

FLEMING DAVID HAY

THE STORY OF THE
SCOTTISH COVENANTS IN
OUTLINE

David Fleming

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Covenants in Outline**

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Note

This short sketch was written as an Introduction to the recent edition of the late Rev. J. H. Thomson's "Martyr Graves of Scotland." The publishers having now resolved to issue my sketch separately as a convenient summary of the covenanting struggle, I have revised and considerably enlarged it.

No Englishman, it has been said, can distinguish the National Covenant from the Solemn League and Covenant. It is to be feared that many Scotchmen are in the same case. The Covenants, indeed, have been sadly mixed up even by native historians; and comparatively few people seem to have any idea of the number of these religious bonds.

D. H. F.

May 1904.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROMINENT FIGURES

Beginning at the left hand is Johnston of Warriston showing a letter to the Earl of Argyll, while Lord Eglinton is in the rear. Two ladies come next – the Marchioness of Hamilton, in widow's weeds, seated, with Lady Kenmure standing beside her. The group around the tombstone includes Lord Rothes in the act of signing the document, Lord Louden, Lord Lothian, and the Earl of Sutherland; while Montrose is on the near side. Then there are Hope of Craighall, with the Rev. Samuel Rutherford, and in the foreground, standing on a tombstone, is the Rev. Alexander Henderson.

The Story of the SCOTTISH COVENANTS in Outline

Scotland is pre-eminently the land of the Covenant, and the land is flowered with martyr graves. When the covenanting cause was in the ascendant, many were willing to appear on its side who cared little for it in reality; but when it waned, and, after the Restoration, the time of trial came, the half-hearted changed sides, or fell away like leaves in autumn, and the love of many waxed cold. Then it was that the faithful remnant stood revealed and grew still more faithful.

While they were opposed and oppressed by some of their former associates, they were, on the other hand, reinforced by the accession of outstanding men, like Richard Cameron and Thomas Forrester, who, in their earlier years, had complied with Prelacy; and by others, like James Renwick, Patrick Walker, and Sergeant Nisbet, who were born after the persecution had actually commenced. Men, and even women, were found ready and willing to endure all hardships, and to brave an ignominious death, rather than relinquish or compromise the principles which they held so dear, and to which, as they believed, the nation was bound by solemn covenants.

Bands or Covenants

The story of religious covenanting in Scotland covers a long period. The covenants, or bands as they were frequently called, may be divided into three classes – public, semi-public, and private – and the influence of each has been felt at some of the most critical periods in the history of the country.

Personal Covenants

The private or personal covenant, in which the individual Christian gave up himself, or herself, formally to the service of God, helped many a one to walk straight in crooked and trying times. These private transactions were neither less solemn nor less sacred because the knowledge of them was confined to the covenanter and his Lord.

A Specimen

Many specimens of these old personal covenants have been preserved, and they throw a vivid light on a type of earnest piety, which, it is to be feared, is rather rare in the present day. One of these came into my hands twenty years ago, inside a copy of Patrick Gillespie's well-known work, "The Ark of the Testament Opened." The book was printed at London in 1661, and is still in the original binding, but the old brown calf had given way at the joints, and so one of the previous owners had it rebacked. Fortunately, the binder preserved the fly-leaves, on which there are a number of jottings and dates; and on one of them there is a genuine personal covenant, written and signed by Francis Wark. He had written this covenant on that side of the last fly-leaf which was next to the board, and had then pasted the edges carefully down to the board, so that no one could see that there was any writing there. After being hidden for more than a century and a half, it was revealed by the binder. As it is very short, it may be quoted as an example: —

"I, Francis Wark, doe hereby testifie and declair that I, being a poor miserable sinner deserving hell and wrath, and that vengeance is my due, and I, not being able to deliver myself from wrath nor satisfie the justice of God for my guilt, doe this day betake myself to the righteousnes of Jesws Christ, fulie renouncing all righteousnes in my self, and betakes me to his mercy; and likways that I take the true God, who made the heavns and the earth and gave me a being upon the world, to be my God and my portion (renouncing the devill the world and the flesh), and resigns up myself sowll and body to be his in tyme and through all the ages of endless eternity, even to him who is one God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; and I take Jesws Christ for my Saviour, my Priest, Prophet and King, and engadges to be for him and his glory, whill I have a being upon the earth: in witnes quhereof I have subscribed this with my hand, Glasgow the 21 day of May 1693,
"Francis Wark."

God our Portion

Documents of this kind help one to understand the reply of the covenanter's wife when the dragoons were driving away all the cattle in her husband's absence. A soldier, who had not altogether lost his feelings of humanity, turned back to her and said: "Puir woman, I'm sorry for you." "Puir!" she exclaimed, "I'm no puir; the Lord is my portion, and ye canna mak me puir!"

There is still some uncertainty as to the precise date when public or semi-public religious covenanting was adopted in Scotland.

Supposed Band of 1556

In speaking of his own preaching in 1556, Knox tells that, at that time, most of the gentlemen of the Mearns “refuissed all societie with idolatrie, and *band thame selfis*, to the uttermost of thare poweris, to manteane the trew preaching of the Evangell of Jesus Christ, as God should offer unto thame preachearis and oportunitie.” Dr M’Crie understood this to mean that these gentlemen “entered into a solemn and mutual bond, in which they renounced the Popish communion, and engaged to maintain and promote the pure preaching of the Gospel, as Providence should favour them with opportunities.” In David Laing’s opinion, Knox’s words do not necessarily imply that the mutual agreement or resolution referred to actually assumed the form of a written “band” or covenant. If it did, Knox has not embodied it in his “History,” nor is any copy known to exist.

Band of 1557

But as to the reality, the nature, and the precise date of the band of 1557, there is no room for dubiety. Knox was on the Continent when it was entered into; but he relates the circumstances which called it forth, explains the object it was meant to serve, and gives a copy of the document itself, as well as the names of the principal men who signed it. The leaders of the Reforming party resolved to persist in their purpose, to commit themselves and their all into God's hands, rather than allow idolatry manifestly to reign, rather than suffer the subjects of the realm to be defrauded as they had been of the preaching of Christ's Evangel. "And that everie ane should be the more assured of other, a commoun band was maid, and by some subscribed."

Calderwood derived his copy of the document, and his account of the circumstances which called it forth, from Knox. Fully forty years ago an original copy of the band was found, and is now in the National Museum of Antiquities, Edinburgh. It only bears five signatures, those of Argyll, Glencairn, Morton, Lorne, and John Erskine. The day of the month is left blank; but the one which Knox followed is dated "the thrid day of December." Knox also says that it was subscribed by many others. The explanation probably is that (as in 1638) a number of original copies were made, and signed by the leaders before being sent out for additional names.

This band of 1557, like those of a later date, is remarkable for the clearness, the directness, and the vigour of its language, but unlike them it can hardly be regarded as a public document. To have exhibited it then to all and sundry would have been to court persecution, perhaps death. "To those who agreed with them," says Buchanan, "they presented bonds for their subscription. These first assumed the name of 'the Congregation,' which those who followed afterward rendered more celebrated." Although there are barely two hundred and fifty words in the band of 1557, the Protestant party is mentioned in it seven times as the Congregation. It was nearly five months after the date of this band before Walter Mill was consigned to the flames

Bands of 1559

The year 1559 was rendered notable in Scotland by the return of Knox, by the open rupture between the Congregation and the Queen Regent, and by the rapid progress of Protestantism. In the summer of that year the Reformers deemed it advisable to enter into at least three distinct covenants, their respective dates being the 31st of May, the 13th of July, and the 1st of August. None of the originals of these is known to have survived, but copies of all the three have been preserved. They had for their general object the advancement of the Reformation, but each had its own distinctive traits and special end. The first was entered into at Perth, the second at Edinburgh, and the third at Stirling. The second was adopted in St Andrews as the “letteris of junctioun to the Congregatioun,” and as such was taken by more than three hundred persons.

Rupture of French Alliance

Not the least striking result of the Reformation was the complete bursting up of the ancient alliance between France and Scotland, and the drawing together of Scotland and England – that England which Scotland had so long and so recently regarded as its “auld enemy.” The importance of this result is frankly acknowledged by Teulet, one of the most competent, careful, and candid of French historical students. He puts the matter thus: “Scotland, which was for so many ages the devoted ally of France, the rein, as our ancient kings said, with which they restrained the encroachments of England, was unwilling to abdicate its nationality and become a French province. Moreover, the unbridled excesses of the French troops in Scotland, no less than the shameless rapacity of the French agents, at last aroused a general spirit of resistance, and England soon found in the rupture of the ancient alliance between France and Scotland an ample indemnification for the loss of Calais.”

French Excesses

The enormities of the French in Scotland were so great, that Mary of Guise, in writing to her brothers, affirmed that the peasantry were in consequence so reduced to despair that they frequently committed suicide. Although these unbridled excesses are enough to explain the revulsion of feeling towards the French, they do not quite account for the sudden alteration towards the English. The change, indeed, was so sudden and so unlikely that some Southerners thought, and naturally thought, it was “a traine to betrappe” their nation.

Scots and English

So great had been the Scotch hatred of the English, that, from the French who came over to help them after Pinkie, they were said to have bought English prisoners, that they might have the pleasure of putting them to death, although they could ill afford the price which they paid ungrudgingly. This hatred, so bitter, so fierce, and so recent, could not have been wiped out by any French oppression had not the Scots been now finding themselves ranged on the same side as the English in the great religious struggle, which was submerging old feuds, breaking up old compacts, and turning the world upside down.

Band of 1560

The oppression by the French, and the help expected from the English army, are both referred to in the band or covenant entered into on the 27th of April 1560. Knox says that this band was made by “all the nobilitie, barronis, and gentilmen, professing Chryst Jesus in Scotland,” and by “dyveris utheris that joynit with us, for expelling of the Frenche army; amangis quham the Erle of Huntlie was principall.” He does not name any other person who signed, although he copied the band itself into his “History”; but the original document was found among the Hamilton MSS., and it bears about a hundred and fifty signatures of noblemen and gentlemen, including those of the Duke of Chatelherault, the Earls of Arran, Huntly, Argyll, Glencairn, Rothes, and Morton, James Stewart (afterwards the Regent Murray), and the Abbots of Kinloss, Coupar, and Kilwinning. All those who adhibited their names did not do so on the same day. Huntly signed on the 28th of April; Morton and twenty-seven others on the 6th of May.

Treaty of Edinburgh

The French had fortified Leith, but were so hard pressed by the English and the Scots that they were constrained to make the Treaty of Edinburgh, with Queen Elizabeth's representatives, on the 6th of July 1560. It was by that treaty, or rather – to be more strictly accurate – in virtue of the concessions in the separate “accord” between the French and the Scots of the same date, and which is referred to in the treaty, that the Scots were able to throw off for ever the merciless tyranny of their old allies and the unbearable yoke of the Papacy. These concessions provided for a meeting of Parliament; and next month that Parliament repealed the Acts favouring the Church of Rome, abolished the Pope's jurisdiction in Scotland, prohibited the celebration of mass under pain of death for the third conviction, and ratified the Confession of Faith drawn up by Knox, Wynram, Spottiswoode, Willock, Douglas, and Row.

Mary Queen of Scots returned from France to her own country in August 1561, and a year later made her first northern progress, in which she went as far as Inverness. Huntly, notwithstanding his having signed the band of 1560, was regarded as the lay head of the Papists in Scotland, and grave doubts were entertained by many of the Protestants as to the results of this progress of the young Queen.

Band of 1562

Knox was then in Ayrshire, and, alarmed by the rumours which reached him, he prevailed on many of the barons and gentlemen of that county to enter into another band, or covenant, at Ayr, on the 4th of September 1562, in order to be prepared for any attempt that might be made to put down Protestantism. It does not appear that it had any influence on the course of events in the North, but it probably had a considerable, though indirect, influence in restraining those in the South, who might have been inclined to help Huntly had there been any prospect of their being able to do so successfully. Those who took the band were not called upon to show their faithfulness in the field. Huntly – through perversity, stupidity, or suspicion – put himself completely out of the Queen’s graces. His forces were defeated, he died on the field of battle, one of his sons was executed, and another imprisoned.

The Queen's Demission

On Thursday, the 24th of July 1567, the Queen, then a prisoner in Loch Leven Castle, was prevailed upon (by threats, she afterwards said) to demit the government in favour of her infant son, James, then thirteen months old. The General Assembly had met on the preceding Monday in the Over Tolbooth of Edinburgh; and on Friday, the 25th, the nobles, barons, and commissioners of towns, who were present, agreed to and subscribed certain "articles."

Articles of 1567

These articles really formed a band for subverting the mass, destroying monuments of idolatry, setting up the true religion through the whole realm, increasing ministers' stipends, reforming schools, colleges, and universities, easing the poor of their teinds, punishing vice, crimes, and offences, especially the murder of Darnley, defending the young prince, bringing him up in the fear of God, and obliging future kings and rulers to promise, before their coronation and inauguration, to maintain, defend, and set forward, the true religion. The subscribers also consented and offered "to reforme themselves according to the Booke of God." In all they numbered about eighty. Of these, two or three certainly knew of the plot against Darnley before it was carried out; and they may have subscribed these articles to avert suspicion.

St Bartholomew's Massacre

The dreadful massacre of the Huguenots, begun in Paris on St Bartholomew's day 1572, excited consternation and horror in Scotland. Believing that all the other Protestants in Europe were to be similarly dealt with, the Privy Council summoned a convention, to be held at Edinburgh on the 20th of October, to consider the impending danger and the means by which it might be averted. Unfortunately for the success of the convention, the lieges had been summoned to meet at Jedburgh on the 22nd to make a raid upon the border thieves; and the Earl of Mar, then Regent, was drawing near his end at Stirling. None of the nobles and few of the lairds attended the convention; but a number of proposals were agreed to, that they might be sent to the Regent and the Privy Council. One of these proposals was that a public humiliation, or fast, should be held throughout the whole of Scotland during the last eight days of November. Another was that the Protestants of the realm should enter into a solemn band, that they might be ready on all occasions to resist the enemy. There is evidence to show that the fast was observed in Edinburgh; but, if the band was ever drawn up, no copy of it seems to have survived, nor any record of its having been entered into. The suggestion, however, was not fruitless. In the following January, Parliament enacted that no one should be reputed a loyal subject to the King, but should be punished as a rebel, who did not profess the true religion; and that those who had made profession thereof, and yet had departed from their due obedience to his Majesty, should not be received to his mercy and favour, until they anew gave confession of their faith; and promised to continue "in the confessioun of the trew religioun" in time coming, and to maintain the King's authority; and also that they would, "at the uttermost of thair power, fortifie, assist and mantene the trew preichouris and professouris of Christis religioun," against all enemies and gainstanders of the same, of whatever nation, estate, or degree, who had bound themselves, or assisted, to set forward and execute the cruel decrees of the Council of Trent, injuriously called, by the adversaries of God's truth, "The Haly League." By this time the "Tulchan Bishops" had been obtruded on the Church of Scotland.

The King's Confession

All the earlier covenants were eclipsed in interest and importance by the one drawn up by John Craig, and commonly called “The King's Confession,” sometimes “The Second Confession of Faith,” and sometimes “The Negative Confession.” In it the corruptions of the Papacy are denounced and renounced in terse language and with refreshing vigour. As John Row puts it: “This was the touch-stone to try and discern Papists from Protestants.” And yet, notwithstanding its searching and solemn words, it failed in at least one notable instance as a touch-stone. The original document, signed by James the Sixth and his household on the 28th of January 1580-81, found its way to France, but fortunately was sent back again to this country – to Scot of Scotstarvit – and is now in the Advocates' Library. This covenant was subscribed in 1581 by all ranks and classes of the people.

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