

COVENANTERS

The Fifty Years Struggle 1638-1688

Today, South West Scotland is a peaceful and largely prosperous area, but a large number of martyrs' graves are reminders of a turbulent past. Many are located on remote moorland, marking the spots where government troops killed supporters of the Covenant. Others are in parish Kirkyards: some erected at the time, others modern replacements. Almost every corner has a tale to tell of the years of persecution when secret meetings were held near to castles and country houses were commandeered by government troops in their quest to capture and punish those who refused to adhere to the King's religious demands.

Scotland was in an almost constant state of civil unrest because people refused to accept the royal decree that King Charles was head of the Kirk. When those who refused signed a covenant stating that only Jesus Christ could command such a position, they effectively signed their own death warrants. It was a grim period of religious persecution which witnessed the bloodiest crimes of the nation's history, committed by Scots against Scots.

The Origins of the Struggle

James VI of Scotland became James I of England in 1603 following the death of Elizabeth I. It is important to remember that, during his reign, the two nations retained their separate parliaments and privy councils. Scotland and England passed their own laws and enjoyed their own law courts. Each had its own national church, own way of levying taxes and regulating trade, and to a certain extent, own foreign policy.

Scotland itself was virtually two distinct nations, with a huge division between Highland and Lowland. James' attempts to persuade the clan chiefs to adopt the Protestant faith were a failure. They clung to the military habits of their ancestors, their Catholic, Jacobite heritage and spoke Gaelic long after most of Scotland had abandoned it in favour of English. James also resented what he saw as the Presbyterian Scottish Kirk's interference in matters of state.

Presbyterianism, as practiced by the Scots, was a hard, unyielding faith. It was deeply suspicious of Christmas, and abominated graven images such as the crucifix. It did not recognise Easter as a celebration. James I insisted that his divine authority came before the Kirks civil jurisdiction. This conflict between two uncompromising factions was a major influence on this whole period of Scottish history. James, despite his Scots ancestry, left London to visit his native country only once between 1603 and 1625.

On his accession to the throne in 1625, Charles I was determined to continue his father's work. He proposed bringing the Scots church into line with that of England, an extremely controversial move which provoked outrage north of the border. He was an opponent of Presbyterianism and thought it would be simpler if all his subjects would adopt Episcopacy, the government of the church by crown appointed Bishops. To this end he planned the introduction of the Book of Common Prayer into the Scottish church service. This took some time and it was not until 1637 that the new liturgy, that many Scots believed to be more Catholic than Protestant, was ordered to be read in the Church of St. Giles in Edinburgh.

Tradition has it, that when the new service was read, one worshipper, Jenny Geddes stood up and threw her stool at the Dean's head shouting, *Wha daur say mass in ma lug?* The congregation erupted and the service had to be abandoned. Although commonly portrayed as a spontaneous outbreak of popular indignation, there is evidence that the incident was carefully contrived.

On 28th February 1638 the **National Covenant** was produced on behalf of the Church of Scotland, backed by the nobility and gentry, in opposition to the new book of prayer. This was essentially an anti-Papist declaration and 60,000 folk gathered to sign the documents placed on public display in Greyfriars church, Edinburgh. Other copies were taken throughout the country for further signatures, bringing the Scottish Kirk into direct conflict with the King and the rule of law. Riots escalated to general unrest, forcing Charles to recall Parliament in 1640 in order to secure the funds necessary to quell this Scottish uprising. The so-called Short Parliament refused Charles financial demands, and disbanded after only one month.

Civil unrest continued in the north and Charles was forced to convene Parliament again. The following year the Irish revolted against English rule, and the determination of King and Parliament to assert their authority over them led to open conflict in 1642.

The Solemn League and Covenant

In 1642, Civil War broke out in England between King Charles and his supporters and the Parliamentarians led by Oliver Cromwell. The English Parliamentarians agreed that Presbyterianism should be adopted as the national religion throughout England and Scotland, as they were anxious to have the Scots allied against the Royalist forces. The Covenanters, therefore, sided with Cromwell and a period of stability ensued. The 1643 treaty between the two was called the Solemn League and Covenant, and was essentially a marriage of convenience. It was a treaty between England and Scotland for the preservation of the reformed religion in Scotland, the reformation of religion in England and Ireland according to the word of God, and the example of the best reformed churches, and the extirpation of popery and prelacy. However, it did not explicitly mention Presbyterianism and was ambiguous in many areas.

The tide of the English Civil War ebbed and flowed over the next six years, culminating in the defeat of Charles' army at the Battle of Preston in 1648. The King was charged with high treason against the realm of England. At his trial, Charles refused to recognise the legitimacy of the court and entered no plea. Notwithstanding, the court rendered a verdict of guilty and sentenced him to death. He was beheaded three days later on January 30th 1649 on a scaffold erected at Whitehall, London. On 6th February the monarchy was formally abolished by Parliament. Henceforth England would be run by a Council of State with Cromwell as its first Chairman.

Cromwell was now in control of England. The Scots, angered by England's unilateral decision to execute the monarch shared by both kingdoms, proclaimed Charles II king a week after his father's execution, in the hope of negotiating with him and securing a Covenanted King. However, Cromwell as an Independent supported by an Army composed largely of Independents, set his face against Presbyterian church government. His fear of a Scots invasion of England to restore Charles to the throne led him to invade and occupy Scotland in 1650.

Cromwell was much less hostile to Scottish Presbyterians, some of whom had been his allies in the First English Civil War, than he was to Irish Catholics. He made a famous appeal to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, urging them to see the error of the royal alliance: *I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you may be mistaken!* The Scots reply was robust: *Would you have us to be sceptics in our religion?* This rebuff, and the decision to negotiate with Charles II, led Cromwell to believe that war was necessary. His victory at the Battle of Dunbar in 1650 saw 4,000 Scottish soldiers killed and 10,000 taken prisoner. Soon after, he captured Edinburgh. Scotland was under English rule.

After Cromwell died in 1658 he was succeeded as Lord Protector by his son, Richard. However, Richard, with no power base in either Parliament or his New Model Army, was forced to abdicate in 1659 and the Protectorate was abolished. Finally, Charles II was fully restored to the throne of England, Ireland and Scotland in 1660.

The men who had signed his father's death warrant were tried as regicides and executed. Anyone associated with the execution of Charles was put on trial. The only people to escape were the masked executioners, as no-one knew who they were. Charles II soon passed an Act enforcing his subjects to recognise him as the supreme authority in matters both Civil and Ecclesiastical. The Church of Scotland rejected this and was thrown into the furnace of persecution for twenty-eight long years.

Repudiation of the Covenant and Rullion Green

In 1661 Charles II repudiated the National Covenant. The following year the Covenant was torn up and Charles' own bishops and curates were appointed to govern the churches. Four thousand non-conforming ministers were ejected from their parishes. At first the authorities tolerated these conventicles, preaching in houses, barns or the open-air. However, it was soon realised that the people's resolve was such that they would not attend the government-appointed Episcopal ministers' services. A first attempt at limiting attendance at conventicles was made in 1663. By 1670, attendance at them had become treasonable, and preaching at them a capital offence.

By 1666, the persecution of church non-attendees by troopers to whom curates had passed on names was so bad that the country became increasingly restless. When an old man was roasted with branding irons by soldiers in Dalry, Galloway, rebellion commenced. Although unplanned, numbers flocked to the cause and a spontaneous march took place in freezing November weather via Lanark towards Edinburgh. The exhausted Covenanters were ultimately defeated at Rullion Green in the Pentland Hills, when General Dalryell's 3,000 strong army routed the nine hundred protestors. One hundred were killed on the battlefield. Another hundred and twenty were taken prisoner and marched to Edinburgh where they were charged with treason and rebellion. It was believed that another three hundred Covenanters died, or were killed, on their way home. Those captured were crowded into a part of the High Kirk in Edinburgh known as Haddock's Hole. Brought before the Justiciary Court on December 7th, they were found guilty and sentenced to be hanged. As many as ten at a time were despatched on one scaffold. Afterwards, the bodies were dismembered and the pieces exhibited in the Covenanters own localities as a warning to others.

Conventicles

On 13th August 1670 the government declared that conventicles, religious meetings in the fields, were illegal and it was a capital offence to attend these. All were to be broken up, and any land owner who refused to help would be fined. However, instead of turning master against man, the order forged links of shared suffering. Presbyterians defied the authorities and held secret religious meetings in the hills, usually with a circle of lookouts, often armed, watching for signs of approaching dragoons. Some conventicles were attended by thousands of people at only a few hours notice, with mass marriages being carried out, a rock serving as an altar. Baptisms were performed in streams. Seven thousand attended a conventicle near Maybole in Ayrshire in 1678 performed by four ministers; at East Nisbet in Berwickshire more than three thousand took part. Another massive conventicle, attended by more than three thousand Covenanters took place on Skeoch Hill in Kirkcubrightshire the following year. A series of boulders were arranged in five rows for the communicants. Four of these 'Communion stones' may still be seen today near Irongray, about seven miles west of Dumfries.

Conventicles were often infiltrated by non-adherents who slipped off early to inform the authorities, so Covenanters had to be highly vigilant. Participants were most likely to be captured or executed, usually on their way to and from conventicles. The fact that they were away from home, and probably had a bible in their possession, was enough for the authorities to justify fining or executing them, often killing them where they stood.

The Highland Host

The government was becoming desperate and in early 1678, nine thousand soldiers from the largely Catholic highlands were brought south to Glasgow and the south-west. The town fathers of Ayrshire wrote to a senior official requesting him not to send so inhumane and barbarous a crew of spoilers into that county, but the appeal fell on deaf ears. Parties of highland soldiers were quartered on land owned by suspected Covenanter sympathisers who were required to feed them and keep them for nothing. They were known as the Highland host and were responsible for many atrocities, robbing hosts of their belongings and livestock, as well as rape, pillage and destruction.

In Kilmarnock, nine highland soldiers were quartered on William Dickie for six weeks. When they eventually left his house, they stole bags full of ornaments, cutlery, plates and a sock full of money, to a total value of 1,000 merks (667 Scottish or English pounds). They also maltreated him and his family. His pregnant wife was murdered by a highlander who stuck a dirk into her side, and Dickie was struck on a number of occasions for not meeting all the soldiers' needs, one of the beatings resulting in broken ribs. The minister of Kilmarnock was so appalled by the highlanders' actions that he condemned them in one of his sermons. As a result, he was waylaid and attacked in the street, and died shortly after.

Many parishes have records which detail the cost of putting up the highlanders, sums that were long in recouping. For example, two hundred and fifty soldiers and officers from Caithness were quartered within the Parish of Cumnock for fifteen nights, resulting in losses of £3015 6s 8d as recorded in the accounts. The total for Avondale parish in Lanarkshire was reckoned to be £1,700, although it is probable that this was only a third of the true cost.

The Battles of Drumclog and Bothwell Bridge

The situation became grave in the Lowlands and South West, and by 1679 the men of Galloway rose again in what became known as the Second Resistance. It began with the Rutherglen Declaration, when they condemned the proceedings of the government since 1660. Shortly afterwards a huge conventicle was arranged in Lanarkshire.

This was a challenge the government had to meet to retain their credibility. John Graham of Claverhouse, known to his friends as Bonny Dundee, but to his enemies as Bloody Clavers, rode from Glasgow with some 180 dragoons, to deal with them. Claverhouse was hated by the Covenanters for the part he played in ordering executions, many being killed by his own hands.

He found the Covenanters drawn up in order of battle at the farm of Drumclog, near Loudoun Hill, on the morning of 1st June 1679. They had chosen their position skilfully, in front was a deep ditch and all around was marsh. They had had little fear of the soldiers coming towards them on horseback. After an exchange of musket fire with little effect, Claverhouse held back as he had no one to guide his men through the morass. His enemies solved his problems for him. Led by William Cleland, later the first colonel of the Cameronians, men made their way around the ditch and attacked the dragoons who had dismounted. Bugged down, and totally outnumbered, the dragoons were at a disadvantage and thirty-six were killed, and seven made prisoner. The rest fled.

Believing that their hour had come, the Covenanters proposed a march on Glasgow, only to find that the fearful residents had barricaded the streets to stop them entering. A civil war ensued, with the militia mobilised and armed men guarding the fords over the River Forth on the approaches to Edinburgh. The Covenanters turned about and at Bothwell Bridge, just north of Hamilton, they made their stand. By now they had become a rabble and were easily defeated by troops led by the Duke of Monmouth. Hundred were captured and marched to Edinburgh where they were locked up in an enclosure of Greyfriars Kirkyard. Five months later, after several escapes, some deaths, and yet others had signed a declaration of government support, two hundred and seventy were sentenced to banishment to the American plantations. Their ship foundered off Orkney and almost all were drowned.

The Killing Times

The period between 1680 and 1685 was one of the fiercest in terms of persecution, and the months between 1684-5 became known as the Killing Times. Charles brother, James II, a believer in the Devine Right of Kings and a supporter of the Roman Catholic faith, was now the throne. He decided to eradicate the Presbyterians.

Parish Lists were drawn up, with instructions to the Episcopalian Curates to furnish Nominal Rolls of *all* persons, male and female, over the age of 12 within their Parishes. The Ministers were ordered to give *a full and complete Roll of all within the Parish and that to their Knowledge they give Account of all Disorders and Rebellions, and who are guilty of them, Heritors or others.* Their instructions concluded: *No remarks need be made upon these Demands made upon every Curate in every Parish; they are plain enough, as also their Design.*

The census was clearly designed to assist in the control and persecution of Covenanters. The list drawn up for Wigtownshire in 1684 featured a total of 9,276 individuals in nineteen parishes.

These were the most horrific times ever inflicted on the people of Scotland. Covenanters were flushed out and hunted down as never before, and soldiers were empowered to take the life of any suspect without trial of law. Usually there was little or no evidence, and often as the result of the suspicions of an over-zealous town official or Minister. The brutality defies the imagination for there was no mercy for man, woman or child, irrespective of circumstance. Any Covenanter caught by the Kings troops was shot or murdered on the spot.

The Glorious Revolution

However, for the Covenanters the period of terror was nearly over. In the spring of 1688, James II ordered his Declaration of Indulgence, suspending the penal laws against Catholics, to be read from every Anglican pulpit in the land. The Church of England and its staunchest supporters, the peers and gentry, were outraged. The birth of an heir, James Francis Stuart, later the Old Pretender, increased public disquiet about a Catholic dynasty.

At the end of June, a small group of peers made the fateful decision to invite William of Orange, James' son-in-law, to defend the liberties of England. William prepared carefully, assembling a formidable army of multinational mercenaries in Holland. In November, he landed at Torbay at the head of fifteen thousand men. Cleverly, he made no public claim to the crown, saying only that he had come to England to save Protestantism.

James marched west with a small but well trained army but, to his dismay, found his troops discontented and unwilling to fight. At Salisbury there were mass desertions, and the king turned tail for London. He still harboured hopes of retaining his throne, but his nerve failed him and he made for the Kent coast. At Faversham magistrates turned him back and he was forced to sail from London. On Christmas Day 1688, he landed in France and from there sailed to Ireland. Meanwhile, William had moved swiftly to neutralise the royal army and establish a provisional government. In January 1689, a hastily summoned Parliament declared the throne vacant, and in February William III and Mary, the daughter of King James, jointly acceded. The second English revolution of the century had been accomplished without violence.

This ended the House of Stewart that had ruled over Scotland for more than 300 years, and England, Scotland and Ireland for eighty-six years. James and his son, Charles, unsuccessfully tried to reclaim the crown through Jacobite risings in 1689, 1715 and 1745. But the Glorious Revolution had taken place, and William III was persuaded by his advisors to accept Presbyterianism as the established church in Scotland. In 1690, Parliament met and passed an Act re-establishing Presbyterianism in Scotland. To this day the Church of Scotland remains a Presbyterian Church.

The Cameronians

Although most of the Covenanters rejoined the established church, there were a good number who wished to remain apart. They established the Reformed Presbyterian Church. The followers of the Reverend Richard Cameron formed the 26th Regiment of Foot in May 1689, better known as the Cameronians. Cameron himself had been killed by dragoons at the Battle of Airds Moss near Cumnock, Ayrshire in July 1680.

Sixty-three Covenanters had taken to the bog for safety, pursued by a hundred and twelve soldiers under the command of Andrew Bruce of Earlshall. The Covenanters stood their ground and fought valiantly, nine being killed against twenty-eight of the regular troops, but eventually they were overcome by the more experienced force. The mutilated body of Cameron was buried on the Moss along with eight of his supporters who fell as, under cover of heavy rain and mist, Covenanters sought to escape. Bruce hacked Cameron's head and hands from his body, and took his trophies to Edinburgh to claim £500 bounty that had been offered for his capture and death. Two Covenanters later died of wounds suffered in the battle, and six more were captured and later hanged for their part in the battle.

John Graham of Claverhouse

John Graham of Claverhouse was made Viscount Dundee. In 1689 he raised an army for the exiled James, in Ireland, who was planning a comeback. The recruits were predominantly Catholic highlanders horrified by the thought of the dethronement of the last in a line of at least 100 Scottish kings. The army marched on Killiecrankie in Perthshire, where a battle took place on 27th July.

Although Bonnie Dundee's forces numbered almost two thousand men, the government troops had twice as many. Although Dundee won the battle, he was mortally wounded by a gunshot and his body was stripped of armour and clothing. A soldier found his body the following day and, wrapping it in a plaid, took it to the Kirk at Old Blair, near Blair Atholl, where it was buried. Despite the fact that the day belonged to the Jacobites, the leaderless uprising soon petered out in a series of minor skirmishes.

For fifty years non-conformist Covenanters had been fined, tortured, flogged, branded or executed for failing to turn up to hear the Kings Curates in the pulpit. One famous observer of the times, Daniel Defoe, estimated that eighteen thousand had died for their adherence to the Covenant. Of those that lived, many had been sold as slaves to America or sent to the dungeons of Bass Rock or Dunottar Castle. Those who escaped sought refuge in Holland and England. The cause still rings out on many martyr graves scattered throughout the South West:

*For the word of God and Scotlands work of Reformation. Scotlands heritage comes at a price
which invokes our greatest heartfelt thanks for the lives sacrificed on the anvil of persecution,
when innocent blood stained the heather on our moors and ran down the gutters of our streets
with sorrow and sighing beyond contemplation.*

Kirkyards all over Scotland have memorials to victims of the years of Covenanting persecution, but no area is as rich in them as the south-west corner of Scotland, particularly the counties of Ayr, Lanark, Kirkcudbright and Dumfries, where virtually every Parish Kirkyard contains at least one Covenanter's grave. Many more are to be seen on the moors and hills which the Covenanters were forced to frequent. Such victims were buried where they fell, for a Kirkyard burial could have led to other deaths. If the authorities learnt that a Covenanter had been given a decent burial, the bodies were usually disinterred and buried in a spot reserved for thieves and malcontents, often after hanging or beheading.