The origins of the Scottish Reformation

ALEC RYRIE

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MANCHESTER 1824
Manchester University Press

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Manchester
University Press
Manchester and New York

distributed exclusively in the USA by Palgrave

Published by Manchester University Press
Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9NR, UK
and Room 400, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010, USA
www.manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk

Distributed exclusively in the USA by
Palgrave, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010, USA

Distributed exclusively in Canada by
UBC Press, University of British Columbia, 2029 West Mall,
Vancouver, BC, Canada V6T 1Z2

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data applied for

ISBN 0 7190 7105 4 *hardback*
EAN 978 0 7190 7105 8

First published 2006

15 14 13 12 11 10 09 08 07 06 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Typeset in Scala with Pastonchi display
by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong

Printed in Great Britain
by CPI, Bath

FOR MY PARENTS

Contents

PREFACE—viii
NOTES FOR THE READER—x
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS—xi
TIMELINE—xiii
MAP: SCOTLAND AT THE TIME OF THE REFORMATION—xiv

Introduction 1

1 A 'corrupt' Church? 12
2 Playing with fire: the Reformation under James V 29
3 The crisis of 1543 53
4 1544–50: imperial Reformation 72
5 1549–59: Catholic Reformation 95
6 1543–59: underground Reformation 117
7 1557–59: the makings of a rebellion 139
8 1559–60: from rebellion to revolution 161

Conclusion: the Scottish revolution? 196

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY—206
INDEX—213

Preface

I embarked on this project with some trepidation. Scottish history has traditionally been the preserve of Scots, mostly working in Scottish universities – often in separate departments of Scottish history. I am a Scot by birth and by other profound connections; but I have lived in Scotland for only one year of my life, I cut my teeth as a researcher on English history and I now work at an English university. Worse, perhaps, I am instinctively sympathetic to the 'British' perspectives which are becoming as contentious now as they were in the sixteenth century. My hope is that these vantage points have allowed me to achieve some insights into Scottish history while also maintaining critical distance. Readers will judge if I have been successful on either count.

My excuse is that the history of Scotland is too important to be left exclusively to Scottish historians. The Scottish Reformation was an event of international significance, and one of the purposes of this book is to see it on that wider stage. The nationalist flavour of much Scottish history has not only distorted the subject, but (in places) failed to do justice to it. Histories of the Scottish Reformation have been coloured not only by nationalist special pleading, but also by the religious controversies which have died harder in Scotland than elsewhere. In recent decades both of these biases have receded: a reflection of the worldwide retreat of academic historians from such dubious agendas, but also of political change in a country which no longer feels the same need to compensate for a disempowered present with a glorious past. The story which is emerging is one in which none of the religious or political players can usefully be described as heroes or villains, and in which events followed a twisting and unpredictable course. This book's aim is to contribute to this retelling, in the confidence that this untidy story is not only truer but more interesting than the traditional, partisan grand narratives. Indeed, some of what I have argued about what happens to idealism in war, about the success and failure of moderation, and about how small groups of violent provocateurs can effect political change, seems to me to be uncomfortably topical.

It is five years since I first began digging into the Scottish Reformation, and I have accumulated numerous debts along the way. Several historians of early modern Scotland have helped me to find my newcomer's way around the subject, and have saved me from mistakes even worse than the ones which this book still contains: J. H. Burns, Marcus Merriman, Laura Stewart, Jenny Wormald and particularly Martin Dotterweich. Peter Marshall and William Wizeman helped to straighten out my theology and cool down my rhetoric. Michael Mullett, the reader for Manchester University Press, made wise suggestions as well as helping to civilise some of my more barbarous writing. For four successive years, the European Reformation Research Group's annual meeting heard drafts of sections of this book, and that group's breadth

and generosity has provided insights I would otherwise have missed. The Centre for Reformation and Early Modern Studies at the University of Birmingham has proved both supportive and stimulating; I am grateful to colleagues who, so far from groaning when they hear the words 'Ah, but in Scotland . . .', have helped me to place my work in clearer perspective. Students in my Scottish Reformation and Mary, Queen of Scots special subjects teased out many of the ideas here with me; I hope they have found these classes as stimulating as I have, and I am grateful to them all. Thank you.

Other debts are more personal. Eilidh Whiteford and Sarah Nicholson taught me – a long time ago, now – something about how to see the world through Scottish eyes. Warren and Vicky Leat, Mo and Jimmy Calder, and Richard Rickford were gracious hosts to their self-invited guest during my research trips, and listened patiently to my post-archival enthusiasms. As always, Victoria's support and strength are fundamental. My final thanks, however, must go to my parents: British Scots of (to my eyes!) the best kind. It is to their care for me that this book owes whatever of breadth or depth it has; it belongs to them.

Notes for the reader

A few words on religious terminology may be helpful for those unfamiliar with recent histories of the Reformation. Both 'Protestant' and 'Catholic' are used here as broad terms, each encompassing a considerable variety of beliefs. I have also used the vaguer label 'evangelical', mostly when discussing the early Reformation period (up to the mid-1540s or thereabouts). This refers to those whose beliefs we, with hindsight, can recognise as proto-Protestant, but which the 'evangelicals' themselves did not necessarily recognise as such. Even vaguer are the terms 'reformer' and 'reformist', which are applied to both Protestants and Catholics (the enthusiasm of some Catholics for radical reforms of their Church is a significant theme of this book). A little more precision is intended by the terms 'Lutheran' and 'Reformed', each of which refers to distinct Protestant groupings: 'Reformed' Protestantism is the multi-faceted tradition often, but misleadingly, referred to as 'Calvinism'.

All quotations have been rendered into modern English. My own inclination is to a more austere style, but while the English of the sixteenth century is accessible enough to the modern reader, the Scots language is another matter. Its distinctive spellings, usages and vocabulary can be daunting, even for modern Scots. I hope those who share my fondness for those usages will forgive me.

Throughout, the year is reckoned to begin on 1 January. All sums of money are, unless otherwise noted, in Scottish pounds (of which there were roughly four to the (English) pound sterling for much of this period, but values fluctuated).

Much of chapter 5 is based on my article, 'Reform without frontiers in the last years of Catholic Scotland', *English Historical Review* 119 (2004), 27–56. I am grateful for permission to draw on that material here.

List of abbreviations

ALC	Robert Kerr Hannay (ed.), *Acts of the Lords of the Council in Public Affairs 1501–1554* (Edinburgh, 1932)
AM	John Foxe, *Actes and monuments of matters most speciall in the church* (RSTC 11225: London, 1583)
APS	*The Acts of the Parliaments of Scotland, vol. II: 1424–1567* (1814)
BL	British Library
CCCC	Corpus Christi College, Cambridge
CSP Foreign 1547–53	William B. Turnbull (ed.), *Calendar of State Papers, Foreign Series . . . 1547–1553* (London, 1861)
CSP Foreign 1558–59	Joseph Stephenson (ed.), *Calendar of State Papers, Foreign Series, of the reign of Elizabeth, 1558–59* (London, 1863)
CSP Foreign 1559–60	Joseph Stephenson (ed.), *Calendar of State Papers, Foreign Series, of the reign of Elizabeth, 1559–60* (London, 1865)
CSP Foreign 1560–61	Joseph Stephenson (ed.), *Calendar of State Papers, Foreign Series, of the reign of Elizabeth, 1560–61* (London, 1865)
CSP Scotland	Joseph Bain *et al.* (ed.), *Calendar of State Papers relating to Scotland and Mary, Queen of Scots, vol. I: 1547–1563* (Edinburgh, 1898)
HP	Joseph Bain (ed.), *The Hamilton Papers: Letters and Papers Illustrating the Political Relations of England and Scotland in the XVIth Century*, 2 vols (Edinburgh, 1890–92)
IR	*Innes Review*
Knox	John Knox, *The Works of John Knox*, ed. David Laing, 6 vols (Edinburgh, 1846–64)
LP	James Gairdner and R. H. Brodie (eds), *Letters & Papers, Foreign & Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII*, 21 vols (London, 1862–1932)
LPL	Lambeth Palace Library
NA	National Archives, Kew (formerly Public Record Office)
NAS	National Archives of Scotland
NLS	National Library of Scotland
ODNB	*Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*
RPC	John Hill Burton (ed.), *The Register of the Privy Council of Scotland*, vol. I: 1545–69 (Edinburgh, 1877)
RSCHS	*Records of the Scottish Church History Society*

RSS	David Hay Fleming *et al.* (eds), *Registrum Secreti Sigilli Regum Scotorum: The Register of the Privy Seal of Scotland*, 5 vols (Edinburgh, 1908–57)
Sadler SP	Arthur Clifford (ed.), *The State Papers and Letters of Sir Ralph Sadler*, 2 vols (Edinburgh, 1809)
SHR	*Scottish Historical Review*
TA	T. Dickson *et al.* (eds), *Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland*, 13 vols (Edinburgh, 1877–1978)
Wodrow Misc.	David Laing (ed.), *The Miscellany of the Wodrow Society* (Edinburgh, 1844)

Timeline

1528	Execution of Patrick Hamilton for heresy at St Andrews
	James V's personal rule begins
1534	Henry VIII of England breaks with Rome
1542	Death of James V: accession of Mary Queen of Scots, aged six days
1543	Earl of Arran becomes Governor of Scotland and briefly pursues Protestant policies
	Treaty of Greenwich pledging Mary Queen of Scots in marriage to Edward Tudor. The treaty is quickly repudiated by Scotland
1544–50	War with England (the 'Rough Wooings')
1546	Execution of George Wishart for heresy at St Andrews
	Murder of David Beaton, cardinal-archbishop of St Andrews
1547	Death of Henry VIII: Edward VI King of England
1548	Treaty of Haddington. Mary Queen of Scots is pledged in marriage to Francis, the Dauphin of France, and is taken to France
1549	First reforming general council of the Catholic Church under Archbishop Hamilton of St Andrews
1553	Death of Edward VI: Mary Tudor Queen of England
1554	Mary of Guise becomes Regent of Scotland
1557	Brief and inconclusive war with England
1558	Mary Queen of Scots marries the Dauphin Francis
	Death of Mary Tudor: Elizabeth I Queen of England
1559	Reformation-rebellion against Mary of Guise breaks out
1560	Protestant victory and 'Reformation' parliament

Scotland at the time of the Reformation

Introduction

This book is about one of the most extraordinary national transformations in European history. During 1559 and 1560, the kingdom of Scotland experienced what was arguably the first modern revolution. The turmoil was sparked by religious conflict, but its impact was far wider. Scotland's political culture, social structure and international position were all profoundly affected by these events.

Like most revolutions, the Scottish Reformation was chaotic and unpredictable, in its course and in its consequences. It began unexpectedly: an attempt by the government to arrest dissident preachers provoked protest which blew up into riot and armed confrontation with frightening speed, surprising foreign observers, the regime and the rebels themselves. The year-long civil war that followed was a bewildering switchback of changing fortunes and foreign intervention. And the rebels' apparently total victory in the summer of 1560 masked their own divisions and the continued strength of some of the forces that had opposed them. For more than a century, religious revolutionaries in Scotland and elsewhere would be inspired by what had been started in 1559–60, and would try to bring it to some kind of completion.

Historians of Scotland have long recognised the Reformation as a pivotal event in Scottish history – perhaps *the* pivotal event. It is nowadays fashionable amongst historians to stress underlying continuities over visible changes, but the sharp break with the past in 1559–60 cannot easily be effaced. For historians with religious axes to grind, the Reformation has represented the moment that Scotland stepped from popish servitude into the light of Christ – or its passage from the true Catholic Church into the outer darkness of heresy. More secular historians of Scotland have also treated 1560 as a watershed.[1] An outstanding recent study by Margo Todd has reminded us of the dramatic social change brought about by Reformed Protestantism (the movement often, misleadingly, dubbed 'Calvinism').[2] The political upheavals of

1559–60 and the corrosive ideologies which Calvinism fomented permanently changed the terms of trade of Scottish politics. Perhaps most importantly, 1560 marked a sharp, unprecedented and (so far) permanent shift in Scotland's international relations, and so in the history of north-western Europe as a whole.

Geography ensured that during the Middle Ages (as indeed since), Scotland's view of the rest of the world was dominated by a single problem: that of relations with its uncomfortably powerful southern neighbour. Obviously enough, there were two clear-cut solutions to this problem available, neither of them particularly attractive. Defiance of England carried the risk of bloody conquest, or (which was little better) repeated, bloody and failed attempts at conquest. At the other extreme, alliance with England might become a bloodless conquest, or at least a 'special relationship' bringing little profit or honour to the junior partner. Both of these solutions had their advocates in medieval Scotland, but when forced to choose, the Scots consistently chose defiance. England's record of aggression was too well known for it to be trusted as an ally. Scotland instead spun itself a wider international web: trading across the North Sea to the Netherlands, Germany, Scandinavia and even Poland; sending scholars to the Netherlands and France; sealing royal marriages with Denmark and France. And it was with France above all that Scotland formed an alternative, and remarkably long-lived, 'special relationship'. The French alliance could not always deter the English, and indeed sometimes provoked them, but it did secure Scottish independence. When war came with England, as it did often enough during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Scotland's formidable defensive geography, its pugnacious and independent aristocrats and its sometimes fickle ally ensured that the invaders were unable to convert battlefield victories into conquest.

During 1559–60 it became clear that this bloody status quo could not last. The Scots' political classes became convinced, perhaps rightly, that France had altered the terms of the 'special relationship' from alliance to colonisation. Many Scots also allowed themselves to be persuaded that England no longer harboured imperial ambitions. This change of heart ensured that Scotland, improbably, became the focus for a major international crisis. Every prince in Western Europe understood that if Scotland replaced its French alliance with an English one, the international balance of power would shift significantly. Indeed, in the spring of 1560 it briefly seemed possible that a Spanish army might intervene in Scotland, on top of the English and French forces already there. However, the decision to renounce the French alliance was a matter not only of politics but also of religion. For many Scots (not all), the choice between France and England had become the choice between Catholicism and Protestantism. By the spring of 1560, the Scottish political establishment had opted decisively for the English–Protestant alignment.

Scotland's basic foreign-policy question remained after 1560 – alliance with or defiance of England? – but its answer changed, swiftly and permanently. The nature of the Anglo-Scottish alliance has proved and continues to prove contentious. Minorities within Scotland have periodically questioned whether the alliance is worth its costs. For all that, however, the maintenance of that alliance in some form as the cornerstone of Scotland's place in the world has been the settled will of the Scots ever since 1560, and, for the time being, remains so. This remarkable alliance eventually created – as some of its founders hoped it would – a new identity and a new country.[3] Whether or not Britain and Britishness are ideas whose time is now passing, during their four centuries of existence they have shaped the peoples of both countries, and of the world beyond them.

The Scottish Reformation was not simply Britain's midwife, however. It also has a broader importance in the history of European religion and politics. Reformed Protestantism in Scotland was not, as it boasted, uniquely pure;[4] but its success was uniquely thorough. Beyond the religious laboratories of the Swiss city-states, Reformed Protestantism never won plainer or more lasting victories. In Scotland, unlike in France or Hungary, Calvinism succeeded in converting widespread support into political dominance. Unlike in England, Calvinism was not neutered and shackled by a state which shared its doctrines but did not trust its ambitions. Unlike in the Netherlands, the established Protestant Church in Scotland laid claim to the allegiance of all inhabitants, and did a remarkably good job of turning that claim into a reality. Scottish Catholicism was not merely politically defeated. It virtually disappeared from lowland Scotland and from the majority of the Highlands, until it returned with Irish immigrants in the eighteenth century. In its place, an astonishingly complete cultural revolution took place, as the model of religious life which Calvin had pioneered in a city of ten thousand people was rolled out across a sparse and sprawling country of a million or more souls. In 1559–60, this project was neither complete (of course) nor clearly defined, but the ambitions of those who began it are unmistakable.

The thoroughness of the Scottish Reformation was a consequence not only of its leaders' religious convictions but also of their political radicalism. Scottish Protestants first established their churches in defiance of established authority, as did Reformed Protestants in France and the Netherlands. In Scotland, however, that defiance extended into the political sphere. The reformers' theologians, notably but not exclusively John Knox, provided robust theoretical and rhetorical justifications for rebellion in the name of the Gospel. Their aristocratic leaders were ready to wrap themselves in such justifications, alongside older beliefs which asserted their own political rights and the consensual nature of the Scottish state. One consequence of this was that the Scottish Reformation took the form of a political rebellion, which

powerfully reinforced the long Scottish tradition of mulish political independence. For nearly a century and a half after 1560, Scottish Protestants resisted attempts by the state to control religious life, while insisting that their rulers were liable to correction (and, ultimately, deposition) by the Church. This unsentimental, uncompromising and sometimes surly tradition of political independence was of lasting importance. Scottish Protestants' loathing of royal control over the Church sparked the civil wars which convulsed the British Isles in the seventeenth century. Scottish political traditions fed into North American ideals; Scottish theorists such as George Buchanan were acknowledged by the political thinkers of the Enlightenment.[5]

For all the Scottish Reformation's importance, however, its causes remain remarkably obscure. This is partly a simple matter of sources. The early history of an underground movement such as Scottish Protestantism is, inevitably, largely hidden from us. This book draws on two kinds of sources, neither of them satisfactory. The first, contemporaneous documents, are frustratingly thin. The informal nature of the Scottish state meant that it left a meagre paper-trail. We also have very few private letters, sermons or treatises. What we do have, in abundance, is English official documentation on Scottish affairs. This is enormously valuable, given England's intimate involvement in the Scottish Reformation, but its perspective is obviously skewed, and the English themselves lamented the unreliability of their information.[6] No other foreign government was nearly so interested in Scottish religious affairs, although we still await a truly thorough study of the relevant French archives.

Secondly, there are memoirs, histories and chronicles written after the fact, by witnesses of varying degrees of reliability. The most important of them is John Knox's gossipy, cantankerous and enthralling *History of the Reformation*.[7] The heart of Knox's history, recording the events of 1558–60, is a near-contemporaneous account; the sections on the earlier Reformation were actually written later, mostly in 1566. Knox was a poor historian: self-important, uninterested in detail and alarmingly ready to base sweeping generalisations on a single event. Yet his *History* is invaluable, not only for his eyewitness testimony but also for his inclusion of a great many documents which would otherwise have been lost. Other Protestant chronicles include the wildly unreliable histories of Robert Lindsay of Pitscottie and of George Buchanan; the English martyrologist John Foxe, whose Scottish material probably reflects the eyewitness testimony of the senior Scottish cleric John Winram;[8] and – a generation later – the Presbyterian polemicist David Calderwood. The most important Catholic history of the Reformation was the trenchant and bitter work of John Leslie, bishop of Ross, although John, Lord Herries' chatty and occasionally reliable chronicle is also coloured by the Catholicism to which he converted.

Almost all of these sources are well known to historians. Any archival discoveries, or rediscoveries, in this book do not change the picture dramatically. Indeed, thanks to the colossal efforts of nineteenth- and twentieth-century editors, most of these sources are in print. This book does not, therefore, claim to reveal unknown facts about the origins of the Scottish Reformation. Its originality, if it has any, lies not in the sources it uses but in the questions it asks of them and the links it can draw between them. For easy answers to questions about the origins of the Scottish Reformation will no longer do.

The search for 'causes' of great events has a bad name amongst some historians, and with good reason. It is altogether too easy to read history backwards to produce 'just-so stories', which start with what happened and then look for the reasons why it must inevitably have been so. The half-century before 1560 thus becomes the overture to the Reformation, rather than a period worth studying in its own right.[9] This 'inevitabilist' history tells us more about historians' metaphysics, and perhaps also their politics, than it does about the events it purports to describe. It is a bastard child of the determinist and social–Darwinist assumption that historical 'success' is always deserved, and grandchild of the corrupted theologies which read historical 'success' as a sign of God's favour. Nowadays historians prefer other (perhaps equally dubious) analogies, often to the dimly understood mathematics of chaos theory. The argument is that the causes of complex events consist of so many interwoven but independent variables as almost to defy analysis. 'Monocausal' explanations are derided as oversimplifications – sensibly enough, although some historians seem alarmingly fond of complexity for its own sake. The concept of 'contingency' is invoked to argue that events need not have turned out how they did, had even minor chance events fallen out differently. It is an appealing idea which has made the old genre of imagined history respectable under the name of 'counterfactuals'.[10] Although the metaphysics of 'contingency' are scarcely better than those of 'inevitability', this idea does at least recognise that great events can sometimes have trivial causes. And if causes are trivial, so, surely, is the search for them? Historians are increasingly turning to examine processes, consequences and historical relationships. Searching for causes seems increasingly futile.

This is doubly so when dealing with events such as the Scottish Reformation, for here the question of 'causes' has been usually been openly partisan. The dominant interpretation of the Scottish Reformation has been the heroic Protestant narrative, whose fundamental answer to the question of why the Reformation happened is that God willed it (which may be true, but is unverifiable). In its more recent forms this narrative has been thoroughly 'inevitabilist'. The classic Protestant history of David Hay Fleming, and the more recent work of James Kirk, belong in a tradition which stresses the

profound corruption of the Catholic Church in Scotland; the fertile soil on which the seed sowed by the first reformers fell; the steady growth of Protestant belief in the dark years of persecution; and the sudden dawn of open Protestantism in 1559–60 banishing the night of popery.[11] Intriguingly, however, the earlier versions of this narrative look more 'contingent' to modern eyes. John Knox stressed that the reformers' cause often seemed hopeless and that even their successes were fragile. He believed that the outcome was in the balance until very late in the day, and that it was by no means secure after 1560. Indeed, Knox believed that the Scottish Reformation was, literally, inexplicable – that it had no worldly causes at all. Its success could thus be ascribed only to the mere will of God. This was an 'inevitability' which was theological, not historical.

Meanwhile, if Protestant histories of the Scottish Reformation have been triumphalist, Catholic histories have either been denunciations of the reformers as venal and godless conspirators; or laments for a lost world, in which the disaster is ascribed penitentially to the old Church's failure to live up to its principles. Modern Catholic histories – best represented in a splendid collection of *Essays on the Scottish Reformation* – have been subtler and more elegiac, but they have not challenged the basic claim that the Reformation was a matter of Protestant activism and Catholic failure.[12]

In the past two generations, historians of Scotland have moved away from these views, although partly by paying the question of origins comparatively little notice. Gordon Donaldson's pathbreaking survey of the Reformation questioned many of the old certainties, as he tried – not entirely successfully – to save Reformation history from being 'the plaything of ecclesiastical polemic'. He described an amorphous Reformation which only slowly and fitfully evolved (or degenerated) into Presbyterianism. Donaldson also argued, influentially, that the Reformation crisis arose 'less from religion than from the resentment which was building up against the government's pro-French policy'.[13] This view of the Reformation as a slow process in which the turning-points were more political than religious has informed a number of local studies of religious change, as well as Ian Cowan's powerful attempt to write a general history of the Reformation which takes full account of local diversity.[14] The best of these local studies, Michael Lynch's magisterial survey of Edinburgh, not only stresses how slowly and painfully the new Church put down roots in Edinburgh after 1560. He argues that the 1559–60 crisis was scarcely rooted in the town at all, but was imposed on it by force from outside.[15] If the religious crisis has been thus dissolved into a gradual process, it has been replaced by a political one. This, in turn, has been questioned by one important recent study casting doubt on the strength of anti-French feeling.[16] The Scottish Reformation almost seems to be in danger of vanishing altogether.

This book aims to present a new synthesis of ideas on the origins of the Scottish Reformation, building on this recent scholarship but also suggesting some new directions. It asks not only why the Scottish Reformation took place, but why *this* Reformation took place, rather than one of the many other 'Reformations' – and, indeed, counter-Reformations – that seemed possible in sixteenth-century Scotland. It tries to reconnect religion and politics, and to trace their interaction. In particular, it emphasises how acts or threats of violence drove political processes and shaped religious culture. Violence isolated moderates and aggravated division. Sometimes it discredited those who applied it. Equally often, it managed to destroy its targets, and those who refused to use violence were outmanoeuvred. As such this is a tale of few villains and fewer heroes. (If I have shown bias, I hope it is for or against individual characters in the story, rather than the parties to which some of them belonged.) The book also tries to place the Scottish Reformation on the wider stage of the European Reformation. Despite the nationalism of the traditional accounts, and of much Scottish history in general, the Reformation's natural stage was all Europe. The Scottish Reformation can be illuminated by international comparisons, and it was itself an international phenomenon. Religious developments in England and France, in particular, were a decisive influence on Scottish events.

The classic explanation for the Reformation is that the pre-Reformation Church was 'corrupt', and that its corruption created a moral vacuum which Protestantism filled. However, as a good deal of recent scholarship has argued, the late medieval Church cannot be dismissed so easily, and the first chapter of this book assesses the state of this question. Although some aspects of the pre-Reformation Church's administration can be described as 'corrupt', it is not at all clear that this 'corruption' was actually damaging. Rather, the Church had bought itself powerful protectors – albeit at some cost to its moral authority. Against this background, chapter 2 assesses the impact of the first arrival of Protestant ideas in the 1520s. As almost everywhere in Europe, this was initially a movement of clerics, scholars and merchants, and as such a rather limited threat to the Scottish religious establishment.

The new heretical movement became dangerous because it intersected with politics. In the 1530s, some members of the nobility, as well as lairds (that is, the landed magnates without noble titles) began to be drawn towards it. Perhaps they wished to do no more than mock the pretensions of the clergy, as they always had, but the Protestant presence and the Church's heavy-handed response to it provided a fresh impetus to such mockery, and a new language in which to mock. Worse, as chapter 2 also describes, the regime of James V (1513–42) was ambiguous towards the reformers. James was vehement in his opposition to heresy, for reasons of conviction and of convenience, but like other Renaissance monarchs he also gave some

houseroom to moderate reformers, intrigued by the nature of their piety and entertained by their withering satires of clerical pomposity. The result was that by the time of his death, Protestantism had gained a foothold in the Scottish state.

James V's unexpected death in wartime pitched Scotland into a major political crisis, the subject of chapter 3. He was succeeded by an infant girl: Mary, Queen of Scots. During 1543, it seemed as if a Reformation of sorts might take place in Scotland. Mary's regent, the Earl of Arran, tried to forge an alliance with Henry VIII's England, and to reform the Scottish Church along English lines. He failed. Facing a broad Scottish consensus against any such deal, Arran reversed his policy in order to salvage his own authority. However, the few months of relative toleration which Scottish Protestantism enjoyed won the movement new recruits, and also raised its hopes. This helped to engender a bitterer and more confrontational mood when those hopes were defeated.

Many of those reformers still looked to England, which continued to aim at a Scottish alliance even when it became clear that such an 'alliance' could only be imposed by force. The so-called 'Rough Wooing' – England's attempt to extort a marriage alliance from Scotland by military means between 1544 and 1550, which is the subject of chapter 4 – proved to be the most intensive period of Anglo-Scottish warfare for over a century. It was a war with a religious dimension; England held out the prospect of a Protestant union between the two neighbours (especially after Henry VIII's death in 1547). However, Scottish Protestant hopes were defeated by England's reluctance to pay more than lip-service to such ideas. There were some notable Protestant achievements during the wars – most spectacularly, the murder of David Beaton, the Cardinal-Archbishop of St Andrews, in 1546 – but they came to nothing. In the end, large-scale French intervention ensured that the English were soundly defeated. Scottish Protestants were discredited by association with them. Their hopes seemed more distant than ever.

The 1550s were less obviously eventful. With the young Queen Mary now in France, Scotland became in effect a French satellite state – an arrangement whose immediate fruits were security and stability. In this context, the old Church, long criticised for its shortcomings and battered by war damage, set about an ambitious programme of reform, which is examined in chapter 5. The Catholic reformers' project was a bold one: they took on board some of the doctrinal, as well as disciplinary criticisms of their Church and attempted what amounted to a relaunch of Scottish Catholicism. It turned out to be self-defeating, largely because the new government of the Queen Mother, Mary of Guise, who became Regent in 1554, was unwilling to give the old Church the support it needed. Instead, she tolerated Protestantism, for her own, dangerously short-sighted reasons. The result was that the old

Church had its certainties shaken, while the Protestant minority, already radicalised by the bitter experiences of the 1540s, grew more aggressive in its beliefs and its mood. The underground Protestant movement, whose spread is discussed in chapter 6, was still small, but it was acquiring both anger and self-confidence.

How this situation toppled into crisis is the subject of chapter 7. It was not a simple matter of anti-French feeling, which in 1550s Scotland was no more than a background problem. The Scottish political classes had some specific grumbles about their ally's conduct, but not enough to question the alliance itself. They were merely becoming suspicious of France's methods and its trustworthiness. When the crisis came, it came for religious reasons. From the convoluted and partial accounts which survive, it is possible to piece together a decent account of religious politics during 1557–59. The picture which emerges is one of a religious peace process. Encouraged by Catholic reform and by political toleration, some of the Protestant lords pressed for a religious compromise which would formally allow some degree of co-existence. The negotiations helped to legitimate Protestant hopes; they failed, however, partly because neither Church nor regime was fully ready to compromise in a changing international climate, and partly because the more radical Protestants deliberately sabotaged the process through a series of provocative and high-profile acts of violence. The last of these, an iconoclastic riot in Perth in May 1559, finally polarised the situation and produced a military confrontation.

Chapter 8 examines the rebellion which followed. The Protestant rebels, styling themselves 'the Congregation', quickly managed to secure either active or tacit support from most of Scotland's political class. The religious issue was at the rebellion's heart, and was the priority for most of its key leaders, to a greater extent than some recent historians have allowed. However, Mary of Guise's clumsy military response to it, and the perceived tyranny of her French troops, also helped to mobilise Scottish opinion in favour of the rebels. Only now did the latent suspicion of France come to the fore. By contrast, the new, Protestant, English regime of Elizabeth I managed to intervene in the rebellion while convincing most Scots that it did not have any imperial ambitions. After a war which lasted into the summer of 1560, and whose end was grimly fought, the Congregation and their English allies managed to extract a surrender from Guise's French forces, not least because the growing religious turmoil in France itself prevented the dispatch of further reinforcements. However, alongside the military confrontation, the Congregation were also beginning the process of building a Reformed Protestant Church in Scotland's parishes. The book concludes by looking at the dubious process by which that Church was established in law in August 1560.

By that stage, the Protestant cause had acquired an extraordinary degree of moral authority and political momentum within Scotland. It is true that,