



Chapter from Book

THE COVENANTERS

by

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Abstract

There seems to be two opinions about the Covenanters. Religion and politics introduce passion into judgment to a most disturbing extent, and one is therefore scarcely surprised that so little calm historical statement is available about this period of Scottish annals. On the one side there is a remarkable quantity of uncritical sentimental panegyric, on the other a considerable amount of snobbish and bitter detraction. The literature which survives from Covenanting times is also very large and is extreme, biased, often venomous, often savage, all requiring to be studied with extreme care. The difference between the Covenanters and their friends on the one side and their enemies on the other is ultimately a matter of temperament. We shall always have the Moderate and the Evangelical as we shall always have the Conservative and Liberal. But any study of the period which is not to be a mere partisan affair must take several points into consideration. It must for one thing take into consideration the whole seventeenth century, and note the ups and downs, the landslides and the splitting of parties. It must not concentrate upon the martyrs and overlook the Protesters, nor vice versa. Perhaps it might be helpful to look at the century in the light of the history of modern political parties. There will be a section which will remain conservative in any circumstances, and a section which will never in any circumstances be other than liberal. In both sections there will be some extremists, a worry to their friends and a source of constant misunderstanding to the other party. Then there will be large numbers of people more easily moved, influenced by immediate conditions, guided by dislikes rather than by more positive feelings, affected by self-interest, and so on. A party may thus at one stage be small, struggling and distracted, at another it may seem to have the whole country with it, and at another a separation process begins to show itself, peace revealing differences, and the balance tending to shift once more. The seventeenth century shows very clearly this continual swinging of the pendulum in Scottish religious life, but the two main positions are always there, though it is the extreme characters and utterances which most readily arrest our attention. Again one must remember that in all parties there are members who may be classed as good, bad and indifferent, and we must be careful not to select for observation and comparison too consistently the bad of one and the good of the other. And we may note the strange fact to which Bertrand Russell calls attention that "machines are worshipped because they are beautiful and valued because they confer power; they are hated because they are hideous, and loathed because they impose slavery". Nor must we be forceful of differences of race, temperament and history in different parts of the country.