CHAPTER 1

Property and Piety: Donations to Holy Trinity Church, St Andrews*

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The Reformation in St Andrews

In the summer of 1559 the residents of St Andrews publicly embraced Protestantism. During the space of a few weeks the archbishop fled the city, ‘all monuments of idolatry’ were removed, reformed doctrines became openly preached, and a functioning kirk session was established.¹ By the end of the year more than three hundred men from St Andrews had proclaimed in writing their support for the Protestant Lords of the Congregation, and pledged that they would assist ‘with our bodies, geir and force, for maynteyning of the trew religioun of Christe, and downe putting of all superstitioun and idolatrie’.² Even former Catholic clerics and noted opponents of heresy such as Friar John Grierson (head of the Dominican order in Scotland) were soon persuaded to renounce the Pope, purgatory and the mass.³

The Reformation of St Andrews was unusually rapid and effective.⁴ The speed with which the burgh adopted Protestantism has encouraged the

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² RStAKS, vol. 1, pp. 6–10; St Andrews University Library (hereafter StAUL), CH2/316/1/1, pp. 4–6.

³ Ibid., pp. 16–18.

assumption (both in the sixteenth century and subsequently) that the population of St Andrews had for some time been Reformist in their sympathies.\(^5\) In the introduction to his edition of the St Andrews Kirk Session minutes David Hay Fleming declared that previous to the events of 1559 ‘reformed opinions had been introduced and nourished by a devoted band of martyrs and confessors’ within St Andrews, and that Catholicism ‘had deservedly lost its hold alike on the affections and respect of the people’.\(^6\) A similar narrative is outlined, albeit in more moderate terms, in Linda Dunbar’s recent biography of John Winram (sub-prior of St Andrews Cathedral and first superintendent of Fife). Dunbar describes how the execution of Walter Milne in April 1558 ‘united the inhabitants of St Andrews against the ecclesiastical authorities’, and states that the canons of the Cathedral were ‘also ready to embrace Protestant reform’.\(^7\) According to this traditional version of events both clerics and laity in St Andrews were disillusioned with the Catholic Church and sympathetic to the Protestant party long before John Knox and the Lords of the Congregation descended on St Andrews in June 1559.

The reality was probably more complex. Prior to 1559 there were people in the burgh with Protestant beliefs, but there is also evidence of considerable commitment to Catholic doctrines and liturgy even amongst those who, when faced with the crisis of the arrival of the Lords of the Congregation, decided to back the Protestant cause. These Catholic loyalties of the sixteenth-century inhabitants of St Andrews have received limited attention. Yet study of the traditional allegiances of the burgh’s residents has the potential both to deepen our understanding of the nature of St Andrews’ Reformation, and to broaden our knowledge of late medieval and early modern Scottish piety.

Despite recent ground-breaking publications, Catholic piety in pre-Reformation Scotland remains woefully under-researched.\(^8\) The Reformers’

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\(^5\) One of the earliest proponents of this narrative was John Knox, who portrayed the people of St Andrews as being filled with a ‘thirst’ for Reformed teachings, and who stated that the ‘godlie’ of St Andrews ‘with one voyce proclaimed, that Christ Jesus sould be preached in despite of Sathan’. *Works of John Knox*, Laing, vol. 6, p. 25.

\(^6\) *RStAKS*, vol. 1, p. vi.


\(^8\) The past two decades have seen several publications on fifteenth and sixteenth-century Scottish piety. Notably, Audrey-Beth Fitch, *The Search for Salvation: Lay Faith in Scotland, 1480–1560* (Edinburgh, 2009), which provides an invaluable overview of lay belief and observance. There have also been studies of more specific topics, including: Steve Boardman and Eila Williamson (eds), *The Cult of Saints and the Virgin Mary in Medieval Scotland*