doi:10.1111/j.1741-2005.2007.00150.x

# Comment: *Scottish Dominicans, 1480-1560*

Saint Dominic died at Bologna on 6 August 1221. The Dominicans reached Oxford a few days later, on the feast of the Assumption. The first house in Scotland was founded at Edinburgh in 1230, no doubt at the behest of Alexander II, King of Scots. The founding group was led by Clement, probably born in Scotland, clothed by Matthew of Paris in 1219, and a teaching member of the Oxford community: he was to become bishop of Dunblane, where he would undertake massive rebuilding of the twelfth-century cathedral (restored in the late nineteenth century and well worth visiting).

The first list of Dominican houses in Scotland, eleven in number, was drawn up in 1297 by the English government during their occupation, ordaining payments to be made to the friars from burgh revenues. If this was meant to win the friars over, it seems not to have done so: the Dominicans in Ayr allegedly massacred the English soldiers billeted on their property. Robert Bruce, after the victory over the English at Bannockburn in 1314, divided the richly embroidered silks from the English royal tent among the friars, for vestments and altar cloths. In 1436, King James I was assassinated in the Dominican priory at Perth, while the papal legate waited to convoke a church council. In 1495 John Carr OP received, from the crown, eight bolls of malted barley for the making of *aquavite*: the first mention of whisky (so Dr Foggie says) in a Scottish source.

In 1481 the Order established an independent province in Scotland, 'at the insistence and request' of King James III. By then the authority of the English Provincial over the friars in Scotland was probably fairly nominal.

The rest of the story is now well told, by Janet P. Foggie, in her fine book, *Renaissance Religion in Urban Scotland: The Dominican Order, 1450-1560* (Studies in Medieval and Reformation Thought, Brill: Leiden 2003). (Dr Foggie, born in 1971, married with children, is a Church of Scotland minister.)

James IV (1473-1513), the only truly Renaissance monarch in Scotland, exploited the Church for his own political and financial ends, yet he was also generous, though preferring the Franciscans. He supplicated Pope Alexander VI to allow Bishop Elphinstone to found the University of Aberdeen in 1495. He used his authority in 1510 to launch the Aberdeen Breviary as a national service book. He

© The author 2007. Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2007, 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK, and 350 Main Street, Malden MA 02148, USA

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2007.00150.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

proposed to join or even lead a crusade against the Turks, which Pope Julius II (himself a ruthless warlord) dismissed as wildly impractical. In 1513, incomprehensibly, James IV invaded England and was killed along with thousands of others, comprehensively defeated at Flodden.

During his last decade James IV presided over a truly albeit modestly brilliant Renaissance court, with musicians such as Robert Carver, and poets like William Dunbar, as well as a Gaelic harpist, an Italian alchemist, and quite a cosmopolitan little crowd of hangers-on and visitors. Recent studies of the court culture, architecture, literature, library catalogues, and so on, have established this beyond dispute.

While never central figures at court, the Dominicans were well respected. By identifying their surviving books John Durkan and Anthony Ross OP showed their humanistic as well as scholastic interests. A substantial number of the ninety or so volumes that survive seem to have been in the possession of individuals: presumably more likely to escape when priory libraries were sacked by Protestant gangs. Some priories were well endowed, with gifts of grazing and arable land. At Perth, for example, the friars sold their crops and hides, and profited from the privilege of owning grain mills — no doubt why the priory was looted in the first frenzy of the Reformation.

From their foundation as an independent entity the Dominicans in Scotland were concerned with reform in the Church and with internal 'observance'. In 1539 two Dominicans, William Keillour and John Beveridge, were burnt as heretics. Thomas Guillaume and John Rough, sent out to preach reform, soon became two of the most prominent Reformed preachers. As late as 1558, the Provincial, John Grierson OP, held a provincial chapter: while there is no extant record, we may surely assume that the brethren discussed the need for further reform before the preaching of John Knox (converted by Guillaume), and the ambitious band of gentry calling themselves 'the Lords and Barons professing Jesus Christ' overthrew what they called 'the Congregation of Satan with all the superstition, abomination and idolatry therefor'.

In May 1559 the houses of the friars in Perth were unexpectedly sacked, and then the Edinburgh Blackfriars. In June the 'reformers' moved to St Andrews. In Inverness the friars handed their precious possessions to the town council for safekeeping. In September the friaries in Stirling and Dundee were sacked. In Aberdeen the provost sought but failed to protect the churches: the valuable lead was stripped from the roofs of the Dominican and Franciscan priories, while their contents, books, furnishings and religious objects were destroyed. The looting seems to have been well organized, instigated and largely carried out by a small group, travelling from

© The author 2007
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2007

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2007.00150.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

one site to another, primarily interested in obliterating all visible signs of the old religion.

By 1560 it was all over, officially at least. In her annotated bibliographical appendix, Dr Foggie identifies some 310 friars, all those known in the period 1450-1560. Only a handful, including Guillaume and Rough, became Protestants. The most eminent to do so was John McAlpine (*Maccabeus* to his scholarly contemporaries): he fled as early as 1534, married a sister of the English reformer Miles Coverdale's wife, settled at the University of Copenhagen, and is best known for translating the Bible into Danish. Some — but not many — who remained Catholic sought refuge in Dominican houses abroad. There were no martyrs. John Black OP, appointed special preacher to Mary, Queen of Scots, in 1561, was murdered in Holyrood Palace on the night in 1566 that her Italian secretary David Riccio was killed in her presence, by a gang of Protestant gentry.

There were no heroes. Many of the friars on Dr Foggie's list are known only because they accepted the pension of £16 *per annum* granted in 1561 for their upkeep to clergy who refused to convert to the Protestant religion. For all the systematic destruction of religious houses, churches, and libraries, far worse in Scotland than in England, there was almost no loss of life. With their priories uninhabitable, most of the last generation of Dominican friars in Scotland seem to have lived out their days in quiet retirement, stunned by the violence and speed of the changes, waiting no doubt for an equally dramatic reversal.

This need not mean that their Catholic faith was never very deep. On the contrary, so Dr Foggie concludes, it was precisely because the Friars Preachers of Scotland had for so long been 'concentrating on their vision of a better Catholic church', that 'they could not be expected to predict its demise' (page 242). Paradoxically, they had been concerned since 1481 with reform, carried by their engagement in a wider European Renaissance humanism as well as inspired by the desire to return to the ideals of Saint Dominic, to such an extent that they were blind to the activities of a significant group of influential lay men, and deaf to the handful of radical preachers. It's an interesting thesis.

***Fergus Kerr OP***

© The author 2007
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2007

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2007.00150.x Published online by Cambridge University Press