

John Knox's Life & Early Writings

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BOOK REVIEW ARTICLE

Selected Writings of John Knox

Public Epistles, Treatises, and Expositions to the Year 1559

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The lot of the majority of mankind through most of recorded history has been one of labour, poverty and misery. All this has been brought upon us by the effects of the fall. There have, of course, always been privileged and wealthy individuals but it is only relatively recently that the greatest part of our population has enjoyed adequate food, housing and medical care, and in this we are relatively fortunate compared with some ninety per cent of the world's inhabitants. Certainly there has been material progress, but the twentieth century also experienced a degree of barbarism unknown to previous generations.

Now the position in Scotland was no exception. Indeed the misery was compounded, even compared with England, by the harshness of the climate and the poverty of the soil. In addition, a corrupt priesthood, apt representatives of the Antichrist, had gathered into their hands some half of all the wealth while the various lords were ever liable to rebel against the king. That the king was not immune to trouble is shown by the melancholy history of the first five Jameses (II to V being sons of the preceding King).

James I (1394-1437) crowned 1424 was murdered aged c. 43.

James II (1430-1460) crowned 1437 killed in an accident aged c. 30.

James III (1451-1488) crowned 1460 was murdered aged c. 37.

James IV (1473-1513) crowned 1488 was slain at Flodden aged c. 40, along with the flower of his nation.

James V (1512-1542) died at Falkland aged c. 30 following the rout at Solway Firth.

Mary, Queen of Scots (1542-1587), the daughter of James V was banished to England and executed at c. 45.

Only when we come to James VI & I of England (1565-1625), Mary's son (possibly fathered by Rizzio), do we get a reasonable life span.

It seems to the reviewer that it is probably difficult to review this selection, taken from Knox's collected works and "Englished," without at the same time saying something about Knox's life and times, as the various pieces are not the reflections of a quiet scholar but necessarily sprang out of the circumstances of his life. It used to be supposed that Knox was born in 1505; however, later work has settled on 1515 though I have also seen 1514 and 1513 quoted, so the following numbers are approximate. At this time Erasmus, the greatest scholar and humanist of his day was 50 and had another 21 years to live. Luther was 32 and had, after a long spiritual struggle, grasped the doctrine of justification by faith alone a few years earlier. John Calvin was 6 and Henry VIII was the young ruler of England. It was a time of Renaissance, but not yet of Reformation. Christendom was of relatively small extent in the whole world, and the lowlands of Scotland represented the northernmost limit—the highlands for the main being inhabited by rude barbaric tribesmen.

Into this situation was born God's prepared instrument for the Reformation of Scotland, an event which has marked the Scottish from that time forward with that diligence, independence, intelligence and high seriousness which is so characteristic of the best, even when they abuse Knox's name and have built a car park over his grave! Now in all this pain and poverty there was one redeeming feature. The "church" necessarily supported education and though Scotland was one of the poorest nations, "it already vied in every branch of learning with the most favoured countries."

Knox was born to a modest family who were able to give him a liberal education and send him to St. Andrews. He was ordained into the Roman priesthood but around 1542 professed himself a Protestant and renounced Roman Catholicism. For a period he acted as George Wishart's bodyguard, but following the latter's burning for heresy and the subsequent murder of Cardinal Beaton, Protestants seized the Castle of St. Andrews, and Knox sought refuge there.

While living in the castle, giving instruction to the young under his care and supporting John Rough, the preacher with advice, he was called by the congregation to undertake the work of the ministry. Shortly after he

preached his first sermon, he was engaged in dispute with his popish adversaries. The first piece in this volume, "Knox's Call to the Ministry and First Public Debate" (1547), taken from his *History of the Reformation in Scotland*, recounts the story. It is instructive to note how reluctant Knox was to take up the task, though he had long prepared himself for it. Instead of thrusting himself into the office, he only accepted it because he believed he had a lawful call. Thereafter he gave himself fully to the work.

Shortly after the castle was besieged and surrendered to the French, Knox was imprisoned and served in the galleys for nineteen months before being released. Meanwhile Henry VIII died and the Reformation, which had got off to a distinctly shaky start in England, was making better progress under his son the youthful Edward VI (1537-1553). Cranmer invited learned protestants from Germany and placed them as professors in the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge to ensure a future supply of godly ministers. Meanwhile there was an urgent need for the present, and the help of Knox was more than welcome. He and others were employed by the English government to exercise an itinerant ministry, in his case primarily and appropriately in Berwick-on-Tweed and subsequently in Newcastle. Many were converted from popery through Knox's labours, but this provoked the enmity of the clergy, mostly bigoted papists, and the bishop of the diocese, Tonsal of Durham. An assembly, which accused Knox of "teaching that the sacrifice of the mass was idolatrous," was convened in Newcastle on the 4th April, 1550, before the bishop and the learned men of the cathedral. Knox, whose motto was "Spare no arrows!" defended his position with vigour. The second item in this volume, "A Vindication of the Doctrine that the Sacrifice of the Mass is Idolatry" (1550), contains his argument. Basically he offered a syllogism:

All worship invented by man is idolatry.

The mass is an invention of man.

The mass is proven to be idolatry.

"This defence," notes Dr. M'Crie, "had the effect of extending Knox's fame through the North of England, while it completely silenced the bishop and his learned assistants."

One Sunday during his residence in Berwick, there came a great lady, Elizabeth Bowes. She was an example of those unhappy souls who, though grasping the biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone, continue in some spiritual perplexity. She showed him no little kindness and he sought

to help her in her spiritual difficulties. She had two sons and ten daughters—and of the latter four never married and five married into good families. Knox married their tenth child, Marjory.

In 1551, he is also appointed a court preacher. He was instrumental in effecting certain changes in the Prayer Book Communion Service and these, included in 1662 on the occasion of the Restoration have continued to this day! He also had a hand in revising the 42, now 39, Articles. Knox prudently declined the offer of the bishopric of Rochester in 1552 and the living of All Hallows in London in 1553. The death of Edward and the accession of “Bloody” Mary that year and the re-establishment of popery left him effectively unemployed. He continued his preaching as long and beyond the time when it was prudent to do so. There was then no opportunity of returning to Scotland and he had no formal charge in England so he headed to northern England, perhaps hoping to see his wife and mother-in-law. But now his enemies were waiting for him. He therefore availed himself of our Lord’s direction: “But when they persecute you in this city, flee ye into another.” He took a boat to Dieppe. Had he not done so he would doubtless simply added one more to the melancholy list of some of those who were martyred under Mary given in the back of this volume. But God had other and valuable work for his servant to perform.

It seems clear from his correspondence that Knox had misgivings about his flight, wondering whether it might not appear cowardly or weaken the hearts of those who had now to face the idolatry of the mass. But his unusual leisure left him opportunity to write and the next three items, not we think in chronological order, were published from Dieppe. First, there is a valuable “Treatise on Prayer” (1553). In it he reminds us that “we find the most holy men most dejected and humbled in prayer.”

Also he had been constantly consulted by Mrs. Bowes, both in person and in writing and to her he addressed “An Exposition Upon the Sixth Psalm of David” (1553), the first of the penitential psalms. We tend to think of Knox as an unbending man, but here we find the pastoral heart, pouring in the balm of Christ’s gospel upon a troubled soul. I was struck by his comment on “‘Thy kingdom come’: which petition asks that sin may cease; that death may be devoured; that transitory troubles may have an end; that Satan may be trodden under our feet; that the whole body of Christ may be restored to life, liberty, and joy; that the powers and kingdoms of this earth may be dissolved and destroyed; and that God the Fa-

ther may be all in all things, after that his Son Christ Jesus has rendered up the kingdom for ever." It is an interesting insight into Knox's eschatological thinking. One is struck in reading it not only by its pastoral but also practical tone.

Third there is "A Godly Letter of Warning or Admonition to the Faithful in London, Newcastle, and Berwick" (1553). As we have seen, during the period between Knox's release from the French galleys and his return to France following the accession of Mary, he had been constantly engaged in teaching and preaching and it had pleased God to bless his labours and call many to the profession of the faith. But now these Protestants faced a sad choice. Romanism was re-established throughout the realm. Either they went to mass and its consequent idolatry—and many who had made profession did just that, to Knox's great grief—or they were visibly absent and liable to be questioned by the authorities, imprisoned and burnt to death. Now in a sense there is nothing new about that. When King Nebuchadnezzar had set up his golden statue there may well have been other Jews present who bowed down to it, but Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego did not, and were cast into the flaming fiery furnace for their pains. The aged Polycarp could have saved his life by emperor worship, but instead he went to the lions. And now the Christians in the realm had the same choice. "Flee from idolatry," wrote Paul; "keep yourselves from idols" commanded John. To the oppressed Protestants, Knox addressed this letter of admonition, and we see the pastor's heart and his concern for the sheep. The whole piece is worth reading and considering. We are not normally constrained to idolatry by the fear of death, but certainly some have had to abandon old friends and lifetime habits in the apostasy which increasingly swamps our day. We give part of his conclusion in the original (with a little patience it can be made out):

Let it be knawn to your posteritie that ye wer Christianis, and no ydolateris; that ye learnit Chryst in tyme of rest, and baldlie professit him in tyme of trubill. The preceptis, think ye, are scharpe and hard to be observit; and yet agane I affirme, that comparit with the plagis that sall assuredlie fall upon obstinat ydolateris, they salbe fund easie and lycht. For avoyding of ydolatrie ye may perchance be compellit to live your native contrie and realme; but oeyris of ydolatrie without end salbe

compellit to burne in hell: for avoyding ydolatrie your substance salbe spoillit; but for obeying ydolatrie heavenly ryches salbe lost: for avoyding of ydolatrie ye may fall in the handis of earthlie tirantis; but obeyeris, manteaneris, and consentaris to ydolatrie sall not eschape the handis of the liveing God: for avoyding of ydolatrie your children salbe depryvit of father, friendis, ryches, and of rest; but be obeying ydolatrie they salbe left without God, without the knowlege of his word, and without hoip of his kingdome ...

Next Knox left Dieppe and travelled to Switzerland, taking the opportunity of consulting with noted divines upon various issues. On a later visit he went to Geneva, was warmly received by Calvin, and an intimate friendship was commenced terminated only by the death of the French Reformer. Returning to Dieppe, a practice he kept up during his time on the Continent in order to receive information and letters, he addressed "Two Comfortable Epistles to his Afflicted Brethren in England" (1554) encouraging them to stand firm and assuring them that God would take vengeance on their persecutors. Meanwhile persecution increased in England; many professing Protestants were returning externally to Rome and partaking of the Mass. Stronger measures were needed and they came in "A Faithful Admonition to the Professors of God's Truth in England" (1554). Take this sample from Knox:

Speak now, O you Papists! and defend your monstrous mistress; ...Who sees not now that she, in all her doings, declares most manifestly that under an English name she bears a Spaniard's heart? If God (I say) had not for our scourge suffered her and her cruel council to have come to authority, then never could these their abominations, cruelty, and treason—against God, against his saints, and against the realm whose liberties they are sworn to defend—so manifestly have been declared ... And what is the cause that Winchester, and the rest of his pestilent sect, so greedily would have a Spaniard to reign over England? The cause is manifest. For as that whole nation surmounts all others in pride and licentiousness, so, for idolatry, vain papistical pride and devilish ceremonies, they may rightly

be called the very sons of superstition. And therefore are they found and judged, by the progeny of Antichrist, most apt instruments to maintain, establish, and defend the kingdom of that cruel beast ...

This is frankly a vigorous piece and Knox has been censured for it, but as McCrie says,

What terms were too strong for stigmatizing the execrable system of persecution coolly projected by the dissembling, vindictive Gardiner, the brutal barbarity of the bloody Bonner, or the unrelenting, insatiable cruelty of Mary, who, having extinguished the feelings of humanity, and divested herself of the tenderness which characterizes her sex, continued to issue orders for the murder of her subjects, until her own husband, bigoted and unfeeling as he was, turned with disgust from the spectacle, and to urge to fresh severities the willing instruments of her cruelty, after they were sated with blood!

But it is also a pastoral letter:

Remember, brethren, that God's vengeance plagued not Pharaoh the first year of his tyranny. Neither did the dogs devour and consume both the flesh and bones of wicked Jezebel, when she first set up her idolatry; and yet as none of them escaped due punishment, so did God preserve his afflicted church, in despite of Satan, and of his blind and most wretched servants; and he shall not fail to do in this great tempest and darkness within the realm of England. And therefore yet again, beloved in the Lord, let the comfort of God's promises somewhat quicken your dull spirits. Exercise yourselves now secretly, in revolving that which sometimes you have heard openly proclaimed in your ears; and be every man now a faithful preacher unto his brother. If your communication be of Christ, assuredly he will come before you are aware. His word is like unto sweet-smelling ointment, or fragrant flowers, which never can be moved or handled, but the odor goes forth to the comfort

of those who stand by—which is not so delectable if the ointment remains within the box, and the flowers stand or lie without touching or motion.

We do well to remember that Mary, born 1516, ascended the throne in 1553; married her cousin Philip of Spain in 1554, imagined herself to be pregnant and died in 1558! She was succeeded by her half-sister Elizabeth, born 1533, who reigned until 1603.

For a time Knox ministered to the refugees in Frankfort, until driven out by the ungodly behaviour of Dr. Cox a newly arrived refugee. He then returned to Geneva, and settled down to the study of Hebrew!¹ But after an urgent request coming from his mother-in-law, he took ship and landing on the east coast near the border, he repaired to Berwick. Here he found “his wife and her mother in comfortable circumstances, enjoying the happiness of religious society with several individuals in that city, who, like themselves, had not ‘bowed the knee’ to the established idolatry, nor consented to ‘receive the mark’ of antichrist.” Slipping over the border he came to Edinburgh. Perhaps after eight years he thought his name would be forgotten. But no! John Knox has come. Mary Tudor may reign in England and Mary of Guise rule in Scotland, but both nations were heartily tired of Rome and ready for reformation. Throughout the late autumn and winter and spring of 1555, he taught and preached and administered communion. It was a time of harvest and many of the nobility were won to the truth. It could not continue. Meanwhile the English congregation in Geneva had called him to the pastorate, and sending his wife and mother-in-law and servant ahead of him to Dieppe in due time he joined them and they proceeded to Geneva.

Mindful of the needs of those left behind we find three works, included here, addressed to them: “A Notable and Comfortable Exposition upon

¹ How very striking! Latin he had known from his youth. Greek, though long known on the continent, only came to Scotland in 1534 and Knox probably acquired it from Wishart. Some measure of French was doubtless painfully acquired in the galleys and thereafter by his residence in Dieppe. Hitherto he had no opportunity of studying Hebrew. But he was a minister of the Word, and he saw it as his duty to be able to read that word in the originals which he endeavoured to preach. While happily acknowledging the good work done by a multitude who had only the Authorised Version to preach from, would not some of the unhappy divisions which subsist among us be solved if all ministers followed Knox's example?

Matthew IV, Concerning the Temptations of Christ in the Wilderness” (1556), “Answers to Some Questions Concerning Baptism, etc.” (1556) and “A Letter of Wholesome Counsel Addressed to His Brethren in Scotland” (1556). The first gives us an example of Knox’s pulpit style; from the second we see that he did not advise re-baptism even when done under the papacy; in the third there is practical advice as to what is to be done where there was no constituted Reformed congregation.

Now such are our times that, four and a half centuries on, many believers find themselves in just such a position. Here is part of his advice:

And therefore, dear brethren, if you look for a life to come, of necessity it is that you exercise yourselves in the book of the Lord your God. Let no day slip or want some comfort received from the mouth of God. Open your ears and he will speak even pleasant things to your heart. Close not your eyes, but diligently let them behold what portion of substance is left to you within your Father’s testament. Let your tongues learn to praise the gracious goodness of him, whose mere mercy has called you from darkness to light, and from death to life. Neither yet may you do this so quietly that you will admit of no witness. No, brethren, you are ordained of God to rule your own houses in his true fear, and according to his word. Within your houses, I say, in some cases you are bishops and kings; your wife, children, servants, and family are your bishopric and charge. Of you it shall be required how carefully and diligently you have always instructed them in God’s true knowledge, how you have studied to plant true knowledge in them, and [to] repress vice (p. 331).

He goes on to call for assemblies of brethren to meet weekly and confer on the Scriptures and gives advice on how their worship is to be conducted. Those similarly situated today would do well to read and heed his suggestions.

Persecution now raged in England, France and across much of Europe. But Geneva was a little sanctuary. John Bale wrote

Is it not wonderful that Spaniards, Italians, Scots, Englishmen, Frenchmen, Germans, disagreeing in manners, speech and ap-

parel, sheep and wolves, bulls and bears, being coupled only with the yoke of Christ, should live so lovingly and friendly?

Here Knox had a loving and intelligent congregation to pastor; here he could enjoy family life and in due course two sons were born to him and Marjory; here he could make his contribution to that great Geneva Bible, the best translation since Tyndale only to be succeeded half a century later by our Authorised Version. But after an urgent call come from Scotland, and having consulted Calvin and others, he felt he must accept. He travelled to Dieppe only to find himself faced with fresh letters and faint hearts. This called forth his expostulation, "Letters to His Brethren, and the Lords Professing the Truth in Scotland" (1557), of 27th October, 1st December and 17th December all from Dieppe. In the first he rebukes the lords' inconstancy; in the second, he bears testimony against Anabaptism, Antinomianism, and Independency (the problems do not change down the passing centuries); in the third he writes "not so much to instruct you, as to animate and to encourage in that most godly work, which once you have purposed." He is anxious they do not rebel against constituted authority in things lawful but also that they boldly profess the faith and seek to defend their brethren from persecution and tyranny. There seems to have been some delay in getting replies from Scotland and Knox was invited back to Geneva and his old congregation.

Meanwhile the bloody murder of Protestants in England under Mary continued. Was it this which called forth Knox's most celebrated pamphlet and the one by which he is best known: "The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women" (1558?). Whatever one may think of his arguments (and Calvin advised against publication) politically this was, as we shall see, a disastrous work.

Then, perhaps somewhat inconsistently, comes an augmented version of the "Letter to the Queen Dowager, Regent of Scotland" (1558) arguing her duty to reform religion. This is followed by "The Appellation from the Sentence Pronounced by the Bishops and Clergy: Addressed to the Nobility and Estates of Scotland" (1558) where Knox argues that "the punishment of idolatry does not appertain to kings only, but also to the whole people ..." (p. 514), and then a "Letter Addressed to the Commonalty of Scotland" (1558). They all have a duty and place in reforming the church.

As we have seen at an earlier stage Knox's ministry had been blessed in Berwick and Newcastle, but under the threat of fire many of the converts had recommenced attendance upon the Mass. This reversion to idolatry calls forth a pained response in "An Epistle to the Inhabitants of Newcastle and Berwick" (1558). Then on November 17 Queen Mary died! Now all is changed. Queen Elizabeth ascends the throne, the country reverts to Protestantism, and most of the English refugees begin to stream home. In January Knox publishes the last piece contained in this volume, "A Brief Exhortation to England, for the Speedy Embracing of the Gospel Heretofore by the Tyranny of Mary Suppressed and Banished," arguing for a more complete reformation than that carried on under Edward.

Now observe the providence of God. Under Edward, Knox had been a court preacher and a man of power and influence in England. Leaving Geneva in January, he reaches Dieppe in March, and applies for a pass through England but is refused! Elizabeth knew all about the "Blast" and the arguments directed at her half-sister could equally apply to her! Knox is refused passage! Eventually he finds a boat in late April which takes him direct to Scotland. Unknown to him the Reformation had been making good progress against the court. But Mary of Guise was fighting back and the situation was critical, when the cry went up and was carried across Scotland: "John Knox is come!" But the story of how the Reformation was won in Scotland and of Knox's main part in that belongs beyond the limit of this volume.

There are important issues raised by Knox's writings. How far may people disobey their rulers? What is the duty of rulers in putting down idolatry? In little more than a century the first was resolved in terms of a constitutional monarchy. The second yet remains with us. There is much in this volume that should attract the attention of the thoughtful Christian.

It only remains to add that the book is beautifully produced. Recommended.