A HISTORY of the SCOTTISH PEOPLE

1 RENAISSANCE SCOTLAND 1450 - 1540

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This is Chapter 1 of 5. Including the Overview, this set comprises 6 PDFs. The others are:

Overview, Chp2 1540-1603, Chp3 1603-1689, Chp4 1690-1760, Chp5 1760-1840

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INTRODUCTION: PERSPECTIVES ON RENAISSANCE SCOTLAND

Until recently, historians tended to see the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries as a period of economic decline, repetitive and destructive conflict between kings and nobles, and a corrupt and decadent church. Apart from the brief flowering of James IV's court and the tragedy of Flodden, it attracted little interest by comparison with the stirring events of the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries. This attitude has crumbled in the light of new research and, more particularly, new evaluation of already known evidence. Historiographically, this is now an exciting period.

Among the questions now being asked are:

• how unsettled or violent was Scotland after all during this period?
• were the Stewart kings as weak as they have been portrayed?
• should we look at how the kings or how the nobles extended their power?
• can a consistently pro-English or pro-French theme be discovered in Stewart policy?
• were the highlands destabilised by government policy?
• was the pre-reformation Church as ineffective as reformers made out?
• why did the Church find it increasingly difficult to meet the needs and aspirations of society?
• how poor was Scotland?
• was continuity or change the dominant feature of economic and social life?  
  what triggered the Renaissance in Scotland: the patronage of a growing court or the invention of the printing press? 
• what were the real achievements of Scottish renaissance culture?

POLITICAL CHANGE: THE STEWARTS AND THEIR STATE

The later Stewarts often used to be portrayed as struggling to master over-mighty subjects. For half of their reigns they were minors and all of them took full power while only teenagers. They died as a result of murder, accident, battle, exhaustion and execution. There is another view, more prevalent now: their dynasty survived and indeed grew more prestigious and powerful; their wars were brief and infrequent before 1540; they gained respect in Europe; they co-operated with their nobles in the interests of an ordered kingdom. How did the Stewart monarchy work? It was highly personal, depending on the actions and personality of the King himself - his choice of servants and his travelling round the kingdom (it was only in the reign of James III that Edinburgh became accepted as the capital). The Stewart kings were at once pious and cynical, calculating and impulsive. James III was dogged but seemingly unpopular; James IV, by contrast, achieved a glamorous popularity through his active involvement in government and his court; James V was feared and respected. For all of them, the key to successful government lay in four areas: money, justice, church and nobility.

Scotland was lightly taxed and lightly administered. Royal civil servants were drawn largely from the educated elite of churchmen, most of whom had also studied law in Europe and had family connections with the landed classes. Royal income was a tenth that of England and the organisation of government much less complex, though probably more responsive. Direct taxation was not used regularly, but was perfectly effective, as in the 1490s and 1530s. The King preferred to secure his income by increasing the stock of royal land at the expense of difficult nobles. The nobility needed an active system of royal justice, as developed in the form of a central court and professional lawyers, but they could become its victims.

The church - at its upper end in the regular clergy and bishops - was, at least in theory, vastly more wealthy than the monarchy and therefore a constant target for royal interference or control. The archbishopric of St. Andrews, established in 1472, was rapidly brought under royal influence - undermining the traditional direct control of the Scottish church by the papacy. Then, in 1487, the crown gained the right of nomination to major benefices. This gave monarchs the power to appoint to bishoprics and religious houses and also handed them the income during the period of vacancy.

The nobility was the link between central and local government - it was in the interests of both sides for King and nobles to co-operate. Parliament and the King's council provided the link between the court and the localities, carrying...
royal wishes in one direction and doubts about policy in the other. The nobles carried out justice in the baronies and regalities of their local areas, and raised armies when required. Their control over their communities was a mixture of lordship and kinship, becoming formalised as bonds of manrent. Success in producing male heirs created stability and continuity in nobles' links with parts of Scotland. To prevent them breaking up, estates were entailed to the eldest son; younger sons might be given smaller estates in the same area. Kinship became defined in terms of male relations and common surnames.

Noblemen ensured a stabilised local government and generally had reliable relationships with the king. This meant that rebellions led by nobles were uncommon; any family who gained too much power in terms of titles and land was likely to find itself cut back by the King, as the Black Douglases had been in the mid-15th century. The King created earls and a new class, called the lords of parliament. New rising families, notably Hamiltons, Gordons and Campbells, all gaining earldoms in the reign of James II, but their regional power still assisted the King rather than threatened him. In fact, the royal minorities can be seen as a limitation on over-mighty monarchs rather than an opportunity for over-mighty nobles.

Government control of Scotland was limited by geography rather than by politics. The crown won control of the Northern Isles through James III's marriage to the Danish princess in 1472, and of the Western Isles, by annexing the Lordship of the Isles in 1493. But these were internally conservative, stable societies. Royal intervention destabilised them but did not provide alternative means of control. In Orkney, a century of struggle in the Sinclair family followed. Clan Donald's power in the west, already taken away and re-granted after alliance with England in the 1460s, was undermined by internal disputes. Their loss of the Lordship of the Isles, however, provoked six serious rebellions against the monarch, the last, in 1545, being the most serious. The Campbell family, earls of Argyll, rose in power.

However, there were very real tensions between them leading the Gaelic community at the same time as they were agents for the crown. This created further divisions of allegiance. James III tried to reverse the hostility between Scotland and England which had been near-continuous since the Wars of Independence, but gained little support. James IV aggravated Henry VII by supporting Perkin Warbeck, the English claimant to the throne. James married Henry's daughter, Margaret, in 1503 attempting to resolve the conflict. The road from this tense alliance to the battlefield of Flodden in 1513 is still historically controversial. Why was James leading such a great army to invade his brother-in-law's country? Was it:

- a demonstration of his control over his own realm?
- an extension of his game of playing the warrior king?
- a riposte to Henry VIII?
- a grand border raid?
- the actions of a 'moonstruck romantic'?
All these interpretations are current. Only the facts of the brief campaign and
the appalling defeat by the Earl of Surrey are not disputed, a defeat that left
thousands of Scots, their king, nine earls, fourteen lords, an archbishop and a
bishop dead. The battle of Flodden in 1513 did little to undermine the authority
of the crown. Nor did it change Scottish foreign policy, which remained torn
between the French and the English alliances, represented by the regent Albany
and the new King's mother, Margaret Tudor.

From the 1520s onwards, there were pro-English and pro-French factions in
Scottish politics. The dynastic connection with England entangled the two
countries but could equally lead to conflict as to alliance. In fact, James V ended
up marrying two French princesses and irritated Henry VIII by failing to attend
an arranged meeting with him. Then, just before his death, he sent a weak army
to invade England, which reflected his high-handed treatment of the nobility. By
1542 little had changed in the structure of Scottish political power, the problems
of monarchy, or the solutions sought by the Stewart kings.

RELIGIOUS CHANGE: THE CHURCH UNDER PRESSURE

The picture of a church in terminal decline in the century before the
Reformation is a classic example of historical hindsight and some of it is
misplaced. We should try to describe the Church dispassionately, pointing out its
vigour and its weakness, the faults and strengths in its structure and its role, its
attempts at improvement and the areas it left dangerously untouched.

The few hundred 'higher clergy' had noble connections and provided most royal
administrators. This included bishops and heads of monasteries, abbeys and
nunneries. Though monasticism had declined in popularity, there was new
building going on, for instance in Jedburgh and Melrose, and new friaries and
nunneries were still being set up, such as the Franciscan nunnery at Sciennes
near Edinburgh in 1517. The Observant Franciscans, a stricter version of the
order, founded in Europe in the 1440, came to Scotland in the 1450s; by 1520
they had established a dozen new friaries, all in towns. The more that is learned
about the religious orders, the more obvious it has become that sweeping
generalisations about their condition, such as the charge that they were just 'property owning corporations', do not stand up to detailed scrutiny. Some
abbeys tried to raise standards; other religious houses had fallen away from
ideas about property or chastity and some were even closed. There was criticism
of the system of 'commendators', which could divert the income from a religious
house. But commendators were not laymen, as is often thought. Many of the
early examples were bishops, extending their power base.

But the most serious flaws in the monasteries probably stemmed from the
crown's use of its right of nomination of priors and abbots. Both James IV and V
provided in this way for many royal favourites and bastards.

The education system proved unable to provide Scotland with an educated
parish clergy. University degrees were rarely available to the ordinary parish
priest. It was the lack of an effective parish clergy that undermined the Church
most disastrously. The problem was less the quality than the poverty of the
incumbents. It has been calculated that 86 per cent of parishes had all or part of

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their income appropriated, to other parts of the Church, such as universities or monasteries. Their inadequate incomes were eroded by inflation and attempts to alleviate their plight, by obtaining payments from their congregations for services or by accumulating benefices, made matters worse. In many places, the parishes were staffed by an underclass of non-beneficed clergy, such as curates or chaplains. The poor repair of many churches was another symptom of the poverty of parishes.

The quality of the people’s religious faith can never be determined, but there is no reason to equate it with misgivings about church organisation. On the contrary, it can be argued that the Catholic Church was in greatest danger when there was a contrast between the needs of the people and the ability of the church to fulfil them. There is evidence in the late fifteenth century of positive developments - at least by those who could afford to demonstrate their support of the Church. They built new collegiate churches, endowed hospitals, and rebuilt burgh kirts. Guilds or individuals paid for new altars, and there was a renewal of popularity for pilgrimages, plays and processions. The later fifteenth century also saw new religious cults, which also suggest that piety rather than cynicism was the prevalent mood amongst the laity. The cult of Christ's Passion took various forms. And there was a new emphasis on both Mary as mother of Christ and the Holy Family. Bishop Elphinstone's Aberdeen Breviary (1508) brought together a host of native saints, such as Columba, Ninian and Margaret, as well as new, exotic foreign ones.

There were some signs of alternative religious opinions, especially among the increasing numbers of literate small landowners and wealthier burgh dwellers. Unlike England, where explicit links can be traced between late medieval heresy and early Protestantism, there were only a few Lollards in the late fifteenth century, and they seem to have been confined to Kyle, in Ayrshire. Natural trading links with Europe led to acts passed from 1525 onwards against the import of Lutheran books. By the early 1540s, the authorities began to worry about 'sacramentarians', who held radical views about the eucharist. And from then on there were frequent enactments against heretical English books, rhymes and bibles, which must have been that of William Tyndale. The combination of links with Europe and access to Protestant works, especially those in the vernacular, raised expectations of the Church. These were ultimately to prove disastrous for it.

In the 1530s there was a major onslaught on the Church but it came from the King, who took advantage of the Pope's embroilment with Henry VIII to demand crippling taxes. The Church tried to pay meet these by disposing of its property as hereditary feu; resulting in a new class of landed proprietor with a greater security of tenure. This gave it ready cash but, in the longer term, impoverished it and weakened it in the face of the new demands. Feuing had a huge impact on the social structure of Scotland by creating a new class of landed proprietor - the feuars.

**SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CHANGE**

The overwhelming majority of the million or so inhabitants of Scotland in the late fifteenth century worked on the land. Land was used as monastic estates,
royal hunting forests or monastic sheepwalks. A huge proportion of the land was waste, too bitter or damp for cultivation. The cultivated land was divided into baronial desmesne and peasant holdings leased from the landowner and arranged in small units round a 'toun' in the lowlands or a 'baile' in the highlands. The system of landholding in the lowlands has been described as 'feudalism tempered by kinship' while in the Highlands it was 'kinship tempered by feudalism'.

As in most of Western Europe, cultivated land was arranged as open fields and individuals worked a complex pattern of scattered plots of various sizes. Rent was paid largely in kind as well as service, though money did circulate generally. It is likely that much of the laird's land was worked by paid, virtually landless, 'cottar' labour and that feudal obligations by wealthier 'husbandmen' had a largely symbolic function by this period. Most of the latter held land either 'at will' (by verbal agreement) or by written lease for between a few years and life. Some were 'rentallers', with possession confirmed by a copy of the entry in the proprietor's rental book. This form of ownership could be inherited. Many tenants might expect to pass on holdings by 'kindness' to their kin. Holdings varied in size and tenants are recorded negotiating the expansion or consolidation of their holdings. Wealthier peasants may themselves have employed labourers. Rural society was less strictly stratified at all levels than in many other countries, which may have reduced the amount of social stress. Long rigs running up and down hillsides were worked with heavy ploughs and oxen teams. There were also compact holdings, either survivals of previous landownership or new intakes. There is scarcely any evidence regarding local variations in husbandry or differences between desmesnes and peasant holdings. Some wheat was grown; the eating of wheaten bread was a mark of social status. Oats and bere (four rowed barley) constituted the main arable crops, along with peas, beans and some flax and hemp. There is little evidence of any rotation. The great monastic houses and also other landowners ran huge flocks of sheep, whose wool accounted for half of Scotland's exports for much of the medieval period. This trade was, however, declining by 1500. There is evidence for a renewed expansion of arable farming at this time, for instance in the introduction of the term 'outfield'.

The most important aspect of rural life was its continuity. There was no sign of improvement in agricultural systems or techniques. This is not to say that there was no change, but it was defined by external factors - poor weather or animal disease in the short term and war and pestilence in the long term. Continuity was also supported by the lack of change in ownership of land by nobility and gentry, by the geographical restrictions on settlement patterns and, most importantly, by the lack of civil war or major social unrest. Indeed, these last two benefits placed Scotland favourably compared to much of Europe between 1450 and 1540.

The biggest change in rural society was brought about by the feuing movement, especially from the 1530s, when large amounts of Church lands were feued to pay royal taxes. Feu ferme was hereditary and paid for by a lump sum and annual duty, which inflation ate into in due course. Over half of the feus went to sitting tenants or minor lairds who acquired a new security of revenue. The main social effect of this was a further expansion of the influence of the lairds and small landowners, thus broadening still further the pyramid of
landownership. A side effect was rack renting by outsiders who had bought feus. For the church, the feuing of its lands was a major factor in undermining its authority at a period of religious tension.

Even the largest towns in Scotland - Perth, Dundee, Aberdeen and Edinburgh - had populations of only a few thousand by the sixteenth century. Most towns were much smaller, having only a few hundred inhabitants. Houses could be densely packed but few were built of stone. Backlands were occupied by poorer housing. Public buildings - churches, friaries, tolbooths - could be found, though in many smaller towns only the church or the tolbooth - and the castle if there was one - were on any large scale.

The institution of the burgh was well established by the 16th century, in the form of both royal burghs and burghs of barony, each of which had particular trading rights. The Convention of Royal Burghs was set up in 1487 to deal with issues of common interest; by then the burgesses had been recognised for more than a century as the third estate of Parliament. Within the burghs, gilds were well established as institutions which regulated commercial activities and also financed urban improvements, supported the church and impoverished members and provided social entertainment.

The distinction between the craftsmen and merchants was often artificial. Most merchant gilds were made up of both kinds of burgesses. However the dominance of merchants in local government was steadily established, paralleled but not threatened by the first craft incorporations from the 1470s. Urban craftsmen mainly worked for their local market, as smiths, tailors, tanners, bakers and brewers. Towns were the marketplace for their wider hinterland over which they often had extensive control. Wealthier townspeople often bought land in the surrounding countryside.

Both royal burghs and the old established ecclesiastical burghs of barony and regality, such as St. Andrews and Arbroath, could trade overseas. The many new burghs of barony established in the period after 1450 acted only as local service centres. The late fifteenth and early sixteenth century saw a lack of commercial development, exacerbated for many burghs by the increasingly overweening economic position of Edinburgh in Scotland's foreign trade. Indeed Edinburgh was the object of royal and baronial envy, as in the 'Cleanse the Causeway' scuffles for its control in 1520 between the Hamiltons and the Douglasses.

Foreign trade had lulled since the end of the fourteenth century but recovered slowly and unevenly up to the 1540s. The lack of Scottish technological skills meant that most exports were still of raw materials. The wool trade was in steady decline. Much of the rest of trade was in hides, woolfells, cloth and salmon. The Low Countries were the main trading partner, with Scottish merchants operating through the staple port of Veere. There was an established triangular trade between Scotland, the Low Countries and the Baltic. Imports included woollen cloth and manufactured goods. Imports of wine from France increased during the early sixteenth century. Attempts to limit the purchase of luxury imports continuously failed. Bullion left Scotland to pay ransoms and confirm benefices in Rome; income from royal dowries did not match this. Successive monarchs reduced the amount of silver in the coinage so that its value against the English equivalents fell, to a third by 1450 and to a twelfth by 1603.
Wages and rents rose to compensate but Scotland was spared as yet a general price rise with its concomitant social dislocation. There was little attempt to improve the economy by the royal government. However, in a stagnating economy, royal and baronial housing projects and demand for artillery and shipbuilding, did increase domestic demand for industries.

CULTURAL CHANGE

Royal patronage, especially at the 'Renaissance' court of James IV, extended the traditions of craftsmanship that elsewhere found expression in everyday contexts. For example, the ability and capacity of Scottish shipbuilders were stretched by the king's naval commissions. This was especially true of the Great Michael, completed at Newhaven in 1511. In this way the aspirations of 'high' culture trickled down to merchants, lairds and lawyers. The skills of craftsmen were being refined for wealthy patrons all over Scotland. The arrival of printing provided another way for court and popular culture to begin to connect. The buildings commissioned by James IV included great halls at Edinburgh and Stirling castles and the Chapel Royal at Stirling. Such patronage provided a stage for the highest craft skills of masons, carpenters and painters. Flemish and French masons worked on royal buildings, and their work was echoed in the architecture of religious buildings or lairds' tower houses which came to show a mixture of imported and vernacular features. The taste of religious and secular patrons for Flemish workmanship survives in imported lamps, images, books of hours, hangings, painted ceilings, tombstones and paintings, most famously the Trinity panels - an elaborate triptych showing James III and his queen, Margaret of Denmark, at prayer, flanked by their patron saints.

The new royal buildings provided the setting for a wide range of cultural activities. The court had a political purpose, unification of the nobility behind the monarchy. This was facilitated by the cult of honour, with pageants, tournaments and festivals as its highlights. These events drew on the imagery, symbolism and coded celebrations of kingship which were common in Burgundy, France and England in the same period. One of the most famous of these was the three-day tournament of the White Knight and the Black Lady, staged at Holyrood in 1508. William Dunbar's poem, 'Blyth Aberdein', celebrated the formal entry of Queen Margaret into the burgh in 1508. No less political in intent was the cosmopolitanism of the court, which spoke six languages including French, Danish and Gaelic. There was also a notable English element after James' marriage to Margaret, daughter of Henry VII, in 1503.

The court enjoyed the services of performing artists such as poets and musicians. The most famous poet was William Dunbar, who named many others whose work is now entirely lost in his 'Lament for the Makirs'. In the previous generation Robert Henryson, not a courtier but a Dunfermline schoolmaster, was the most able poet. Along with Gavin Douglas in the early 1500s, an aristocratic bishop, and Sir David Lindsay, a courtier of James V, these poets wrote in a European humanist intellectual tradition with connections to Chaucer, Villon and Boccaccio.

The courtiers wrote in Scots. Middle Scots had become the language of government, court and culture. Though Dunbar called it a 'lewit barbour tong',
'Inglis' (which needs to be distinguished from English) was a source of unity among Lowland Scottish society. This was also the period when the deprecation of Gaelic culture as 'barbarous' began. The famous tournament staged by James IV in 1508 included a defeat inflicted on Highland savages, probably a dramatised re-enactment for the amusement of the court of his annexation of the Lordship of the Isles in 1494. The oral traditions of the Gaelic bards were gradually abandoned by Lowland writers - employed if at all as an object of mockery, albeit humorous rather than vicious. The distinction between Highland and Lowland culture accentuated the division between the two societies, despite the fact that many Gaelic speakers had rich European contacts.

Cultural self-consciousness also led to an interest in Scotland's past. This was expressed in epics such as 'The Wallace', written in the reign of James III, though the first surviving edition dates to 1570. It was also expressed in didactic books on the art of government. Hector Böeck's humanist inspired but largely mythological history of Scotland was published in Latin in 1527 and translated into Scots at the expense of James V in the 1530s. John Major's scholastic and more sceptical 'History of Greater Britain' was published on 1521.

Court musicians in the reign of James IV included the King's Gaelic harpist Robert Carver, who was also prominent in the next reign. He wrote a mass for six voices in 1520, probably for performance in the new Chapel Royal at Stirling. In music as elsewhere, the court was only the apex of a wider cultural achievement. A number of Scots musicians studied in the Netherlands and one, John Fethy, returned to be master of a song school in Aberdeen. Fethy's pupil Robert Black became a talented composer for the organ. Other towns had song schools to provide choristers for the churches.

Though there were a number of different kinds of schools in the towns and countryside. Song schools, gave a basic education as well as training in music; many song schools survived the Reformation. Vernacular or 'Inglis' schools gave a rudimentary education to children up to the age of seven or eight, which was when, for most, their school days ended. In grammar schools, the curriculum was taught in Latin, using standard textbooks often imported from abroad. They were usually based in burghs and trained a select number of boys up to the age of twelve. Elsewhere, there were lairds' schools. In these the children - boys and probably girls too -of the laird, his larger tenants and kinsmen were educated. The number of these schools and their pupils are unknown because they have left few records. Among the general population literacy levels undoubtedly remained low. They were at there highest in large towns where possibly one in four adult males could read. Writing was a separate skill from reading and considerably fewer could write. Universities were still seminaries for the training of the clergy. New colleges were founded at Glasgow in 1451 and at Aberdeen in 1495. At St. Andrews, which had had a university since 1412, two new colleges were founded in the first half of the sixteenth century. All of these provided an arts degree for at most a few score students a year. Further degrees were usually obtained abroad.

The greatest cultural instrument of the of the period, the printing press, was set up, under royal licence, at Edinburgh in 1507-8, though many scholars still sent work abroad to be printed. Its impact was gradual rather than immediate. It depended on the growth of literacy to provide a market and technological
developments which reduced the cost of printed works. Both of these developments continued throughout the early modern period. The press was intended as an instrument of government by James IV, for cultural excellence had a national function. However it was clear from the early sixteenth century that neither royal nor church authorities could control the spread of ideas in the way they previously had. Both the Reformation and the changing relationship between monarch and people, as they unfolded through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, owed much to the printing revolution.

The growth of lay literacy was a cultural revolution as great as printing. Literacy had always been a clerical attribute and lawyers and administrators came from the clergy, although this was changing. Half of the senators of the new, central civil law court, the Court of Session established in 1532, were clerics and half were laymen. It was professional lawyers that Bishop Elphinstone wanted to produce at his new university in Aberdeen. Parliament in 1496, in Scotland's first Education Act, tried to encourage the schooling of the sons of the nobility.

By 1540, the evidence of written bonds shows that, almost invariably, nobles could at least write their own name. But some families, such as the Sinclairs of Roslin, had collected books for several generations. A few were also literary patrons; the poem 'The Buke of the Howlat' was commissioned by the earl of Douglas, while the huge history of Walter Bower, called 'Scotichronicon', is dedicated to the laird of Rosyth. Whether these estate owners and burgesses wished to emulate the king or their European counterparts or to keep an eye on business is unknowable. Whatever the motivation, literacy allowed the laity as well as the clergy to contribute to and be influenced by the same intellectual ideas - and the same religious views.

NOTES

This is Chapter 1 of 5. Including the Overview, this set comprises 6 PDFs. The others are:

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