CHAPTER THREE

’Saints at the Door don’t Make Miracles’?

The Contrasting Fortunes of Scottish Pilgrimage, c.1450–1550

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In 1512 Alexander Stewart, archbishop of St Andrews, was in a mood for reflection. Once upon a time, he recalled, ‘divers pilgrims did set forth to the Church of Saint Andrew’. They came in their multitudes ‘from divers lands, far and near’, attracted by ‘the wonders for which the relics of the blessed Apostle became famous’. To cater for this descent of the faithful, a hospital was established—probably in 1144. Four centuries later the miracles and pilgrimages had, however, ceased—at least ‘in a measure’—and the hospital was now inhabited by elderly women ‘who did give little or no return in devotion or virtue’. Stewart had studied under Erasmus and some of the eminent tutor’s humanist disdain for pilgrimage had perhaps rubbed off on a royal pupil now eager to augment his academic reputation. The poor, at any rate, were to be ejected from the hospice and replaced with students. This was not perhaps the Rachmanite archbishop’s finest moment—but there seems little doubt that his ambitions were facilitated by the absence of pilgrims. It is the purpose of this chapter to ask where they had gone.

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1 ‘Santos da porta não fazem milagres’: I am grateful to Paula Ferreira for acquainting me with this Portuguese proverb; and to Aly Macdonald for characteristically incisive comments on a draft of this paper.


3 The tenants probably included men too: St Andrews University Library, St Andrews Burgh Charters, B65/22/191.

The traditional historiographical response to that question is straightforward. Scotland’s pilgrims had gone nowhere—except, perhaps, home to prepare for Reformation. While reformers railed against images and relics (those indispensable accoutrements of pilgrimage), pilgrims themselves rate little mention from that ecumenical trinity of Reformation scholars, Kirk, Donaldson and Lynch. This accords with Ian Cowan’s more explicit assessment that pilgrims ‘became less common in the sixteenth century’, and with Peter Yeoman’s argument that ‘the last floruit of popular pilgrimage’ occurred in James IV’s reign (1488–1513). The basis for these admirably clear conclusions lies largely in older scholarship. Cowan drew on publications by David McRoberts relating to Roman and Holy Land pilgrimages. Yeoman (following Sir James Balfour Paul) focused more upon domestic pilgrimage and especially on royal peregrinations. Taken together, however, there is clear agreement: both foreign and domestic pilgrimages were in decline—by at least 1512, if the fate of St Andrews was at all typical.

This historiographical consensus stands at the intersection of three different intellectual approaches. There is, firstly, a whiff of Whiggish predestination to the notion that pilgrimage became unfashionable just as Protestantism began its supposedly inexorable advance. Coincidentally (and secondly) many political historians, with an avowedly secular outlook, are doubtful whether piety motivated human action. These quite different views have been partly substantiated from the Catholic perspective, epitomised by McRoberts, who found only limited evidence of later medieval pilgrimage. But McRoberts deployed a methodology that was neither comprehensive nor systematic. His perception that pilgrimage became unfashionable rests largely upon the disappearance of pilgrims from published government records after 1513. This does not, however, prove that pilgrimage declined. Rather, it reflects changing bureaucratic practice: James V’s peregrinations are revealed by different