
Dark Ages In Scotland

In the year 1600, Scotland's population was a meagre 800,000 but the country was well-endowed with seats of learning. Despite their locations on the north-west fringe of Europe, five Scottish universities were already well established. The foundation of the University of St Andrews in 1410 had been prompted by the defection of Augustinian clergy from the University of Paris, as a result of the 'Avignon schism' in the Roman church, and from Oxford and Cambridge, as a result of the continuing hostility and sporadic warfare between Scotland and England. During the schism, Scotland supported the Avignon 'anti-popes' Clement VII and Benedict XIII. Bishop Henry Wardlaw of St Andrews had the full confidence of Benedict, who confirmed the establishment of the new university by Papal Bull in 1413. The University of Glasgow, founded in 1451, became the fourth-oldest university in the English-speaking world, followed by King's College, University of Aberdeen, in 1495. The Scottish Reformation led by George Wishart and John Knox resulted in the Edinburgh Parliament approving the Protestant confession of faith in 1560, rejecting any papal jurisdiction over the country's church or government. The 'rough wooing' of the young Mary Queen of Scots by English invasion, and her eventual forced abdication in 1567 after a tempestuous, tragic and divisive reign, firmly established Presbyterianism in Scotland. When the University of Edinburgh was founded in 1582, its authority derived not from Rome or Avignon, but from the Town Council and a Royal Charter granted by the Stuart King, James VI. In Aberdeen, the 5th Earl Marischal, George Keith, was ambitious to establish another 'Town College' based on the same principles. He founded the 'Marischal College and University of Aberdeen' in 1593, thus endowing that northernmost Scottish city with two universities. In 1603, with the accession of King James also to the English throne, Scotland and England were united under a single monarch, but retained their separate parliaments, churches, laws and education systems.

The old Scottish universities admitted their students young, and based their education on a broad range of subjects: Latin, Greek, Law and Mathematics, as well as Arts, Divinity and Medicine (or *materia medica*, the very early forerunner of pharmacology). They looked mainly to the universities of continental Europe for their contacts, and it was common for Scottish students with sufficient means to supplement their studies in the likes of Paris, Leiden, Padua or Heidelberg. 'Sufficient means' of course usually required a relationship with a noble or landowning family. Natural philosophers - today we would call them physicists - mathematicians, astronomers and learned men of that ilk were often regarded with doubtful suspicion by the generally illiterate public, as probable necromancers, astrologers, alchemists and heretics. Natural philosophy could be a dangerous pastime. On February 17th, 1600, Galileo's contemporary, Giordano Bruno, was burned at the stake in Rome for heresy and maintaining the Copernican view that the Earth and planets orbit the Sun.

Through the 17th century, scholars in Scotland, as more widely in Europe, would be obliged to conduct their studies against a background of continual religious and political strife. The ruler of the newly-defined Great Britain, James VI and I, had no love for the Kirk's Presbyterianism and its obstreperous denial of the Divine Right of Kings. He snarled "A Scottish Presbytery agreeth as well with a monarch as God and the Devil". When his son Charles I attempted to anglicise the Church of Scotland and reclaim ecclesiastical lands seized during the Protestant Reformation, the result was revolution. A 'National Covenant' pledging the defence of the

Calvinist religion and the freedom of the Kirk was composed by Alexander Henderson, a minister at Leuchars in Fife. It was signed by 150 Scottish nobles in Edinburgh in February 1638, and became a national movement. Charles' attempts to suppress the Covenanters by force led directly to his downfall in the English Civil War - these days much more accurately called the Wars of the Three Kingdoms - which engulfed all of Scotland, England and Ireland. The repercussions of the deposition and then restoration of the Stuart monarchy would continue to torment Scottish society for more than a hundred years.