

REVIEW

Mairi Cowan, *Death, Life, and Religious Change in Scottish Towns, c.1350-1560*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012. Pp. xi + 252. ISBN 978-0-7190-8023-4. £60.00.

In a highly readable book, Mairi Cowan explores the religious culture of Scottish towns in the period between the Black Death and the Scottish Reformation. In doing so, she joins a growing band of Scottish historians who are realizing the insights that can be gained through studying religious devotion and the ways in which people expressed their faith in medieval and early modern Scotland. In addition, her work contributes to debates about the nature of Church reform that was underway in Scottish burghs prior to 1560, arguing that Scotland was “the only country in Europe where Catholic Reformation preceded Protestant Reformation” (p. 13).

A wide range of sources has been consulted and Cowan’s interdisciplinary training in the Centre for Medieval Studies at the University of Toronto shines through. Drawing on material including burgh records, obit books, papal letters, poetry, and archaeological evidence, a clear picture is presented of the vibrancy of lay piety in late medieval and early modern Scotland, especially in larger burghs such as Edinburgh and Aberdeen, for which the extant sources tend to be richer than for their smaller counterparts. Indeed, a useful and welcome addition would have been greater acknowledgement of the limitations of the evidence, particularly for the fourteenth century for which sources are less plentiful and varied than for either of the following two centuries.

Cowan has structured her book imaginatively in accordance with the inscription on the St. Giles’ church bell of 1460. This bell in Edinburgh declared itself to lament the dead, summon the living, and subdue thunderbolts: “*defunctos plango: vivos voco: fulmina frango*” (p. 1). The book is thus split up into three main parts, each of which is subdivided into two chapters. Chapters 1 and 2 (“How the living influenced the dead” and “How the dead influenced the living”) cover such topics as indulgences, burials, commemorative masses, and saintly intercession; chapters

3 and 4 (“Communities of religion” and “The individual in the community”) include discussion about the communities of parishes, guilds, and burghs, and confession and the reading of devotional works; and chapters 5 and 6 (“Religious dissent” and “Catholic reform”) highlight the changes that were occurring in devotional practice from the late fifteenth century onwards, and the reforms that were taking place within the existing Church structure before 1560.

While it is admirable that the chosen shape of the book echoes the words of a medieval inscription, at times the order of the topics under discussion means that information which would have helped to contextualise an earlier chapter does not appear until later on in the text. For example, some of the content of chapter 3 in the section discussing guilds would have helped to contextualize the discussion of guild funerals (pp. 29-31) in chapter 1. In a similar way, while in chapter 1 *The Golden Legend* is described as “a text read widely in Europe and found in several Scottish libraries” (p. 19), it is not until chapter 2 that the reader is told what it was, when it was written, and who the author was (p. 59).

Despite this, one of the strengths of the book is the way in which it combines examination of the piety of individuals alongside their relationships not only with family and kin groups—a significant conclusion from a study of chantry foundations being that a married woman “retained connections to her own natal kin and did not become completely assimilated into her husband’s kin” (p. 43)—but with fellow members of guilds, parishes, and burgh communities. At the same time, those who did not conform to the Christian community or who were excluded from burgh life—for instance, those who committed suicide, those who were classed as heretics, those who were afflicted with diseases such as leprosy—are also given due consideration. Furthermore, the wider context is not ignored. Comparisons are made with other parts of Europe; for example, the lack of any evidence of the Brethren of the Common Life or of beguines in Scotland is noted in contrast to the Low Countries (p. 184).

It is unfortunate that David McRoberts’ Rhind Lectures of 1970 (published as *Lost Interiors: the Furnishings of Scottish Churches in the Later Middle Ages*, Aquhorthies Press, 2012)

appeared in print only in the same year as Cowan's book and that she did not get the opportunity to cite them. Nevertheless, that two such complementary books should be published at around the same time emphasises the growing interest in, and importance of, the study of late medieval devotion in Scotland.

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