

Book reviews

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Jane Dawson, *John Knox* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), pp. 384. \$45.00.

Professor Jane Dawson, whose *John Knox* was published to celebrate the 500th anniversary year of Knox's birth at Haddington, is successful in bringing the famous Reformer to life. The word 'definitive' has been justly applied to this new biography, not least through Professor Dawson's access to previously unavailable sources, particularly the recently discovered papers of Knox's close friend and colleague, Christopher Goodman.

Any biography of Knox has to contend with the stereotypes which have come down the generations. From the start, therefore, I was riveted by chapter 1's charming account of the baptism by Goodman, in Geneva on 23 May 1557, of Knox's first child, Nathaniel. The reader's first glimpse of the great man finds him 'proudly cradling his new born son in his arms'; followed by the comment: 'Being a man to whom tears came easily, he was probably weeping with happiness.'

If such an image disarms, so does the choice of Geneva rather than Haddington to begin the narrative. By this means a wider, international perspective is immediately established for the story which is to unfold. Knox was a key figure in the Scottish Reformation, but he was also a major player on the stage of sixteenth-century Europe. As Dawson puts it: 'He was an Englishman by adoption, a warm friend of France, Geneva and the European Reformed network and a potential missionary to Ireland.'

A new and unexpected light is shone on Knox's relationship with Mary, Queen of Scots. There is no denying the tempestuous nature of many of their dealings. This makes it all the more intriguing to learn that they collaborated in an effort to save the marriage of the Earl and Countess of Argyll. Mary spoke to her half-sister, Countess Jane, while Knox worked on the Earl. Their efforts were successful, if only for a time.

Such images of Knox as tender father and marriage guidance counsellor may disarm, but they hardly tell the whole story. Politician and ecclesiastic on the European stage he may have been, but diplomacy was not one of his gifts. His *First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* was clearly aimed at Mary Tudor. One of its effects, however, was to scupper any prospect of what might have been a useful constructive relationship with Mary's successor, the Protestant Queen Elizabeth of England; likewise

with Mary, Queen of Scots. Drawing on Knox's *History*, Dawson gives a wry account of the Reformer's first meeting with Mary. He went out of his way to assure her that, while he adhered to his view that female rule was wrong in principle, she was not the target of the *First Blast*. Moreover, if the realm were prepared to accept Mary's authority, he would keep his opinions to himself. He then offered a biblical precedent of the apostle Paul appealing to, and thereby acknowledging, the pagan Roman Emperor. The implication of an equivalence between Mary and Nero feels less than conciliatory.

In revolutionary times leadership can call for resolve, unwillingness to compromise and even a degree of ruthlessness. Dawson details various examples of such attitudes on Knox's part. One particularly caught my attention as a former Principal Clerk to the General Assembly. This was a decision of the first General Assembly, meeting in Edinburgh in December 1560, to order the destruction of the collegiate church at Restalrig as 'a monument of idolatry'. Dawson sees Knox's hand in this, since he regarded the Dean of Restalrig, John Sinclair, as a traitor who had initially supported the reform movement but, in the end, decided to remain loyal to the old church.

In all of this and so much more Professor Dawson's writing achieves a perfect balance of the scholarly and the accessible. Her enthusiasm is evident and the story unfolds with a pace and style which readily engage the reader. At one point a sense of immediacy is added to the account of a journey made by Knox from Ayrshire to Edinburgh by the observation that his route would have been that followed by today's A71 trunk road.

For those whose interest is particularly academic there are detailed end-notes, a chapter-by-chapter listing of recommendations for further reading and a thorough index of topics and names.

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Nigel Biggar, In *Defence of War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 384. £25.00.

This is a major contribution to the literature on the morality of war, written in two voices, one argumentative, the other reflective and open to other perspectives. In *Defence of War* is, on the one hand, a rich reflection on a wealth of literature, historical and contemporary, addressing the justifications for making war. The chapters – developed on the basis of a series of essays already published elsewhere – span the historical development of just war