

## Public Opinion in Early Modern Scotland, c.1560-1707

**Review Number:** 2456

**Publish date:** Friday, 25 March, 2022

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**ISBN:** 9781108843478

**Date of Publication:** 2020

**Price:** £75.00

**Pages:** 320pp.

**Publisher:** Cambridge University Press

**Publisher url:** <https://www.cambridge.org/gb/academic/subjects/history/british-history-after-1450/public-opinion-early-modern-scotland-c15601707?format=HB>

**Place of Publication:** Cambridge

**Reviewer:** Julian Goodare

This is Karin Bowie's second book about the history of public opinion in Scotland. Her first, in 2007, examined the period 1699-1707 in depth, covering the debate leading up to the Union of Parliaments.<sup>(1)</sup> The present book deals with a longer period, and has no single focus like the Union. Instead it discusses a larger range of political debates – and some religious debates, at least to the extent that these affected politics. Nevertheless, the questions driving the new book are similar. What was 'public opinion', and how was it expressed? Or, what were people's opinions, and how did they express them? The 'public' is never a singular thing that has a single opinion. Bowie's book is thus about debate, and about processes of debate.

When historians discuss public opinion, what often interests us is the balance of opinion on debated topics. Was a given topic 'popular' or 'unpopular'? Would a majority of the population have voted for or against (say) the Reformation at the time when it was being proposed? Historians of the early modern period cannot conduct opinion polls, but we recognise that the opinions that such polls would have measured did exist in some way. When we write of the 'popularity' of the Reformation, or indeed of its 'unpopularity', we are making statements that are to some extent psephological.

On the other hand, historians of the early modern period usually recognise that the 'popularity', or not, of a topic like the Reformation is not just a matter of psephology or counting heads. Politically, some of the heads' owners counted for more than others. Early modern society was heavily hierarchical and patriarchal; poor men, and all women, usually had little political influence. When we discuss a topic's 'popularity' we are usually looking beyond the tiny group of aristocrats who led most political debates, but we recognise that those aristocrats had client networks, and indeed that the aristocrats' clients had their own clients at a lower social level. The scope that such clients possessed to form and act on their own 'opinions' may well have been modest. One of this book's welcome features is that it does pay attention to the opinions of ordinary men, and even women, when the evidence makes that possible. Another marginalised group, Highlanders, also receive attention.

Bowie's previous book, as noted above, dealt with the proposed union between the Scottish and English parliaments. Previous scholars had usually assumed that the Union was generally unpopular with the

Scottish public. Bowie did not contradict this interpretation outright, but she noted division, uncertainty and shifting views. She also discussed the difficulty of inferring a balance of opinion from the evidence, much of which consisted of anti-Union ‘addresses’. A lot of people signed these addresses, but were they representative, and what could they tell us about the views of those who did not sign? She has since produced a book-length edition of the texts of these addresses.[\(2\)](#)

The Union, and Bowie’s view of it, provide important context for the book under review. This book certainly does not deal with a single debated topic. Indeed the topics under debate are rarely placed in the forefront of Bowie’s discussion; she explains them briefly but no more. And, in keeping with her earlier approach, she certainly does not attempt to conduct retrospective opinion polls or to measure ‘opinion’ – which is probably just as well.

Instead, one of Bowie’s most important questions concerns what may be called the *idea* of public opinion. What did people say at the time about the popularity, or otherwise, of a debatable topic? Did ‘popularity’ matter? Did people even think that the ‘public’, or anything like it, was entitled to an ‘opinion’? Bowie is also interested in how people debated controversial issues. The vehicles for debate are to the forefront in most of the book.

The book contains six substantive chapters, covering two distinct periods. The first four chapters cover the bulk of the book’s period, 1560-1689 – from the Reformation to the Revolution of 1689. The two remaining chapters cover the shorter period, 1689-1707, from the Revolution to the Union. As we shall see, this division may partly reflect Bowie’s previous work on the later period, which she seeks to avoid duplicating here.

Another way to divide up the six chapters is to note that the first three all cover precisely-defined, narrow topics: ‘Protestations’, ‘Petitions’ and ‘Oaths’ respectively. Bowie regards these as important evidence for public opinion, at least in the earlier period – they are ‘traditional devices’ (p. 15). The fourth chapter, on ‘Public Communications’, deals with the same period as the first three (1560-1689) but discusses a much wider variety of public discourse. All four of the pre-1689 chapters have a basically narrative structure. The two chapters on the later period (1689-1707) also take in a wide variety of evidence, but in pursuit of narrower and more specific questions, as we shall see.

Protestations and petitions were closely related – so much so that it is part of Bowie’s task in her first two chapters to show ways in which they differed. A protestation was a publicly-expressed objection to some public topic or policy proposal. The protest could be by one person or by many people, or it could be made by a corporate body like a burgh council. Multi-person protests might or might not have signatures attached. Petitions were similar, but were formally requests, addressed to a specific authority (often the crown) and asking for specific action. The focus is primarily on national politics, but there is welcome attention to local debates also (e.g. pp. 56-7).

As vehicles for public opinion, oaths were different, and could take two main forms, either pro-government or anti-government. Governments sometimes imposed oaths, mainly on office-holders, in order to weed out and crush dissent; these might be oaths of allegiance or of abjuration. Opposition groups could also cement their active solidarity with oaths – notably the revolutionary National Covenant of 1638. The National Covenant, however, developed into a pro-government oath once the Covenanters seized power. Oaths in the Restoration period, 1660-1689, had a particularly divisive ecclesiastical character, and this part of Bowie’s chapter begins to resemble an ecclesiastical history.

Chapter 4, ‘Public Communications’, also covers 1560-1689, but is broader in scope, dealing with expressions of political controversy in various media. Printed books, pamphlets and broadsides receive the bulk of attention, and censorship is also discussed. Bowie notes that anti-government controversialists often had to use manuscripts or overseas presses. It is perhaps surprising that more is not said about sermons; I will come back to this. Indeed, the range of persuasive public statements was a good deal wider than Bowie

has scope for in this chapter. Just to mention a few official communications media, there were mottoes on coinage, royal entries and other ceremonies, annual calendar rituals especially on 5 August and 5 November (after 1600 and 1605 respectively), military musters, and political executions. Nevertheless this chapter is an effective survey that is well worth reading on its own.

As for the two post-1689 chapters: Chapter 5, 'The Inclinations of the People', is an analytical essay on the revolutionary Claim of Right of 1689, and specifically on its rationale for demanding the abolition of episcopacy. Bishops, said the Claim of Right in a famous phrase, had been 'contrary to the inclinations of the generality of the people ever since the reformation (they haveing reformed from popery by presbyters)'. Gordon Donaldson once devoted an entire book to contradicting the phrase in brackets.<sup>(3)</sup> Bowie shows that the issue of the 'inclinations of the generality of the people' was vigorously debated after 1689, with both Presbyterians and Episcopalians making detailed if tendentious claims that public opinion favoured their side. The final chapter, 'The Sense of the Nation', is a fascinating general survey of the broader political debates of the period 1689-1707, focusing on claims of 'national' interest or sentiment.

The book's periodisation, with a sharp division in 1689, is a little puzzling. It may simply be an attempt to avoid duplicating Bowie's previous book, which covered 1699-1707 in detail. For instance, it would make sense to cut off the narrative of 'petitions' before 1699, because the previous book contains a detailed narrative of petitions from then onwards. But, if so, why 1689 and not 1699? Bowie may explain this in the following statement: 'In the second phase, from the 1688-90 Revolution to the making of the United Kingdom in 1707, the Scottish parliament and general assembly met regularly, and petitioning and printing were less constrained. In these new circumstances, the crown's management methods were not always able to maintain control of parliament as discontent with the royal policy was expressed more freely in the name of the people and the nation' (p. 15). But most of these points would apply also to the period 1637-1651 – which leads me to a consideration of Bowie's pre-1689 periodisation, which is usually less decisive in identifying change.

Thus, the date of 1560 in the book's title is of course the date of the Reformation, but it seems to have been chosen for convenience rather than to make an argument about any change that occurred on or around that date. The Union of Crowns in 1603 is often considered an important date, but it was only important for some topics; Bowie finds little change in expressions of public opinion as a result. Then, as we move through the seventeenth century, the 1689 revolution seems to be the book's only revolution. We are told that the National Covenant of 1638 'drew together a resistance movement against the king' (p. 37), and we hear of the 'Covenanter regime' (pp. 111, 156). But the Scottish Revolution – as the Covenanters' seizure of power has been called ever since David Stevenson's celebrated book of 1973 – features here mainly as a period of intense political controversy.<sup>(4)</sup> Well, it was a period of intense political controversy, so there is nothing wrong with that, but perhaps an angle has been missed. Bowie's book here can be read alongside Laura Stewart's recent, magisterial analysis of political processes in the period 1637-1651.<sup>(5)</sup>

From the point of view of periodisation, the biggest gap in the book is the period 1567-1573, in which Scotland's political elite were so divided that they could not even agree about who was the monarch. This in turn followed the personal reign of Mary Queen of Scots, whose Catholicism had both angered and divided the Protestant political establishment. After Mary's deposition in 1567, civil war was the only way to resolve the dispute between the 'king's party', supporting the regents governing in the name of the infant James VI, and the 'queen's party', attempting to restore the queen. The king's party eventually won, aided by English military intervention and the corresponding failure of the French to intervene on the other side, but their victory was far from guaranteed. And 'public opinion' was loudly and frequently expressed on both sides, notably in the form of political broadsheets, mostly in verse, either printed or circulated in manuscript. More broadsheets supported the king's party, but Bowie's brief discussion does not mention that some came from the queen's party (pp. 147-8). The depth, range and bitterness of the civil war debates could well have received more attention.

One can thus imagine an alternative structure to this book, beginning with a section discussing the shorter

period 1560-1573 in which Scotland's religion and international allegiance hung in the balance, and followed by a section on the longer period 1573-1707 during which these vital and hotly-contested early issues would be seen to have been settled in favour of Protestantism and a connection of some kind with England. I am not saying that this would have been a better structure, but I am observing that our choice of periodisation sometimes affects the questions that we ask about the past. What matters here is that we should be clear about our questions, and keep the periodisation subordinate. Focusing on the earlier period would have brought out the depth of division in political society; focusing on the later period, by contrast, may bring out changes in mechanisms of debate.

Still, the muting of periodisation in this book is usually more of a strength than a weakness, enabling thematic concerns to emerge more clearly. In the spirit of encouraging continued discussion, I would like to turn now to some of the themes that Bowie gives herself no scope to address more than briefly or obliquely, but that nevertheless raise themselves to one interested in early modern political processes. I regard it as a tribute to the stimulating nature of Bowie's analysis that it raises even more questions.

My first question is a hardy perennial. How were people motivated to take political action? The assumption of most of the political discourse discussed in the book is that people acted, or ought to act, through ideological commitment – 'opinion', in fact. But perhaps ties of patronage and clientage were as important, or more important? One can certainly see patronage and clientage at work in the Union debate, for instance.

How much scope people have for freedom of expression is an interesting question that often comes up obliquely. Lists of signatures on petitions are suppressed for fear of offending the authorities; people are pressed to take oaths reluctantly. On the other hand, monarchs sometimes express a willingness to take advice and to hear grievances. This can be related to the concept of legitimacy, discussed in political science. People may not *like* their government, but they may put up with it or co-operate actively with it. Most governments do not rule primarily by force. In Scotland in this period, the main exception was the military occupation by English Cromwellian forces in 1651-1660, though even that regime attracted some Scottish support.

Bowie could have said more about sermons – surely the communications medium with the furthest reach in early modern Scotland. Her book is not primarily religious history, but many ministers expressed themselves vigorously from the pulpit on the controversial political issues of the day. Here Bowie can profitably be read alongside the recent study by Alasdair Raffe of religious controversy between 1660 and 1714.<sup>(6)</sup> Raffe shows that there was much more to these arguments than sermons, but he does give sermons due attention. His book, to which Bowie herself pays frequent and generous tribute, also deals in large part with political questions.

I would be interested to know more about how contemporary political theory related to the public ideologies of the period. Bowie sometimes seems to expect her readers to understand this already, as when passing and unexplained mention is made of a 'Buchananite elective monarchy' (p. 172). The big names of political theory, like George Buchanan, are never analysed; still less do we hear of the influence in Scotland of broader theoretical debates like those sparked off by the French Wars of Religion. Political theorists, of course, do not make public opinion directly, but there is a relationship here that could be explored. Moreover, one of Bowie's concerns is the idea of public opinion, and Buchanan and other theorists certainly had things to say on that topic, or at least on related topics like popular sovereignty.

At the other end of the spectrum from individual elite thinkers, we have the expression of public opinion by crowds. Gathering a supportive crowd has always been a dramatic way to make a public statement. Bowie's previous book had a chapter discussing actions by crowds – demonstrations, riots, and ritualised actions like public burning of the articles of union. Here, however, 'crowds are not presented as a separate factor' (p. 3), though there are occasional mentions of crowds in connection with, for instance, the presentation of petitions. Since crowds periodically demonstrated or even rioted over controversial issues throughout this period, their omission from the book is regrettable. Bowie hints that she may address this topic in future

work (p. 242), and it would be good to hear more about this.

At this point I should take the opportunity to point out four minor errors. Firstly, we are told that James VI after 1596 'restored bishops as a parliamentary estate' (p. 14). James certainly appointed more bishops at this time, and some recent parliaments had contained as few as two bishops. However, bishops had always been a parliamentary estate. Secondly, the Presbyterian radical Marion Harvie is quoted as denouncing 'all opinions that are contrar to the found truths of God' (p. 49) – no, these were the *sound* truths of God. Thirdly, we are told of 'leasing-making, a Scots term for *lèse-majesté* or seditious words' (p. 69). In fact this conflates two distinct concepts. 'Leasing-making' was indeed about seditious words; the term 'leasing', cognate with the modern word 'lying', denoted a false statement. By contrast, '*lèse-majesté*', meaning 'harm to majesty', was regarded as a synonym for treason.

The fourth error takes a little longer to explain. The Company of Scotland trading to Africa and the Indies, founded in 1695, gave rise to much political controversy that features in Bowie's book. The Company was originally conceived as an Anglo-Scottish body with a capital of £600,000 sterling, half each to be subscribed by Scots and English. As far as prospective English investors were concerned, this was a blatant attempt to infringe the monopoly of the English East India Company under a Scottish flag. Lobbying by the latter company forced English investors to withdraw, whereupon in 1696 the Scots increased their own capital contribution from £300,000 to £400,000. Bowie seems unaware of this, writing that 'the original target of £300,000 was expanded to £400,000 to accommodate subscribers travelling from afar' (p. 223).

Let me end, however, not with minor points but with a big topic: the concept of the 'public sphere'. This is of much interest to Bowie throughout both her books. The public sphere was originally taken up by historians of the eighteenth century, but has spread to the sixteenth and seventeenth. The phrase 'public sphere' denotes a process rather than a thing (whether spherical or not). Typical components of the process include: a free press (or at least opportunities for political self-expression); rational debate; political parties or groups with rival programmes; and a political community in the country as a whole, not just within the royal court or parliament. Rational debate is seen as seeking compromise and consensus. The public sphere process can thus be contrasted with the winner-takes-all nature of modern elections and referendums. Bowie argued in her previous book that a public sphere emerged in Scotland only in the early eighteenth century. Here she adds that the public sphere process can be contrasted with what she sees as an earlier insistence on 'God's truth' as a standard for political action (p. 241), and a consequent aversion to compromise.

There is certainly something in this from an ideological point of view. The main political ideologies available in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were rigidly uncompromising. However, here we are more interested in political practice. It might be suggested that political practice in an Aristotelian sense is always about the quest for ultimate compromise. Even the Covenanters compromised sometimes, and Bowie makes a contribution to our understanding of how they did so.

One final aspect of the public sphere that may be particularly important to early modern historians is the emerging assumption that debatable public issues arise continuously, so that people have regularly to inform themselves about the issues and take sides on them. This may be related to the emergence, towards the end of Bowie's period, of a periodical press, providing a continuous flow of discussion of public issues. It may be suggested that earlier public spheres were temporary emergencies. People involved themselves in debate and action concerning, for instance, the National Covenant, but they hoped that, once the issues were settled, they would be able to return to private life. Her present book reiterates this view, but tells us much more about how political debate was conducted in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as well. For this she deserves our thanks.

## Notes

1. Karin Bowie, *Scottish Public Opinion and the Anglo-Scottish Union, 1699-1707* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press for Royal Historical Society, 2007).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Karin Bowie, ed., *Addresses Against Incorporating Union, 1706-1707* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press for Scottish History Society, 2018).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Gordon Donaldson, *Reformed by Bishops* (Edinburgh: Edina Press, 1987).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. David Stevenson, *The Scottish Revolution, 1637-44: The Triumph of the Covenanters* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1973).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Laura A. M. Stewart, *Rethinking the Scottish Revolution: Covenanted Scotland, 1637-1651* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Alasdair Raffe, *The Culture of Controversy: Religious Arguments in Scotland, 1660-1714* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2012).[Back to \(6\)](#)

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