# Change and Continuity in Contention: The Reform of Scotland's Universities in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries

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[This paper represents work-in-progress and is intended as a discussion document.]

There is perhaps no more fruitful and exciting a period in which to explore the twin themes of 'transformation' and 'continuity' in university history than the sixteenth century. The intellectual ferment of humanism and reformation reshaped the religious, political and intellectual contours of Europe and her institutions-ecclesiastical, governmental, cultural and educational. It is no accident that the re-formation of church and intellectual life frequently coincided in its personnel and in its dynamic and that the place in which these people and processes met was the university: Luther's work after all was as much a 'university event' as an ecclesiastical one.

Reformation came relatively late to Scotland, and it was not until 1560 when the country became officially 'protestant'. There is of course all the difference in the world between official and actual religion, and Scotland was in no way different: while in the main the transformation to the new Kirk was extensive it was not complete, and levels of non-compliance and of catholic recusancy were relevant in certain areas. Scotland is interesting in terms of university history for several reasons: there were, by the end of the sixteenth century several active universities each with its own character and problems. Because there was an identifiable 'network' of universities they became an integral part of plans for re-formation. The reformers were not content to re-form only the Kirk: their plans included schemes for reforming Kirk, society, polity and university.

Scotland's universities present an illustrative example of all the problems and challenges faced in the sixteenth century by Europe's universities, churches and states. Within a short time-frame Scotland can furnish several discrete yet related examples-instances of university reform in theory and in practice, institutional conservatism and recusancy, and the foundation of new universities-which open out the content of transformation and of continuity within the universities, and how the pressures for change were reconciled with the universities' traditional roles as keepers of knowledge and pursuers of truth.

Scotland's reformation of 1560 drew out very quickly the vulnerabilities of the universities as institutions. Their ecclesiastical background, and particularly their funding structures, made them very susceptible to the substantial structural changes which the Reformation entailed. It became obvious that large portions of the church's wealth, such as the teinds of parishes which had traditionally formed the endowments for the colleges, could be re-deployed in order effectively to fund the preaching ministry which was to be the basis of the new religious dispensation. Aside from the individuals involved, who would obviously seek to defend their historic privileges for both selfish and noble reasons, a very real set of problems was created. The dynamic for change which the Reformation signified on a religious and theological level was matched by a new energy for intellectual change which to a certain extent Scotland's universities had been insulated from. Reformers like Melville and Buchanan brought with them the innovations and re-creations of academic disciplines which were present on the continent and which suited the new mindset demanded of a reformed clergy.

And yet, all those seeking to re-form the church and university in the sixteenth century were faced with a familiar conundrum: how to resolve the contention between change and continuity so as to effect the former with as much of the latter as possible. At first sight the parameters for change would appear to be wide, necessitating as much change in the universities as had occurred in the church. The universities, after all, had been established to instruct canons in the relevant subjects of study and there was a close alignment between church ideas and university studies. After the Reformation this alignment became, if anything, more important to the ecclesiastical leaders, who sought to promote the universities in the training of a reformed ministry. Scotland's universities should be identified as ecclesiastical institutions, with financial support from church properties, a clearly defined religious role and ethos, and personnel who were clerics by vocation or in formation. What is striking in all reform proposals is that there was a serious attempt to conserve. Between the pre and post-Reformation universities there was an interesting and important continuity of purpose. The transformations came in the content, but genuine innovation in reality failed.

The first systematic proposal for reform of the universities came in 'The First Book of Discipline' in 1560. While this plan for an entire reform of the Christian commonwealth was not adopted, many of its proposals for university reform were in fact adapted at individual institutions over the course of the following decades and the particular historical value of the First Book of Discipline remains.

The provisions of the Book of Discipline were as follows. There were to be three universities at St. Andrews, Glasgow and Aberdeen, the principal one being St Andrews. The specific and more detailed proposals for St Andrews give a clear indication of the problems that the Reformers perceived within the universities. It is evident that the three constituent colleges at St Andrews were offering an archaic, even chaotic education with a considerable and inefficient overlap and repetition of effort. The Latin taught was that of John Major and not that of renaissance humanism; Greek was unknown even at the best college of St Mary's. It is clear that in designating different branches of study to each constituent college the reformers intended to bring some sort of unity and efficiency to both the provision of education and the use of precious resources. One of the colleges was to provide an entrance to university studies (prior to this students had been free to commence their studies in any of the three) teaching Dialectic, Mathematics and Physics, as well as the higher discipline of medicine. The second college would teach Moral Philosophy and Law, and the third college would teach Greek, Hebrew and Divinity. Each college was to be headed by a Principal, with the university as a whole to be regulated by a Rector.

The sources for the reforms-notably the Genevan Academy and the academy at Nimes-are an indication of two important phenomena. Firstly they show the tendency of university developments to be 'European', trans-national and 'exportable', in that the divinity curriculum is inspired by the recently established Academy in Geneva. Secondly they show the means by which developments became established across Europe, and ideas were transmitted. Experience gained abroad by scholars and reformers was imported directly and used to shape institutions at home.

The inclusion of university reform in the Book of Discipline gives a clear indication of two things: the importance of maintaining the intrinsic link between the universities and the church, and the tendency by the authorities-church and secular-to see the several universities and colleges as a 'national system' in which there could be official intervention. Assembled at the behest of the Scottish Privy Council, working to terms of reference supplied by the secular authorities and informed by a trenchant Protestantism, the Book of Discipline marks an attempt to circumvent or even abolish the medieval principle of university autonomy which provided a precedent for subsequent measures and attitudes. After 1560 both church and secular authorities, but especially the secular, looked upon university supervision as a

particular task, consistent with their overall responsibilities, although sporadically exercised. The reforms proposed in the Book of Discipline sought continuity in maintaining the university/church link, and shaped change in creating a precedent for official supervision and overview. Inevitably this was a tension which would work itself out within and across Scotland's colleges and universities over the following decades.

For diverse reasons the First Book of Discipline was not adopted by the secular authorities, and its provisions for university re-from went unheeded, but not without some official consternation. In 1563 an Act of Parliament established a commission to investigate the state of St Andrews university, the grounds for which being that there was

> …waisting of the patrimony of sum of the fundatiounis maid in the Collegeis of the City of Sanctandros and uthers placis within this Realme for the intertenement of the youth, and that few sciences and speciallie they that ar maist necessaire, that is to say, the toungis and humanitie, are in ane part not teichit within the said Citie to the great detriment of the haill liegis of the Realme.

This is a fairly substantial criticism of the form and content of the university, and indicates that little had changed since 1560. The Commissioners, including Moray, Maitland and Buchanan, did not in fact report as required, but there is *Mr George Buchanan's Opinion Anent The Reformation of the University of St Andros* which gives a scheme for reform. In certain respects it resembles the earlier Book of Discipline proposals in its three-college structure but also differs from it. The differences lie mainly in the scope and realism of Buchanan's scheme as compared to the former plan, particularly in the shift of emphasis towards a basic education in humanity and the arts, and away from the 'higher' disciplines of medicine, law and divinity. Buchanan appears to be cognisant of the fact that only modest change would ever be effected because of entrenched attitudes and interests, but also because of limited resources. His more detailed plan is clearly an attempt to induce change, to interpolate it into the college system by gently shaping smaller details while maintaining confidence in the whole. Change and continuity in contention led to a scaled down plan for reform, and necessitated a move away from the 'ideal' to the 'attainable' university for St Andrews. It would not be until 1579, however, that attempts at reform would actually become material in terms of a Nova Fondatio. At the very least, St Andrews did become a Protestant institution. The same could not be said for the northernmost of Scotland's universities, King's College Aberdeen.

The desire to reform Scotland's universities was evidently never enough to effect reform, and official exasperation was frequent. The language of the 1563 Act of Parliament is one such indication of this. Another way in which the contention between change and continuity was resolved is provided by King's College in 1569. Whereas the process had been more subtle in St Andrews, the persistence of both Catholics and institutionalised Catholicism in King's required a straightforward confrontation and purgation. In June 1569 the protestant regent the Earl of Moray deprived the principal Catholic academic staff of King's of their posts after they refused to sign the reformed Confession of Faith, the Regent and council characterising them as 'persons dangerous and unmeet' for educating the young. The college and its property were handed over to the provost of Aberdeen until the purged staff could be replaced. King's College had been able to act as a Catholic stronghold for nearly ten years, and it was evidently the hope of the reformed church and the secular authorities that a dramatic purge would provide a *tabula rasa* for their university plans. We can see into the 'official mind' because some indication is given by George Hay, chaplain to the regent, in his *Oration* at the purging of King's 1569. Hay indicates that the regent had, in Aberdeen's case, "tried a policy of complaisance and gentleness", which had failed "because of the cunning and fraudulent pretences of crafty men." But Hay's oration is more than a polemical attack on Catholic academics, and he uses the occasion on which he is speaking-namely before an audience of final-year students-to offer great consolation, and some attempt to resolve the tension between the need for change and the need to conserve. This he does by looking backwards not forwards. He truly seeks to re-form the university, by establishing his opposition to the very idea of change: "…all who have had experience of practical affairs have the very best of reasons for dreading, shunning and fearing all changes, because the results of such changes are grievous misfortunes, ruinous losses and disastrous political upheavals". Hay turns his negative polemical attack on individuals and characterises them and their work as deviant, novel, and ultimately pointless:

> …what was to be expected from those demented masters whose strength lay in the empty display, not in the discovery of knowledge, in the reputation for virtue, not in the solid and clear-cut embodiment of it…What happened as soon as the young generation, having emerged from the grammar schools was handed over to these men? Certain barren, jejune and dull precepts were put before them in the dryest possible manner.

What Hay promotes is the idea of the rebirth of the founders' intentions:

> Nor…is there any reason for us to fear the decisions, testaments and wishes of our founders; for these after having been annulled by them [the purged catholic academics] are being reinforced by us…they have been brought forth by us into the light of day and now…are being revived and endowed with their former glory and high esteem…

As to the wider purpose perceived for the universities, Hay is very clear:

> In truth gentlemen, the keen desire and intention of the founders was that the young generation, which is rightly termed by the ancients the seed-bed of the state, should be educated in good literature, should be entrusted to the care of teachers who are good men and outstanding in all branches of knowledge, and should so devote their energies to these teachers as to make progress in the acquisition of private property and promise help to their friends, and thereafter have the easiest possible access to the government of the state and the attainment of high office.

Standing in the way of everything we can perhaps see remarks directed more widely, or at least indicative of a concern wider than that of the immediate context:

> Great is the power of custom over the minds of men, great is the tyranny of preconceived opinions, which condemns whatever it does not know and stops up the ears against what is unfamiliar; indeed the mentality which prevents itself, because of a kind of prejudice and ready formed opinion, from getting to know the truth is not only a disgrace to anyone but is the greatest disgrace of all to those who claim to be possessed by the eager desire for truth.

Humanist scholars like Luther, who himself had been drawn into reform by his work and reflection as a university professor and who made his university-work the bedrock of transformation, could resolve the tension between change and continuity by looking backwards-*ad fontes*-and viewing what they disapproved of as accretions to a formerly pristine model of church or of knowledge. The solution was always to present the 'opposition' as the innovators, and to present the favoured choice as the traditional, if long-neglected and abused, formation. Hay, and the upper echelons of the secular authorities of

which he was a part clearly shared the view that re-formed universities were to provide a basis for both church and state.

Evidently the examples of how Scotland sought to reform its universities can be extended well into the seventeenth century. What remains characteristic of all attempts at reform is that theory was frequently confounded in practice, but that there are clearly identifiable lines which reformers took up in order to effect change in the content and form of the university system. On balance, continuity was promoted at times as the key to inaugurating change, and change was frequently opposed by those who saw continuity as needing no change. An interesting dilemma clearly emerged for certain key individuals in the universities, be they the purged catholic academics of King's in Aberdeen or zealous reformers like Buchanan, a dilemma which mirrored the wider theological changes of the Reformation: having been charged with a responsibility for the promotion and defence of truth, which was seen as immutable, the demands of their institutions and their own vocations as academics required them to respond to the new dispensation which seemed to be opposed to their old ways of doing things. Hay, and others, looked backwards in order to advance their cause. The catholic academics, and the stubbornly conservative, looked in the same direction with a view to staying there. A clear case of change and continuity in contention which served both the cause of renewal and the cause of conservatism well into the seventeenth century.