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Who were the ‘Aberdeen Doctors’, and what did they think? The first part of this question is easier to answer than the second.¹ The ‘Doctors’ were a group of academics and ministers affiliated with King’s and Marischal College in the two decades following the accession of Bishop Patrick Forbes of Corse in 1619. They are best known for the series of tracts and pamphlets they exchanged in the summer of 1638 with the Covenanting ministers Alexander Henderson, David Dickson, and Andrew Cant, which denounced the National Covenant as seditious and theologically unsound.² However, their attempts to sway national

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² These were published in two collected editions as the Generall demands concerning the late covenant (1638) and the much longer The Answers of some brethren of the ministrie to the replies of the ministers and professors of Divinitie in Aberdeen ... also Duplies ... concerning the late Covenant (1638).
opinion were unsuccessful, and when the Covenanters consolidated their hold over Scotland in 1639 they were all removed from their posts and subsequently died, either in exile or relative obscurity.³

The Doctors are largely seen as a footnote to the Covenanting revolution, producing some token intellectual opposition in 1638 that, while interesting, had no real impact on the broader rebellion. Yet the group at Aberdeen was larger than the small number of men involved in the pamphlet war, and was intellectually more than the sum of their tracts. While its best-known members are those who subscribed the anti-Covenant pamphlets – the academics John Forbes of Corse, Robert Baron, and Wiliam Leslie, and the three local ministers Alexander Scroggie, Alexander Ross and James Sibbald⁴ – it also included the regents and other post-holders at the university, most notably David Leech, the sub-principal and senior regent of King’s College between 1632 and 1639.⁵

This entire community made extensive use of the publishing press of Edward Raban that was based in the city between 1622 and 1649. Raban produced over 150 separate works during his tenure in Aberdeen, the majority of which were connected to the university and over twenty of which were written by Robert Baron and John Forbes alone. Several more works by the two men are still extant in manuscript.⁶ This substantial corpus of Aberdonian material awaits a full study, but in what follows I want to tentatively suggest that their approach to philosophical and theological teaching was unique and highly progressive

3 Baron fled immediately into exile and died at Berwick in 1639. Sibbald fled to a Protestant Episcopalian ministry in Dublin, where he died from the plague in 1647. Leslie was deposed from his position as principal in 1639 and died at Spynie in 1654. Scroggie was deposed from his position at King’s in 1639 and died at Rathven, in Banffshire, in 1659. Forbes was deposed from his chair and ejected from his university residence in 1641 and spent five years in Campvere in the Netherlands, before returning to Aberdeen in July 1646; he spent the rest of his life at Corse, where he died in 1648.

4 Forbes was the first professor of divinity at King’s College (appointed 27 April 1620) and son of Bishop Patrick Forbes; Baron spent his early career as a student and regent at St Salvator’s College, St Andrews and then minister at Keith in Banffshire before taking up the inaugural chair of divinity at Marischal College (appointed 21 December 1625); Leslie was principal of King’s College between 1632 and 1639; Scroggie, Ross, and Sibbald were all ministers in Aberdeen parishes. See MacMillan, The Aberdeen Doctors, pp. 227–264.


6 P.J. Anderson, Notes on Academic Theses with Bibliography of Duncan Liddell (Aberdeen, 1912); J.F. Kellas Johnstone, Bibliographia Aberdonensis (2 vols, Aberdeen: Third Spalding Club, 1929); Aberdeen University Library (aul) MS136, Robert Baron, Disputationes theologicae quaedam (1687); aul MS635 and 635A, John Forbes of Corse, ‘A Diary, or Spirituall Exercises’. Copied from his own manuscript (1687 and 1690).