The Covenanters' Contribution to the Revolution in Scotland, 1688–90

Rev. Dr Alasdair J Macleod, Lecturer in Church History, Highland Theological College UHI.

based on Address at the HTC Church History Conference, Dingwall, 30 April 2024.

ABSTRACT: In 1689, the deposition of James VII created a constitutional crisis in Scotland, with a major civil war threatened between the Williamites and the Jacobites. The Covenanters were active at this crucial stage in support of the accession of William and Mary to the throne of Scotland, and were instrumental in securing the achievement of this Revolution without major bloodshed. The great majority of Covenanters supported the resulting Revolution Settlement of the Church of Scotland as Presbyterian. Only a small minority of hardline Covenanters stood outside the Kirk after 1690.

INTRODUCTION

In early January of 1689, the news spread to the furthest ends of Scotland that the King had fled from London. The Roman Catholic King James, II of England and Ireland, VII of Scotland, escaped at the end of December 1688 to the Continent, as the Dutch army of the Protestant Prince William of Orange and his English wife Princess Mary occupied the capital without bloodshed. It was an extraordinary turnaround: a true revolution. Less than a year before, on 17 February 1688, the Covenanting minister James Renwick had been hanged at the Grassmarket in Edinburgh for just the same crime: he declared that James Stewart was not the rightful king. For five years, Renwick had preached against the policies and rule of James in the fields and in private homes throughout the south of Scotland, repeatedly escaping from the troops sent to apprehend him. At last, he had been caught, and had faced death fearlessly on a charge of high treason against the King. The monarch's power seemed – indeed was – absolute: James dominated the established Church of Scotland through his chosen bishops, and the Scottish state through an appointed Privy Council, and was openly working to secure the toleration of Roman Catholicism. When the Parliaments of England and Scotland had resisted his policies, James suspended their sittings, and ruled by decree. For the Covenanters, the very future of the Protestant Reformation in Scotland looked to be in question.

This article contends that the Covenanters contributed to the successful achievement of the Glorious Revolution in Scotland, whereby William and Mary acceded to the Scottish crown without significant bloodshed. Not only were the Covenanters active in their support for the new monarchs, they also largely supported and participated in the institutions of William and Mary's reign, the national Church above all. The article will discuss the Covenanters in their identity and standing under James VII; the situation in 1688; the progress of revolution during 1689, and particularly the Covenanter contribution to it; and the conclusion of the Revolution settlement of the Church of Scotland in 1690.

I. THE COVENANTERS

The Covenanters were those Scottish Protestants who were committed to Reformed theology and Presbyterian church government, and desired reform of the Church along these lines. Their commitment had famously been enshrined in the National Covenant signed in Greyfriars Kirkyard in 1638, and they had dominated both church and state in Scotland in the years that followed. However, they had been left divided and gravely weakened by the disputes of the succeeding decades, by conquest by Oliver Cromwell and the English Army in the 1650s, and by the relentless persecution of the Stewart monarchs since the Restoration of 1660. Some who had signed the Covenant had conformed to the Episcopalian settlement imposed on the Scottish Church by Charles II. The remainder had endured the Great Ejection of 1662, whereby their ministers were excluded from the Church for their Presbyterian principles and forbidden to preach. Yet even this group were divided: some of the ministers and congregations accepted indulgences in the years that followed, which permitted them to minister legally according to Presbyterian form under certain restrictions; others viewed these ministers as having sold out their principles and considered it vital to stand apart from them. Some of the remaining Covenanters ministered illegally at covert field gatherings; others waited quietly for a better day or retreated into exile on the Continent.

The most radical of the Covenanters, the United Societies, rejected entirely the legitimacy of the rule of the Stewart kings as monarchs in breach of the Covenant and preached armed rebellion on that basis – and entire separation from those who disagreed, whether Episcopalians or more moderate Presbyterians. Richard Cameron was the first to articulate this position, in the Sanquhar Declaration in 1680, but the other ministers of the United Societies maintained the same convictions. Each met a violent end successively: Cameron was killed in battle later in 1680; Donald

Cargill was hanged in Edinburgh in 1681; and Renwick in 1688. This left the United Societies with just three young ministers at the time of the Revolution: Thomas Linning, Alexander Shields, and William Boyd.

As a result of their radicalism in challenging James's right to the crown, and their willingness to carry arms in defiance of the authorities, the United Societies were the object of particular concern for the Scottish Privy Council. While James VII's legal tolerance was extended even to Roman Catholic services, the United Societies remained banned from worship, and people were subject to the severest civil penalties if they were found to have attended field meetings of the Societies.

Even Covenanters not associated with the Societies were still in danger of persecution, where their ministry seemed to challenge in any way the settled religious order under James VII. One victim was the former minister of Inverness, Angus Macbean, who had been ordained as an Episcopalian, and after a brief pastorate in Ayr had been called to the first charge of Inverness. There he was much appreciated and admired as a preacher of Protestantism, known for denouncing Roman Catholicism. But he became increasingly disillusioned with the corrupt Episcopalian government of the Church of Scotland, and in 1687 he withdrew from the Establishment, and began to minister in private houses to those who would gather to hear him in Inverness and elsewhere. This led to his arrest, interrogation by the Privy Council in Edinburgh, deposition from the ministry, and imprisonment in the Tolbooth. There he remained for most of the year 1688, and by the time deliverance came, his health had broken, and he died shortly afterwards, yet another martyr for the Covenanting cause, though he had no connection to the United Societies.[1]

II. THE SITUATION IN 1688

James looked unassailable, but in fact his authority was fragile. Two crucial events in the year 1688 served to undermine his reign. The first was the birth of a son, James Francis Edward on 10 June, to James and his Italian wife Mary of Modena. This was a shocking development, as James's marriage had been childless for eleven years. Unlike his older half-sisters, this child would be raised in the Roman Catholicism of his parents, and as a male held precedence in the line of succession from birth. This birth thus brought the prospect of a permanent Roman Catholic dynasty ruling Britain. James's Romanism could no longer be considered a private matter.

[1] Hew Scott, *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticanae*, (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1926), vi, 456–7.

The second event that undermined James was the legal case fought over the Declaration of Indulgence. This Declaration, which James issued in 1687, granted freedom of worship to dissenters. While the Declaration extended to both Catholics and Protestants, all knew that the King's purpose was to promote the advance of Roman Catholicism. When he re-issued it in 1688, James demanded that it be read in every Anglican church. The result was a protest from seven bishops of the Church of England against the Declaration, to whom the prospect of open toleration of Romanism was obnoxious. James brought an ill-advised prosecution for seditious libel against the bishops for publishing their protest. The case was politically disastrous for James, arousing great sympathy for the bishops, who were eventually acquitted on 30 June 1688. The hasty prosecution destroyed James's authority.

That very same day, an invitation was sent to William of Orange signed by seven leading individuals in the English Church and state, inviting him to take the throne of England. When William landed at Torbay in Devon on 5 November, he was greeted with relief on all sides, and entered London without bloodshed. As James escaped abroad, it seemed that the kingdom of England agreed with the martyred Renwick that he was not the rightful king. Yet it should be acknowledged that the immediate developments of 1688 owed nothing to the Covenanters or indeed to Scotland. It was not the Cameronian opposition that swept James from power but opposition rather from those Protestants whom the Covenanters most despised, the supposedly quiescent conformists of the Church of England, who turned out to be more zealous than many expected when it seemed that the Reformation itself was under threat. In its immediate accomplishment, the Glorious Revolution was an Anglican achievement.

In Scotland, the Lord Chancellor, the Roman Catholic Earl of Perth, a ruthless persecutor of Renwick and the other Covenanters, fled from Edinburgh after being assaulted by a mob in December 1688. The crowd smashed up the Catholic chapel at Holyroodhouse where the King and his favourites had reintroduced Mass, and where the Jesuits had set up schools and a printing press. The books, beads, crosses, and images were burnt in the streets. Lord Perth was captured shortly afterwards, trying to flee on board a ship to the Continent dressed as a woman, and was confined in the common prison in Kirkcaldy.

Scotland was therefore without a King, and without a Lord Chancellor, creating a situation fraught with both possibility and danger. It was far from clear what would happen next. William could become King of the three kingdoms of England, Scotland and Ireland, but this was by no means a certainty. Furthermore, James would presumably seek to regain

his crown, and would certainly call on his Scottish allies to fight for him. The nation seemed on the brink of a new Civil War.

But for the Covenanters, the Presbyterians of Scotland, it was a glorious moment. They had survived the 'Killing Times', now the persecuting King, who had threatened to bring the British Isles back under the heel of the Papacy, had fled. On 25 December members of the United Societies proclaimed their support for the 'Protestant Protector' William of Orange and his 'Declaration to the People of Scotland' in Glasgow. This was led by the Cameronian preacher William Boyd and was probably the first public response to the Declaration. Willliam's declaration to the Scottish people on 10 October 1688 had spoken explicitly of the persecution in Scotland in recalling the destruction of 'the poor people' 'by hanging, shooting and drowning them, without any form of law or respect to sex or age'.[2] Such sympathetic rhetoric was clearly intended to appeal to the Covenanters of Scotland and enlist their support. The Cameronian response suggested that William's words had received a ready response, though Matthew Vogan has cautioned that not all in the United Societies supported William Boyd's proclamation at Glasgow.[3] Boyd had previously lived in Holland, where, according to the Fasti, 'he enjoyed the friendship and confidence of William, Prince of Orange', which may help to explain the speed and enthusiasm of his welcome for William.[4]

III. THE DEVELOPMENTS OF 1689

On 4 January 1689, the United Societies gathered for worship at Douglas, Lanarkshire: their minister, Alexander Shields, expounded Psalm 76, 'In Judah's land, God is well known, / his name's in Isr'el great'. The context of the Psalm, the thanksgiving for God's deliverance of His people, appeared very apt. In expounding the psalm, Shields recalled that it had been 'sweetly sung by famous Mr. Robert Bruce at the Cross of Edinburgh' when news was received of the defeat of the Spanish Armada one hundred years before.[5] The comparison was clear: God had judged and averted a Roman Catholic plan of conquest in 1588, and in 1688 he had done the same again through the coming of William and Mary. For the Covenanters, the English-born James was the foreign oppressor, while the

2 Quoted in Matthew Vogan, 'Alexander Shields, the Revolution Settlement and the Unity of the Visible Church' (109-146), *Scottish Reformation Society Historical Journal*, 2 (2012), 113–14.

3 Vogan, 'Alexander Shields', 114.

4 Scott, *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticanae*, ii, 408.

5 Quoted in Vogan, 'Alexander Shields', 116.

Dutch prince was their deliverer, and by implication, an agent of God's judgment.

An uneasy peace continued through the early months of 1689, as all sides waited for the news from England. On 13 February, William and Mary jointly accepted the crown of England from the English Parliament, and a Convention of the Estates of Scotland, which would effectively function as a Scottish Parliament, was summoned for 14 March.

Meanwhile, on 2 March, the United Societies gathered in vast numbers at Lesmahagow and renewed the National Covenant, and Solemn League and Covenant, amongst solemn scenes of mourning over past sins, and earnest dedication of themselves to be faithful to the Lord. Shields preached from Deuteronomy 26:16: 'This day the LORD thy God hath commanded thee to do these statutes and judgments: thou shalt therefore keep and do them with all thine heart, and with all thy soul'. The Societies had never hesitated to bear arms at their meetings, and it was now clear that their military strength was considerable – especially in their heartlands in the South West. The Covenanters' position was clear: they stood with William and Mary and would fight for them if necessary.

The Convention of Estates thus gathered in a very tense situation, under a real threat of Civil War. The Duke of Gordon still held Edinburgh Castle for James, and its batteries were trained on Parliament House. The Jacobite peers Lord Balcarres and the bloody persecutor of the Covenanters, John Graham of Claverhouse, now ennobled as Viscount Dundee, both attended with letters of authority from the exiled King. The nine Scottish bishops, who were of a different stamp from the English bishops, and entirely dependent on James's choice and support for their promotion, took their seats as well. The Convention's first duty was to elect a President, and William's candidate was the Duke of Hamilton, Scotland's pre-eminent peer. The Marquess of Atholl opposed him as the candidate of the Jacobite party. However, it must be emphasized that these noblemen were opportunistic politicians rather than true partisans. Astonishingly, in both cases, their sons were also members of the Convention, and in both cases the sons joined the opposing party to their fathers, as the noble families blatantly hedged their bets!

The vote was taken, and Hamilton gained the Presidency. The Williamites had their first victory. Next came the reading of the letters from the two rival sovereigns. On a vote, it was agreed to take William's letter first, which was a typically cautious and conciliatory document. Then James's letter was read, and was typical of all the failings of the Stewart kings: standing on the royal prerogatives, threatening charges of treason against those who opposed him, it proved deeply damaging to James's cause. As the historian William Ferguson observed:

> This alarmed the waverers among the Episcopalians who feared that in the event of James's restoration their natural allegiance would be made to cover not just the King's majesty but also the spiritual claims of the Pope. Rightly, this episode has been regarded as the main determinant of the course followed by the convention. [...] At a stroke, his stupid letter reduced James' active sympathisers in the estates to a relatively small body of committed Jacobites of whom the chief was Viscount Dundee.[6]

After these initial discussions, it was clear that few other than the bishops were determined partisans for James. Crucially, the leaders of the Episcopalian Church were thus left marginalised, the supporters of a discredited King, while those of even moderate Presbyterian sympathies were firmly allied to William of Orange. With little prospect of success, Claverhouse abandoned the Convention and headed north to raise a Jacobite army in the Highlands. The Jacobites in the Convention were therefore left few and leaderless, and William's supporters had their way all the more easily.

On 4 April, the Convention declared the throne of Scotland vacant. By his misrule, James was deemed to have forfeited the crown – a vindication, just a year later, of James Renwick's position by the very authorities that had executed him. That same day, the United Societies paraded with arms in the Grassmarket, in a show of military strength in defiance of the Jacobites. On 11 April, the Convention formally determined to offer the crown of Scotland jointly to William and Mary. The terms of the offer were enacted in the Claim of Right, a hugely important piece of constitutional legislation, which rejected the supremacy that the Stewart kings had claimed over the rule of law, and limited the power of the monarch over Parliament. It condemned episcopacy as 'a great and insupportable grievance and trouble to this Nation and contrary to the Inclinationes of the generality of the people ever since the reformatione' and called for it to be abolished.[7] With the bishops of the Scottish Church still supportive of James, there was no way for the Williamites to secure the crown in Scotland except by siding with the Presbyterians.

With the prospect of conflict drawing nearer, the Covenanters of the United Societies were ready to take arms in defence of William's kingship and the Claim of Right. That same month, the Earl of Angus raised a regiment of 1200 Covenanters, called the Cameronians in memory of their martyred minister Richard Cameron, to fight for William. Remarkably, the minister who had been abominated as a notorious traitor by the Scottish authorities for the preceding decade was now lending his name to a regiment defending the organs of the state. The Cameronians had

---

6 William Ferguson, *Scotland, 1689 to the Present* (Edinburgh, 1968), 3.

7 'Claim of Right', 1689, URL: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/aosp/1689/28

not produced the Glorious Revolution, but were willingly enlisted in its support.

On 11 May, William accepted the terms of the Claim of Right, with the provision only that he was not going to be a religious persecutor. Scotland had a new King and Queen, and a Presbyterian settlement was in sight. With the crown settled, a full Scottish Parliament met, and rapidly began to reform the Scottish Church: on 26 May, the Westminster Confession of Faith was approved as the Confession of Faith of the Scottish Church, restoring the Confession that had been used in the Church between 1647 and 1661, during the high water mark of Covenanter domination of the Kirk. On 22 July, episcopacy was formally abolished.

Meanwhile, the Jacobites were divided. Atholl acquiesced, and wrote to William to assure him of his allegiance. Gordon surrendered Edinburgh Castle, and Balcarres submitted to imprisonment. But Dundee had gathered his forces in the Highlands, and began to advance south. The long-brewing conflict at last erupted on 27 July, at the Battle of Killiecrankie in Perthshire, where the Highland Jacobites won a rapid victory over the Williamite forces under General Hugh Mackay of Scourie. But it was a hollow win, as Claverhouse himself was mortally wounded during the fight. The Jacobites in Scotland were victorious, but effectively leaderless.

The situation was now dangerous, with a victorious Jacobite army heading south. The Scottish Privy Council prepared to leave Scotland, and ordered the new Cameronian Regiment to Dunkeld, with orders to hold back the Jacobite advance at all costs. On 21 August, an army of 5000 Highland Jacobites assailed Dunkeld. The Cameronians had just 800 men in the field, and Dunkeld offered little protection, having no city wall. The Cameronians therefore took up their positions in the Cathedral and in the mansion of Lord Atholl.

The Jacobites attacked from all sides. The Cameronian Colonel was killed in the first hour, and the major was wounded, so it fell to a mere captain, George Munro, to lead the defence. For sixteen hours, the battle went on. At last the Cameronians were stripping the lead off the roof of Atholl House to make musket balls, yet they kept firing. At 11 o'clock that night, the exhausted Jacobites, out of ammunition, at last withdrew, and began to retreat north – the town, and the south of Scotland, had been held for William. The Cameronians had won the victory. The Revolution and the Protestant royal succession would both have been seriously endangered without the Cameronian defence of the Parliament and the victory at Dunkeld which, in Ian Cowan's assessment, 'secured the

protestant revolution in Scotland'.[8] The Cameronian regiment thereafter remained a permanent part of the British Army, in service to William and Mary and their successors.

IV. THE ACCOMPLISHMENT OF THE REVOLUTION SETTLEMENT, 1690

In the latter part of 1689 and throughout 1690, the process of reform continued at a local level. In the Covenanting heartlands, the Episcopalian curates were ejected from their churches and manses. Though there was an element of retribution, it was a not reverse persecution: no one was killed or tortured. By law, ministers were obliged to pray for William and Mary, and those who refused could lawfully be deprived of their charges. By 7 November 1689, 182 curates had been dispossessed for this reason. Throughout Scotland, Presbyterianism was associated with loyalty to William, Episcopacy with support for James. Consequently, many ordained to their parishes according to Episcopalian order now professed conversion to Presbyterian principles and loyalty to the Kirk going forwards. The Scottish Parliament passed an 'Act ratifying the Confession of Faith and settling presbyterian church government' on 7 June 1690, confirming the Presbyterian settlement of the Kirk, which by that stage was inevitable.[9]

As appointed by that Act, the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland finally met in October and November of 1690, the first General Assembly to meet in Scotland since 1653. It was a gathering of elderly ministers, as under the terms of the Act its ministerial membership was drawn exclusively from the Presbyterian survivors of the Great Ejection of 1662. Thomas Hog, minister of Kiltearn, by then a frail 62-year-old, was typical of its membership. It would be for this body to decide whom to admit and whom not to admit to the Kirk going forward, as clearly it was not for the civil authorities to weigh the merits of the various Episcopalian claimants to Presbyterian conversion. In practice, the Church showed a generally conciliatory attitude to Episcopalians, with those professing conversion to Presbyterian principles rapidly admitted, and even those who remained stubbornly loyal to episcopacy generally left in their charges, provided only that they were willing to take the oaths of allegiance and assurance of loyalty to William and Mary as rightful

[8] Ian B. Cowan, *The Scottish Covenanters: 1660-1688* (London, 1976), p.144.

[9] Act ratifying the Confession of Faith and settling presbyterian church government, 1690, URL: https://www.rps.ac.uk/search.php?a=fcf&fn=william_and_mary_trans&id=49704&t=trans

King and Queen.[10] Crucially, the 1690 Assembly agreed to admit the three young ministers from the United Societies, and all three went into ministry within the Kirk: Boyd as parish minister of Dalry; Linning of Lesmahagow; and Shields as chaplain to the Cameronian regiment. This decision did much to conciliate the remnants of the United Societies.

Ultimately, only about one third of the Societies' membership determined to remain separate from Church and state.[11] Far from being the sole remaining Covenanters, those who remained outside the Revolution Church were only the most extreme edge of the movement, a minority of the United Societies, which were in turn just a minority of the Covenanter movement. These groups lacked unity among themselves, becoming known generally, as Vogan has observed, by the names of their most prominent leaders, 'Adamites, Harlites, Howdenites, etc.' The Hamiltonians, followers of Sir Robert Hamilton, were the first formally to repudiate the authority of William and Mary, by a second Sanquhar Declaration in 1692, though their subsequent conduct made clear that they had no intention of attempting an armed uprising.[12]

CONCLUSION

It is thus not accurate to contend that the Covenanters declined to enter the Revolution Church. In fact, the Covenanters *were* the Revolution Church. The Assembly of 1690 was composed of those who had ministered in covenanted Presbyterianism prior to the Great Ejection, and it was these ministers, and their associated elders, who guarded the orthodoxy and determined the extent of the charity to be dispensed in admitting applicants of Episcopal ordination to the ministry. Even when the focus lies strictly upon the United Societies, it is evident that the majority entered the Revolution Church, led by the Societies' ministers, and supported not only the accession of William and Mary but also the institutions of their rule, such as the Parliament and the Army. Indeed, William and Mary owed a very specific debt to the Cameronian regiment, recruited from the supporters of the United Societies, for their heroic defence of Dunkeld in 1689, an action that helped to safeguard the Williamite succession and ultimate Presbyterian settlement in Scotland.

The key point of difference, which divided the United Societies, was ultimately very simple – those who entered the Kirk accepted the limitations of the possible. They recognized that it was not possible to impose

[10] J. H. S. Burleigh, *A Church History of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1960), 263–5.
[11] Vogan, 'Alexander Shields', 130.
[12] Vogan, 'Alexander Shields', 116.

the Covenants on William and Mary, or a Presbyterian settlement upon England. A Presbyterian settlement for Scotland upon the basis of the Westminster Confession was the most that could be achieved, and was viewed by most of the Covenanter remnant as a fulfilment of the National Covenant's pledge to pursue reformation in the Kirk.