Jane Dawson’s new biography of the Scottish Reformer John Knox is titled simply *John Knox*. The eschewal of a subtitle is an indication of the ambition of a work which has already been hailed as definitive. This is a biography of the entire man, not a facet of his life or thought. The cover image of Knox is from an oil painting owned by the University of Edinburgh which, after cleaning and restoration, is now thought to be the earliest surviving image of the reformer. Similarly, the book itself offers a reassessment of a familiar face based in part upon newly discovered and previously unavailable primary sources. This biography will undoubtedly be the standard work on Knox for many years to come.

In her introduction Dawson reconstructs the baptism of Knox’s first son Nathaniel at Geneva on 23 May 1557. She uses this vignette to highlight key aspects of Knox’s thought, to introduce important characters, and finally to lay out her challenge to the traditional view of Knox as a strict, misogynistic and parochial figure. The book is largely chronological: it begins with a baptism and ends with a death. However, Dawson sets out her thematic concerns early on and weaves them into this narrative with considerable skill. For example she identifies Knox’s abhorrence of what he saw to be the embellishment of worship with unscriptural inventions as central to his passion for reformation. In the opening chapters Dawson contrasts the austere simplicity of his son’s baptism with Knox’s own baptism into the Catholic Church, which was an ‘elaborate and highly visual ceremony’ (p. 12). The latter was the world into which Knox was born; the former was the world he helped to create.

Given the lack of sources on his early life the narrative here is marked by frequent uses of the word ‘probably’ and other such qualifications. Dawson uses the opportunity to paint a picture of the religious, cultural and institutional milieu of Scotland in the early 16th century. The country was still scarred by the trauma of Flodden, fearful of further English invasions and politically volatile. In this time of uncertainty the Church of Scotland represented a point of stability and Dawson is right to emphasise, despite the foreshadowing inherent in such a biography, that no-one anticipated the upheavals of the Reformation.

Knox studied at St Andrews under the great scholastic teacher John Mair, or Major, and it was here that he developed a love of language, rhetoric and pugilistic debate. Boxing metaphors run through the biography and reinforce the view of Knox as something of a bruiser, at least when it came to his public speaking.
Dawson reminds us that in a semi-literate world a command of the spoken word was a powerful tool (p. 18). It was ‘because he could arouse great emotion in his hearers and … his words could stir people into action’ that Knox became a significant historical figure (p. 18). This is important for the historian to remember, engrossed as we often are in the world of the written word. The difference between an erudite political treatise, read by a few, and an impassioned speech or sermon which inspires many to action is crucial. To drive home this point Dawson draws comparisons between Knox’s oratorical skills and those of Winston Churchill and Martin Luther King, Jr. (pp. 183, 317).

The sketch of Knox’s early life Dawson draws is one of conventionality. As she puts it, ‘However much he later rejected it, Knox owed his early career entirely to the late medieval Church, and he was a churchman through and through’ (p. 21). It is frustrating, though of course no fault of Dawson’s, that records of Knox’s early life are so sparse. His conversion from a Catholic priest to a Protestant preacher is, despite Dawson’s best efforts, hard to trace or to explain and his early life remains largely opaque. Dawson pinpoints 1543 as the year in which Knox began to hold some Protestant beliefs, the same year in which the Earl of Arran allied with England and sought to introduce limited church reform (p. 23). This included sending preachers out to tour the country and it was through such sermons that Knox came to adopt the doctrine of salvation by faith alone. Dawson sees this as the first stage in Knox’s three-step transition from Catholic priest to Protestant preacher. The second step was meeting the preacher George Wishart in 1545 (pp. 28–37), and the final step was his call to be a minister whilst at the besieged St Andrews castle in 1547 (pp. 38–52).

Working with a relatively narrow source base, Dawson is required at points to speculate, but she is always careful to qualify such remarks and there is no doubt that they are based on excellent scholarship. Dawson’s close reading of events and words is illuminating. For example, she suggests that the ‘unusual addition to his notarial signature of the phrase, “a faithful witness through Christ to whom be the glory, amen” might be an early suggestion of a shift in Knox’s beliefs’ (pp. 22–3). Of Knox’s decision to act as Wishart’s ‘security guard’ and to carry a claymore, she notes that he ‘was also making explicit his own changed status because priests were not supposed to bear arms or spill blood’ (p. 29). These and other insights flesh out and enliven the narrative. It is always a pleasure to read a well-written academic work, and Dawson is a confident yet charmingly modest author. Her prose is vivid, precise and humorous at turns and she deploys metaphors sparingly and effectively.

Her emphasis on Knox’s family life and his close personal relationships certainly help to soften the popular image of the man. However she never denies that he was a zealot too. Knox, she writes, ‘always needed to be standing on one side of a fence or other and was never comfortable with grey areas’, he favoured black and white choices and ‘was happiest viewing the world in crystal-clear polarities and he thrived on unmistakable contrasts’ (pp. 29, 31, 32). However Dawson perceptively observes a tension in his thought between the people of God, broadly conceived, and the small groups of committed believers with whom he was most comfortable. This is a reflection, arguably, of the tension within covenant theology itself. Roger Williams, the 17th-century religious controversialist, questioned the legitimacy of the shift from a covenant of grace with the elect to a political covenant with the whole nation. This problem appeared to trouble Knox at a personal level but he does not seem to have articulated a response to it.

It is a constant temptation for the historian to make links between the past and the present. When this is not anachronistic it is a worthwhile, if onerous, pursuit. Dawson makes subtle connections, as when she notes that Knox’s parish lost its church during the Rough Wooings and did not recover one until 1973 (pp. 15–16), that the road he travelled on across the southern uplands in 1555–6 is today the A71 (p. 115), and that Knox’s grave lies under the car park outside the Court of Session in Edinburgh (p. 311). These asides both provide a firmer physical grounding to the narrative and gently prod the reader into thinking more deeply about the bridges between Knox’s world and our own.

In today’s politically febrile Scotland, animated by a referendum on independence from the United Kingdom and the likelihood of another in the future, it is tempting for some to draw upon the mythologised figures of Scotland’s past for present political purposes. Knox is a problematic character in this respect. He was, as
Dawson has written in another work, a Scot who in the decade after 1548 ‘pursued his career almost exclusively within an English context, married an English wife and acquired a noticeably English accent and a hybrid Anglo-Scottish literary style’. (1) The vernacular bible that Knox read was in English, since no Scots or Gaelic version existed, and it was from England that anti-papal works were imported (pp. 25-26). The thrust of Dawson’s argument is that Knox was not a parochial Scottish figure but a man of international significance who was profoundly shaped by the experience of multiple exiles.

It is clear that Knox thought in international as well as national terms. The ‘Anglo-Scottish strategy’ that Dawson argues, Knox and his friends devised in Geneva had Protestant unity between England and Scotland at its core. Though profoundly religious in motivation, and conceived within an apocalyptic framework, this strategy was also a political one. It was clearly in English interests to prevent Scotland coming under the control of France, and true religion in either country would never be entirely secure unless they were both reformed. It is ironic then that it was in part due to Knox’s radical writings that the Elizabethan church would turn away from Geneva and Calvin towards Zurich and Bullinger. One wonders how different things might have been if Knox and Christopher Goodman’s revolutionary rhetoric had not contaminated the perception of the Genevan church in England. The desire for religious uniformity, both for religious and political reasons, would of course be one of the major themes of the Wars of the Three Kingdoms, and Dawson posits that it was in part due to Knox that England and Scotland had taken different religious paths.

It is the relationship between Knox and the English radical protestant, Christopher Goodman, rather than between Knox and his first wife Marjorie, which gives the biography its personal core. Becoming a husband and head of household undoubtedly ‘altered the pattern of his life and how he viewed the world’, as Dawson argues, but she does not provide great detail on the latter point (p. 121). Dawson portrays Knox as initially almost the senior partner in his relationship with Goodman. He ‘convinced Goodman of his approach to worship’, and Goodman ‘also accepted Knox’s analysis of the failings of the Edwardian Church and adopted the Scot’s prophetic and apocalyptic version of recent English history’ (pp. 106–7). However the relationship was clearly symbiotic: Goodman changed Knox’s mind as well, and Knox borrowed his view of covenant obligations (pp. 138, 157). She is undoubtedly right that the ‘apocalyptic pressure’ felt by both Knox and Goodman contributed to their revolutionary rhetoric (p. 146). Knox was, however, more a man of words than action, though his rhetoric inspired radical deeds.

One of Dawson’s stated aims is to correct the view of Knox as an irredeemable misogynist. However, her contextualisation and interpretation of The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women does little to dispel this view of the Scot (pp. 140–6). Rather Dawson relies on Knox’s many close relationships with women in to soften his image. It is not an entirely successful venture, and one feels at points that Dawson is trying just a little too hard to defend her subject. Knox clearly did not hate women, but it is equally clear that he saw them as inferior to men. It is arguably not for the biographer to attempt to reconcile the contradictions and hypocrisies of their subject. Dawson ably highlights the tension between Knox’s private personal relationships and his public political works, but she does not explore this dualism in great depth. In Dawson’s defence it is of course important to remember that our own standards should not be anachronistically applied to past societies and the apparent contradictions in Knox’s view of women were unlikely to have been seen as such in the 16th century. Knox’s views may be unpalatable to modern day readers but were commonplace in his own time.

It is hard to find fault with this book. There are avenues left unexplored and ideas only hinted at but that is to be expected in a biography. There are certainly plenty of suggestions for other historians to pick up and develop. A small point of criticism is that the chapter titles though evocative are also esoteric, and do not offer the reader a clear overview of the structure of the book. However, each title is based on an apposite contemporary quote which is explained within the chapter. The index, on the other hand, is unusually fulsome, with useful thematic subsections on, for example, ‘Writings’, ‘Personality’ and ‘Political thought’. Two maps are provided, along with a selection of images, and a guide to further reading, broken down by chapter. The only thing lacking is a timeline, which would have been useful given the occasional jumps in chronology which Dawson makes, particularly given that this edition is clearly aimed at a wide market.
However each chapter helpfully begins with a concise summary highlighting key themes and giving the historical context.

The chronological approach, though accessible, has its weaknesses. Discussion of Knox’s theology is limited to a brief section in the final chapter, for example. It would also have been beneficial to give an overview of the historiography surrounding Knox and a reassessment of his place in history and Scottish culture. John Coffey’s biography of another zealous Scot, Samuel Rutherford, is a good example of this type of biography. (2) Dawson’s *John Knox* can be seen as an ideal starting point, accessible to the wider public whilst offering enough insight, depth and nuance to engage the academic reader too. The themes and ideas touched upon in her biography are of course more fully developed in Dawson’s many other articles and chapters on Knox. Dawson’s biography is a more sympathetic, though by no means uncritical, study of John Knox. Rather like the portrait on the cover of the book, gentle cleaning and restorative work has led us to look at the man afresh.

**Notes**


The author is happy to accept this review, and does not wish to comment further.

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