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(The image and identity of) catholics in
Eighteenth-century Scotland**

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CLOTILDE PRUNIER

**'ALIENS AND OUTLAWS RATHER THAN
SUBJECTS AND CITIZENS'
(THE IMAGE AND IDENTITY OF)
CATHOLICS IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY SCOTLAND**

In the wake of the Reformation in 1560, the jurisdiction of the Pope in Scotland was abolished and a string of anti-Catholic laws were passed by Scottish Parliaments all through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, culminating in 'the Act for Preventing the Growth of Popery' in 1700. This Act not only 'Revive[d], Ratifie[d] and perpetually Confirm[ed]' previous penal laws, but also introduced new restrictions which affected the Scottish Catholics' daily lives. The clause debarring Catholics from inheriting estates was clearly intended as an enticement to Catholic nobles to embrace the Protestant Faith, which a number of them did, leaving the Scottish Catholic Mission poorer for it. Similar laws obtained in the rest of the British Isles and dominions.

By 1778, the British Parliament had granted partial relief to Roman Catholics in Canada, Ireland and England. Not surprisingly, Scottish Catholics expected to 'participate in this happiness' since they '[could] not even conceive a reason, why the rays of Royal Mercy should be intercepted from [them] alone, when they [were] so bountifully diffused over all besides.'¹ However, Scottish Catholics were disappointed in their hopes of seeing the penal laws in force against them repealed when mobs took to the streets in Edinburgh and Glasgow, dissuading Parliament from extending Relief to Scotland. Eventually Scottish Catholics had to wait until 1793 to be granted liberty of conscience. How can their singular situation be accounted for?

The supporters of the Relief Bill for Scotland contended that common sense demanded that those rights which had been conceded to Catholics in Ireland, England, and even Canada, should be extended to Scotland, there being no difference whatsoever between the Catholics of Scotland and those living elsewhere. As Edmund Burke put it with his tongue in his cheek to a member of the Committee of Correspondence for the Protestant Interest: 'I cannot be brought to believe that there is any peculiar malignity in the air of North Britain which can operate to make them so much worse than they are in this [ie England] and in other countries.'² This is precisely the point the opponents of the Repeal would not grant. First, they suggested that Parliament should not have passed the English and Irish Relief Acts (nor the Quebec Act for that matter) in the first place, and further, laid emphasis on the line of division, as they saw it, between Scottish Catholics on the one hand and Catholics elsewhere in the British Isles. According to those writers, the distinction lay in the fact that Scottish Catholics predominantly lived in the Highlands. In their opinion, this geographical location went a long way towards explaining the

peculiar circumstances of the Catholics in Scotland since in the Highlands and Islands they remained out of reach not only of the effects of the penal laws but also of the so-called progress of civilization, not least as far as religion was concerned. The moderator of the presbytery of Skye, for instance, linked the survival of the Roman Catholic Church and of its tenets to the topographical features of the West Highlands: 'The extensive tracts possessed by papists on the opposite continent are hemmed in betwixt unhospitable seas on the one side, and ridges of almost impenetrable mountains and extensive barren muirs on the other, that the ancient prejudices might hold out among them till the last period of time unabated.'³ Whatever part the mountains and lochs may have played in preserving intact the Catholic dogma, it cannot be denied that in the 1770s a majority of Scottish Catholics still lived in those places of the Western Highlands and Islands where Irish Franciscans had officiated in the early seventeenth century. Other important Catholic centres were found in the north-east.

Another major element in the image of Scottish Catholics was their alleged Jacobite sympathies. They were considered as staunch supporters of the Stuarts, which did not endear them to Scottish Presbyterians. More often than not, anti-Catholic writers reminded their readers of the part played by Catholics in the '45 which they consistently exaggerated.

Reliable figures are difficult to come by but it is estimated that there were between 25,000 and 30,000 Catholics in the early 1780s who accounted for about 2 per cent of the total population of Scotland. As these figures show, numbers were not on the side of Scottish Catholics. Furthermore, they wielded no influence either as there was no Catholic gentry to speak of – by the end of the eighteenth century there was only one noble family which still adhered to the old faith. In this respect, their situation was in stark contrast with that of Catholics both in England and Ireland. In 1780, there were over 58,000 Catholics in England, among whom a certain number of people of high rank, while in Ireland Catholics represented over two-thirds of the population. Finally, an essential difference between Scottish Catholics and Irish Catholics was that the latter were successful in retaining their hierarchy while Scotland had sunk, as the Irish saw it, to the level of a Mission depending on Propaganda Fide. Scottish Catholics seem to have felt the need to reassure themselves of their identity both as genuine Catholics and true Christians as they kept drawing parallels between their situation and that of the primitive Church.

Keeping these facts in mind, it is very hard to reconcile the real situation of Scottish Catholics, which was that of a marginal minority living on the fringe of a Protestant kingdom, with the image some Protestant writers held out to their readers. If we are to believe these authors, most of whom belonged to the Evangelical Party, there was a constant increase of Popery which, as was to be expected, went hand in hand with an ever-growing number of priests. The rhetoric used in that literature invariably seemed to equate Catholicism with a tidal wave about to swamp Scotland. The anonymous author of *Scots*

Anticipation puts a different 'apocalyptic' metaphor in the minister of Paisley's mouth, but to the same purpose: 'The endless tribes of *these locusts of the bottomless pit* [...] are ready to over-run the pastures, and at last to suck the blood of our flocks themselves.'⁴ This metaphor is also typical in so far as Catholics were very often compared to animals. John Erskine,⁵ for instance, described them as ravens and lions. That seemed to be part and parcel of a deliberate attempt to portray Catholics as dangerous, violent, and almost inhuman creatures. Those Catholics who were represented in the anti-Repeal literature were 'not human' in more than one sense. Except for Bishop Hay, they were never named and they very rarely appeared as individuals or creatures of flesh and blood. In short, their whole identity seemed to be contained in the only name they were given, that is to say 'papist'. This is not to be wondered at since they were often nothing more than the figment of the anti-Catholic authors' imagination. Indeed, it is worth noting that most of these writers lived in the Lowlands where the odds of their meeting, to say nothing of their knowing personally Catholics were poor.

That supposedly emblematic image of 'the Scottish Catholic' was fiercely opposed by Scottish Catholics themselves or, to be more precise, by Bishop Hay, the Vicar-Apostolic for the Lowland District from 1778 on, but also by those Protestants who supported religious toleration, most of whom were Moderates such as Alexander Fullarton, George Campbell, Alexander Carlyle and William Robertson. They did their utmost to break up the image the Evangelicals contrived to give. This they did by insisting on keeping to the facts, in other words to the identity of Scottish Catholics. In his speech to the General Assembly in 1779, William Robertson could not help expressing his amazement at the discrepancy between the extent of the alarm raised by the Relief Bill and the actual strength of the Scottish Catholic community: 'If any person, unacquainted with the state of Scotland, has attended to the debate of the day, he must have been led, by the reasoning of several members, to imagine, that the Papists of this country composed a body very formidable, by their number, their wealth, or their influence. But what is the real fact?'⁶ Even if he underestimated – probably unknowingly – the number of Scottish Catholics, he gave an otherwise accurate picture of their circumstances. That it had come to be seen as a trite Moderate argument is clear from its being made use of in *Scots Anticipation*, which is a collection of 'imaginary' speeches putting forward the lines of argument of both the opponents and the advocates of Relief.

More generally speaking, the Moderates' contention was that Catholics being so few in Scotland, and concentrated in some parishes of the Highlands to boot, they were not described as they were, but as their opponents imagined them to be. In other words, the Moderates maintained that the Scots' image of Catholics rested on false assumptions which they had no opportunity to check because what may be termed the 'visibility' of Scottish Catholics was almost nil. This was of course a major difference with Ireland. As mentioned earlier,

Catholics made up about 70% of the population and were not confined to the lowest walks of life so that whatever John Bowes's views on that matter, who once declared that the law did not presume an Irish Catholic to exist except for the purposes of punishment, Irish Protestants could not be unaware of their existence. The Irish Catholics' 'visibility' was obviously much greater than that of their coreligionists in Scotland who, even in their wildest dreams, would not have thought it conceivable in the 1770s to see the obituaries of their priests and bishops printed in Scottish newspapers.

Paradoxically enough, it is the debate on the Relief Bill in 1778-79 which gave Catholics an opportunity to set their distorted image straight. Indeed both sides of the argument were put to the public in the press and the *Scots Magazine* in particular granted pride of place to the controversy. It is worth noting that until then Bishop Hay had usually published his works under a pseudonym.

The Catholic literature of the period is mainly made up of petitions and answers to scurrilous Protestant pamphlets. The bulk of it was written by Bishop Hay and consisted in a manifest attempt to delineate the real identity of Scottish Catholics, in contrast to the deceptive image held out by their Protestant antagonists, as the pervasive use of expressions such as 'vile and detestable colours' or 'odious light' in opposition to 'true colours' testifies. To be sure, it was a more faithful picture but some compromise with the truth was involved in the process. For instance, while Bishop Hay emphatically impugned the common assertion that priests proselytized, letters sent to Propaganda Fide insisted on the numbers of converts and on the opportunity to make an even greater harvest of them in the future. Moreover, Catholic writers and the advocates of Relief consistently portrayed Catholics as harassed and persecuted people. While there is no denying that they were discriminated against, the description of their sufferings is often wide of the mark. Inevitably, it soon turned out to be a battle of images (rather than a case of Image vs Identity) as it eventually boiled down to substituting a more positive image for the negative one. It is worth noticing that those Protestants who were berated for presenting a deceptive image retaliated by laying the same accusation at the door of the supporters of Relief. Indeed, they claimed that thanks to the penal laws Scottish Catholics were only faint images of their real violent, persecuting selves.

There was more at stake than the mere standing of Catholics in Scotland. They were aware that their fate, and more particularly that of the Relief Bill for Scotland, depended on the outcome of that battle of images. Indeed, as long as Scottish Catholics were seen as dangerous people intent on subverting church and state at every turn, that is to say on doing away with the Revolution Settlement, they could not expect Parliament to relax the penal laws in force against them. Furthermore, the riots in Edinburgh and Glasgow and their consequence – the withdrawal of the Bill – had taught Bishop Hay and his coreligionists that it was not enough to have Parliament and the Moderates within the Church of Scotland on their side – if they wanted any future Relief Bill to succeed, they also had to convince the 'lawless multitude'⁷ that they were innocuous, which

explains why the battle of images outlasted the Relief Bill.

As seen earlier, Catholics did not exist as individuals but only as a category of people whose religion was tantamount to their identity. Now, the controversy in 1778-79 revolved around the relationship which that category ought to entertain with the state or, in other words, with Scottish society. Were Catholics 'aliens and out-laws' or 'subjects and citizens'?⁸ To put it another way, did they belong in Scotland? In theory they did not. Indeed, the 'Act for Preventing the Growth of Popery' passed in 1700 implied that they were not to be reckoned with when it stated that Catholics could not inherit property and that instead it would pass on to the Protestant heir who would have succeeded 'if they and all the interveening popish heirs were naturally dead.'⁹ An older law, passed by the Scottish Parliament in 1581 went so far as obliging all Catholics to 'leave the kingdom within a limited time'¹⁰ so that John Bowes's words aptly sum up the situation of Catholics in Scotland. It also explains why Scottish Catholics, who were prevented from going to court, petitioned Parliament for redress and protection after the Edinburgh and Glasgow riots. The 1581 law enabled some Protestants to contend that there was legally no room for Catholics within Scottish society. The author of *Protestant Interest Vindicated* resorted to this argument in his answer to Edmund Burke when he compared Catholics in Scotland to 'uninvited guests' and thus justified the treatment meted out to them:

Suppose a stranger should intrude upon your private conversation with your friends, or present himself at your table, and rudely vindicate his place among your guests; would such a one, in your own judgement, be intitled to those exertions of hospitality and politeness which are bestowed upon those to whom invitation insures their welcome? Ought he to be surpris'd at his cold reception, or at any indecorum which, during the entertainment, might hurt his sensibility?¹¹

A Letter to All Opposers of the Repeal of the Penal Laws against Papists in Scotland bluntly claimed that 'all Papists [were] aliens in Scotland.'¹² The author argued that 'the majority of Papists, especially in the more populous parts of Scotland [were] either strangers from abroad or converts lately gained by Popish priests' and further maintained that Scotland was not 'their native country' but 'a place where they have lately crept into, contrary to law.'¹³ These assertions were blatantly false as most Catholics in Scotland were still native Scots, the number of Irish immigrants not being worth mentioning yet. However, these statements bore testimony to the deeply-ingrained image of Catholics as aliens in a Protestant kingdom and pointed to the fact that the definition of national identity was tightly woven into the debate. Catholicism and Scottishness were seen as utterly incompatible. Indeed the heritors and inhabitants of the town and parish of Kilmaures did not shrink from asserting this much in their resolution against the Relief Bill:

We pretend by no means to know the statesman, from whose political brain the idea of extending this detested bill to North Britain originally issued: but we know he discovers by it such ignorance of the warmth with which the Scotch are attached to the constitution in church and state, that it is difficult to believe him to be of their nation. If, after all, however, he is a Scotchman, we know he discovers such a perverse disposition to thwart and oppress his countrymen, as renders him unworthy equally of their notice and of their name.¹⁴

That aspect of the controversy was bitterly resented by the author of the 'Humble Remonstrance of the Roman Catholics' who took the Presbyterian ministers to task for it: 'We beseech you, are we not your brethren? Did we not draw our first vital breath in the same air? Were not our progenitors as genuine Caledonians as yours?'¹⁵ Catholics in Ireland did not have to face such a challenge. They were not denied the name of Irishmen.

In both countries a long drawn-out debate on 'how far Papists ought to be considered as Good Subjects'¹⁶ of a Protestant kingdom took place. The definition of Ireland as a Protestant kingdom may seem dodgy, but there is no doubt whatsoever about Scotland. Alexander Belsches spoke for most anti-Catholic authors when he wrote in 1774 that Protestantism was a 'religion which alone [made] loyal subjects, useful citizens, and good men.'¹⁷

For all their boasting, the opponents of Relief knew that it was of no avail to claim that those Catholics who lived in Scotland were foreigners. Nevertheless, they did not seem ready to bow to the inevitable. Catholics might have managed to settle in Scotland but they should not be allowed to rise above the status of pariahs as John Erskine's assimilation of the penal laws to the regulations enforced 'when the plague rages in a country'¹⁸ clearly indicates. This impression is further enhanced by *A Letter to all Opposers of the Repeal and Protestant Interest Vindicated*, both of which advocated the complete boycott of Catholics. The aim of such action was unashamedly confessed. It was, as the author of *Protestant Interest Vindicated* put it, 'not to destroy society, but to disengage it from redundant or contagious members.'¹⁹ That these books presented the boycott of Catholics as an alternative should the penal laws be relaxed underlines the fact that the Repeal was seen as an attempt to integrate Catholics into Scottish society. Indeed that is exactly how it was construed by Bishop Hay and his coreligionists who laid emphasis on the political circumstances of Britain at the time, namely on the War of American Independence, to urge the need 'to re-unite' its 'separated members' to the 'body.'²⁰ All supporters of the Relief Bill, Protestants as well as Catholics, put this argument forward. Moreover, the Moderates contended that it was not politic to keep Catholics excluded from society, as it were, while Britain was in a state of war and could not afford to harbour in its midst discontented people. That seemed to have been the view of the British state too, but its earnestness to 'unite all parties, under one noble denomination of faithful subjects, firmly attached to their King and Constitution'²¹ may be put

in doubt. As a matter of fact, when Scottish Catholics realized the government was about to go back on its promise to grant them relief, a plan of emigration to Spain was set on foot, confessedly to 'make a handle of it with Ministry in order to procure Protection.'²² However, Bishop Hay was clearly disgruntled by Lord North and Lord Weymouth's reaction, as his letter to his coadjutor Bishop John Geddes testifies: 'all the answer we got was that we knew best what was of most advantage to us, and that if we choose (sic) to go to any other Country we should not be hindered.'²³ We may safely conclude that the government's will to integrate Scottish Catholics into British society was only half-hearted to say the least.

The government's stance may be understood when we call to mind on the one hand the small number of Scottish Catholics which meant that, contrary to Irish Catholics, they had little political or economic leverage and, on the other hand, their failure to win over the bulk of the Scottish people in the battle of images in which they had engaged, so that in the end, both the image and identity of Scottish Catholics played a part in the collapse of the Relief Bill in 1779.

Notes

1. The Humble Remonstrance &c of the Roman Catholics: Roman Catholic Memorial to the Presbyterian ministers asking them to countenance Catholic Relief Bill for Scotland [incomplete], ms. SM4/17/14, SCA, Edinburgh.
2. 'Letters on Popery: Mr Burke's' *Scots Magazine* 41 (March 1779): 133.
3. Malcolm MacPherson to the Royal Bounty 9 April 1779, ms., CH1/2/121 f.256, Royal Bounty Papers, National Archives of Scotland, Edinburgh.
4. *Scots Anticipation*; or, a summary of a debate containing the substance of some of the principal speeches That are to be delivered in the G-I A-y of the C-h of S-d, upon an OVERTURE transmitted by the P-I S-d of G- and A- relating to POPERY (Edinburgh: William Creech, 1779): 13.
5. John Erskine, *Considerations on the Spirit of Popery, and the Intended Bill for the Relief of Papists in Scotland* (Edinburgh: W. Gray, 1778) 6-7; 8; 10.
6. 'Assembly Speeches: Principal Robertson' *Scots Magazine* 41 (August 1779): 413.
7. 'petition of the Roman Catholics' *Scots Magazine* 41 (1779): 133.
8. George Hay, *Roman Catholic Fidelity to Protestants Ascertained; or, An Answer to Mr W.A.D.'s Letter to G.H.* (London: J. Coghlan, 1779) 3.
9. 'Act for Preventing the Growth of Popery' *Acts of the Parliaments of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Printed by Command of His Majesty King George the Fourth, 1814-24) X, 217.
10. 'An abridgement of the Laws against Papists' *Scots Magazine* 40 (October 1778): 513.
11. 'Books: Protestant Interest Vindicated' *Scots Magazine* 41 (May 1779): 265.
12. *A Letter to All Opposers of the Repeal of the Penal Laws against Papists in Scotland, wherein is proposed an effectual method of suppressing Popery, without touching the persons or property of Papists* (Edinburgh: W. Gray, 1779) 6.
13. *A Letter to All Opposers ...* 5; 20.

14. 'The heritors and inhabitants of the town and parish of Kilmaures' *Scotland's Opposition to the Popish Bill; A Collection of all the Declarations and resolutions published... throughout Scotland against a proposed repeal of the Statutes for Preventing the Growth of Popery* (Edinburgh, 1780) 73-74.
15. The Humble Remonstrance &c of the Roman Catholics: Roman Catholic Memorial to the Presbyterian ministers asking them to countenance Catholic Relief Bill for Scotland [incomplete], ms, SM4/17/14, SCA, Edinburgh.
16. *An Inquiry how far Papists ought to be treated as Good Subjects* is the title of an 'anti-papistical' book advertised in the *Scots Magazine* 8 (January 1746): 52.
17. Alexander Belsches, *An Account of the Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge from its Commencement in 1709, in which is Included the Present State of the Highlands and Islands with Regard to Religion* (Edinburgh: A. Murray and J. Cochrane, 1774) 53.
18. John Erskine, *Considerations on the Spirit of Popery, and the Intended Bill for the Relief of Papists in Scotland* (Edinburgh: W. Gray, 1778) 25-26: 'When the plague rages in a country, the government in neighbouring countries is not arraigned as cruel or unjust, when regulations for preserving public health are enforced, by punishing, with immediate death, every one who dares to violate them: and is not a community equally intitled to guard her political health and existence?'
19. 'Books: Protestant Interest Vindicated' *Scots Magazine* 41 (May 1779): 266.
20. George Hay, *Roman Catholic Fidelity to Protestants Ascertained; or, An Answer to Mr W.A.D's Letter to G.H.* (London: J. Coghlan, 1779) 5.
21. George Hay, *Roman Catholic Fidelity to Protestants Ascertained; or, An Answer to Mr W.A.D's Letter to G.H.* (London: J. Coghlan, 1779) 146.
22. Bishop George Hay to Bishop John Geddes, 28 May 1779, BL3/316/14, SCA, Edinburgh.
23. Bishop George Hay to Bishop John Geddes, 28 May 1779, BL3/316/14, SCA, Edinburgh.

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