Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications
and other research outputs

Mapping the Scottish Reformation: Tracing Careers of the Scottish Clergy, 1560-1689

Journal Item

oro.open.ac.uk

MAPPING THE SCOTTISH REFORMATION: TRACING CAREERS OF THE SCOTTISH CLERGY, 1560–1689

DIGITAL HUMANITIES SPECIAL FEATURE

Michelle D. Brock, Washington and Lee University
Chris R. Langley, Newman University

ABSTRACT

This article introduces readers to *Mapping the Scottish Reformation,* a digital prosopography of ministers who served in the Church of Scotland between the Reformation Parliament of 1560 to the Revolution in 1689. By extracting data from thousands of pages of ecclesiastical court records held by the National Records of Scotland, *Mapping the Scottish Reformation* (MSR) tracks clerical careers, showing where they were educated, how they moved between parishes, their age, their marital status, and their disciplinary history. This early modern data drives a powerful mapping engine that will allow users to build their own searches to track clerical careers over time and space. In short, M*apping the Scottish Reformation* puts clerical careers – and, indeed, Scottish religious history more generally – quite literally on the map.

Keywords: Scotland; Scottish Reformation; Scottish clergy; digital humanities; digitization; digital mapping

Mapping the Scottish Reformation is a digital prosopography of ministers who served in the Church of Scotland between the

Reformation Parliament of 1560 to the Revolution in 1689. By extracting data from thousands of pages of ecclesiastical court records held by the National Records of Scotland, *Mapping the Scottish Reformation* (MSR) tracks clerical careers, showing where they were educated, how they moved between parishes, their age, their marital status, and their disciplinary history. This early modern data drives a powerful mapping engine that will allow users to build their own searches to track clerical careers over time and space. In short, *Mapping the Scottish Reformation* puts clerical careers – and, indeed, Scottish religious history more generally – quite literally on the map.

Scottish history has no shortage of colorful characters. From (in)famous presbyterian firebrands who took up the sword in defense of their faith to lesser-known preachers who guided their congregations through poverty and plague, few groups loom as large in the historical record as the clergy. Of course, not all relationships between the government and clergymen, or between ministers and their parishioners, were harmonious. The records of the ecclesiastical courts—local kirk sessions, regional presbyteries and provincial synods— are littered with tales of ministers behaving badly, showing up at the pulpit inebriated or arguing on the streets with a congregant.[1] The annals of Reformation-era Scotland also remind us that clerics who defied the directives of the state sometimes lost their positions, fled their parishes, and worse, found their necks in a noose. In short, Scottish clergymen were complex individuals deeply entrenched in their local communities, as well as key players in national and international movements. Throughout the early modern period, they served as a fulcrum around which religious, social, and political change pivoted.

---

[1] On the relationship between ecclesiastical courts, communities, and the clergy, see Margo Todd's seminal *The Culture of Protestantism in Early Modern Scotland* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

The Reformation of 1560, among the most important events in Scottish history, sparked a revolution not only of theological ideas and religious practice, but also of leadership. The clergy were at the forefront of this change. Increasingly, members of the newly Protestant clergy in Scotland were expected to be formidable scholars: to hold university degrees, to read multiple languages, and of course, to understand the nuances of theology and doctrine. At the same time, clerics needed to be active in their parishes: these men could marry and have exemplary, godly, families; they were to be persuasive preachers giving three or four sermons a week; they assessed their neighbors' poverty, visited the sick, comforted the dying; and, above all, they helped people to know and understand God. Ministers, even those who had quieter careers and did not leave behind any publications, were thus critical figures in the daily lives of ordinary men and women.[2]

The careers of Scottish ministers in the generations following the Reformation varied widely and in ways that historians have yet to fully chart or comprehend. William Adair, for example, was minister of Ayr, a thriving port-city in southwest Scotland, for a remarkable forty-four years. During his tenure there, he presided over a mass confession intended to stave off an outbreak of plague, provided poor relief to scores of Irish men and women fleeing political turmoil, encouraged witch-hunting in his parish, and fought in battles against royalist forces. Throughout, and for reasons that remain unclear, he held on to his post at Ayr and seems to have been beloved by his congregation, despite (or, as likely, because of)

---

[2] For more on the varied lives and experiences of the Scottish clergy, see Chris R. Langley, Catherine E. McMillan, and Russell Newton, eds., *The Clergy in Early Modern Scotland* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, forthcoming, 2021).

his radicalism and consistent opposition to the British crown's ecclesiastical policies.[3]

On the opposite end of the spectrum, other ministers were remarkably mobile. The firebrand Andrew Cant was born in Aberdeenshire in the final quarter of the sixteenth century and flourished as a student at King's College, Aberdeen. After short-term positions in the ministry in the rural north east, Cant was invited to the parish of Newbattle over one hundred and thirty miles to the south. His work in Newbattle was cut short by war as Cant enlisted to preach as a minister in the army that invaded England in 1640. He preached in pulpits as far south as Newcastle in England, and, upon his return, he was invited north again to the principal charge at St Nicholas, Aberdeen. In contrast to Adair's career in Ayr, Cant's ministry was characterized by mobility: shifting between rural and urban parishes across the length of Scotland and beyond.[4]

These are only two examples of the thousands of ministers whose words and actions forever altered Scotland's local, national, and international histories. Though academic interest in the interrelated role of ecclesiastical courts and the ministry during the Scottish Reformation has flourished, and a few excellent academic studies of individual ministers have been written in recent years, we still know remarkably little about this massive and diverse group.[5] Moreover, the most

---

[3] On William Adair and his congregation at Ayr, particularly surrounding the plague of 1647, see Michelle D. Brock, "Plague, Covenant, and Confession: The Strange Case of Ayr, 1647–8," *Scottish Historical Review*, 97 (October, 2018): 129–52; Chris R. Langley, "Sheltering under the Covenant: The National Covenant, Orthodoxy and the Irish Rebellion, 1638–1644," *Scottish Historical Review*, 96 (October, 2017): 137–60.

[4] See Chris. R. Langley, *Worship, Civil War and Community, 1638–1660* (London, 2015); Idem., "'Diligence in His Ministrie': Changing Views of Clerical Sufficiency in Mid-seventeenth-century Scotland," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte*, 104 (2013).

[5] Alexander D. Campbell, *The Life and Works of Robert Baillie (1602–1662): Politics, Religion and Record-Keeping in the British Civil Wars*

comprehensive collection of biographical data on the clergy—Hew Scott's *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticanae*— is limited by its vague index, lack of any comprehensive search function across volumes, and errors and inconsistencies.[6] Though the *Fasti* remains a work of tremendous value to Scottish historians, it provides no references to manuscripts and is thus entirely unreflective of the archival material and unhelpful as a guide to primary sources. Therefore, a new, modernized resource is needed to aid scholars, archivists, and genealogists in researching the Scottish clergy and navigating the data from the voluminous archival that helps us piece together their lives. We hope *Mapping the Scottish Reformation* (*MSR*) will be that resource.

　　Once complete, *Mapping the Scottish Reformation* (*MSR*) will be one of the largest databases of Protestant thinkers, theologians, and preachers in the world. This is the first project to ever comprehensively chart the growth, movement, and networks of the Scottish clergy between 1560 and 1689. It is also the first project of this type to map clerics' careers allowing users to easily visualize where a cleric served and where his ministry took him over the course of his life. For scholars and students of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, this provides new ways to understand religious beliefs, political conflicts, and institutional change. For those interested in family history on both sides of the Atlantic, *MSR* will provide unprecedented information on individuals whose

---

(Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2017); John Coffey, *Politics, Religion and the British Revolutions: The Mind of Samuel Rutherford* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Jane Dawson, *John Knox* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

[6] Hew Scott, *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticanae, The Succession of Ministers in the Parish Churches of Scotland, from the Reformation, A.D. 1560, to the Present Time*, originally published between 1866 and 1871 and reprinted in a second edition by the Scottish Record Society in 2003.

outsized archival footprints make them critical figures for genealogical research.

Using the records of presbyteries and synods housed at the National Records of Scotland (NRS), our project team is currently focused on the pilot phase of *MSR*, which concentrates on the four hundred parishes of the synod of Lothian and Tweeddale, an important region that includes almost a third of Scotland's parish churches and contains the relatively wealthy parishes of Edinburgh. This phase, funded by a grant from the National Endowment from the Humanities, has involved the messy but essential work of accounting for the unevenness of ministerial careers, making complex editorial decisions about who to include as clergy, and wading through some very difficult paleography. To date, we have gathered data from over two and a half thousand pages of material from the Presbytery records and detailed our progress at www.mappingthescottishreformation.org. In the coming year, we plan to make this data available in a fully searchable online database and corresponding mapping layer. During the next stage of the project, we will expand our focus beyond Lothian and Tweeddale to encompass clerical careers throughout Scotland.

Currently, we are still gathering and standardizing our data for the Synod of Lothian and Tweeddale using Google Sheets, but soon we will begin the process of uploading it to Wikidata. The benefit of using Wikidata at this phase in our project is that it is a linked open data platform and is already used as a data repository for the Survey of Scottish Witchcraft, which captured information on most of the parishes and a number of the ministers in our project. Using the Wikidata plugin in Open Refine will help us reconcile ministers in our data set with those already appearing in the Survey of Scottish Witchcraft. Once our data is uploaded to Wikidata, we will run some initial queries using SPARQL and generate basic data-driven maps, with the eventual goal of working with a web

developer to build our own Mapping the Scottish Reformation interface. Stay tuned!

Taken as a whole, *Mapping the Scottish Reformation* invites us to re-examine traditional interpretations about the ministry. For example, historians consistently characterize the southwest region of Scotland during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as 'radical' and dogmatically Presbyterian, while depicting the northeast as more 'conservative' and Episcopalian.[7] These assumptions likely contain a grain of truth, but the near impossibility of tracking the careers of minsters in any comprehensive or comparative way makes it very difficult to sustain these arguments with certainty. We do not know, for example, if most ministers in the southwest were educated in Glasgow, Edinburgh, or St Andrews, if this changed over time, and how these patterns of education may have influenced the political and religious leanings of the clergy in specific areas.

Moreover, the pilot phase of MSR has revealed that, despite common assumptions about the rigidity and consistency of the Church of Scotland's structure, there was in fact tremendous diversity over time and space in the career paths of the post-Reformation clergy. In these volatile years, ecclesiastical policy was hotly debated; parishes were created, dissolved, or united with each other; and ministers' roles changed, from mere exhorter to preacher of God's word. As such, our records reflect frequent deviation from the typical

---

[7] For an excellent investigation into the 'radical' reputation of the Southwest, see Sharon Adams, "Road to Revolution: Religion, Politics and Society in South-West Scotland, 1600–50," (Ph.D. thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2002). See also William Makey, *The Church of the Covenant, 1637–1651: Revolution and Social Change in Scotland* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1979), esp. 165–78. For insight into stereotypes and realities of the "conservative North East," see Catherine MacMillan, "Keeping the Kirk: The Practice and Experience of Faith in North East Scotland, 1560–1610," (Ph.D. Thesis, New College, University of Edinburgh, 2016).

path from student to expectant to parish minister, and instead suggest greater informality and flexibility in clerical careers than has previously been appreciated by historians. One of the core goals of Mapping the Scottish Reformation is to capture essential data while remaining sensitive to messiness of clerical experiences between the Reformation of 1560 and the Revolution of 1689.

By combining new technologies with rigorous examination of archival evidence, *Mapping the Scottish Reformation* will provide a transformative way to ask questions about the clergy, trace their careers and movements, and unpack the complex networks of men whose words and works forever altered the politics, piety, and daily lives of the Scottish people and their descendants.

We invite everyone to follow the latest updates at our website, www.mappingthescottishreformation.org, and on Twitter at @MappingScotsRef.