our breasts.[7]

In the work of the late Iain Crichton Smith the anti-Calvinist polemic became a self-conscious crusade. The best known of his novels, *Consider the Lilies*, is a widely used school text-book and it is safe to say that the law would not allow teachers to hold up to similar ridicule any other religious group in the country. The Introduction to the Canongate Classics edition of the novel is from the pen of Isobel Murray,[8] who argues that Smith's basic theme is the danger of accepting any ideology or system of beliefs. She continues: 'the ideology inevitably under attack here is certainly Scottish Calvinism. Crichton Smith has many times written about the effects that the rigidities of Scottish Calvinism have on the Scottish psyche, and his attacks are passionate and deeply felt, for his own childhood on the island of Lewis was spent very much under the shadow of the Free Church there: "I hate anyone trying to control my mind," he says.'[9] It is no accident that Smith makes his Good Samaritan figure an atheist, although he himself admits that there is no evidence that his historical proto-type was of any such religious persuasion. 'It is not Christianity that Crichton Smith is attacking here,' writes Murray; 'it is what he calls "the Calvinist ideology".'[10] By contrast to the atheist, the parish minister is a compound of vices: insincere, self-important,

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[6] From the poem, 'Gospel 1955' in Donald MacAulay, ed., *Nua-Bhardachd Ghaidhlig: Modern Scottish Gaelic Poems* (Edinburgh, 1995), pp. 192-3).

[7] *Nua-Bhardachd Ghaidhlig*, p. 164.

[8] Iain Crichton Smith, *Consider the Lilies* (Edinburgh, 1987), pp. vii-xii.

[9] Ibid., p. viii.

[10] Ibid., p. xi.

economical with the truth, self-serving and sycophantish. When the widow goes to him for help, all he can say is that the evictions are a divine judgement:

> 'Have you ever thought, Mrs Scott, that this is a visitation?' Still looking at her he clicked his fingers sharply, then continued with some anger: 'I mean that the people of this village, aye, the people of all the villages here, have deserved this. Have you ever thought that this came as a punishment for their sins?'[11]

DISCRIMINATION

Scottish literature, then, has clearly not lived in craven fear of Calvinism. It has attacked its alleged repressor most manfully; and it has done so not through marginal, second-rate figures but through its most representative writers.

But some discrimination is called for. The older writers do not present the unrelieved caricatures which mar the recent literature. Burns, for example, knew perfectly well that although the Kirk could produce its fair share of sanctimonious hypocrites, Holy Willie was by no means a typical Presbyterian. In *The Cotter's Saturday Night* he presents a very different picture:

> The chearfu' Supper done, wi' serious face,
> They, round the ingle, form a circle wide;
> The Sire turns o'er, with patriarchal grace
> The big ha' Bible, ance his Father's pride:
> His bonnet rev'rently is laid aside
> His lyart haffets wearing thin and bare;
> Those strains that once did sweet in Zion glide
> He wales a portion with judicious care;
> 'And let us worship God!' he says with solemn air.

Scott, too, knew that there was more to Calvinism than 'screw'd-up, grace-proud faces'.[12] One need only recall his famous description of Dr John Erskine's preaching in *Guy Mannering* (Chapter XXXVII).[13]

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[11] Ibid., p. 74.

[12] Scott himself was an elder of the Kirk and as such had subscribed, presumably sincerely, to 'the whole doctrine' of the Westminster Confession.

[13] Erskine (1721-1803) was Evangelical colleague to the celebrated Moderate,

> A lecture was delivered, fraught with new, striking and entertaining views of Scripture history – a sermon, in which the Calvinism of the Kirk of Scotland was ably supported, yet made the basis of a sound system of practical morals, which should neither shelter the sinner under the cloak of speculative faith or of peculiarity of opinion, nor leave him loose to the waves of unbelief and schism... and although the discourse could not be quoted as a correct specimen of pulpit eloquence, yet Mannering had seldom heard so much learning, metaphysical acuteness, and energy of argument, brought into the service of Christianity. 'Such,' he said, going out of the church, 'must have been the preachers to whose unfearing minds, and acute, though sometimes rudely exercised talents, we owe the Reformation.'

CONFESSIONS OF A JUSTIFIED SINNER

Similar discrimination is needed in assessing James Hogg's classic, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner.* The work, written in 1823-24, is often portrayed as an uncompromising indictment of seventeenth-century Scottish Calvinism. David Groves, for example, describes the central character, Robert Wringhim, as isolated and lonely 'through his adoption of the twisted elitism of doctrinaire Calvinism'[14] David Daiches sees the *Confessions* as, 'The most sustained attack on the antinomian aspects of some popular Scottish interpretations of Calvinism'.[15] He even takes advantage of the connection between Hogg ('the Ettrick Shepherd') and Thomas Boston (Minister of Ettrick from 1707 to 1732) to link the *Confessions* specifically with the antinomianism of Boston's preaching: 'Hogg must have heard about Boston if he had not also read him' and this, along with local stories about the prowess of the Devil 'provided the germ of the *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*'.[16]

Dr William Robertson (1721-1793), in Greyfriars Kirk, Edinburgh.

[14] Introduction to James Hogg, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (Edinburgh, 1991), p. ix.

[15] David Daiches, *God and the Poets* (Oxford, 1985), p. 146.

[16] Daiches, *God and the Poets*, p. 146. Daiches' knowledge of Boston was second-hand. He quotes from Henry G. Graham's *Social Life of Scotland in the Eighteenth Century* (2 vols, London, 1899) to the effect that according to Boston's *Fourfold State* the good works of religion performed by an unregenerate man were 'mere sham and dead forms of holiness' and the repentance of one who was not elect 'nothing but sin; for man, aye, even the new-born babe, is a lump of wrath, a child of hell'. Even allowing for selective quotation, Daiches might equally well have levelled the charge of

There is no doubt that Hogg portrays both Wringhim and his entire circle as vindictive, predestinarian antinomians. Amid the vilest crimes, Wringhim comforted himself with the belief that 'a justified person could do nothing wrong'. No act of his could mar the eternal counsel, or in the smallest degree alter one event which was decreed before the foundation of the world. His father was of the same kidney: 'to the just, all things are just and right'. Even the mother had drunk the heady brew: 'Ah, that is a sweet and comfortable saying, Mr Wringhim. How delightful to think that a justified person can do no wrong.'

But did Hogg intend his readers to accept the Wringhims as typical Scottish Calvinists? It would be absurd to argue that the portraits have no connection with reality. We have all met religionists who 'knew no other pleasure but what consisted in opposition'. Equally we could give a name to the malevolence that pretends, 'I had no aim in seeking you but your own good.' We may even have met the man (or woman) who prays only for the elect, distinguishes thirteen different kinds of faith and initiates a conversation by asking, 'What is *In*effectual Calling?'

On the other hand, it is difficult to trace within Scottish Presbyterianism anything like the antinomianism represented by Wringhim.[17] It is certainly absurd to lay the charge of antinomianism against Thomas Boston. The minister of Ettrick was admittedly no legalist and strenuously defended the doctrine of justification by grace in the very terms of Luther, but he was adamant that the law remained the rule of life for every Christian. No man could be regenerate and continue to live his old life, let alone a lawless one: 'In his relative capacity, he will be a new man. Grace makes men gracious in their several relations, and naturally leads them to the conscientious performance of relative duties. It does not only make good men and good women, but makes good subjects, good husbands, good wives, children, servants, and, in a word, good relatives in the church, commonwealth and family.'[18]

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antinomianism against his own Jewish scriptures, according to which 'all our righteousnesses are filthy rags' (Is. 64:6).

[17] It clearly existed in England and is well represented in the writings of Saltmarsh and Crisp. Scottish Calvinism – not least in its most supralapsarian and scholastic spokesman, Samuel Rutherford – deplored it. Rutherford's *Survey of the Spirituall Antichrist* (London, 1648) was specifically targeted at 'the secrets of Antinomianisme'.

[18] Thomas Boston, *Human Nature in its Fourfold State* (first published 1720. Re-issued Edinburgh, 1964), p. 223. Cf. the comment of Dr John Duncan: 'I would like to sit at Jonathan Edwards' feet, to learn what is true religion, and at Thomas Boston's, to learn how I am to get it.' On another occasion

Hogg knew Scottish Calvinism too well to identify it with predestinarian antinomianism and throughout his narrative he is at pains to distance himself from Wringhim and to contrast him with the authentic religion of the Reformation. To some extent this is done through 'the Editor', even though it might not always be safe to take this figure as exactly representing Hogg's own position (at the end Hogg disowns him). It is 'the Editor' who memorably describes Wringhim's mother: 'Hers were not the tenets of the great reformers, but theirs mightily overstrained and deformed. Theirs was an unguent hard to be swallowed; but hers was that unguent embittered and overheated until nature could not longer bear it.'[19] This is close to a statement of the theme of the book: if you really followed the tenets of the Wringhims, they would drive you mad (which, in Robert's case, they clearly did). It is also 'the Editor' who records the Laird of Dalcastle's exasperated assessment of Rev. Mr. Wringhim:

> You are, Sir, a presumptuous, self-conceited pedagogue, a stirrer up of strife and commotion in church, in state, in families, and communities. You are one, Sir, whose righteousness consists in splitting the doctrines of Calvin into thousands of undistinguishable films, and in setting up a system of justifying-grace against all breaches of all laws, moral, or divine. In short, Sir, you are a mildew, – a canker-worm in the bosom of the Reformed Church, generating a disease of which she will never be purged, but by the shedding of blood.[20]

But Hogg is not content to leave the damning of Wringhim to the Editor. He also makes him damn himself. At the very beginning of the *Memoirs*, for example, he portrays Wringhim indulging in a ridiculous disquisition on Ineffectual Calling and records his mother's adoring wonder at the child's theological precocity. '"What a wonderful boy he is!" said my

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he declared, 'Boston had great tenderness of conscience, but I think there was a legality and *pernicketiness:* I think that a great deal of what he called desertion was just low spirits. Yet there were two things in him: he was looking only to Christ for justifying righteousness, and he was seeking to walk before God unto all well-pleasing.' See David Brown, *The Late Rev. John Duncan, LL.D. in the Pulpit and at the Communion Table* (Edinburgh, 1874), p. 63. Boston's horror of Antinomianism is also made repeatedly clear in his Notes on *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* (Edinburgh, 1726).

[19] Hogg, *Confessions*, p. 2.

[20] Ibid., p. 12.

mother. "I'm feared he turn out to be a conceited gowk," said old Barnet, the minister's man.'[21]

Hogg also uses other more subtle devices to distinguish Wringhim's religion from that of the Presbyterian peasantry. Nothing was more characteristic of Scottish Calvinism than its stress on preaching. Wringhim has no patience with anything so evangelical. His commission is not to harangue sinners from the pulpit, but to cut sinners off with the sword. He roots this in the decree of predestination, but there is a fine irony in it. There is no point in preaching, if the decree has for ever rendered their conversion impracticable. He seems not to notice that there is as little point in trying to murder people if God has not decreed it. But the rationale he offers for his preferences shows that his religion has little in common with the Calvinism of Scotland: 'The more I pondered on those things, the more I saw of the folly and inconsistency of ministers, in spending their lives, striving and remonstrating with sinners, in order to induce them to do that which they had it not in their power to do.'[22]

There is a similar gulf between Wringhim and the piety of Scotland on the even more fundamental matter of prayer. Referring to his growing friendship with Gilmartin, Wringhim writes: 'After weeks, and I may say months of intimacy, I observed, somewhat to my amazement, that we had never once prayed together; and more than that, that he had constantly led my attentions away from that duty, causing me to neglect it wholly.' He resolved to ask Gilmartin to explain: 'He disapproved of prayer altogether, in the manner in which it was generally gone about, he said. Man made it merely a selfish concern, and was constantly employed asking, asking, for every thing. Whereas it became all God's creatures to be content with their lot, and only to kneel before him in order to thank him for such benefits as he saw meet to bestow. In short, he argued with such energy, that before we parted I acquiesced, as usual, in his position, and never mentioned prayer to him any more.'[23]

Three things, then, are clear. First, the religion represented by Robert Wringhim was never the religion of Scotland. Secondly, Hogg was perfectly aware that Wringhim's tenets and behaviour were not those of the Reformers or their successors. Instead, these tenets provide the moral structure of the novel. It is by the standards of Protestant Christianity that Wringhim is damned. Thirdly, while most of the attention has focused on Wringhim's abuse of the principles of Calvin, we should not forget that

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[21] Ibid., p. 80.
[22] Ibid., p. 100.
[23] Ibid., p. 104f.

what is really being abused (and Hogg focused on this in his title) is Luther's doctrine of justification. Nor should we forget that that doctrine, at least in Luther's own judgement, was simply a rediscovery of the gospel according to St Paul, who was himself acutely conscious that his doctrine was liable to antinomian abuse: 'What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?' (Rom. 6:1) It is not Luther's fault, or Calvin's, any more than St Paul's, if men draw infernal inferences from their gospel.

But if Hogg's theme was not the hellish implications of Calvinism, what was it? The answer to that may prove elusive, as it does in relation to all great art.[24] Even Hogg himself may not have been able to answer it. What is clear is that Wringhim was no mere 'implacable ideologist', but a psychotic, and the symptoms of his psychosis are brilliantly drawn. At one level, his delusions are harmless enough. For example, he regards his journal as an allegory comparable to *Pilgrim's Progress*. At another, they are fiendish. He feels himself commissioned to 'shed blood in the cause of the true faith' and once he had committed the first murder he was 'exceedingly bold and ardent'. Here is a seventeenth-century Yorkshire Ripper, hearing voices urging him to act as God's scourge. To an extent, of course, the voices are Gilmartin's, but it is hard to know whether Gilmartin is the Devil or whether he is half of Wringhim himself. We could say he is both, but then Hogg doesn't tell us: probably because Hogg doesn't know.

But if the symptoms of the psychosis are brilliantly drawn, its causes remain obscure. To an extent Wringhim himself is a victim, not least because his psychosis is not the whole reason why he pushes Pauline and Reformation tenets to demonic extremes. He was nurtured in these extremes, imbibing them literally with his mother's milk. But neither do these extremes explain his psychosis. Rev and Mrs Wringhim (to continue Hogg's style) both held the same tenets, pushed to the same extremes, yet neither feels compelled to shed blood 'in the cause of the true faith'. In any case, this last phrase is itself a delusion. Wringhim can murder for envy as well as for predestination: witness his slaying of his brother, George Colwan.

The roots and causes of psychosis remain a mystery even to modern psychiatry and Hogg's achievement was not to explain it, but to describe it and then to leave it burdening our brains for the rest of our lives.

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[24] There may be no answer beyond, 'Read the story!'

DETAILED CHARGES

So much for the broad sweep of anti-Calvinist polemic in Scottish literature. But what have been the detailed charges?

First, that Calvinists have been censorious kill-joys, majoring on the preaching of hell, burying self-esteem under mountains of guilt and making innocent pleasure a sin. In the poem, *Selfrighteousness*, for example, Donald Macaulay bemoans this aspect of Hebridean religion:

> They ask of me only
> to weep repentance for a sin
> that does not concern me
> and I shall get in return an alien
> freedom I don't understand.

(Part of the force of this is lost in translation. In Gaelic evangelicalism, the word *saorsa* or 'liberty' is a technical term for the sense of deliverance experienced by Christians at conversion: the kind of experience registered in Charles Wesley's words, 'My chains fell off, my heart was free'. Macaulay is making the very deliberate point that this 'liberty' is of little use if you've never felt yourself imprisoned in sin.)

In *Highland Woman* Sorley Maclean makes the same point in a seeringly etched outburst which is at once an angry appeal to Christ, a protest against the exploitation of women and an indictment of the joylessness of religion.

> This spring and last
> and every twenty springs from the beginning
> she has carried the cold seaweed
> for her children's food and the castle's reward.

When she sought pastoral support and spiritual comfort she found little:

> And thy gentle Church has spoken
> of the lost state of her miserable soul.

There have, of course, been such preachers: men whose philosophy has been that terror alone could drive humans into the kingdom of God and that the only way to instil it was by preaching sin, hell and damnation. But they have not been confined either to Scotland or to Calvinism. The most famous sermons on hell are those of the New England theologian, Jonathan Edwards and the English Methodist, John Wesley. By contrast, no one could accuse John Calvin of being a hell-fire preacher. His

voluminous published sermons make scant reference to it. The same is true of the published works of his Scottish disciples. Their guiding principle was the dictum of St Paul, 'We preach Christ crucified.' This is clearly reflected in the homiletical literature of Scotland. The seventeenth-century divines gave their strength to such sermons as appear in Robert Bruce's sermons on the Lord's Supper,[25] Rutherford's *Christ Dying and Drawing Sinners to Himself* and Durham's exposition of the Song of Solomon. The eighteenth century gave us John MacLaurin's *Glorying in the Cross of Christ* while the nineteenth gave us Thomas Chalmers' *Fury Not in God* and *The Expulsive Power of a New Affection.* In the Scottish Highlands, John MacDonald, revered as the Apostle of the North, transformed countless lives (and churches) with such discourses as *Wilt Thou Go With This Man?*

In fact, the hell-fire preachers of Scotland have left astonishingly little behind them, suggesting, surely, that the theme was the staple fare of only ill-equipped and ill-prepared third-rate men. The Bruces, Rutherfords, Dicksons, Durhams, Guthries, Erskines, Maclaurins, Bostons, Thomsons, Chalmers, Bonars and McCheynes had better things to say.

Closely linked to the idea of its obsession with hell is the belief that Calvinism spread a pervasive communal gloom, banning innocent pleasures and driving them underground.

It would certainly be hard to find a fun-loving Calvinist anywhere in Scottish literature. Instead we have miserable sods like Rev. Mr. Wringhim, Ephraim Caird and Old Mortality. On the other hand, it would be easy enough to invoke historical Calvinist figures who were the reverse of gloomy. William Guthrie of Fenwick, for example, was described by Wodrow as 'usually extremely cheerful and facetious in his conversation'.[26] He was also a keen sportsman, who used 'the innocent recreations and exercises which then prevailed: fishing, fowling, and playing upon the ice'.[27] This is all the more remarkable considering that Guthrie was not only a Covenanter, but one who in the disastrous divisions which followed the Engagement of 1649 sided with the extremists (the Protestors) against the more moderate Resolutioners. But Guthrie, sadly, has no equivalent in Scottish fiction.

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[25] Robert Bruce, *The Mystery of the Lord's Supper,* ed. Thomas F. Torrance (London, 1958).

[26] R. Wodrow, *Select Biographies,* ed. W. K. Tweedie, volume II (Edinburgh, 1847), p. 50.

[27] Wodrow anticipates Raeburn's famous painting, *Rev Robert Walker Skating on Duddingston Loch* (National Gallery of Scotland).

Yet there may be something in the portrayal of post-Revolution Calvinists as gloomy. They had a good deal to be gloomy about. Modern historians, anxious to press on to highlight Presbyterian intolerance, are loathe to linger over the savage persecution suffered by the Kirk between 1661 and 1688. We may not like Covenanters,[28] we may deplore the murder of Archbishop Sharp and we may dispute contemporary estimates of the numbers actually killed, but by any standards the slaughter of these years constituted a Presbyterian Holocaust. John Maitland, Duke of Lauderdale, was its Himmler; Claverhouse its Eichmann; the Dragoons its Gestapo; the Bass Rock its Auschwitz; and the rack, the screw and the death-ships its ovens and gas-chambers. Scottish Presbyterianism was decimated; its leaders imprisoned, hanged and butchered. Rutherford escaped the scaffold only by succumbing to fatal illness. The leading lay-men of the Covenant, the Marquis of Argyll and Johnston of Warriston, were both executed. So, too, were the leading ministers: James Guthrie, Hugh McKail, Donald Cargill and James Renwick. Richard Cameron, like Hulrich Zwingli, fell on the field of battle. Cameron was only thirty-two; McKail and Renwick a mere twenty-six. John Livingston, Michael Bruce and Robert McWard (first editor of Rutherford's *Letters*) were banished. Alexander Peden, Alexander Shields, John Blackadder, Thomas Hog, James Fraser (of Brea) and William Carstares (architect of the post-Revolution church) were all imprisoned.

Any judgement on the moroseness of the Covenanters must take account of the trauma which had overwhelmed them, just as modern Israeli intransigence must be seen against the background of Nazi terror. Even fanatical intolerance might be understandable in the light of the corporate horror which had engulfed them. The devout peasantry of Scotland were subjected to a reign of terror as fiendish as Ceauşescu's oppression of Romania.

One of the most moving descriptions is that of Daniel Defoe:

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[28] James Hogg did not share the prevailing literary attitude towards the Covenanters. Defending Kirkton's *Secret and True History of the Church of Scotland* from one of his 'objective' modern editors, C. K. Sharpe, Hogg wrote: 'Never before did the world see so clearly that the suffering party were men struggling against oppression with their treasure and their blood; that they burned with a desire for freedom, and were possessed of spirits of which their country have good reason to be proud; and that their persecutors were that slavish cringing set – that fawning sycophantic race, who could sacrifice the rights and liberties of their fellow subjects for... base worldly lucre.' (Quoted from David Groves' *Introduction* to Hogg's *Confessions*, p. xiv.)

> They suffered extremities that tongue cannot describe and which heart can hardly conceive of, from the dismal circumstances of hunger, nakedness and the severity of the climate – lying in damp caves, and in hollow clefts of the naked rocks, without shelter, covering, fire, or food: none durst harbour, entertain, relieve, or speak to them, upon pain of death. Many, for venturing to receive them, were forced to fly to them, and several put to death for no other offence; fathers were persecuted for supplying their children, and children for nourishing their parents; husbands for harbouring their wives, and wives for cherishing their own husbands. The ties and obligations of the laws of nature were no defence, but it was made death to perform natural duties; and many suffered death for acts of piety and charity in cases where human nature could not bear the thoughts of suffering it. To such an extreme was the rage of these persecutors carried.[29]

The psyche of post-Holocaust Israel is driven by one obsession: it must not happen again. Hence the state of Israel. Hence the meticulous security of El Al. Hence the massive Israeli defence budget. Hence the determination to secure the Golan Heights and to settle the West Bank. All reflect a nation whose every home was touched by the gas-chambers, whose every night is haunted by the tortured faces of lost parents and children and whose every breath brings reminders of treachery and betrayal.

The injustice perpetrated by Scott was suddenly to paint the Covenanters, sullen, bigoted and morose, on the virgin canvas of Romanticism; as if they were weeds generated inexplicably from the pristine landscapes of Scotland's south-west. They were not. They sprang from the rack, the boot, the bayonet, the hell-hole and the death-ship. If opposition sometimes corroded their appreciation of the culture of the courtier that is understandable. If it sometimes drove them mad, that, too, is understandable.

But did Scotland's Calvinists not ban innocent pleasures?

There is no straightforward answer to this question. For one thing, Calvinist preaching inevitably reflects the strain of asceticism which runs through all Christian traditions. This asceticism derives ultimately from Jesus himself, particularly his exhortations to self-denial. In accordance

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[29] Daniel Defoe, *Memoirs of the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1844), p. 66. Defoe's account of 'The Church in her Suffering State' is unendurable. I found it impossible to read it. He himself was under no illusions as to the scale of what he was describing. The Persecution, in his view, was 'the most inhuman of all the Persecutions which we read of, either before or since the Primitive Age of the Church of God; and by it the sufferings of the Church of Scotland are distinguished from the sufferings of all that ever went before them.' (Ibid., p. 77.)

with this, the New Testament abounds with appeals to sobriety and self-control and it is unfair to detach from this background Calvinist exhortations to renounce the world, forsake pleasure and turn our backs on self-indulgence. All Christian traditions echo the same sentiments, challenging the natural human assumption that 'fun' is happiness, insisting that spiritual joys are more substantial than those of earth, and proclaiming that all life's prizes are ultimately 'vanity'. This explains how a temperamental non-Puritan like Thomas Chalmers could preach so eloquently on *The Expulsive Power of a New Affection*. It also explains the emergence within Highland Evangelicalism of a kind of lay-monasticism not far removed from the monkery it professed to deplore. The Catholic principle of a counsel of perfection found a curious Presbyterian parallel in the difference between the discipline imposed on communicants and the standards expected of mere adherents.

The Kirk's banning of innocent pleasures is one of the underlying themes of John Buchan's novel, *Witch Wood*. In a conversation between the hero, David Sempill, and one of his more reasonable fellow-clergymen, Mr Fordyce of Cauldshaw, the latter declares: 'I'm tempted to think that our ways and the Kirk's way is not God's way, for we're apt to treat the natural man as altogether corrupt, and put him under over-strict pains and penalties, whereas there's matter in him that might be shaped to the purposes of grace. If there's original sin, there's also original innocence.'[30] In Mr Fordyce's mind (and doubtless in Buchan's) this innocence is linked to Katrine Yester, the adolescent daughter of a family of incomers frowned on by the ungodly because of their ecclesiology (or lack of it). But like most of the flawless saints of fiction, Katrine is a flat, one-dimensional character. She exists in elegiac snapshots rather than in action: a wraith-like, idealised nymph for whom the Witch Wood is a paradise where she can caper and dance and sing at her pleasure. Fordyce comments: 'When I hear the lassie Katrine Yester singing about the door at Calidon, I have an assurance of God's goodness as ever I got in prayer. If you ban this innocent joy it will curdle and sour, and the end will be sin. If young life may not caper on a Spring morn to the glory of God, it will dance in the mirk wood to the Devil's piping.'[31]

That is undoubtedly true. Nature has a way of avenging itself on repression. But what exactly is Buchan saying? The Kirk had not banned

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[30] John Buchan, *Witch Wood* (Edinburgh, 1988), pp. 113f.

[31] Ibid., p. 114. See the later (p. 220) comment of Mark Riddell, the new tenant of Crossbasket: 'The Kirk has banned innocence and so made a calling of hypocrisy.'

Katrine Yester and the reason why the native children do not play in the Wood has little to do with Calvinism. They are terrified of it because of its occult associations. Nor can it be argued that the locals resort to the Wood because, unlike Katrine, their games have been banned. The black rituals of Beltane are not a reaction to the suppression of innocent joy. They are testimony, instead, that even in its hey-day the Calvinism of Scotland was only skin-deep. The Kirk, which may have thought it had the hegemony, in reality knew little of what was going on. Beneath the veneers of Sabbatarian orthodoxy old superstitions flourished. Beltane held sway long before the arrival of Calvinism; now that the Reformation tide had ebbed, it was claiming its public place again.

The Witch Wood was not the only symptom of the survival of paganism under the very nose of the Kirk. Many ancient superstitions remained integral to the lives of ordinary people. When Rev David Sempill went to pay a death-bed visit to Marion Simpson, wife of the shepherd of Glenshiel, he arrived too late. She was already dead. But something struck him at once: 'The shepherd of the Glenshiel might be an old exercised Christian, but there were things in that place that had no warrant from the Bible. A platter full of coarse salt lay at the foot of the bed, and at the top crossed twigs of ash.' The covens, black Mass and orgiastic dances of the Wood might be different in scale, but they were not different in principle. Reformed Scotland still had its ancient gods and thousands still worshipped at their high places.

This does nothing to extenuate the demonic hypocrisy of Ephraim Caird and his fellow elders. Nine months after Beltane the parish was littered with children born out-of-wedlock (or 'still-born'). 'Where,' fumed David Sempill, 'were the men who had betrayed these wretched girls? ... What was betokened by so many infants born dead?' The men, of course, were in his own Kirk Session: noted theologians and experts in church polity, who placed the girls on the penitence-stools and subjected them to public humiliation and social ruin, knowing all the while that the real guilt was their own.

It would be foolhardy to deny the grains of truth in Buchan's tableau. Scottish Calvinism undoubtedly had its Ephraim Cairds: stern elders, noted theologians, leaders in black arts and deflowerers of virgins. But was every elder an Ephraim Caird? Only in Scottish fiction.

INQUISITORIAL MORAL TYRANNY

A second specific complaint is that Scottish Calvinism exercised a harsh discipline, probing inquisitorially into private lives and subjecting

Scotland to four hundred years of repressive moral tyranny. The Kirk was Big Brother. For Edwin Muir the Calvinistic Thought Police originated with Knox's *Book of Discipline*, which 'substituted for the particular tyranny of the priest a universal and inescapable public tyranny'.[32] In Muir's view it was symbolic that 'the Book opened with a command to prosecute, and almost closed with a plea for the extension of capital punishment'.[33] Its most fundamental idea, after all, was the corruption of man's nature, 'and its policy had necessarily, therefore, to be a policy of espionage and repression. Its sole instrument for keeping or reclaiming its members was punishment.' The result was that for centuries Scotland fell under the tyranny of sadistic Kirk Sessions who execrated moderation, showed a stiff-necked blindness to the more liberating ideas which were beginning to move mankind and encouraged the self-opinionated and censorious at the expense of the sensitive and the charitable.

Quite what Kirk Sessions did to provoke Muir to such bitterness is something of a mystery. A childhood in Orkney hardly placed one under the scrutiny of Knox or Calvin. But whatever the Orkney elders did to the poet must have been quite awful, because Muir is unforgiving: this fearful institution, the Kirk Session, wielded a sordid and general tyranny. His only comfort was that 'the time-honoured Scottish tradition of fornication triumphantly survived all its terrors'.[34]

There is no doubt that by the standards of today Kirk Session discipline in the seventeenth century was harsh.[35] Sessions meted out penitences, fines, imprisonments and even corporal punishments. One obvious defence of the elders is that in the seventeenth century the functions of ecclesiastical and civil courts overlapped.[36] Indeed, in many parts of the

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[32] See the chapter on 'The Book of Discipline' in Muir's *John Knox* (London, 1929), pp. 215-29.

[33] Muir's portrayal of the Scottish Reformers as bloodthirsty tyrants is utterly misleading. In practice, the 'persecution' of Roman Catholics was limited to fines and banishment.

[34] Muir, *John Knox*, pp. 306f.

[35] The best study of the operations of Kirk Sessions remains that of G. D. Henderson, *The Scottish Ruling Elder* (London, 1935). This includes a sober, and sobering, account of Kirk Session discipline (pp. 100-145). As a counter to the impression that Sessions did nothing but inflict punishments, see A. Gordon, *Candie for the Foundling* (Edinburgh, 1992).

[36] Cf. Henderson, *The Scottish Ruling Elder*, p. 108: 'it has to be remembered that the Session was practically the police court of the day, dealing with classes of people who do not now come under Church influences, and working by legal procedure only'.

country there appear to have been no criminal courts as such and the whole burden of trying and sentencing felons fell on the Kirk Session, who seem to have been able even to call on the services of the public hangman if they thought a flogging was appropriate. As a result, many offences which today come under the jurisdiction of sheriff courts would in the seventeenth century have come before the Session: drunkenness and child-murder, for example, along with domestic violence, foul and abusive language, theft and breaches of the peace. In these instances, the church was not making the law. It was merely enforcing it. Unfortunately, this also meant that the church was enforcing the savage penal code of the time.

But this amounts to little more than a plea in mitigation, and even as such it carries little weight. Scotland's seventeenth-century theologians knew perfectly well that church government was distinct from civil government. Apart from all else, the Westminster Confession had stated it very plainly: 'The Lord Jesus, as king and head of his church, hath therein appointed a government in the hand of church officers, *distinct from the civil magistrate.*' (*The Westminster Confession,* XXX.I: italics mine.)[37] Unfortunately the Confession itself also sowed the seeds of future difficulty by laying down that it was the duty of the civil magistrate to suppress blasphemy and heresy (*The Westminster Confession*, XXIII.III). This opened the door to confusion in both directions: church courts meddling in civil matters as brazenly as civil courts meddled in spiritual. The outcome was horrific. Kirk Sessions imposed not only the discipline of the penitence-stool, but the totally non-spiritual punishments of the birch, the stocks and the jouggs; not to mention banishments, exiles and imprisonments and whatever else was the accepted penal code of the day.

It is astonishing that such a confusion of civil and ecclesiastical roles could arise within a Christian tradition which at the level of theory insisted so strongly on the distinction between church and state. The harshness of the penal code did not itself, however, owe much to Calvinism. In non-Presbyterian England, the treatment of offenders was even more savage. No fewer than seventy thousand people were executed in the 38-year reign of Henry VIII (1509-1547): an average of almost 1,800 a year. The Puritan Alexander Leighton (father of the future Archbishop) had his ear cut off, his nose slit and his cheek branded by order of the Court of Star Chamber;

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[37] The Scottish Reformers had consistently shown themselves opposed to the idea of the clergy exercising public judicial functions. The *Second Book of Discipline*, for example, laid down that, 'The criminal jurisdiction joined in the person of a pastor is a corruption.' See James Kirk (ed.), *The Second Book of Discipline* (Edinburgh, 1980), p. 224.

and as if that weren't enough he was flogged (39 lashes) and imprisoned. Seventeenth-century England (as well as continental Europe) burned witches in their hundreds and even as late as 1820 the English penal-code prescribed the death-penalty for no fewer than two hundred offences.

None of this exonerates men who ought to have taken their guidance from the New Testament rather than from the seventeenth-century advocates of 'Tough on crime!' But Knox and his successors should be judged in their historical context. After all, men were being flogged and birched in Scotland even in our own life-time. There is certainly no justification for insinuating that Scottish Kirk Sessions were guilty of treating offenders more cruelly than corresponding courts elsewhere in Europe. Indeed, the composition of Kirk Sessions in most Scottish burghs was such that the accused at least had a good chance of being judged by his peers: a stark contrast to the English system where the gentry sat on the Bench and the poor appeared in the dock.

It should also be borne in mind that disciplinary processes were no more lenient under episcopacy than they were under Presbyterianism. The savage punishments meted out to those who attended conventicles or absented themselves from services conducted by the curates have already been noticed. But quite apart from these special situations, Episcopalian rigour fully matched the Presbyterian. In 1661 (and again in 1672) Parliament passed Acts as strictly Sabbatarian as any from the days of the Presbyterian hegemony. In 1603 the Episcopalian Kirk session of Aberdeen appointed 'censurers and captors to listen for bad language and either fine offenders or give them 'a straik on the hand with a palmer'. In 1663, the same Session banished three Quakers from the town; and in 1686 it paid a man sixteen shillings for catching a man and woman in bed together.

Even the Celtic church, so often romanticised as a model of eclectic tolerance, had a penitential discipline we today would find insufferable. Its prescriptions, in the words of Dr Ian Bradley, are 'full of severe punishments for what often seem to our eyes trivial lapses and faults'.[38] The ninth-century document, *The Law of the Lord's Day in the Celtic Church*, gives a fascinating glimpse of the way this discipline operated in relation to the Sabbath, so often seen as the distinctive obsession of Calvinist Presbyterianism.[39] The list of forbidden actions is formidable: beginning a journey, selling, contracting, cropping hair, shaving, roasting,

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[38] Ian Bradley, *Columba: Pilgrim and Penitent* (Glasgow, 1996), p. 82.

[39] D. Maclean, ed., *The Law of the Lord's Day in the Celtic Church* (Edinburgh, 1926).

bathing, baking and churning; as well as aimless running, grinding corn, housework and splitting wood. The punishments were correspondingly severe: 'The fine for transgression is four three-year old heifers, together with forfeiture of equipment.' In addition, a workman who did unnecessary work at his own pleasure had to forfeit the remainder of his annual pay; while anyone who witnessed a breach of the law yet failed to exact the punishment was liable to 'the same fine as the person who violates the sanctity of the Lord's Day'.

The harshness of Calvinist discipline should be judged against these backgrounds. Even so, its rigours were often in clear breach of formal Calvinist guidelines. The Westminster Confession, for example, had plainly restricted the power of church officers to inflicting *ecclesiastical* censures: admonition, temporary suspension from the Lord's Supper and (in extreme situations) excommunication from the church (*Westminster Confession*, XXX.IV). Sadly, in the confusion which reigned in an era which Clifford Hill has described as 'The world turned upside-down'[40] these guidelines were forgotten. The lapse is both explicable and reprehensible.

From the early eighteenth century onwards, Scottish Presbyterian discipline was regulated by *The Form of Process*. This document, adopted by the General Assembly in 1707, clearly stipulated that nothing should be admitted as a ground of censure but what was explicitly forbidden by the Word of God. This immediately limited the jurisdiction of Kirk Sessions to a handful of well-defined offences: swearing, cursing, Sabbath-profanation, drunkenness, fornication and adultery. At the same time, *The Form of Process* laid down careful rules with regard to the taking of evidence. Defendants had to be properly cited, given a clear statement of the charge against them and furnished with a list of witnesses. It was also stipulated that the accused had to be present when the witnesses gave their testimony. In addition, there was a clear system of appeals: anyone who felt she was a victim of local injustice could appeal to the presbytery; and beyond that to the Synod and the General Assembly.

This is not to say that from the eighteenth century onwards Scottish Calvinism unfailingly limited its discipline to spiritual offences or that it always acted justly, charitably and pastorally. The Kirk continued to sanction the burning of witches (the last was burned in Dornoch in 1727). It also condoned the execution in 1697 of Thomas Aitkenhead, an eighteen-year old youth guilty of little more than adolescent atheism.[41] No defence

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[40] Clifford Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down* (London, 1975).

[41] The Scottish judicial system must bear its own share of the blame: 'serious flaws in the prosecution and judgement were ignored at the time, and the

is to be offered for such behaviour on the part of a state which professed to regulate its civic life by the teaching of Christ. The lesson may be that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a government to enter the kingdom of God.

SUPPRESSION OF THE ARTS

The third criticism (and the most strident of all) has been that Scottish Calvinism suppressed and discouraged the arts. This note was fairly muted in pre-twentieth-century critiques. Since then it has become the stock-in-trade of the Scottish literati, particularly among the writers of the Gaelic Renaissance, all of whom regard the advent of Evangelicalism in the nineteenth century as fatal to Gaelic culture. Calvinism (so the mantra goes) has promoted intellect at the expense of imagination, stifled creativity, driven out the old tales, songs and traditions and replaced them with the alien philosophy of Geneva.[42]

The key-note for this particular discourse was struck by Alexander Carmichael in his highly influential work, *Carmina Gadelica*. Carmichael travelled widely in his quest for traditional hymns and incantations and at one point in the *Introduction* to his first volume he describes in great detail the hospitality extended to him at a home in the parish of Ness at the Butt of Lewis. He feasted on fried herrings, fresh turbot, new-laid eggs, home-made butter, barley bannocks, wheat scones, oat-cakes and excellent tea. But his gratitude, such as it was, did not deter him from slandering the culture of his hosts.

He recounts a conversation he had with the housewife. He had asked her, 'Have you no music, no singing, no dancing now at your marriages?' She replied 'with grief and surprise in her tone': 'It is long since we abandoned those foolish ways in Ness, and, indeed, throughout Lewis. In my young days there was hardly a house in Ness in which there was not

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court lacked the elementary humanity to appoint counsel for the prisoner'. See A. L. Drummond and J. Bulloch, *The Scottish Church 1688-1843* (Edinburgh, 1973). p. 14.

[42] The one, notable, exception to this chorus is the poet Sorely Maclean, who pronounced himself, 'very sceptical of the Scottish writers who seemed to attribute most of Scotland's ills to Calvinism. What did they know of Calvinism?' Maclean also spoke of Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* as 'a travesty of the Calvinism of the Scottish Highlands, and I believe of the Lowlands too'. See Sorley Maclean, *Ris a' Bhruthaich: The Criticism and Prose Writings of Sorley Maclean*, ed. W. Gillies (Stornoway, 1985), p. 10.

one or two or three who could play the pipe, or the fiddle, or the trump. And I have heard it said that there were men, and women too, who could play things they called harps, and lyres, and bellow-pipes, but I do not know what those things were.' 'And why were those discontinued?' 'A blessed change came over the place and the people,' the woman replied in earnestness, 'and the good men and the good ministers did away with the songs and the stories, the music and the dancing, the sports and the games, that were perverting the minds and ruining the souls of the people, leading them to folly and stumbling.... They made the people break and burn their pipes and fiddles. If there was a foolish man here and there who demurred, the good ministers and the good elders themselves broke and burnt their instruments.'[43]

Edwin Muir had little interest in Gaelic culture.[44] He spoke for the elitist end of the spectrum; and he spoke, of course, with considerable animus. In his view, there was one simple reason for the poverty of Scottish poetry since the seventeenth century: 'the strict Calvinism of the Scots, which was adverse both to the production of poetry, and to poetry itself'.[45] In particular, the Reformers had absolutely prohibited dramatic poetry and this signalised the beginning of Scotland's decline as a civilised nation: 'The strict surveillance of Calvinism and the consequent failure of Scotland to achieve poetic drama may partly account for the fact that in her poetry since the sixteenth century she has failed to rise above the level of the simple lyric.' Even in the non-dramatic sphere, she has failed abysmally: the Scots 'have produced scarcely a single verse of good

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[43] Alexander Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh, 1928), pp. xxxv-xxxvi. In all probability the conversation is merely a literary device employed by Carmichael to express his own opinion. It is highly unlikely that any housewife in Ness prior to 1900 could have delivered such a brilliant oration in English. It would also be very difficult to translate the dialogue back into Gaelic. I was born in the parish of Ness some forty years after Carmichael's visit. By that time the dancing, the music and the songs had staged a miraculous recovery. There was still one hundred per-cent adherence to the church, but the herring and the turbot, sadly, had gone.

[44] According to Muir, Scotland's Celtic civilisation, if it ever existed, 'left behind it an astonishingly meagre record of its existence. A little poetry, a number of lovely songs, some beautiful pipe music, hardly any sculpture or architecture, no painting, no philosophy, no science, and no sign of that conceptual intelligence which welds together and creates great and complex communities and makes possible the major achievements of art and science.' See Muir's *Scottish Journey* (Edinburgh, 1979), p. 130.

[45] Muir, *Scott and Scotland* (London, 1936), p. 23.

religious or metaphysical poetry'. There has been no Scottish Donne or Beaudelaire. In short, the technical skill and the whole art of poetry 'fell into a bottomless gap after the Reformation and the events which immediately followed it'.[46]

Yet Muir is not quite sure that 'the desolating influence of a gloomy and intolerant fanaticism' can bear the full responsibility. There is another possible explanation: the demise of the Scots language. 'Scotland's loss of a native civilisation was bound up,' writes Muir, 'with its loss of a native language.'[47] More specifically, Scottish life was split in two. Scots remained as the language of sentiment; English became the language of thought. As a result, irresponsible feeling lay side by side with arid intellect. Alternatively, Scots and English co-existed in 'reciprocally destructive confrontation'.[48] According to Muir, Gregory Smith labelled this phenomenon 'the Caledonian Antisyzygy': an attempt, presumably, to express (unintelligibly) the idea of Scots and English being unequally yoked.

But even for the 'antisyzygy' Calvinism must be blamed. In pre-Reformation Scotland, judging by the poetry, there must have existed 'a high culture of the feelings as well as of the mind'. This concord was destroyed by the rigours of Calvinism, which drove a wedge between thought and feeling and destroyed the language in which they had been fused. Alternatively (Muir's argument is not coherent) Calvinism was prolific of dissensions and this was paralleled by the break-up of Scots into local dialects.[49]

The issue here is not whether Calvinism is to blame for the demise of Scots, but whether the tension between Scots and English was itself as fatal to Scottish literature as Muir assumes. He deplores our loss of a native civilisation and attributes it to our loss of a native language. Does this mean that America has no native civilisation? He suggests, too, that bilingualism creates artistic schizophrenia. How does he account, then, for the fact that one of our major Scottish novelists, Iain Crichton Smith, was a native Gaelic speaker? or for the corresponding fact that the great modern Gaelic poets (Sorley Maclean, Derick Thomson, Iain Crichton Smith, Donald MacAulay) were all educated in English? How does he account for the fact that Joseph Conrad's native language was Polish? or that the native language of the four evangelists (who wrote in Greek) was Aramaic?

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[46] Ibid., pp. 24, 25, 23, 48.
[47] Ibid., p. 72.
[48] Ibid., p. 61.
[49] Ibid., p. 73.

Scottish life is not riven by any one *antisyzygy*. It is riven by a host of them: Highlander and Lowlander, Gaelic and English, Catholic and Protestant, Irish and Scottish, native and immigrant, council housing schemes and private fiefdoms. These tensions may as easily stimulate great art as suppress it. And bilingualism, far from inducing intellectual schizophrenia, may instead afford to our perceptions an extra dimension, furnish our imaginations with a whole arsenal of contrasts and comparisons and bring to our modes of expression a new depth and precision.

Back, however, to Muir's central argument: Calvinism is to blame for Scotland's calamitous failure in the arts. Part of the problem is the standard by which we measure failure. Muir, and perhaps all of us, assume that Scotland ought to have produced world-ranking artists in every field. In some (particularly literature) we have: Burns and Scott have had an enduring international influence. In others we have not. There has been no Scottish Mozart, Beethoven or Bach (neither, of course, has there been an English, Mozart, Beethoven or Bach; or for that matter a French one). We have produced no Scottish Michelangelo, Rembrandt or Picasso. Nor have we produced any Scottish Shakespeare, Aeschylus or Racine.

But are our expectations in connection with the arts any more realistic than our dreams on the stage of world soccer? How many world-beaters, how many geniuses, how many giants, can a small nation produce? In almost every artistic sphere, post-Reformation Scotland has produced work which although short of genius has reached high standards of excellence. Muir lamented our failure to produce a single verse of good religious or metaphysical poetry. The work of the Gaelic poet, Dugald Buchanan, certainly fell into that category.[50] In fiction, Scotland has produced James Hogg, John Galt, R. L. Stevenson, Neil Gunn and Lewis Grassic Gibbon; in poetry (apart from Burns) McDiarmad, Maclean, McHaig and Muir himself; in *belles lettres*, Carlyle and John Brown; in painting, Allan Ramsay, Raeburn and McTaggart.

Two figures are worth lingering over. One is the artist David Wilkie, whose influence extended far beyond Scotland to England and the continent.[51] The remarkable thing is that Wilkie found the Calvinist

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[50] See D. Maclean, ed., *The Spiritual Songs of Dugald Buchanan* (Edinburgh, 1913). The poem, 'An Claigeann' ('The Skull') is a brilliant example of metaphysical poetry.

[51] Duncan Macmillan describes Wilkie as 'next to Hogarth, the British artist with the most far-reaching European influence'. (*Scottish Art 1460-1990*, Edinburgh, 1990), p. 165.

ambience of Victorian Scotland no impediment to his art. On the contrary, he warmly embraced it, sharing the evangelical vision of Thomas Chalmers and falling under the spell of Thomas McCrie's *Knox*. One result of this was Wilkie's concern to explore the issues of common life, not least the distresses of Scotland's humble poor. The most brilliant example is *Distraining for Rent,* painted in 1815 and now hanging in the National Gallery of Scotland. But Wilkie was also determined to explore religious issues and his sympathetic treatment of Scottish Presbyterianism is in marked contrast to its treatment at the hand of the poets.

Three of his most outstanding paintings cover the key moments in Presbyterian liturgy. The first, completed in 1832, is *The Preaching of John Knox before the Lords of the Congregation* (Tate Gallery). The second also features Knox: *John Knox Administering the Sacrament at Calder House* (1839, National Gallery of Scotland. This painting was never finished). The third, depicting family worship and enthusiastically proclaiming Presbyterianism's independence of both priests and holy places, is *The Cottar's Saturday Night* (1837, Glasgow Art Gallery). This is an evocative masterpiece, reminding us that *Holy Willie's Prayer* was not Burns' only word on Scottish Calvinism. Wilkie gives the scene his own twist by including in the dim background a fiddle hanging on the wall.

Parallel to Wilkie's is the case of Hugh Miller. For 16 years (1840-1856) Miller edited the *Witness*, producing almost single-handedly a twice-weekly evangelical newspaper whose circulation rivalled and sometimes even surpassed that of the *Scotsman.* Yet, for all the pressure, it is doubtful if any nineteenth-century exponent of *belles lettres* equalled Miller's editorials. To call them *belles lettres* scarcely does them justice. In *belles lettres*, form and style are everything. They are primarily for entertainment. Miller's style, with few lapses, was brilliant: clear, crisp and economical. But the style was servant to the substance as Miller drew on his immense erudition not only to entertain but to educate and to advocate. In church history, English literature, theology and geology Miller was a front-rank expert. Whether he was arguing the cause of the Non-intrusionists (without Miller there would have been no Disruption), explaining the history of the Old Red Sandstone, describing a fossil, advocating a national scheme of education, deploring the evils of the bothy system or discussing the difference between the poetry of intellect and the poetry of fancy, Miller's strength of intellect, mental stamina, felicity of expression, fertility of imagination and strength of argument are awesome.

The 13 volumes of Miller's published writings represent only a fraction of the literary output of these phrenetic years: years which culminated, tragically, in suicide. Carlyle, Hazlitt or De Quincey may each excel Miller

in some one department. None could match his combination of talents or rival the public impact of his achievement. He was a remarkable fusion of the scientific, the artistic and the forensic.

Miller's contemporaries knew his worth. John Brown (1810-82), author of 'Rab and his Friends', numbered him with Burns and Scott, Chalmers and Carlyle, as the foremost Scotsmen of their times and described him as 'self-taught and self-directed, argumentative and scientific, as few men of culture have ever been, and yet with more imagination than either logic or knowledge'.[52]

Yet today Miller's literary legacy is forgotten. This can hardly be attributed to his mediocrity. Nor can it (as in the case of Chalmers) be attributed to Victorian rotundity and prolixity. Even less can it be attributed to Miller's irrelevance to our contemporary world. It is hard to resist the conclusion that the neglect of Miller is due to the fact that his Christian assumptions are unpalatable and his Calvinism anathema. There is no place for him in Scottish literature's Hall of Fame.

THE PRIMACY OF ART

But Muir makes a second assumption: art, and particularly drama, is the single most important enterprise in the world. In this he consciously echoes Goethe, who declared that not only is poetic tragedy the greatest of all literary forms, but that the writing of it is the highest activity of which man is capable.[53] Closer to home, Wordsworth, in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, made similarly extravagant claims for poetry. The poet, he wrote, towers above the rest of mankind as a man 'endowed with more lively sensibility'; he is 'the rock of defence of human nature'; he is 'its upholder and preserver', who 'binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society'. Accordingly, his art is the most sublime and his craft the most indispensable of all human activities. 'Poetry,' writes Wordsworth, 'is the most philosophic of all writing'; it is 'the image of man and nature'; it is 'the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge'; it is 'the first and last of all knowledge... as immortal as the heart of man.'[54]

If Muir and his fellow anti-Calvinists are arguing that from such perspectives Scottish Calvinism never gave art its due, they are absolutely right. Calvinism could never have ascended (or descended) to such idolatry

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[52] John Brown, *Horae Subsecivae* (Edinburgh, 1882), p. 216.

[53] Goethe, quoted in Muir, *Scott and Scotland*, p. 78.

[54] Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (London, 1991), pp. 255, 257, 259.

of art. It could never have made art the measure of man or viewed the promotion of art as the driving passion of a civilised society. Even less could it have entertained a standpoint prepared to justify anything and everything in the name of art.[55] It certainly could not have regarded poetry as a god which demanded total commitment. Man's chief end is not the writing of poetry or the staging of drama. Man's chief end is to glorify God; his *summum bonum* is to enjoy him.

From this point of view, Scottish Calvinism has for too long been on the defensive. A more confident and robust Protestantism would have claimed for itself what Muir and Wordsworth claimed for poetry; and from there it would have gone on to indict Scotland's artistic establishment on a charge of undermining and suppressing religion. Poetry, not philosophy, has been the scourge of Scottish Christianity, reducing us to a nation where the gap between the opera-going elite and the drug-addicted poor is greater than at any point in our history.

In a fascinating essay on, 'The Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences' David Hume warned that, 'there is no subject in which we must proceed with more caution than in tracing the history of the arts and sciences, lest we assign causes which never existed, and reduce what is merely contingent to stable and universal principles'.[56] The protagonists of the view that the reasons for Scottish cultural atrophy can be reduced to one simple factor (gloomy Calvinist fanaticism) should heed Hume's warning. It is easy enough to assign one comprehensive reason (the Treaty of Versailles) for the rise of German Nazism. It is not so easy to explain in one sentence why Scotland produced no Shakespeare (or why England produced no Knox). The argument that the church is to blame assigns to her a power she never possessed.[57] It assumes, *contra* Hume, that the rise and fall of cultures is subject to some determinist nexus and that if the church had adopted a deliberate policy of promoting drama, then a Scottish Shakespeare would inevitably have appeared. It forgets that the Kirk never had the wealth of Medicis and Borgias prepared to patronise the arts. And it forgets that unlike medieval Catholicism and all its modern imitators Calvinism could not seek to realise its ideals through ornate and

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[55] Cf. Abraham Kuyper: 'unable to grasp the holier benefits of religion, the mysticism of the heart reacts in art intoxication'. *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, 1931), p. 143.

[56] David Hume, *Essays Moral, Political and Literary* (London, 1903), p. 114.

[57] Cf. the remark of W. Croft Dickinson: 'no sooner had the Reformers won the war than they lost the peace'. *Andrew Lang, John Knox and Scottish Presbyterianism* [The Andrew Lang Lecture, 1951], (Edinburgh, 1952), p. 13.

sumptuous structures of worship: 'By virtue of its principle Calvinism built no cathedrals, no palaces and no amphitheatres, and was unable to populate the vacant niches of these gigantic buildings with sculptured ornaments.'[58]

The truth is that Scotland's cultural development was influenced by a multitude of factors: the size of the population; the nature of the climate; the state of the economy; the rapacity of the aristocracy; the limitations in education; the loss of the Royal Court; the despotism of the monarchy, with its nemesis in civil war;[59] the demotion and virtual elimination of the native languages, both Scots and Gaelic; endemic Highland unrest prior to Culloden and virtual genocide afterwards.

Add to all these the utter unpredictability of genius. None can forecast where or when the next one will be born, yet such genius will not only achieve personal greatness, but will also stimulate cultural activity all around it. Genius inevitably has its 'circle'. Scotland has not had the honour of producing any towering literary, musical or artistic genius, but it has had the honour of producing the philosopher David Hume, the political economist Adam Smith and the physicist James Clerk-Maxwell, all of whom were responsible for paradigm-shifts in their own fields. And at the risk of provoking Muir's ghost to return in apoplectic fury we may even take pride in the long succession of Scots-born prophets, preachers and theologians whose spiritual influence is still felt all over the world.

Suppression of the arts was never part of the Calvinist agenda. Indeed, Calvin himself elaborated his doctrine of Common Grace precisely because he recognised both the reality and the value of the liberal arts. He rejoiced that hardly anyone is to be found who does not manifest some talent in art and readily acknowledged that this gift is bestowed indiscriminately on the pious and the impious. This, after all, is why we need a doctrine of *common* grace. But *gift* it is: a divine endowment rooted in the common grace of God.[60]

Calvin speaks more fully in his *Commentary on Genesis*. Take, for example, his remarks on Jabel, 'the father of all such as dwell in tents' (Gen. 4:20): 'the invention of arts, and of other things which serve to the common use and convenience of life, is a gift of God by no means to be

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[58] A. Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, p. 164.

[59] Cf. Hume, op. cit., p. 116: 'it is impossible for the arts and sciences to arise, at first, among any people, unless that people enjoy the blessing of a free government'.

[60] Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, edited by J. T. McNeill, translated by F. L. Battles (Philadelphia, 1960), II.ii.12-17.

despised, and a faculty worthy of commendation'. He notes that it was among the descendants of the accursed Cain that these arts first flourished, and comments, 'It is truly wonderful, that this race, which had most deeply fallen from integrity, should have excelled the rest of the posterity of Adam in rare endowments.' 'Let us then know,' he concludes, 'that the sons of Cain, though deprived of the Spirit of regeneration, were yet endued with gifts of no despicable kind; just as the experience of all ages teaches us how widely the rays of divine light have shone on unbelieving nations, for the benefit of the present life; and we see, at the present time, that the excellent gifts of the Spirit are diffused through the whole human race. Moreover, the liberal arts and sciences have descended to us from the heathen.'[61]

Such theoretical endorsement of the arts does not mean, however, that Calvinism has nothing to repent of. I limit myself to two points.

First, there has been no Calvinist aesthetic. An excessive spiritualism has inhibited us from clearly asserting the goodness of the material universe. Terrified of the sensual we have refused to face the deeper question of the sensuous. We have also failed to insist on the absolute value of beauty, even though it is clearly emphasised in the creation narrative itself. In Genesis 2:9, for example, we read that God planted in the Garden 'all kinds of trees'. Some were 'good for food'. But others were there simply because they were 'pleasant to the eye'. They had no other 'use' and their inclusion in the Garden is nothing short of a ringing endorsement of beauty. If something is 'pleasant to the eyes' it may need no further justification.

But what is beauty? That, too, is surely a matter for the theologian, though not, of course, for him exclusively. Does the very form of the Creation Narrative constitute an endorsement of art? Are the orderliness and rhetorical brilliance of Genesis 1 themselves pointers to the criteria of great art? And what are the theological/aesthetical implications of the refrain, 'God saw that it was good'? Does this mean (as I think it does) that the poet always has God looking over his shoulder, that in the last analysis *God* is the only judge of art and that great art is therefore only that upon which *God* can look and see that it is 'good' (or even 'very good')? And if so (if God is the Paramount Art Critic), what are his criteria? Can we know them, or must we remain for ever agnostic? Can art be 'good' irrespective

[61] Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses called Genesis* (Edinburgh, 1847), vol. 1, pp. 217f. Cf. Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, p. 155: 'art has the mystical task of reminding us in its productions of the beautiful that was lost and of anticipating its perfect coming lustre'.

of moral and theological considerations (even if, for example, it is racist, sexist or blasphemous)?

Secondly, theologians have failed to make appropriate use of the arts. The late Donald Mckinnon spoke once of the diminution devout men suffer when they 'show themselves unwilling to allow their insight into human beings to be enlarged in ways at once unexpected and unfamiliar through great literature'. He warned: 'if one's image of the creature is contracted, that contraction reacts inevitably upon one's image of the creator'.[62]

Dr. Mackinnon's specific complaint was that men speak and act as if, for adults, novels were only properly read for relaxation and were unsuitable reading for 'the serious hours of the morning'. 'Do we,' he wondered, 'reach for such works as *Anna Karenina, Middlemarch, Nostromo, The Wings of the Dove, The Rainbow* for relaxation? Or if we do treat them simply as light reading, have we not already resolved in advance that we will not learn from them or take them seriously? In such an attitude of mind there surely lies a most certain source of the most deadly spiritual philistinism.'[63]

More recently, Professor Stanley J. Grenz, speaking of 'the wider context of the theological conversation', has written: 'Because the life-giving Spirit is present wherever life flourishes, the Spirit's voice can conceivably resound through many media, including the media of human culture.... Consequently, in the conversation that constitutes theology, evangelical theologians should listen intently for the voice of the Spirit who is present in all life and therefore precedes us into the world, bubbling to the surface through the artifacts and symbols humans construct.'[64]

This is a serious challenge, even though we may have to tone down Grenz's suggestion that the Spirit is present in all life, at least to the extent of reminding ourselves that the demonic is also present in all life and that the proportions of the one to the other vary enormously from one place to the next.[65] The Spirit is certainly not present in *Last Tango in Paris* as he is present in *Coriolanus* and *The Heir of Redclyffe*. But the question is still an urgent one: is art revelatory? If the heavens declare the

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62 D. Mackinnon, *Borderlands of Theology and Other Essays* (London, 1968), pp. 50f.

63 Ibid., p. 51.

64 John G. Stackhouse, Jr, ed., *Evangelical Futures* (Grand Rapids, 2000), p. 128.

65 Cf. the more restrained comment of Calvin (on John 1:9): 'beams from this light are shed upon the whole race of men ... there is no man to whom some awareness of the eternal light does not penetrate.' (*The Gospel according to St John 1-10*, Carlisle, 1995, p. 15.)

glory of God, can art make those heavens even more eloquent? Can it make 'the made things' (*ta poiemata*, Rom. 1:20) even more revelatory? If conscience continuously bears witness to the categorical imperative, can art aid and abet it, probing and illuminating, as no prosaic theology can, the darkness of human depravity and the depths of human despair? And if man, alone among God's creatures, can say, 'O LORD, our Lord, how excellent is your name in all the earth!', is it possible that our human capacity for doxology finds its zenith in art: in Handel, perhaps, or in Bach?

Art must defer to theology as truth; but then theology must listen to art as exegesis. A poem, a painting or an aria may be worth a thousand words.