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AFTERWORD: FINDING RELIGION IN SCOTTISH LITERARY HISTORY

Crawford Gribben

Few things cry so urgently for rewriting as does Scots history, in few aspects of her bastardized culture has Scotland been so ill-served as by her historians.

Lewis Grassie Gibbon, *Scottish Scene* (1934)

A great deal has changed in the fifteen or so years since the first publication of the essay to which the colleagues who share their work in this issue of the journal have kindly and generously responded.¹ It is much easier now to make a case for the significance of religious identities or for the motivating power of religious ideas—including those ideas that are packaged as the system of theology that is commonly known as “Calvinism.” In 2004, the same year in which my essay appeared, Marilynne Robinson published *Gilead* as the Pulitzer prize-winning first instalment in a trilogy of novels that continued with *Home* (2008) and *Lila* (2014) to explore among other things the social and theological dynamics of Reformed thought and their potential for the creation of literary art. Robinson’s defense of John Calvin and her creative interest in his writings are part of a much wider return to the sources of Reformed thought.² In the last fifteen years, large numbers of American evangelicals have grown to appreciate their tradition’s theological origins, with sometimes startling

¹ Crawford Gribben, “The literary culture of the Scottish reformation,” *Review of English Studies*, 57:228 (2006): 64-82, reprinted as “Introduction” in *Literature and the Scottish reformation*, ed. Crawford Gribben and David G. Mullan [St. Andrews Studies in Reformation History] (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009), 1-18.

² Christopher Leise, “‘That little incandescence’: Reading the fragmentary and John Calvin in Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead*,” *Studies in the Novel*, 41.3 (2009): 348-67; Rebecca M. Painter, “Further thoughts on a prodigal son who cannot come home, on loneliness and grace: An interview with Marilynne Robinson,” *Christianity and Literature*, 58.3 (2009): 485-92.

results. In 2009, for example, *Time* magazine splashed “the new Calvinism” on its cover page as one of the “ten ideas changing the world right now.”³

While trends in criticism have not always kept up with these wider developments, there is now no reason for anyone commenting on the early modern intellectual contexts within which the Scottish literary tradition was first consolidated to apologize for their concern. If, in this context, and after a broader “turn to religion” in arts and humanities research, I am struck by how old-fashioned my essay now seems to be, by how out of step it now appears with some of the most important trends in religion and in creative writing, I am also reminded of how much its argument still matters, and how much literary historical work is still required in order for dominant stereotypes finally to be dismantled. The most recent literary historical work may have moved on from the paradigms established by Muir, MacDiarmid and other writers of the Scottish Literary Renaissance, but it has yet to fully appreciate the effect of our reading their cultural polemic as historical explanation, the institutionalization of their system of values and preferences, or of its occlusion and even exclusion of voices and perspectives, including many of those traditionally under-represented in literary history.

This is particularly important with reference to the literary contexts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. One of the most important signs of renewed interest in this area was the decision by the editors of *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature* (2006) to include a chapter on early modern theological writing, as part of an ambitious project to broaden out the scope of literary activity in the medieval and early modern periods.⁴ These contexts were described in much more detail in *Literature and the Scottish Reformation* (2009), which gathered work by intellectual historians, church historians, book historians, theatre historians, and literary critics.⁵ Perhaps significantly, this volume appeared not in a series dedicated to literary production and its contexts but as one of the St Andrews Studies in Reformation History, a reminder that what looks like revisionism among literary critics may look much less surprising in other

³ David Van Biema, “The New Calvinism,” *Time* (March 12, 2009), on line at: http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1884779_1884782_1884760,00.html; see also Colin Hansen, *Young, Restless, Reformed: A Journalist's Journey with the New Calvinists* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

⁴ Crawford Gribben, “Scottish theological literature, 1560-1707,” in Ian Brown and others, eds, *Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature*, 3 vols (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), I: 231-37. Some of these themes were picked up by Donald E. Meek, in his “The literature of religious revival and disruption,” *ibid.*, III: 360-70.

⁵ Referenced in n. 1 above.

disciplinary contexts. For, if critics sometimes struggle to make sense of the paradigms with which their subjects of study were most familiar, scholars in related disciplines as well as some of the most important of our contemporary novelists are now much more confident of the value of the kinds of religion that we might find in Scottish literary history.

As the contributors to this issue notice, the argument of my essay can also be applied to texts from the eighteenth century to the present day. Our appreciation of work by Archibald Pitcairne, John Galt, Thomas Carlyle, Lewis Grassie Gibbon, Fionn Mac Colla, A. J. Cronin, Muriel Spark and James Robertson can be helped in significant ways by our better understanding of the religious commitments or concerns that are represented in or by their work. Kelsey Jackson Williams's reading of Archibald Pitcairne's late poems shows how his enthusiasm for the principles of "enlightenment" did not prevent his working to invest within his Jacobite convictions a distinctive religious sensibility (if "commitment" may claim too much). Here, the work by intellectual historians to push back against assumptions that "the Enlightenment" drove or even demanded secular ways of thinking can be harnessed to open up those spaces in literary history in which, as in this case, an individual writer's private interests might be discovered, while also thinking about the possibility that political communities, such those supporting Jacobite culture, might develop a distinctive religious aesthetic. While national contexts remain important, as Joanna Malecka reminds us, this antagonism to Calvinism was in the nineteenth century not a uniquely Scottish cultural project. Thomas Carlyle and Edward Irving, who were friends as younger men in Ecclefechan, made their reputations in London a few years apart but for entirely different reasons, but both showing what modified forms of Scottish Calvinism could achieve in an environment in which many of its claims were unfamiliar. Malecka's argument reminds us that Calvinism was more than a creed—the label signaled a tradition of thinking, perhaps even a tradition of feeling, that depended upon convictions that are often deeply pessimistic about human potential, even as they may be drawn upon to release that potential in significant literary or cultural contributions.

The essay by Matthew Wickman develops this argument, noting that the critical dismissal of Calvinism does not so much reflect the overlooking of a period of history, but of a mode of experience. The temptation for literary and other historians is to respond to established critical oversights by quoting "chapter and verse," he notes, as "Scottish critics alert to religion become almost too literal in their rebuttals ... in showing where Muir and MacDiarmid got it wrong." But these claims do need to be historicized. Scottish Calvinism was, after all, both a credal and a deeply affective religion. It sought to encourage and then to contain religious feeling within boundaries that were eventually outlined in the

Westminster Confession of Faith (1647). Not for nothing did the first answer of the Westminster Assembly's Shorter Catechism encourage believers to remember that "man's chief end" is both to "glorify God and to enjoy him forever," as Brooke McLaughlin Mitchell reminds us.

At this remove, can literary critics or historians easily distinguish creed and religion within a discursive system in which they were so tightly combined? Lewis Grassie Gibbon develops an account of this regional modernism in such a way as to highlight the religious politics of his characters as well as of himself. *Sunset Song* may have been "fathered between a kailyard and a bonny brier bush in the lee of a house with green shutters," but it moves far beyond the sentimental piety of Ian MacLaren's *Beside the Bonnie Brier Bush* (1894) or the pyrrhic achievements of George Douglas Brown's *The House With the Green Shutters* (1901), exploding any easy sense of a national Christian community that these earlier works in different ways presupposed.

Calvinism, for Gibbon, is a discourse that permits the suggestion by one character that Picts were "skin-clad savages" now "burning in hell," but the novel also recognizes that even its Presbyterian characters can be alienated from their own religious history, when the world of the Covenanters seems as alien as that of pre-history: while Chae's interruption of political speech-making invokes "the God of old Scotland ... aye fighting on the side of the people since the days of old John Knox and He would yet bring to an end the day of wealth and waster throughout the world," Chris' walk through the graveyard evokes the horrors of the "old, unkindly times of the Covenanters."⁶ Not everyone recognizes the Scottish religious past – and those who do are sharply divided by its meaning. Perhaps it is significant that the soldiers' inscription on the Standing Stones ends with the citation of Revelation 2:28—"I will give you the morning star"—a promise of salvation that is invested with new political connotations in the mouth of a socialist preacher.⁷ Such questions about meaning abound in work by James Robertson, who, in his focus on "Holy Willies and holy terrors," might be the modern writer most alive to the creative potential of Scottish Calvinism.⁸ Alison Jack's discussion of Robertson shows how his work demonstrates the epistemological and narratological possibilities that early modern Calvinism still retains.

Of course, as other contributors recognize, my argument in favour of finding religion in Scottish literary history can be more widely applied, not only to later centuries but to other strands of Scottish belief. Gerry

⁶ Lewis Grassie Gibbon, *A Scots Quair* (London: Penguin, 1986), 31, 43, 55, 82, 101.

⁷ Gibbon, 192.

⁸ James Robertson, *The Fanatic* (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), 25.

Carruthers, who has elsewhere offered some telling criticism of the Muir thesis, works to recover one of the most popular of modern Scottish writers, and shows how A. J. Cronin's Catholic faith developed alongside his perennially popular publications.⁹ Approaches of this kind have also been effectively advanced in Linden Bicket's *George Mackay Brown and the Scottish Catholic Imagination* (2017).

But even for Catholic writers other kinds of religious background matter too. Richard Rankin Russell shows how Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* requires "criticism that is both theologically-informed and religiously-grounded," reading the text with recognition of Spark's Presbyterian background, as well as of her adult Catholicism. Brooke McLaughlin Mitchell mentions the importance of Fionn Mac Colla's childhood in the Plymouth Brethren—a heritage he shared with William Montgomerie, whose poem "Breaking of Bread" dramatized this community's central act of worship, and Robert Rendall, the Orcadian conchologist and poet who remained within the community throughout his life.¹⁰ Perhaps one result of our effort to recover and to consider overlooked religious contexts in the writing of Scottish literary history will be to expand the number of authors that we study and to draw more connections between them.

Nevertheless, Robert P. Irvine's discussion of canon formation offers some important cautions to the kinds of argument these essays represent. He reminds us that not every early modern text to find itself excluded from the category of "literature" can be presented as the victim of some kind of religious exclusion, for the formation of national literary canons in the eighteenth century functioned to center and privilege certain kinds of aesthetic and other cultural values. His argument that the Scottish canon was forged in opposition to the national church rather than to the theological system that it promoted is both plausible and of obvious importance. But I am not entirely persuaded. After all, canons are continually formed and re-formed, and the work of enlightened Moderates to shape a values-driven account of Scottish literary culture was revised in the nineteenth century and again by the polemicists of the Scottish Literary Renaissance. Irvine's argument about Galt is powerful, but it might not do justice to the experience of other writers. Pre-reformation writers were retained within the national canon as it was reinvented in the 1920s and 1930s. Meanwhile post-reformation writers such as the Seceder poet

⁹ See, for example, Gerard Carruthers, *Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 14-16.

¹⁰ William Montgomerie, "Breaking of Bread," in his *Time and Time Again* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1985), 8-13; Neil Dickson, ed., *An Island Shore: the Life and Work of Robert Rendall* (Lerwick: The Orkney Press, 1990).

Robert Pollok, whose astonishingly successful epic, *The Course of Time* (1827), was bought by Blackwood for £2,500 and went on to sell tens of thousands of copies on both sides of the Atlantic, became one of the three or four most popular poems of the first half of the nineteenth century. Yet by the end of the nineteenth century readers were much less appreciative of Pollok's emphatic Calvinism, and *The Course of Time* was quietly forgotten, unmentioned even in such comprehensive literary histories as the multi-volume works published by Aberdeen and Edinburgh university presses, in which Pollok appears merely as the writer of sentimental fiction about the Covenanters.¹¹ The author that emerges from the pages of this kind of artful canonical amnesia is arguably the creative equivalent of Hogg before the recovery of interest in his *Justified Sinner*. But Irvine's powerful and compelling argument, based upon his very astute account of efforts to "domesticate Presbyterianism," deserves fuller consideration than this afterword can afford.

There is, as always, more work to be done. As several contributors insist, there remains a need for theological literacy among literary critics who write about the textual artefacts of a culture that took its catechetical processes extremely seriously. But, as other contributors imply, fully to appreciate the changing role of religion in Scottish literary history we may need both to develop more explicitly religious interpretative practices, and also to draw on the perspectives and methodologies of other disciplinary traditions.

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¹¹ Crawford Gribben, "Scottish Romanticism, Evangelicalism and Robert Pollok's *The Course of Time* (1827)," *Romanticism*, 21.1 (2015), 25-36.