

Andrew Melville (1545–1622): Writings, Reception, and Reputation

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Have pity upon poor Andrew Melville. Once he was a towering figure in Presbyterian Scotland, John Knox's successor as a leader of men, chastiser of proud monarchy and preacher of the truth. A student at St Andrews at the time of the Scottish Reformation, Melville spent a decade studying and teaching in France and Geneva. Returning to Scotland in 1574, he was the reforming principal successively of Glasgow University and St Mary's College, St Andrews. He engaged vigorously in the turbulent religious politics of James VI's reign, promoting a Presbyterian reorganisation of the Church, while upholding its spiritual autonomy and freedom from royal interference. His celebrated confrontation with the king at Falkland Palace in 1596 is one of the most quotable events in Scottish history. '[T]hair is twa Kings and twa Kingdomes in Scotland', bellowed Melville, referring to the distinct but entwined civil and spiritual realms. (1) 11 years later, James was in triumphant possession of three this-worldly kingdoms, and he sent his adversary to the Tower of London. From 1611, a martyred Melville passed the remainder of his life in French exile.

But today's historians have little use for such heroes as Melville. No longer do we set up past titans as the pioneers of our religious and political attitudes. Not for us are the Reformation's battles of contemporary relevance. To our minds, colourful anecdotes inspire cautious scepticism, not reverent retelling. Melville, then, is a victim of the secularisation, professionalisation and specialisation that have transformed history writing in the last century. The pedestal on which he once stood had three pillars, now dismantled. First there was Melville the party leader, whose combative charisma qualified him to speak for Presbyterianism and against royal supremacy in the Scottish Church. Curiously, as Caroline Erskine shows in the volume under review, Melville the figurehead at first featured most prominently in the anti-Presbyterian polemics of 17th-century English royalists and Scottish Episcopalians. Writers on Melville's side were disinclined to base their campaign for ministerial parity on the pre-eminence of a single clergyman. But whatever his significance in the struggles between James VI and the Presbyterians, Melville tended to attract the attention of historians, thanks to the extensive coverage of his deeds in the *Autobiography and Diary* of his nephew James, and in the near-contemporary histories by John Row, David Calderwood and John Spottiswoode.

As if they feared that magnifying Melville exposed the limited backing for their cause, Presbyterian writers

developed a second way of presenting him. This was to make Melville representative of the mainstream tendency in Scottish Protestantism. An influential spokesman for this interpretation was Melville's biographer, Thomas M'Crie, whose *Life* appeared in 1819. Melville was busy, well-connected and outspoken, but it was his ability, not his doctrinal position, that was unusual. This reading relates to one of the oldest, and now least relevant, of Scottish historical controversies. Was Scotland 'reformed from popery by presbyters', as the revolutionary convention of estates put it in 1689, and was Presbyterianism the natural, native disposition of the Scottish Church?(2) Presbyterians said yes, asserting a continuity from Knox through Melville to the Covenanters and the 1690 Presbyterian settlement. According to Episcopalians, on the other hand, Melville's Presbyterianism was an innovation, a fixation unknown to the earlier Reformers. A version of this debate continued into recent times, but it has collapsed as a result of more sceptical use of the early Presbyterian histories, greater attention to local complexity, and the posing of new questions about life in post-Reformation Scotland.(3)

Not long ago, there remained Melville's reputation as a university reformer, the man most responsible for the reconstitution of Scotland's universities after the Reformation, the promoter of humanistic scholarship and the new logic of Petrus Ramus. But as Steven Reid argued in his *Humanism and Calvinism* (2011), 'the constitutional revolution that Melville attempted to implement largely failed'. Of the re-founded medieval colleges, only Glasgow and St Mary's in St Andrews outlived Melville with something like the structures he created. If Melville improved language teaching and dismissed metaphysics from the curriculum – the evidence is fragmentary – Ramist logic did not supersede the essentially Aristotelian approaches inherited from the universities' earliest years. Scottish higher education adapted to the post-Reformation world, but royal and parliamentary initiatives, together with feuding and nepotistic academics, contributed at least as much as Andrew Melville.(4)

Melville's reputation is not what it once was. But if recent scholarly efforts have punctured the heroic image, there is now a determined effort to substitute a new Melville in its place. Much of *Andrew Melville*, edited by Roger Mason and Steven Reid, is devoted to this positive task of revision. The essays are perhaps not in the most appropriate order, as the collection concludes where it might have begun, with a stimulating essay by Caroline Erskine that picks over the outmoded perspectives of earlier advocates and detractors. Erskine historicises the reputation of Melville, surveying discussions from the 17th to the 19th century. In fact, she works against the grain of the rest of the volume. By entertaining us with the Melville of nebulous myths, and telling us much of significance about long periods of religious and political debate, her contribution inevitably diverts our attention from the real Melville and his concrete achievements.

For the most part, however, Mason, Reid and their contributors focus on Melville's writings. There are at least 230 poems, 84 surviving letters, an unpublished commentary on the book of Romans, and theological theses that were debated by Melville's students at St Andrews and reflect his views. One feature raising this volume above the normal run of edited collections is Steven Reid's annotated bibliography of Melville's works. This listing is a splendid resource, and should encourage further studies. The obstacle to such research, as the volume makes clear, is that Melville wrote for the most part in Latin. Poems in the anthology *Delitiae Poetarum Scotorum* (1637) are currently being translated, as part of the 'Bridging the Continental Divide' project at the University of Glasgow.(5) The present volume includes Jamie Reid Baxter's versions of 'The Powder Plot November 5 1605' and Melville's verses in the 1609 edition of *Pietas Pontificia* by Francis Herring. But most of the sources remain beyond the linguistic skills or patience of the majority of early modernists. Those essays in *Andrew Melville* that convey the importance of neo-Latin poetry to non-specialists are thus particularly welcome.

There are perhaps three aspects to the new Melville. First, he is presented, with more emphasis than before, as a Renaissance humanist. There was no contradiction between his strict Protestantism and his love of classical literature. Analysing three of Melville's biblical paraphrases in verse, David McOmish shows how Melville appropriated images and phrases from Virgil and Ovid. Melville's paraphrase of Deuteronomy 32, in the *Carmen Mosis* (1573-4), used hexameters, the metre in which Moses was supposed to have written. But Melville's approach was distinctly Virgilian. Interestingly, given that Melville probably composed the

paraphrases while resident in Geneva, his biblical source was the Vulgate. In his verse paraphrases of the Psalms, Melville followed the illustrious example of Scotland's greatest humanist, George Buchanan (1506–82). The two men were acquainted, and Melville inevitably stood in the older man's poetic shadow. 'Melville's efforts', McOmish writes, 'are bound to look clumsy when juxtaposed with Buchanan's' (p. 185). Nevertheless, Melville was a 'more than capable poet' (p. 199).

Several other chapters discuss Melville's connections with Buchanan. Roger Mason contributes a fascinating case study of Melville's extensive annotations in one of his copies of the *Rerum Scoticarum Historia* (1582) by Buchanan. The first section of Buchanan's work, a chorological description of Scotland, was put into verse by Melville, possibly one of the projects that occupied his time in the Tower. Unsurprisingly, Melville noted Buchanan's discussions of the pristine early Scottish Church, whose monastic Culdees stood in for post-Reformation presbyteries, and whose corruption by creeping papal tyranny gave grounds for Melville's anti-Catholicism. Buchanan's account of the Scottish monarchy, in which kings were originally elected and remained accountable to the political community, also won Melville's approval. But as Steven Reid explains in a further chapter, Melville was not prepared to imagine the deposition of his king. If his relationship with James was sometimes strained, the circumstances of Melville's career and the character of his scholarship prevented him from becoming a theorist of resistance.

Melville's dealings with James VI are central to a second dimension of his new reputation. This is Melville the public intellectual, a counsellor of the king in verse and an influential observer of contemporary politics. 15 years before he commemorated the gunpowder plot, Melville had been commissioned by the king to write a poem celebrating the coronation of Queen Anna. In 1594, the birth of her son, Prince Henry, prompted another congratulatory work. Though Melville's attitudes towards the king changed over his life, his poems were never those of the flattering courtier or the alienated dissenter. In 1605, when confronting James's enthusiasm for the English Church, Melville did not abandon his vision of godly Stuart kingship, though his demands for reform of the English hierarchy and worship had no effect. Melville's contributions to powder plot poetry – briefly a cultural phenomenon – are masterfully contextualised by Jamie Reid Baxter. Here we see in the poet's failure to complete a project subtle signs of his disappointment with the king. A more obvious response to royal policies was the *Melvini Musae* (1620), a volume combining Melville's anti-episcopal verse with a poisonous memoir of his adversary, the deceased Archbishop Patrick Adamson. But this text presents a problem, carefully assessed by Steven Reid: who assembled and saw to the publication of the *Musae*, and what did Melville, who was still alive but apparently not consulted, make of it?

Perhaps the most ambitious interpretation of Melville as a commentator on his times has been developed by Arthur Williamson. In an earlier article, written with Paul McGinnis, Williamson located Melville at the heart of a flourishing cultural 'moment'. His friends were concerned with Scotland's place in the world, which they established with maps and treatises on maritime law. But the circle was also gripped by the global confrontation between protestant Britain and the popish Iberian empire.⁽⁶⁾ In his contribution to *Andrew Melville*, Williamson argues that Melville, David Hume of Godscroft and Edmund Spenser had much in common in their reading of this struggle. Melville and Spenser drew on opposing national origin myths, and thus Melville envisaged for Scotland a central role that Spenser sought to deny. But both thought that the conflict with Spain was a harbinger of the apocalypse. Williamson sketches some grand claims about Scottish philo-Semitism, and a 'Saxonist' racism forged in England in response. These arguments call for greater elaboration, which we can presumably expect from Williamson's forthcoming work. Moreover, his contribution supplies materials for a history of Scottish apocalyptic thought, a subject awaiting a comprehensive analysis.

The third claim made in these essays for Melville's significance is as a churchman. Rather than the clerical politician, contributors to *Andrew Melville* explore his theology and professional approach. Mark Elliott compares Melville's commentary on the epistle to the Romans with related analyses in the works of Robert Rollock and Robert Boyd. This essay usefully demonstrates that theologians sharing a common Calvinism adopted different approaches shaped by their intellectual and political circumstances. More than Melville,

Rollock and his contemporaries liked to describe salvation in terms of the covenant of grace. The extent to which theologians emphasised the concept of two kingdoms fell and rose as the king's policy shifted. Elliott's essay efficiently considers these themes, but their wider ramifications are not discussed in detail.

John McCallum's study of Melville and his nephew James offers a further perspective on Andrew Melville's place in the post-Reformation ministry. Examining the two men's relationship, as portrayed in James's *Autobiography and Diary*, McCallum argues that the younger man did not present his uncle as a Presbyterian of unique prominence. But Andrew Melville was unusual among late 16th-century Scottish clergy in other respects, remaining in academic posts and not settling in the parish ministry. Compared to his nephew, his piety was less intense, his personality less suited to communicating an evangelical message to humble worshippers.

The essays on Melville as a clergyman suggest a problem with the collection. For readers primarily interested in neo-Latin poetry and Renaissance scholarship, studies focusing on one writer can be immensely revealing. But historians of the Church and religious life depend on comparisons more than individual case studies. If Andrew Melville was not a party leader, nor the single-handed reformer of Scotland's universities, but was nevertheless atypical of Scottish clergy, why put him in the spotlight? While *Andrew Melville* always links its subject's career to his times, some readers will think that it devotes too much attention to Melville the literary individual. Nevertheless, there is much to learn from this book, both about a poet and intellectual, and about his religious and political circumstances.

Notes

1. *The Autobiography and Diary of James Melvill*, ed. Robert Pitcairn (2 vols, Edinburgh, 1842), i, p. 370.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *Records of the Parliament of Scotland to 1707*, ed. Keith M. Brown et al. <<http://www.rps.ac.uk/1689/3/108> [2]> [accessed 25 September 2014].[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Particularly important works in these respects are Alan R. MacDonald, *The Jacobean Kirk, 1567–1625: Sovereignty, Polity and Liturgy* (Aldershot, 1998); Margo Todd, *The Culture of Protestantism in Early Modern Scotland* (New Haven, CT, 2002); John McCallum, *Reforming the Scottish Parish: The Reformation in Fife, 1560–1640* (Farnham, 2010).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Steven J. Reid, *Humanism and Calvinism: Andrew Melville and the Universities of Scotland, 1560–1625* (Farnham, 2011), quotation at p. 267.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. See <<http://www.dps.gla.ac.uk/> [3]> [accessed 25 September 2014].[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Paul J. McGinnis and Arthur H. Williamson, 'Politics, prophecy, poetry: the Melvillian moment, 1589?96, and its aftermath', *Scottish Historical Review*, 89 (2010), 1–18.[Back to \(6\)](#)

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