



Langley, C. R.: *The National Covenant in Scotland, 1638–1689*. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press. Studies in Early Modern Cultural, Political and Social History vol. XXXVII. 2020. v + 248 pp. ISBN: 978-1-78327-530-4. £75.

On 28 February 1638, a group of Scots gathered at Greyfriars Kirk in Edinburgh to draft and sign the National Covenant. This document permeated the daily lives of Scots who grappled with its religious and political legitimacy as they debated whether to subscribe. Despite the significance of the National Covenant in Scottish society, scholars have frequently focused on its ‘British’ context, an approach which portrays Covenanted Scotland as uniform and monolithic. Chris Langley’s edited collection, *The National Covenant in Scotland, 1638–1689*, provides a crucial new assessment of the text’s domestic reception to examine ‘how Covenanter ideology and memory interacted with the changing political and religious landscape of the period’ (p. 15). The volume achieves this aim through eleven carefully-researched chapters which address how Scots in many professions across different levels of society experienced, understood and remembered the National Covenant from 1638 until 1689. Together, these chapters explain the many interpretive choices Scots made regarding the meaning of the text and the implications of those decisions in local and regional contexts. This much-needed volume ultimately overturns and reconsiders long-standing stereotypes about Covenanted Scotland by demonstrating the highly fractious and contested (rather than cohesive) nature of the movement.

The collection comprises three thematic sections. The first, ‘Swearing and Subscribing,’ explores how Scots understood the act of swearing allegiance to the National Covenant and the Solemn League and Covenant (1643). Essays by Nathan Hood, Paul Goatman & Andrew Lind, Russell Newton, and Jamie McDougall examine the many challenges individuals faced when deciding whether or not to subscribe. But these essays also reveal that attempts to enforce orthodox understandings of the text and strengthen allegiances existed, including corporate conversion experiences (Hood) and local presbytery-led campaigns (McDougall). The second section, ‘Identity and Self-Fashioning,’ explores the relationship between the Covenanting revolution and identity formation. Chapters by Langley, Louise Yeoman, Lind, and Salvatore Cipriano reveal how ideas about the meaning of the Covenant fractured and became increasingly contested throughout the 1640s as the political climate became more volatile. These essays suggest that Covenanter leaders sought a unified interpretation of the movement but ultimately failed to maintain its initial loose unity. The third and final section, entitled ‘Remembering,’ discusses the memory of the Covenanting revolution in Restoration Scotland, including how key events from the 1640s were used to

inform responses to contemporary political and religious problems. Chapters by Neil McIntyre, Allan Kennedy, and Alasdair Raffe document how Restoration Scots reflected on the Covenanting past to support their agendas in a still-fractured society. These eleven essays work together to show that an orthodox and uniform interpretation of the Covenant's meaning and application did not exist, especially on local and regional levels. Rather, for most of the seventeenth century, Scots infused the text with highly individualised religious and political meanings, making Covenanting a truly volatile experience.

This collection advances our understanding of this monumental period in Scottish history in a variety of ways. First, the collection importantly foregrounds Scottish royalism through essays by Newton, Goatman & Lind, McDougall, Lind, and Cipriano. While most scholarship has focused on the Covenanters and their justifications of the movement, these chapters show that there was widespread opposition throughout Scotland. They also challenge inaccurate stereotypes that Covenanters and royalists can be categorised based on their beliefs about church government. From these chapters, it is clear that not all Covenanters rigidly supported Presbyterianism, while royalists did not uniformly advocate Episcopalianism. Instead, these individuals held complex religious and political beliefs that informed their allegiances, ones that they often changed under societal pressure. These chapters therefore call into question prevailing but inaccurate definitions of 'royalists' and 'Covenanters,' urging us to account better for the spectrum of beliefs in the period.

Second, the volume engages with exciting new methodologies, which have yet to be applied fully to the Covenanting period. The history of the Covenanting movement has long been the remit of church historians and scholars focused on the formation of the Scottish state. But new approaches, many of which are demonstrated in this collection, are being opened up. For example, Hood's essay on the experience of subscription as corporate conversion delves into the history of emotions, while Yeoman's essay addresses how women gained a voice through demonstrations of public affective piety for the Covenanting cause. Langley, McIntyre, Kennedy, and Raffe all engage with the history of memory by discussing how Scots drew upon and manipulated their national history to advance their own theological and political agendas. The approaches represented in this volume therefore offer a well-rounded analysis of multiple aspects of Scottish society which move beyond traditional church history or political history.

My only critique of this outstanding volume is minor. The focus on local contexts does somewhat downplay the significance of the dominant narrative advanced by Covenanting leaders, such as Samuel Rutherford, Sir Archibald Johnston of Wariston, Alexander Henderson, George Gillespie, and Robert Baillie. The volume rightly moves away from the Covenanting leadership who have long dominated the history of the period, opening up new avenues of research into parishes and universities. However, the volume might have benefited from a fuller

exploration of how local reactions to the Covenant compared to the narrative advanced by Covenanter leaders for an English audience. The volume aims to show how local applications of the Covenant challenged the prevailing narrative, but a more explicit explanation of differences between the interpretation advanced by the Covenanting leadership and in local discourse might have strengthened the analysis of the volume as a whole.

Additionally, many Covenanter leaders situated the National Covenant within a transnational political and religious context to defend its legitimacy and garner support, claiming that they were drawing upon and representing traditional Reformed ideas about covenants, the true religion and resistance. While the aim of this volume is admittedly to focus on the domestic conversation, some exploration of how Scots debated the legitimacy of the Covenant in a transnational context (especially the political ideas about monarchy that are touched upon in some chapters) would have provided an interesting framework for the uniquely Scottish elements of this discourse.

Nevertheless, the volume significantly improves our understanding of the complexity of religious and political beliefs in the period while challenging stereotypes of Scotland as dominated by a uniform, monolithic Covenanting elite after 1638. This collection demonstrates how Scots across all levels of society encountered the National Covenant, resulting in many conflicting and highly individualised interpretations of its meaning. The chapters highlight the intensely personal decisions individuals had to make when faced with societal pressure and persecution, including how they remembered and refashioned those decisions years later. The range of material covered in this collection therefore makes it essential reading for scholars looking for new, cutting-edge approaches to religious and political diversity in early modern Scotland.

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