

**"WHAT KNOX REALLY DID":
JOHN KNOX AND THE SCOTTISH RENAISSANCES**

Rubén Valdés Miyares
Universidad de Oviedo

What Knox really did was to rob Scotland of all the benefits of the Renaissance (Edwin Muir).¹ This that Knox did for his nation, I say, we may really call a resurrection as from death (Thomas Carlyle).²

These statements written by two of the most representative Scottish writers of the last two centuries, share something significant. Both refer to John Knox and Scotland in the absolute terms of death or renascence. Both coincide in ascribing to Knox a greater significance than any individual man could ever assume in History, and they represent the traditional attitudes of Scottish intellectuals towards the most famous leader of the Scottish Reformation in the 16th century. Such impassioned views must be seen to derive either from the eminence given to heroes by 19th-century Romantics and Victorians, as it is clearly the case of Thomas Carlyle, or from the magnification by the Presbyterian churches of their own founder. Even Edwin Muir, writing at the end of the 1920s, within the cultural context known as the Scottish Literary Renaissance, ends his attempt at a demystification of the Reformer treating Knox as if he alone had changed the course of Scottish history, and had provoked the cultural decline that the modern Renaissance was trying to surmount. This paper will discuss these attitudes, which have only in the recent decades begun to be superseded by less emotional estimations, so as to pinpoint Knox's significance in the Scottish culture.

It is four hundred years after Knox's death that we begin to find definite signs of an objective insight into his historical significance. A book edited by Duncan Shaw in 1975 under the title *John Knox: A Quatercentenary Re-Appraisal* contains essays by four scholars, two of whom touch what we may consider the key topics today: these are "Knox the Writer", by David D.

"What Knox Really Did":
John Knox and the Scottish Renaissances

Murison, and "Knox the Man", by Gordon Donaldson. The latter, a Professor of Scottish History at the University of Edinburgh, has made, in the last three decades, the greatest single contribution to find a proper place for the Reformer in Scotland's past and present. Thus in a brief article synthesizing the meaning of Calvinism to Scottish culture, Donaldson concludes that it is "Knox's vivid narrative" that "has given him a pre-eminence among Scottish reformers which he may not deserve".³ Donaldson alludes mainly to the *History of the Reformation in Scotland* that Knox himself wrote around 1556, and which was published in 1586. The Reformer's claim to literary fame is usually said to rest entirely on this book,⁴ though nobody would give him credit as a historian today. Yet anyone interested in the historical Knox and the Scottish Reformation must return to his account, for it is easy to get carried away by the forceful style in which the story is told, a story whose absolute hero is undoubtedly its author, however much Knox narrates it in a modest first person singular, and refers to himself as "the said John". Knox's *History* is, in short, a characteristic exercise in self-justification, in which the Calvinist Reformer was, to use an expression containing one of his favourite metaphors, blowing his own trumpet. In contrast, the accounts of Knox's contemporaries "have", in Donaldson's words, "little to say of him",⁵ but these have never been read so widely.

Knox's conspicuous central place in the Scottish Reformation belonged, in his own day, to his historical fiction, rather than to historical fact, yet the myth he created for himself has had an actual influence on Scottish history ever since. The year after the publication of the *Quartercentenary Re-Appraisal* came out another, more popular book simply entitled *John Knox*, which proves that the Knoxian myth will die hard in the Scottish scene. In his review of this book Gordon Donaldson points out that only one of its three contributors seemed to have read the earlier re-appraisal, which does not upset him particularly, though as reviewer and historian he has to be critical of the unreality behind some of their assertions. Donaldson even quotes one of the contributors with more approval than irony: "myth", as Mr. Maclean observes, "has a reality at least as respectable as history, so that what men have thought about Knox, for example, is part of history".⁶ Donaldson also notes that the views expressed in the little book are hardly original, and here is, to my mind, where its value lies: it is not presented as any definitive scholarly study, its aim being openly polemical, not critical. It tries to give a new voice to three old Scottish attitudes

towards Knox. Each of its contributors, a minister of the Church of Scotland, a Scottish Catholic priest, and a Scottish atheist poet, seasons with a pinch of fact his strong reaction to the myth that took root especially between the age of Carlyle and that of Muir.

Anthony Rose, the Catholic, purports to explore Knox the man so as to destroy the myth, as Muir had tried to do. His approach is the one which comes closest to Donaldson's approval. At the end Rose, like Muir, slips into the myth by blaming every Scottish and Irish problem on Knox and the Reformation, but not before raising some interesting issues. Thus he is aware of the origin of the myth in Knox's text on the Reformation, and of the fact that Knox did not himself invent the idea that the state should use the death penalty if necessary in defence of orthodoxy, nor was his grossly depreciatory attitude to women new in a Christian ideologist;⁷ more importantly Ross rightly locates the main re-fashioning of the Knoxian image in the 19th century milieu, starting with Thomas McCrie's biography, which was widely acclaimed at least inside Scotland,⁸ and with Carlyle's essays, and soon leading to the erection of statues of the religious hero in several Scottish towns. The first of these monuments appeared, to the horror of Catholics like Ross, near the medieval cathedral of Glasgow,⁹ and, for the benefit of Scottish writers who would exploit the sinister symbolism,¹⁰ Knox is still standing there on a high pillar, with an open granite book in his hand, dominating the necropolis of Glasgow.

The essay preceding that of Ross in the same polemical book is by Cambell Maclean, a popular Presbyterian minister famous for his appearances on TV. In sharp contrast with the Catholic writer, Maclean proudly asserts the myth of Knox instead of undoing it. He supports his argument with the kind of prestige granted to myth in the Romantic age: myth, he argues, "springs from the immediacy".¹¹ Next the Minister resorts to commonplaces that any already convinced congregation would readily admit, such as the saying that "by the 16th century the Church of Scotland was the most corrupt in Christendom".¹² Thirdly, he touches on the modern topic of Knox as a great revolutionary leader, the "ruthless extremist" Scotland needed.¹³ Finally he feels enough assurance to speculate on what Scotland would have been without Knox, and to conclude that:

without Knox we might have had nothing but that ingratiating sunshine which, like the soft cushioning of the old unreformed

*"What Knox Really Did":
John Knox and the Scottish Renaissances*

Catholic Faith breeds hapless indolent folk like Spaniards and
Italians.¹⁴

Such chauvinistic statements have their far origin in the nationalist claims of the Presbyterian churches since the days of the English Civil Wars and the Covenant Movements of the 17th century, and a more immediate one in views like that of Carlyle, who saw in Knox "eminently a national specimen; in fact what we may denominate the most Scottish of Scots".¹⁵ Against this argument Ross recalls the fact that Knox "was only part of what later came to be identified as an anglicizing trend",¹⁶ a statement easily corroborated by a quick glance at the Reformer's strategy of alliance with England against papist France, and by the conscious use of English, instead of pure Scots, in his writings. The historical role of Knox as agent of English absorption is assumed by most 20th-century Scottish nationalists, including the last contributor to the book, to whom we now turn.

The author of the third essay on Knox is Hugh MacDiarmid, who emphatically dismisses all religious standpoints, to defend his own materialist aesthetics. "Hugh MacDiarmid" is in fact the pen-name of the late Christopher Murray Grieve, the major poet, theoretician and leader of the Scottish Literary Renaissance of the 1920s and beyond. To him was dedicated Edwin Muir's book on Knox of 1929, perhaps as if to set up the man who created the modern Scottish Renaissance against the man who, in Muir's opinion, deprived Scotland of the 16th-century Renaissance that England and other countries enjoyed. The Scottish writers of Muir and MacDiarmid's generation consciously reacted against the kind of sentimental and parochial literature produced in the 19th-century Scotland by what Ross calls the "Knoxian-Victorian" situation.¹⁷ They sought to revive the national culture, and most of them agreed on finding in Calvinism the main cause of Scotland's decline. Knox, however, enjoyed some political prestige among left-wing writers like "Lewis Grassie Gibbon" (James Leslie Mitchell), who, after comparing him to Lenin, wrote that Knox:

was a leader defeated: [...] Knox himself was of truly heroic mould; had his followers, far less his allies, been of like mettle, the history of Scotland might have been strangely and splendidly different.¹⁸

Yet to another contemporary writer, Naomi Mitchison, Knox "was on the winning since", and though "cruel, treacherous and cowardly", he was brave enough to face Mary Queen of Scots, since "she was the embodiment of something that had to be broken, the Divine Right of Kings".¹⁹ Thus all these writers gave Knox a deeply symbolical significance in history. This is, naturally, even more noticeable in writers with Catholic sympathies. Among the latter was Muir himself, and Fionn Mac Colla, who wrote that "What the Reformation did was to sniff out what must otherwise have developed into the most brilliant national culture in History".²⁰ These writers tended to take a more bitter view, and they often compared Calvinism with Communism as totalitarian destructive ideologies.²¹ Moreover, Muir gradually became convinced that the damage Knox and his creed had caused to Scotland was irretrievable.

Muir's increasing pessimism run counter to the original spirit of the Scottish Literary Renaissance. One of MacDiarmid's slogans when he was launching the movement for the first time was "Dunbar -Not Burns", for he thought it necessary, as pointed out by another Scottish poet and nationalist, to go "back beyond Burns to the uncorrupted Scottish tradition found in the poetry of Dunbar".²² Accordingly, MacDiarmid created a "Synthetic Scots" by recovering words and rhythms from the pre-Reformation, pre-Knoxian makers like Dunbar (as well as by adding new borrowings from other languages). A similar attitude seems to have been shared by Edwin Muir at first, when he produced his early poems in imitation of Medieval Scottish ballads. However, in 1936 Muir published his critical essay *Scott and Scotland*, where he argued the impossibility of having a Scottish literary tradition after the Reformation; consequently, he was now denying the possibility of a modern Renaissance, in spite of his earlier praise of MacDiarmid's poetic efforts. This was understood by MacDiarmid as a betrayal he could never forgive. Thus, to some extent MacDiarmid had undertaken the difficult task of overlooking Knox's negative influence, whereas Muir was invoking the shadow of the Reformer against any recovery of national culture. Furthermore, the nationalist writers like MacDiarmid and the novelist Neil M. Gunn preferred to seek the causes of Scottish decline in more general problems, such as the loss of nationhood, As Gunn wrote in his review of *Scots and Scotland*, other reformed countries like England and Germany had not lost their literary tradition, and unreformed countries like Ireland had not had one for centuries and then she had recovered it recently, coinciding with their independence.²³ Likewise, in his essay on Knox

*"What Knox Really Did":
John Knox and the Scottish Renaissances*

MacDiarmid points out that "Calvinism in other countries had not had a like disastrous effect", after arguing that "the really serious thing from a cultural point of view was the dissemination of the Bible in English, and Knox's own intromission with the English".²⁴

In conclusion, it is hard to deny to any of the writers mentioned (except, perhaps, for Carlyle's hyperbolic assertions) a part of the truth about "What Knox Really Did to Scotland", provided that by "Knox" we do not mean the historical man but the historical situation he stands for. What is most certain is that in Knox the Scots have found a demoniac figure on which they project what Muir recognized as their "exceptionally powerful myth-making faculty".²⁵ It is no wonder that Carlyle took great pains to discover a faithful portrait of John Knox: he was not just looking for the face of a man, but of a demigod: for the Reformation and Scotland herself made man.

If, on the other hand, we attend to history instead of myth, two facts stand out. First, that the Reformation would have taken place anyway in Scotland without John Knox. The English historian Henry Thomas Buckle, who was born only twenty-five years after Carlyle, could write in the mid-19th century that Knox:

affected more than any single man, although the really important period of his life, in regard to Scotland, was in and after 1559, when the triumph of Protestantism was already secured, and when he reaped the benefits of what had been effected during his long absence from his own country.²⁶

To be sure, this cautious interpretation, supported by Gordon Donaldson's later reading of history, invalidates Muir and Carlyle's views at once. It is always tempting to speculate, and one would say that Scotland would have been reformed even if Knox had been a papist. In support of the nationalist claims of the Church of Scotland, it may be recalled that, at the time, the reformed barons of Scotland sought in the alliance with the faith of Protestant England a safer measure to retain their independence than the pressing power of Catholic France, although this would in turn lead to the political absorption and the neglect and decline of native culture that followed the union of Crowns under James VI of Scotland and I of England. French pressure alone can be regarded

as a greater force at work for the Reformation than Knox's mission. As Ross notes, "Knox no more invented the Anglophile policy of the Scottish reformers than he invented Calvinism".²⁷

Secondly, Knox was, as Donaldson points out, "perhaps the chief agent in the anglicization of Scotland, in both its politics and culture", but he cannot be held personally responsible for the strict Puritanism and Sabbatarianism subsequently imposed by his Church on Scottish society, or for the destruction of drama and the older Scottish traditions in poetry.²⁸ As Campbell Maclean rightly says, Sabbath-breaking, for example, was being denounced by the Catholic Scottish Archbishop Hamilton eight years before the Reformation took place.²⁹ This makes MacDiarmid's view only half mythical: he is rightly aware of Knox as agent of anglicization, but he resorts to the myth when he equates Knox with Scottish religion and the whole cultural plight. In either case, there were many factors working in favour of the anglicization and the excessive influence of the Church on Scottish culture, especially after the Scottish court moved into London. James was anointed, even though Knox preached a sermon against the unction of kings during the same ceremony or coronation.³⁰ Finally, if we attend to literary history alone, Knox's individual contribution through the *History of the Reformation in Scotland* is truly impressive, for the influence it exerted on the Scottish interpretation of history; for the representativeness of his Anglo-Scottish prose, and even, as it is argued latterly by critics after Murison and R. D. S. Jack,³¹ for its intrinsic literary merit. His language marks a decisive stage in the development of the Scottish literary tradition, and the fully dramatized passages in his *History* reveal an author trying to engage his readers in a text which also shows a sense of humour and effective irony. All we need to do is read Knox's history as fiction, and not only as "The Iron Text" that haunted Muir throughout most of his own writings about Scotland.

NOTAS

1.- Edwin Muir, *John Knox: Portrait of a Calvinist* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1929), p. 309.

"What Knox Really Did":
John Knox and the Scottish Renaissances

- 2.- Thomas Carlyle, *Lectures on Heroes*. The Ashburn Edition, vol. III (London: Chapman & Hall, 1885), p. 120.
- 3.- David Daiches, ed., *A Companion to Scottish Culture* (London: Arnold, 1981), p. 166.
- 4.- See, for instance, Maurice Lindsay, *History of Scottish Literature* (London: Hale, 1977), p. 118. Indeed, Knox's *The Historie of the Reformatioun in Religion Within the Realme of Scotland* has been the only book by him that has had several later editions, the most recent one by W. Croft-Dickinson in 1949. As Knox has begun to be appreciated as an author, some critics have turned their interest to his other writings as well: see, e. g., Kenneth D. Farrow, "The Rhetorical Application of Syntax in Knox's familiar epistles", in J. Derrick McClure and Michael R. G. Spiller (eds.), *Bryght Lanternis: Essays on the Language and Literature of Medieval and Renaissance Scotland* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen Univer. Press, 1989), pp. 298-307, where the linguistic analysis of Knox's letters is accompanied by a literary appreciation.
- 5.- See Gordon Donaldson's comment in this respect in a bibliographical note of his *Scotland: James V - James VII*. The Edinburgh History of Scotland III (Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 1965), p. 408.
- 6.- Gordon Donaldson, "Myths Old and New", *The Scottish Review: Arts and Environment*, vol. 1, n^o. 4 Autumn 1976, p. 28.
- 7.- Ross reminds us that in Knox's time Catholic and Protestant alike generally thought that obstinate heretics should be put to death, and he mentions Thomas Aquinas as example of a predecessor of Knox in thinking that the State had a duty to secure religious uniformity even with the death penalty: cf. Hugh MacDiarmid, Campbell Maclean and Anthony Ross, *John Knox* (Edinburgh: Ramsay Head Press, 1976), p. 49. As for eminent philosophers and Fathers of the Church showing a strong anti-feminist bias, he mentions The Old Testament, Aristotle, St. Paul and St. Augustine, among others: *ibid.*, p. 63.
- 8.- For a 19th century English writer who did not accept McCrie's biography and the Knoxian myth it reproduces, see especially the book on Scotland in Henry Thomas Buckle, *History of Civilization* (1857), re-edited by H. J. Hanham as *On Scotland and the Scotch Intellect* (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1970).
- 9.- *John Knox*, pp. 15.
- 10.- See especially Alisdair Gray's novel *Lanark* (1981; rpt, London: Granada, 1982), pp. 191, 348.
- 11.- *John Knox*, p. 15.
- 12.- *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- 13.- *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- 14.- *Ibid.*, p. 21.
- 15.- Thomas Carlyle, *Latter-Day Pamphlets. Norway: John Knox*. The Ashburn Edition, vol. V (London: Chapman & Hall, 1885), p. 97.
- 16.- *John Knox*, p. 52.
- 17.- *Ibid.*, pp. 61, 69.
- 18.- Lewis Grassie Gibbon and Hugh MacDiarmid, *Scottish Scene, or the Intelligent Man's Guide to Albion* (London: Hutchinson, 1934), p. 31.

19.- Naomi Mitchson, "Notes on Part Two", *The Bull Calves* (1947; Glasgow: Richard Drew, 1985), p. 460.

20.- Fionn Mac Colla, *At the Sign of the Clenched Fist* (Edinburgh: M. MacDonald, 1967), p. 204.

21.- Fionn Mac Colla equates Calvinism with Communism, Hitlerism and other political and religious "heresies" for their totalitarian ideologies: *ibid.*, pp. 178-82. A more explicit comparison of Communism and Calvinism is that of Edwin Muir in "Bolshevism and Calvinism", *European Quarterly*, n° 1, 1934, pp. 3-11. The general idea was, as stated in -George Malcolm Thomas's *Short History of Scotland* (1930), that "intensely egotistical and entirely courageous, he (Knox) played Lenin to Calvin's Marx": quoted by MacDearmid in *John Knox*, p. 82.

22.- Duncan Glen, *Hugh MacDiarmid (Christopher Murray Grieve) and the Scottish Renaissance* (Edinburgh: Chambers, 1964), p. 40.

23.- Alistair McCleery, ed., *Landscape and Light: Essays by Neil M. Gunn* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen Univ. Press, 1987), p. 125.

24.- *John Knox*, p. 82.

25.- Edwin Muir, *Scottish Journey* (1935; London: Flamingo, 1985), p. 92.

26.- Buckle, *op. cit.*, pp. 80-1.

27.- *John Knox*, p. 52.

28.- See Gordon Donaldson, "John Knox: Victim of Puritan Mythology", *New Edinburgh Review Anthology*, ed. James Campbell (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1982), pp. 50-1.

29.- *John Knox*, p. 36.

30.- Donaldson (1965), p. 131.

31.- See especially P. Janton, "John Knox and Literature", *Actes du 2e Colloque de Langue et de Littérature Ecossaises* (Moyen Age et Renaissance), Université de Strasbourg, 1987, pp. 422-9, and R. D. S. Jack, "The Prose of John Knox: A Reassessment", *Prose Studies IV*, 1981, pp. 239-51. The most recent extensive survey of Scottish Literature has a curious gap between chapter 10, "Vernacular Prose Before the Reformation", and Chapter 11, "Prose after Knox", as if to suggest that a chapter about the period of John Knox had been left missing in between, but both chapters duly acknowledge Knox's new position in the Scottish literary tradition: R. J. Lyall and chapter 10 with an assessment of Knox's prose, in which he points out that "Knox's style is characterized less by deliberate anglicization than by a desire for lucidity", and that "in the *Historie*, at least, he represents the fulfilment of a slow, erratic progress towards a confidently mature Scots prose": cf. *The History of Scottish Literature*, vol. 1: Origins to 1660, ed. R. D. S. Jack (Aberdeen: Aberdeen Univ. Press, 1988), pp. 178-9; then, in the next chapter, David Reid argues that "the Scottish church [...] can hardly be blamed for crushing the Renaissance in Scotland. The case is rather that it would have taken more than a church to make a Renaissance": *ibid.*, p. 184.

32.- See James Aitchison, "The Iron Text", *The Golden Harvester: The vision of Edwin Muir* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1988), pp. 102-11.