CHAPTER TWO

THE FORMATIVE YEARS
(1545–1563/4)

The Narrative History

Were it not for the diarist and narrative historian James Melville and his efforts at chronicling his own life in relation to the broader ecclesiastical, political, and cultural developments of late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Scotland, our knowledge of the life of Andrew Melville would be extremely limited. Melville himself did not write an autobiography nor do we have any extant letters from his hand prior to 1572. While studying and teaching in Geneva we know that he corresponded with his brothers Richard and James, probably in the years 1572 or 1573, yet, sadly, none of these letters have survived. We also know that while he was in Paris and Poitiers during the years 1563/4-1569 he was in communication with his brothers back in Scotland and that this correspondence was interrupted by the French wars of religion, leading his family to believe that he had perished in the conflict. The earliest correspondence we have from his hand is a letter written to Peter Young on 14 April 1572 at the very end of his time on the continent just prior to his return to Scotland. Whatever correspondence he did write prior to 1572 simply has not survived. This lack of material from Melville himself only underscores the indispensable nature of James Melville’s narrative history.

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2 James Melville, The Autobiography and Diary of Mr. James Melvill ed. Robert Pitcairn (Edinburgh, 1842), 30. James Melville writes that there had been correspondence between Andrew and his brothers during his time in France but that it had been “four or fvye yeirs sen they gat anie letters or word from him.”

3 Letter of Andrew Melville to Peter Young, 14 April 1572, Bodleian, Smith MS. 77, 27.
While James Melville’s work is exceedingly valuable, especially regarding the early years of Melville’s life, the Diary (1602) and True Narratioune (1610) are not without their own historical discrepancies and errors and thus must be consulted critically and cautiously. These discrepancies may be seen from the very opening page of the Diary, which identifies 1556 as the year of James’ birth while Andrew himself maintained it was 1557. Likewise, James stated that he commenced his studies at St Leonard’s College, St Andrews in November 1571 while the official records of the University state that he matriculated in 1570 and was graduated in 1572. Similarly, James identified June 1575 as the month in which his father Richard died while the neo-Latin poet John Johnston identified the date as 25 May 1575 in his poem entitled Richardus Melvinus. While it is certainly possible that Johnston himself is mistaken, it would not be the first time James Melville confused dates. Furthermore, James is mistaken when he claims that his uncle served as “a Professour of Humanitie in the Collage” in Geneva. Rather than serving as a professor of humanity in the schola publica of the Genevan Academy, Melville served as a regent in the second class in the schola privata, “the lower-level Latin school.” James also mistakenly identified 1578 as the year Melville first published his Carmen Mosis. According to McCrie, the Carmen Mosis along with chapter 3 of the book of Job and various epigrams, were first published in Basel in 1574. Despite such