

The English Reformers

(Knox of Scotland)

ROBERT KLUTTZ

The purpose of this paper is to deal not in myth or imagination, nor to delve in deceit or delusion, but to search out the candid facts of history that compelled the immortal Pilgrims and Puritans to jettison their homeland with everything dear in this world, and to aim for things far better and greater. In Bedford Square a statue proclaims of one among their number, where stands a man having...

His eyes lift up to heaven,
The best of books in his hand,
The law of truth upon his lips...
Who stood as if he pleaded with men.

Taylor Innes in his study of Knox posed the following:

What was it after all which really made the man who made the age?¹

To answer that question is an objective of this paper.

Anybody can rewrite history. *Let history stand!* It is “a record of God’s own dealings with man,” and man tinkers with the record at his own peril. Its purpose is that man may *learn* from his mistakes, but “he who *will not learn* the lesson of history is condemned to repeat it.” In this Santayana was not wrong, and among all the lessons that it *would* teach, the clearest seems to be that those who seek to realize aims by force are always unscrupulous, always cruel, and always doomed to failure.

BRITISH CHARACTER

There is something exquisitely commendable about the character of the British Islanders, both individual and national. The one reflects the other. As individual men have an identifying “character” that they bear along in life — good, bad, strong, weak, or biliously neutral — so also nations. The national character of Great Britain has been put through the fires of trial and testing, hammered out over the anvil of God’s justice, and in men like John Knox of Scotland emerged all the finer — not at all unlike that of gold.

Hoggart speaks of British character as a “Martha-Mary” combination², both necessary and good, commendable and complementary; but far removed from a Jekyll-Hyde concept and never identified with it. “In 1979,” he writes, “the Martha side took over from the Mary... [It] expresses itself in such phrases as ‘you must live within your means’, ‘cut your coat according to your cloth’, ‘pay your own way’, ‘don’t spend what you haven’t earned’, ‘be beholden to no one’, ‘stand on your own two feet’, ‘cleanliness before godliness’, ‘don’t kill with kindness’, ‘Unto every one that hath shall be given...but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath.’ ...Not surprisingly, Kipling made himself one of their celebrators: ‘the Sons of Martha favour their Mother of the careful soul and the troubled heart...They do not preach that God will rouse them a little before the nuts work loose. — They do not teach that His Pity allows them to leave their job when they [d]-well choose’...Others of Martha’s assumptions include that there is only a limited amount of goods and things of value in our world and that they have to be earned and then duly apportioned... The Martha spirit is therefore practical, Ricardian, hates hire purchase, works hard. It clearly has at its best some strong virtues, notably reliability and probity.”³

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James Kirkup, caustic about nearly everybody and everything including himself, reveals yet the truth when he says that the British are well known for their distinctive character. From a chapter entitled “The British Character” in his small but interesting treatise *The Britishness of the British*, he enumerates among other tenets the following: characteristic independence of spirit (love of freedom); nonconformity to the mass of the robotic unthinking; frank honesty and openness (as opposed to surreptitious under-handed double-dealing); undaunted courage in the face of hardship, danger, and difficulty; determination and resolve; composure; dignity; culture; refinement; propriety; common sense; and class. To which may be added integrity; honor; love of truth;⁴ nobility of mind; greatness and purity of soul; vision; single-minded purpose; tenacity; discipline; diligence; enterprise; genuine knowledge as opposed to rote memory or the cramming of facts; faith; trust; sincerity; justice; belief in equality before the law, and in a Law⁵ that transcends all manmade law. Indeed, the British are possessed of uncommon intelligence, common decency, and an exceptionally high sense of moral rectitude.

The reader no doubt will have seen the famous portrayal of Queen Victoria presenting a copy of *The Bible* to a foreign prince and declaring that *it* was “the secret of England’s greatness.” Happy empire whose sovereign loved and revered the Word of God!⁶ After the coronation of Her Majesty, a series of festivities was concluded with the singing of Handel’s “Messiah.” When the “Hallelujah Chorus” was being sung, all present in usual manner rose immediately in honor to the Great King,⁷ but the young Queen had been instructed that as regent she had every right to remain seated. When the choir reached that magnificent crescendo “King of kings and Lord of lords,” however, she forgot her courtly instructions. Rising meekly to her feet, she folded her arms and bowed her head — with

the Crown of the British Empire upon it. *The secret of England's greatness!*⁸

The writer's basic assumption has been that an individual is propelled along in life by certain foundation principles, either for good or for evil. So also a nation. So also the British. Could it be that that premise is indicative of a far greater *Foundation* whose existence is not so readily apparent on the surface of man's modern, high-tech, frenzied living, but becomes evident when one takes the time and effort to dig for *reasons* back of man and his society? "There is more to life than we would otherwise be tempted to think, another dimension."⁹ Could it be that nations *and individuals* by their ungodliness call down upon themselves the judgment of God when they obliviously continue in lifestyles of sin and wickedness, disobedient to His Law and in rebellion against it? The pattern of history would seem to point in that direction.¹⁰

CHAMPION OF NATIONAL AND PERSONAL RIGHTEOUSNESS

Without the good bellwethers of righteousness and justice along the way, however, one can easily see the history of Great Britain and of the Empire having gone in other directions. Well did Heraclitus observe, "A man's character is his destiny." No more fitting description could be given of Reformer John Knox, who belongs not only to his own native Scotland but to the whole of Great Britain and to all of moral mankind.

The strong stand of a single man for personal and national righteousness in the midst of religious, political, and moral corruption raging rampant, assured that history would take a turn for the better and that these noble lives would not have been given in vain. The purpose of continuing this investigation has been to plumb the depths to which the leading English

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Reformers by their stand in evil hour were able to influence for good the course of their nation's history and that of the world. The present paper deals only with the hero of the Scottish Reformation, whom Thomas Carlyle designated "chief priest and founder of English Puritanism." (Cowan, 99)

To include in one brief paper every single contribution of Knox to the Reformation would be both impractical and impossible. Only the most general highlights, therefore, will be touched upon, as introduction and inspiration for future study and research.

YEARS OF PREPARATION

The exact date of his birth is uncertain, but is generally recognized as the year 1505 in or near the village of Haddington east of Edinburgh. Born of comparatively well-to-do parents who provided for him a good education in the Catholic church, he became at early age a friar in the Franciscan monastery at Haddington, and at seventeen was sent to the University of Glasgow where he studied the art of logical argument under Dr. John Major. It was this John Major from whom Knox in course of time received the doctrine that "if princes exceed their bounds, and do against that wherefore they should be obeyed, there is no doubt that they may be resisted even with power."¹¹ (Cowan, 273) From Major also Knox apparently "first imbibed those advanced views" on monarchy and democracy that we take so much for granted today.

From the people kings have their institutions, and on them royal power depends. The nation is above the king, who exists for the people's good, not they for his. (Cowan, 38)

Knox was ordained a Catholic priest in 1529, and his brilliant young mind began to fathom the writings of Jerome and Augustine.

His studies now received new direction...not satisfied with mere excerpts from ancient authors...he resolved to have recourse to the original works. In them he found a method for investigating truth,⁴ to which he had hitherto been a stranger. Among the fathers of the Christian Church, Jerome and Augustine attracted his particular attention. By the writings of the former, he was led to the Scriptures as *the only pure fountain of divine truth...* In the works of the latter, he found religious sentiments very opposite to those taught in the Romish church. (McCrie, 7)

What he learned mainly from Augustine, in addition to theological predestinarianism, is that "Faith is conceived *only* from the Scriptures."¹² (Watt, 22)

In short order he threw off many of the superstitious trappings of the Roman Catholic church, as the light of God's Word began to penetrate the medieval darkness of his soul.

THE INFLUENCE OF WITNESSING MARTYRDOMS

When one considers the conversion of Knox, he is reminded of Saul's volte-face and the doubtless impact of Stephen's brave martyrdom on that ostensibly hard heart of a young pharisaic Jew.¹³ Two young martyrs figured prominently in Knox's decision to follow Christ without all the manmade traditions associated with "Holy Mother Church."

The first was that of young Patrick Hamilton, leading pioneer of the Scottish Reformation and son of a Linlithgowshire knight and kinsman of

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the noble families of Hamilton and Albany.

The reformed doctrine had made considerable progress in Scotland before it was embraced by Knox. Patrick Hamilton, a youth of noble descent, obtained the honour not conferred on many of his rank, of first announcing its glad tidings to his countrymen, and sealing them with his blood. As early as the year 1526, a gleam of light was by some unknown means imparted to the mind of that noble youth, amidst the darkness which brooded around him. (McCrie, 14)

His freedom in exposing the reigning corruptions soon drew upon him the jealousy of the popish clergy, who *decoyed* him to St. Andrews where, on the last day of February, 1528, he obtained the crown of martyrdom by the hands of Archbishop Beatoun...and according to the young martyr's prediction, 'the flames in which he expired were, in the course of one generation to enlighten all Scotland, and to consume with avenging fury the Catholic superstition, the papal power, and the hierarchy itself.' (McCrie, 15)

Hamilton was *tricked* into "such a definite declaration of his views as sufficed to bring home...the charge of heresy..."¹⁴ A single day witnessed his trial, condemnation, and martyrdom." He was only twenty-three years of age. (Smith, vi)

At the stake he prayed that God would open the eyes of his fellow-citizens; and when unable any longer to speak he held up his half-burnt hand in response to a sympathetic bystander — as a token of steadfast faith.

It was a common saying at the time that the reek of Patrick Hamilton infected as many as it blew upon; and we can hardly imagine that Knox, who reports this saying, was himself entirely unaffected... (Cowan, 34)

Knox himself in his *History of the Reformation in Scotland* portrays the incident:

When these cruel wolves had, as they supposed, clean devoured the prey, they found themselves in worse case than before. Within St. Andrews, yea, almost within the whole Realm, there were none found hearing of that fact who began not to inquire, Wherefore was Master Patrick burnt?... So, within short space, many began to call in doubt that which before they held for certain verity. (Knox, 6-8)

Because of Knox's adverse influence (according to the Romish ecclesiastics), Cardinal David Beaton, Archbishop of St. Andrews and that enemy of all righteousness and reform, hired assassins to destroy him, but Providence guaranteed his safety.

About 1545, Knox came under the influence of the second martyr, Reformer George Wishart, who became his close friend and mentor. But Wishart was martyred at the hands of Beaton in 1546. His "mock trial" on the same charge of "heresy" took place on the exact anniversary of Patrick Hamilton's condemnation and martyrdom. Carried out in the cathedral at St. Andrews, "before two archbishops and other dignitaries of the Church" but without sanction of the Regent (who, states Pitscottie in his *History of Scotland*, "would not consent that any 'skaith' shall be done to that man..."), Wishart was burnt next day, March 1, 1546. (Foxye, 253)

Among the martyr's last words were these:

'Consider and behold my visage. Ye shall not see me change my colour! This grim fire I fear not; and so I pray you...not to fear them that slay the body, and afterward have no power to slay the soul...¹⁵ I know surely that my soul shall sup with my Saviour this night,

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ere it be six hours...'

Last of all the hangman his tormentor, upon his knees, said: 'Sir, I pray you forgive me, for I am not guilty of your death.' To whom he answered: 'Come hither to me.' When he was come to him, he kissed his cheek and said: 'Lo! here is a token that I forgive thee. My heart, do thine office!' Then the trumpet sounding, he was put upon the gibbet and hanged, and there burnt to powder...

After the death of this Blessed Martyr of God, began the people in plain speaking to damn and detest the cruelty that was used. Yea, men of great birth, estimation, and honour...avowed that the blood of Master George should be revenged, or else it should cost life for life. (Knox 64-5)

But for Wishart, Knox might never have left the Church of Rome. Within only a few years now would the people of Scotland be singing a song that no man could have sung in the days of these two noble martyrs:

The Paip, that pagane full of pryde,
He hes us blindit lang.....
Bot his abominatioun
The Lord hes brocht to licht;
His Popische pryde, and thrinfalde crowne,
Almaist hes loist thair nicht. (MacGregor, 219)

Two months later the Cardinal himself was murdered, and suspicion fell immediately upon Knox.¹⁶ The avengers fled for refuge to the Castle of St. Andrews and Knox, though guiltless of any complicity in the crime, was compelled for his own safety's sake to join them at Easter in 1547, about which time he accepted the call to minister in the Castle and at the local parish church.

Knox rejected the order of episcopal ordination as totally unauthorized

by the Word of God. “Once convinced that God had called him to the ministerial office, he consulted not with flesh and blood, and counted not his life dear if haply he could save others.” (Smith, 18)

Knox did not believe that ordination by man was a necessary part of Christ’s command to preach, nor did he think it necessary for the presbyters to lay hands on him [in order] to qualify...¹⁷ (Martin, 14)

Warfield concurs with the above by saying that “he who knows that it is God who has chosen him and not he who has chosen God, and that he owes his entire salvation...to this choice of God, would be ingrate indeed if he gave not the glory of his salvation *solely* to the inexplicable elective love of God.” (Warfield, 294)

PERFIDY, TREACHERY, SLAVERY

Religio-political intrigue between Scottish royalty and the French resulted in the dispatch of a French fleet to beseige and conquer the outmanned and outgunned defenders of the Castle at St. Andrews. Following a brave resistance of four weeks, they were forced to capitulate on Saturday, July 31, 1547. The French victors failed, however, to abide by terms of the surrender, and the poor Scots were carried to Rouen and “confined to the galleys as slaves.” Loaded down with chains, they were forced to row ships back and forth across the English Channel — Knox himself for a period of eighteen months, so that in the process his health was irreparably damaged.

The French captors made persistent efforts to cajole, threaten, and torment their Scottish prisoners into conformity with Roman usages. On

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Saturday nights their *Salve Regina* was sung, and they were compelled to kiss “a painted brod (board)” called “Notre Dame.”

A revealing incident of the time is recorded for posterity:

Soon after their arrival at Nantes, their great *Salve* was sung, and a glorious painted Lady was brought in to be kissed, and amongst others, was presented to one of the Scottishmen then chained.¹⁸ He gently saith: ‘Trouble me not. Such an idol is accursed; therefore I will not touch it.’ The Patron (Skipper) and the Arguesyn (Lieutenant), with two officers, having the chief charge of all such matters, said, ‘Thou *shalt* handle it’; and they violently thrust it to his face, and put it betwixt his hands. He, seeing the extremity, took the idol... cast it into the river, and said: ‘Let our Lady now save herself. She is lycht aneuch; let her learn to swim!’ After that was no Scotsman urged with that idolatry! (Knox, 94-5)

Here we find Knox employing “the very cannon-ball that breached the fortress of despotism.” (Watt, 104) His name cannot easily be obliterated from “the ancestral tree of democracy.” “Others sned the branches of the Papistry, but he strikes at the root, to destroy the whole,” reported his contemporaries. Upon hearing his electrifying addresses, some remarked: “Maister George Wishart spake never so plainly, and yet he was burnt: even so will this one be.” (Whitley, 31)

It is commonly reported that he served to put more life into the Scots than a thousand trumpeters blasting away in their ears — the key to which obviously lay in that ring of truth inherent in his life and lips. An old maxim buttressing this fact says that words should never be counted — only weighed. In his *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*, Thomas Carlyle identifies Knox’s character and message in its true compass:

Let all men know that they are [but men at best];
created by God, responsible to God; who work in any meanest
moment of time what will last throughout eternity.¹⁹

Knox became the “Moses of the Scots...their Amos and their Isaiah...
their Washington and their Lincoln. But his importance extends far
beyond the little nation he both tamed and inspired. It took many genera-
tions of determined struggle to give the Western democracies such protec-
tion against despotism as we today enjoy. Neither Knox nor any other
single individual could have built the elaborate system of safeguards against
tyranny with which we are familiar. But he was one of the pioneers.”
(MacGregor, 10) He made men *feel* what Robert Burns penned two hun-
dred years later as Scotland’s national anthem:

Scots, wha hae wi’ Wallace bled,
Scots, wham Bruce has aften led,
Welcome to your gory bed,
Or to victorie.

Wha will be a traitor knave ?
Wha can fill a coward’s grave ?
Wha sae base as be a slave ?
Let him turn and flee !

By oppression’s woes and pains !
Be your sons in servile chains !
We will drain our dearest veins,
But they shall be free ! ²⁰

NEXT: CHARACTER, CONVICTIONS, AND CONFLICT

NOTES

1. Innes, 10.
2. For a clearer understanding of his analogy, the reader's attention is directed to Luke 10.
3. Hoggart, 12-13. As opposed to those holding the "Creed of Martha," the adherents of Mary's Creed believe and practice "casting bread on the waters, trusting in human decency and promise, belonging to one another, planting seed corn wherever possible." They are persuaded that "growth can make more growth...chances should be taken, [and that] godliness — charity — should come before cleanliness..." They are "communal, generous, fraternal, [and belong] to that England of Blake, Cobbett, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Arnold, Lawrence, Forster, Orwell, Tawney and Titmuss." (Hoggart, 14)
4. Sir Francis Bacon is credited with the statement that the greatest possible goal in life is the quest to discover what truth actually is, apart from what it is "thought by experts" to be.
5. The world's highest standard of moral law is briefly comprehended in the Ten Commandments of Moses (Exodus 20), without which basis for society *all the systems of men* are but "philosophy and vain deceit."
6. "Righteousness exalteth a nation: but sin is a reproach to any people." (Proverbs 14.34)
"Blessed is that nation whose God is the LORD..." (Psalm 33.12)
7. Identified as Jesus the Messiah, sole Savior of all mankind, according to Revelation 17.14 & 19.16:
"...for He is Lord of lords, and King of kings: and they that are with Him are called, and chosen, and faithful."
"And He hath on His vesture and on His thigh a name written, KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS."
8. From a tractate published by Brook Street Chapel, Tottenham, and received by the author at Hyde Park in May, 1995.
9. Hoggart, 272.
10. "Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." (Galatians 6.7)
"But if ye will not do so, behold, ye have sinned against the LORD: and

be sure your sin will find you out.” (Numbers 32.23)

11. “He that ruleth over men must be just, ruling in the fear of God.” (II Samuel 23.3)
12. “So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God.” (Romans 10.17)
13. “...and the witnesses [to the death of Stephen] laid down their clothes at a young man’s feet, whose name was Saul.” (Acts 6.58)
14. Almost *anything* displeasing the rabid hierarchs might be twisted and construed as “heresy.” Wishart, for example, had come under suspicion of that fearful ogre for a mere reading of the *Greek New Testament* with his pupils! (Cowan, 57) Can the reader possibly *conceive* of an era in history when believers were “holden in such bondage that they durst not have read the Lord’s Prayer, the Ten Commandments, nor the articles of their Faith in the English tongue, but they should have been accused of heresy”? (Knox, 39)
15. The courage to face certain death in like manner doubtless originates with the words of Christ as recorded in Luke 12.4-5, and with such other as Peter’s in Acts 5.29 and Solomon’s in Proverbs 29.25.
16. The enemies of Knox have taken occasion from this circumstance to charge him as being among the conspirators who assassinated the Cardinal, which is contrary to all testimony. Others have accused him of joining them and giving them his countenance, after the deed was perpetrated; but neither has this any foundation. The only thing which can plausibly be laid to his charge in relation to this matter is that in his writings he justified the act. He does indeed speak of it as a judgment of God and an act of Providence for the safety of His servants; but it is true that he vindicated the putting this cruel persecutor to death, as a righteous and praiseworthy deed, and well pleasing to God. (McCrie, 20)
17. Most probably a conviction based on Christ’s words to Peter and the other disciples as recorded in John 15.16: “Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you...”
18. Thought to have been Knox himself.
19. Guthrie, 252.
20. MacGregor, 121.

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John Knox



Site of Knox's probable birthplace, in Giffordgate, Haddington. The tree was planted by the direction of Thomas Carlyle.