
The Not So Conservative North: Covenanting Strength in 1638-39

JEFFREY STEPHEN

Ever since Professor Gordon Donaldson put forward his case for the “conservative north” the idea has become Scottish historical orthodoxy. Professor Donaldson argued that in ecclesiastical and political policy and ideology, Scotland split along geographical lines. During the reformation, for example, he claimed that the reaction to the *First Book of Discipline* was such that, “it might be a fair deduction that, in the north, conservatism as well as self-interest dictated a preference for the traditional ecclesiastical structure”. Northern conservatism was also apparent in the universal conformity of its ministers to the infamous “Black Acts”. However, the “clearest indication of the division of opinion along geographical lines” was to be found at the restoration of Episcopal government in 1662. The fact that most of the northern clergy welcomed the restoration of Episcopal government and that there were so few deprivations of ministers compared to the areas in the south, meant that it was “reasonable to infer” that the country north of the Tay was “solidly conservative”.¹

When it came to the northern conservatism apparent during the covenanting revolution, Donaldson argued that the evidence upon which he based his claim was apparent upon even the most superficial examination, and he identified three factors in support of it. The strongest opposition to the Covenant was concentrated in and around Aberdeen. There was the opposition from the burgh of Aberdeen

¹ Gordon Donaldson, *Scottish Church History* (Edinburgh, Scottish Academic Press, 1985), p. 191.

and its officials, the intellectual and theological challenge offered by the “Doctors”, or theological professors of King’s and Marischal Colleges, and the existence in the north of a significant anti-covenanting force under the leadership of George Gordon, second marquis of Huntly.² That such opposition existed is not in question, nor that the north-east provided the most significant opposition to the Covenant; what is questionable is the conclusion drawn from it. While it would be accurate to describe the north-east as the area in which anti-covenanting was strongest, it would be wrong to describe the area as anti-covenanting. This paper will demonstrate that the covenanting movement carried a substantial and significant body of support in the north-east and that claims of a conservative north need to be substantially qualified. In fact, the strength of the covenanting movement in the north was apparent to royalist contemporaries such as Patrick Gordon of Ruthven who acknowledged that while there was resistance to the Covenant in the north, it was very weak and too weak to resist “such a mightie and violent flood as the strenth of the whole kingdome, yet . . . even in that weaknesse their was ever a certane vigour, which, by Divine influence, seemed to prompe it up when it was almost brokin in pieces by that heaven threating gyant our warre hatching covenant”.³ Of all the factors identified by Gordon and other royalist chroniclers of the troubles for the crushing of that resistance, one of the most significant was the strength of support for the Covenant in the north itself.⁴ In examining that strength this paper will place a particular emphasis upon the initial period between the signing of the Covenant in 1638 and the conclusion of the first Bishops’ War in 1639, and on the three areas identified by Professor Donaldson as significant: the burghs, the ministry, and the northern nobility.⁵

² *ibid.*, p. 191; Gordon Donaldson, *Scotland: James V-James VII* (Edinburgh, 1965), pp. 319-320.

³ Patrick Gordon of Ruthven, *A Short abridgement of Britane’s Distemper, from the yeare of God MDCXXXIX to MDCXLIX* (Spalding Club, Aberdeen, 1844), pp. 11-12.

⁴ Gordon, *A Short abridgement*, p. 18.

⁵ Covenanting in the north still awaits an exhaustive and systematic study. The most recent study makes the point: “In the current historiography of the Civil Wars of the mid-seventeenth century it remains under-appreciated that the National Covenant gained widespread support in the north of Scotland.” See Barry Robertson, “The Covenanting North of Scotland, 1638-1647”, *Innes Review*, Vol. 61 (1) (2010), pp. 24-51. Older works include Rev. M. Macdonald, *Covenanters in Moray and Ross* (Inverness, 1892); Robert King, *Covenanters in the North* (Aberdeen, 1846); and G. D. A. Henderson, “Covenanting Provost of Banff”, *Scottish Notes and Queries* (August 1933). More recent works are: Edward M. Furgol, “The Northern Highland Covenanter Clans, 1639-1651”, *Northern Scotland*, Vol. 7 (1987), pp. 119-31; Gordon DesBrisay, “‘The Civill warrs did overrun all’: Aberdeen 1630-

1. The burghs

It is not uncommon for any discussion of the National Covenant, signed on 28th February 1638, to begin with a list of things that it was designed to reject. It was a rejection of imperial monarchy, of absentee monarchy and rule by the dubious, dangerous, capricious royal prerogative. It was a rejection of the unionist vision of James VI and Charles I and their attempts to reduce Scotland to the status of a province. It was a rejection of their stated aim of anglicising the Scottish Church, of Erastianism, archbishops, bishops and Episcopal Church government. It was a rejection of the imposition of ceremonies and unbiblical innovations in worship. But what was the Covenant for? It was for the restoration of civil and religious liberty; for the restoration of free Parliaments and free General Assemblies. It was a defence of the kingship of Christ over His Church, of Presbyterian Church government, of the purity of worship, of the reformed tradition in Scotland. It was a defence of the regulative principle. The Covenant called for and heralded a religious and constitutional revolution that reversed the political and religious policies of the Stuarts. Episcopacy and its ceremonies were abolished and Presbyterianism, spiritual independence, and the reformed faith, with its simplicity and purity of worship, were re-established. Royal power and the abuse of the prerogative were curtailed and significant political powers were transferred to Parliament.

Following the initial signing of the Covenant at Greyfriars Church in Edinburgh, the covenanting leadership were determined to secure national support for their cause. Copies of the Covenant were carried across Scotland where they were read out and people were encouraged to sign. It quickly became apparent that the Covenant enjoyed widespread support. On 16th March 1638 a delegation of representatives from the Burghs and the Tables arrived at Aberdeen to try and persuade the town to sign the Covenant.⁶ At a meeting of the town's council the Covenant was read, and discussed at length with the delegation. The council had

1690", in E. Patricia Dennison, David Ditchburn, and Michael Lynch (eds), *Aberdeen Before 1800, a New History* (East Linton, 2002), pp. 238-66; Barry Robertson, "The House of Huntly and the First Bishop's War", *Northern Scotland*, Vol. 24 (2004), pp. 1-15. Another element in the argument for a conservative north lay in the fact that the majority of the twenty-eight thousand people who signed the King's Covenant came from the north-east. The King's Covenant was Charles I's alternative to the National Covenant and drew little support outwith the north-east.

⁶ The delegation contained two representatives of the burghs, Alexander Wedderburn and Robert Barclay, and four north-eastern lairds, Dun, Morpie, Balmain, and Leys.

no objection in principle to the contents of the Covenant and declared that they “culd not disallow of the said confession of faith in so far as the same is consonant and agreeable with Gods word and warranted be the lawis of the kingdome”.⁷ However, they refused to subscribe because it lacked the authority of the king and because the commissioners had no authority from the king or the Privy Council to “exact any such subscription” from them. The council pointed out that a recent proclamation had forbidden bands among the king’s subjects and that they could not, without violating their allegiance to the king and treating his authority and recent proclamation with contempt, subscribe the Covenant.⁸

At this point, Aberdeen was not entirely alone in not having signed the Covenant. In the south, St. Andrews and Crail had also resisted. In St. Andrews, despite council opposition, the general populace of the town were won over following sermons by Alexander Henderson in late March and early April 1638.⁹ Responding to arguments like those offered by the council at Aberdeen, Henderson declared,

There is a great controversy now about disobedience to superiors, and the contempt of those who are in authority; but there is not a word of that, whether God be obeyed or not, or if he be disobeyed by any. Fy, that people should sell themselves over to the slavery of man, when the Lord has only sovereign power over them! I would not have you to think that a whole country of people are appointed only to uphold the grandeur of five or six men. No, they are ordained to be magistrates for your good. And sall we think that a ministry shines into a land for the upholding of the grandeur of some few persons? No, all these things are ordained for the good of God’s people; and seeing that it is so, sall ye then make yourselves like unto asses and slaves, to be subject to all that men pleases to impose upon you? No, no; try anything that they impose upon you, before ye obey it, if it is warranted by God or not; because God is the only superior over you.¹⁰

⁷ L. B. Taylor (ed.), *Aberdeen Council Letters* (6 vols., Oxford University Press, 1942-1961), Vol. 2, p. 88; John Spalding, *Memorialls of the Trubles in Scotland and in England, A.D. 1624-A.D. 1645*, John Stuart (ed.), (2 vols., Spalding Club, Aberdeen, 1850-1851), Vol. 1, p. 87.

⁸ *Aberdeen Council Letters*, Vol. 2, pp. 88-9.

⁹ Both burghs soon subscribed.

¹⁰ R. T. Martin (ed.), *Sermons, Prayers and Pulpit Addresses, by Alexander Henderson, 1638* (Edinburgh, 1867), pp. 13-14.

Meanwhile in the north, Aberdeen proved to be the exception to the rule as the Covenanters had little trouble getting other burghs to subscribe. Letters were dispatched north with news that a meeting would be held at Inverness on 25th April. The delegation included the Laird of Innes, Andrew Cant (minister from Pitsligo in Aberdeenshire), George Leslie (minister at Bonar), and James Baird (advocate from Edinburgh). Baird and Cant in particular were sent to satisfy legal or religious scruples anyone might have about signing. Despite efforts by opponents of the Covenant to dissuade men from going to Inverness, a large number of northern nobility and their men turned up, including the Master of Beridale, the Earl of Sutherland, Lord Reay, the Laird of Ballingowan, and Lord Lovat. The Covenant was read out and, despite the reservations of some and a message from the Marquis of Hamilton urging them not to subscribe, it was enthusiastically subscribed by the assembled nobles, lairds, and gentlemen, and their numerous adherents, and the inhabitants of Inverness. With few exceptions the ministers of the northern Presbyteries all signed.¹¹

Questioning the extent of the Covenanters' success, David Stevenson suggests that they "probably" exaggerated their support in the area on the grounds that they were making the claims themselves. Nevertheless, he acknowledges that they did not try to hide "the fact that many ministers had grave doubts about or were opposed to the covenant". It is interesting to note that while recent historians like Stevenson emphasize those who opposed the Covenant, the contemporary royalist writers such as Spalding, Patrick Gordon, and James Gordon, place their emphasis upon the support given to the Covenant. Take, for example, Spalding's account of the covenanting delegation that visited Inverness. Yes; there were some who refused to subscribe, but he acknowledges the overwhelming success of the Covenanters: "the haill toun, except Mr. William Clogie minister at Inverness, and some few others, willingly subscribed".¹² Thus, according to the royalist Spalding, virtually the whole town of Inverness willingly signed the Covenant.

¹¹ *A Relation of Proceedings concerning the Affairs of the Kirk of Scotland, from August 1637 to July 1638*, by John Earl of Rothes (Bannatyne Club, Edinburgh, 1830), pp. 104-106. For a more detailed examination of the positive response to the Covenant in the Highlands, see Furgol, "The Northern Highland Covenanter Clans".

¹² David Stevenson, *The Scottish Revolution, 1637-44* (Edinburgh, 2003), p. 92; Spalding, *Memorials*, Vol. 1, pp. 87-8.

The covenanting delegation travelled from Inverness to Forres, where it arrived on Saturday 28th April, and began by meeting the ministers of the Presbytery in the town church. The ministers had some scruples, which were answered to their satisfaction by George Leslie and James Baird. Thereafter, the local nobility and gentry arrived at the church and once again, Andrew Cant gave a short exhortation before reading and explaining the Covenant. The assembled laity readily subscribed and hesitancy among the ministers was soon overcome by the encouragement of John Hay, minister at Rafford.¹³ While this was taking place in the church, the Master of Beridale, the Laird of Innes, and James Baird went to the Tollbooth where the whole town subscribed the Covenant “most cheirfullie”. The version of events recorded by the Covenanters was substantially verified by Spalding who recorded that, “the haill ministrie of that presbyterie subscribed, except Mr. George Cumming, person of Dollass”. Spalding also noted that as a result of the “industrie” of the covenanting commission, Caithness, Sutherland, Ross, Cromarty, and Nairn, had for the most part subscribed the Covenant.¹⁴ As for the Presbytery of Nairn, it could hardly be described as anti-covenanting when only one of its ministers had refused to sign the Covenant.

At Elgin on 30th April, and in the surrounding region, the Covenant was well received; a reaction that had been foreshadowed the previous year in the matter of the service book. On the first Tuesday of October 1637 the meeting of the Provincial Synod of Moray recorded that ministers had been instructed “to buy and use the service book conforme to the king’s command, as all the rest of the bishops had done; but some coft [bought, purchased], some took to be advised and some refused”.¹⁵ While some were prepared to accept the king’s command, it is clear that some had reservations and others flatly refused. Thus, when the Covenant arrived in Elgin, it should not have been a surprise that the Earl of Moray, his people, and the Baillies, Chamberlains and gentlemen of Elgin all signed, as did John Leslie, Baillie of Rothes and the minister of Rothes, John Weymes. The Town Council of Elgin subscribed with some reservations and the Laird of Grant arrived with his followers and signed.¹⁶ Spalding’s account concurs with that of the covenanting Earl of

¹³ *A Relation of Proceedings*, pp. 104-106.

¹⁴ Spalding, *Memorialls*, Vol. 1, p. 88.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, Vol. 1, pp. 80-1.

¹⁶ *A Relation of Proceedings*, pp. 104-106.

Roths: “the hail people was conveyed; Mr. Andrew cant stood up in the reader’s dask, and made some little speech; thereafter the provost, baillies, council and community, altogether subscribed this covenant, very few refusing, except Mr. John Gordon minister at Elgin who did not subscribe”.¹⁷ Such was their success that in Moray support for the king was described as inconsiderable in comparison to those that supported the Covenant.¹⁸ In response, the Bishop of Moray locked himself up in Spynie Palace and provisioned it with men, arms, ammunition, and food because he foresaw trouble ahead.¹⁹ Not the actions of a man living in friendly anti-covenanting territory!

The Covenanters had further success when the burgh of Banff subscribed. In fact, after leaving Elgin the covenanting commissioners continued to enjoy considerable success with subscriptions. According to Spalding, “Thir commissioners removed from Elgine, upon the first day of May; and as they had gotten obedience, so commissioners were direct out be the nobility throw all the kingdome, and gott this covenant subscribed, few refusing, except Aberdein and the marquess of Huntly”.²⁰ By the time the covenanters made a second visit to Aberdeen in July it was the only burgh in Scotland that had not subscribed.²¹ As for the “conservative” north-east of Scotland, all of the burghs in the region, with the exception of Aberdeen, willingly signed the National Covenant. There was no coercion; the Covenant was presented, read out, explained, and any reservations held by those present were fully discussed and resolved. Rather than being the rule that defined a conservative north, the burgh of Aberdeen proved to be the exception.

2. The ministry

The Covenanters, having failed to persuade Aberdeen to sign the Covenant, sent another delegation to the town that arrived on 20th July 1638. The delegation included the Earl of Montrose, Lord Couper, the

¹⁷ Spalding, *Memorialls*, Vol. 1, p. 88.

¹⁸ Joseph Robertson and George Grub (eds.), *History of Scots Affairs, from MDCXXXVII to MDCXLI*. By James Gordon, *parson of Rothiemay* (3 vols., Spalding Club, Aberdeen, 1841), Vol. 1, p. 61.

¹⁹ Spalding, *Memorialls*, Vol. 1, p. 88.

²⁰ *ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 88.

²¹ *History of Scots Affairs*, Vol. 1, p. 61; Alexander Peterkin, *Records of The Kirk of Scotland, containing the Acts and proceedings of the General Assemblies from the year 1638 downwards* (Edinburgh, 1843), p. 76. Letter from Earl of Roths to Patrick Leslie of Aberdeen, 13th July 1638.

Master of Forbes, Sir Thomas Burnet of Leyes, the Laird of Morphie, Alexander Henderson (minister at Leuchars), David Dickson (minister at Irvine), and Andrew Cant.²² There are conflicting accounts about the reception they were given. According to Spalding, they were courteously welcomed by the Provost and baillies with offerings of wine and confections which were “disdainfully refused” with the comment that they would not drink with them until the Covenant had been subscribed. Robert Baillie on the other hand said that the brethren “wes bot coldly welcomed in that town”. Furthermore, during their first night in the town, the Aberdeen Doctors “sent to them a number of ensnareing Demands, hoping by disputts and janglings to make their journey fruitless”.²³ The demands included a request to know, “by what authority they could require of them or their people to subscribe this Covenant, which had neither the authority of the King, the Lords of the Privy Council, the national Synod or of any other judicatory; and how they could attempt to enforce upon them their interpretation of the articles of the Negative Confession”. This particular demand was a repetition of that made by the Aberdeen council in March. The Covenanters replied that,

They had not come hither to usurp the authority of any civil or spiritual tribunal, or to enforce upon their reverend brethren and the people committed to their charge, the subscription of the Covenant, or the interpretation of the Confession that is called negative; but were sent to represent to them, in all humility, the present state and condition of the church and kingdom, calling for help at their hands, and, in brotherly love, to exhort and entreat that they would be pleased to contribute their best endeavours to extinguish the common combustion; which, by uniting with almost the whole church and kingdom in the covenant, they trusted they might lawfully do, without prejudice to the king’s majesty or to any lawful judicatory.²⁴

On the Sabbath, the three covenanting ministers wanted to preach and explain the purpose of their visit to the people of Aberdeen, and

²² Spalding, *Memorialls*, Vol. 1, p. 91.

²³ David Laing (ed.), *The Letters and Journals of Robert Baillie, A.M. Principal of the University of Glasgow, MDCXXXVII-MDCLXII* (3 vols., Bannatyne Club, Edinburgh, 1841-2), Vol. 1, p. 97.

²⁴ Quoted in King, *Covenanters in the North*, p. 56.

were willing to do so in the presence of the local ministers, but they were refused access to the town's pulpits. According to Spalding, the covenanting ministers went to the Earl Marischall's Close, where Lady Pitsligo's sister was staying. She was described as "ane rank puritane".²⁵ Alexander Henderson preached first, followed by David Dickson, and lastly Andrew Cant. All three delivered their message "in the audience of many". Despite the obstacles placed before them, the covenanting delegation was not disappointed. They recorded that, "After our last sermon, towards evening, we found that our labour was not in vaine in the Lord; for divers persons of speciall note, both for place and wisdome, with willing heart, and great readinesse of minde, did publickly put their hands to the covenant".²⁶ Robert Baillie reported that the number of subscribers was around four or five hundred.²⁷

The following day, all three men preached again to a large gathering, and once again with success. Those who subscribed the Covenant included Patrick Leslie, burges of Aberdeen, and his brother John; John Lundie, master of the Grammar School and common procurator of King's College; Alexander Jaffrey and other burgesses of Aberdeen; and a large group of the Burnet family. It was also on this day that a group of local ministers signed, including David Lindsay of Belhelvie, Andrew Melvill of Banchory Devinick, Thomas Melvill of Dyce, Walter Anderson of Kinneller, and William Robertson of Footdee. Dr. William Guild, one of the ministers of Aberdeen, and Robert Reid, minister at Banchory Ternan, while subscribing with reservations, nevertheless subscribed.²⁸ On 28th July, Robert Johnston, Provost of Aberdeen, wrote to Huntly that "the counsel at least many of yaim ar subscrivers of the covenant".²⁹ It is clear that Aberdeen's opposition to the Covenant was by no means universal.

The "Doctors" referred to by Robert Baillie were six academics/theologians from King's and Marischal Colleges in the town. The

²⁵ Spalding, *Memorialls*, Vol. 1, p. 92.

²⁶ *The Answers of Some Brethren of the Ministrie, to The Replies of the Ministers and Professours of Divinitie in Aberdeene: Concerning the Late Covenant* ([Edinburgh], 1638), quoted from the preface "To the Christian Reader".

²⁷ Baillie, *Letters and Journals*, Vol. 1, p. 97.

²⁸ Spalding, *Memorialls*, Vol. 1, pp. 92-3.

²⁹ NRS GD 406/1/429. On 16th August 1638, the Provost and two baillies of Aberdeen wrote to Huntly expressing their fears that at the coming election of office-holders, only Covenanters would be returned, signed by Robert Johnston, Provost, and Mr. Gray and G. Morrisoun, baillies. NRS GD 406/1/669.

Doctors, their actions, and ideas have been the subject of a number of sympathetic studies; and their opposition to the Covenant, expressed in a series of papers they exchanged on the subject with the covenanting delegates, has been widely interpreted as a significant factor underpinning the idea of a conservative north.³⁰ There seems to be an assumption that where the Doctors led, the rest of the clergy in the north must have followed, particularly because many of them were graduates of King's or Marischal and had come under the influence of the Doctors at some time. Of that influence, one writer argued that, "if it had pleased the king to have appointed the reading of the liturgy first for some time at Aberdeen by the learned doctors there, and other places in the north, where the people of all ranks were well affected to Church and king, both by principle and inclination, it certainly would have met with no opposition there, and so might have had better success afterwards elsewhere".³¹ However, this is a mistake as there is strong evidence to suggest that during 1638 many ministers in the north subscribed the Covenant freely. Some may have subscribed with reservations but this was perfectly acceptable to the covenanting movement. A significant number supported the Covenant and subscribed freely and willingly without coercion and without any threat of suspension or deposition.

Having preached in Aberdeen, the covenanting commissioners left on Monday 23rd July and spent the rest of the week travelling through the Presbyteries in the Synod of Aberdeen seeking subscriptions, before returning to Aberdeen on 28th July. Once again, the royalist Spalding records that they were very successful as they travelled through the Presbyteries of Buchan where they "gott many subscriptions of ministers and laicks to their covenant. . . . They were but few in company, about 30 horse, and multitudes resorted to them besides, out of Buchan, Marr, Mearns and the Gairoch, who subscribed all."³² According to Spalding

³⁰ Martyn Bennett, *The Civil Wars Experienced, Britain and Ireland 1638-1661* (London, Routledge, 2000); David Stewart, "The Aberdeen Doctors and the Covenanters", *Records of the Scottish Church History Society*, Vol. 22 (1984), pp. 35-44; D. Macmillan, *The Aberdeen Doctors* (London, 1909). Not so sympathetic in his comments was Robert King who wrote of the Doctors, "Long after the reformation from Popery, the University of Aberdeen withstood the siege of the more enlightened masses; and now at the dawn of a better day, its learned doctors, not content with being the conservators within their own walls of overdated, impracticable and mischievous notions, became the active antagonists of the new light; and, by virtue of their academical learning, and their expert use of dialectic weapons, their exertions were attended with no small success". See *Covenanters in the North*, p. 39.

³¹ Quoted in King, *Covenanters in the North*, p. 40.

³² Spalding, *Memorialls*, Vol. 1, p. 94.

then, the Covenanters were very successful in getting the signatures of “many ministers”. The other notable royalist writer, James Gordon of Rothiemay, confirms Spalding’s analysis. According to Gordon, the covenanting delegation

kept some meetings with the ministry and others of severall presbyteries. Thes who intended to subscribe, came upon the desire of ther letters, and others absented themselves. The most pairt of the presbytrye of Deare, by Mr. Andrew Cantes paines tacking (who was then a member therof), had subscribed befor; so had the most pairt of the presbytrye of Alforde done (from which presbytrye Mr. Andrew had been, not many years befor, transplanted), by his meanes and influence, being fetched into the covenant. Some in the Presbytrye of Aberdeen did the lyke, particularly he who was at that tyme moderator, Mr. David Lyndsey, minister at Belhelvye; one who would be either amongst the first or not at all ther. They had a meeting lyckwayes at Turreff, with the ministry of that presbytrye, and gott some ther lykewayes, after an imperious satisfacione of ther scruples by Montross, who wer glad for to subscribe. In that presbytery, Mr. Thomas Mitchell, minister of the place, was active for them, one who during the sway of the Bishoppes, had been intimately familiar with two successivelye.³³

Of the ministers who had scruples, Gordon noted, “In the places wher they mett with the ministrye, in the shires of Aberdeen or Banfe, ther wer some who had scruples, as they pretended, but they came mostly with a resolution to be satisfied before they heard the answers to ther objections”. Clearly Gordon did not think much of their scruples and was convinced that they had none but had all along intended to sign the Covenant.³⁴ This account by the royalist writers was not contradicted by the Covenanters who also revealed that before they initially arrived in Aberdeen their representatives, led by Cant, had been successfully gathering subscriptions in the Presbyteries of Alford and Deer. They also claimed that the Presbytery of Turriff signed after they had satisfied the scruples of some members. As a result of their week’s work, Baillie claimed that the deputation had secured subscriptions from forty-four

³³ *History of Scots Affairs*, Vol. 1, p. 85.

³⁴ *ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 87.

ministers in and around Aberdeen, which was just under half of the Synod.³⁵ Bearing in mind the testimony of Spalding and the success of the Covenanters in the spring time in the Presbyteries around Inverness and in the Synod of Moray, it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that around half the ministers in the Synods of Moray and Aberdeen signed the Covenant in 1638. The Doctors in Aberdeen may well have been staunchly anti-covenanting but they were not representative of the ministry in the north-east as a whole, and among that group there was considerable support for the Covenant.

It is important to make a distinction between those ministers who signed in 1638 largely out of principle and those who signed subsequently in 1639-40 on more pragmatic grounds. In August 1639 acts of both the Privy Council and the General Assembly declared subscription to be compulsory.³⁶ The following year the Assembly met in Aberdeen and passed two further acts. One was for censuring speakers against the Covenant, which declared that any minister having signed the Covenant, who spoke against it, would be deprived and if he continued to do so while deprived, would be excommunicated. The act recognised that there were ministers whose subscription was forced, reluctant, or pragmatic rather than principled.³⁷ According to James Gordon, the act was a reaction to complaints that many ministers and others around Aberdeen were alleged to have been openly mocking the Covenanters and their activities, despite having signed the Covenant.³⁸

The Assembly also passed an act declaring that any ministerial candidate who refused to subscribe, would be unable to hold office as a teacher, reader, or minister and would be unable to reside in any burgh, university, or college.³⁹ This act, according to Gordon, was prompted by the fact that at Aberdeen there were many students, single and with “no means to lose”, who refused to subscribe the Covenant and who disputed against it. Gordon claimed that those students who could not subscribe nor stay silent went into voluntary exile.⁴⁰ Subscription to the Covenant was not just a badge of loyalty but a prerequisite for holding office, and

³⁵ Baillie, *Letters and Journals*, Vol. 1, p. 97.

³⁶ *Acts of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, 1638-1842* (Edinburgh, 1843), p. 42.

³⁷ *ibid.*, p. 45.

³⁸ *History of Scots Affairs*, Vol. 3, p. 220.

³⁹ *Acts of the General Assembly*, p. 45.

⁴⁰ *History of Scots Affairs*, Vol. 3, p. 220.

subscription was vigorously policed and enforced.⁴¹ Under such circumstances few ministers refused subscription, suggesting a rather lukewarm commitment on their part to the anti-covenanting cause. Many of the north's clergy took the pragmatic rather than principled approach.⁴² Among those was the anti-covenanting minister James Gordon, who succeeded the deposed Alexander Innes as minister of Rothiemay. Gordon was, as his narrative reveals, hostile to the Covenant and critical of those who had, in his view, signed insincerely; but he nevertheless subscribed the Covenant himself.

By the time that the General Assembly was held at Aberdeen between 28th July and 5th August 1640, most ministers in the area had for one reason or another signed the Covenant. The small number still resisting were summoned before the Assembly, including the four remaining Aberdeen Doctors (Robert Barron and Alexander Rose had both died in 1639). Dr. Alexander Scroggie had been educated at King's College and was a Regent at Marischal College. He attended the Aberdeen Assembly in 1605 and was summoned before the Privy Council but was released after he acknowledged that the Assembly had not been lawful. He had become Rector at King's in 1636 and offended covenanting sensibilities by celebrating communion on Christmas day 1638, in opposition to the Glasgow Assembly. He was deposed on 1st August 1640 by the General Assembly. However, at the General Assembly held in St. Andrews in 1641, he offered to subscribe and made a full recantation before the Presbytery on 26th May 1642.⁴³ Dr. James Sibbald was educated at Marischal and King's College and appointed Regent in Natural Philosophy at Marischal from 1622 to 1626. In 1639 he visited the king at his camp at Berwick but received little encouragement. The Assembly deposed him for not subscribing the Covenant and for his Arminianism. He fled to England, but returned to Scotland early in 1641, before finally taking a position in Dublin, where he died of the plague in 1647.⁴⁴ Dr. William Leslie was also educated at King's and became a Regent in 1617. Leslie was accused of laziness, neglecting his work, and drunkenness. James Gordon believed that the

⁴¹ Peterkin, *Records of the Kirk of Scotland*, p. 346.

⁴² *History of Scots Affairs*, Vol. 3, pp. 248-49.

⁴³ *ibid.*, Vol. 3, pp. 227-29; Hew Scott, *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae, The Succession of Ministers in the Church of Scotland from the Reformation* (8 vols., Edinburgh, Oliver and Boyd, 1915-1950), Vol. 6, pp. 18-19.

⁴⁴ *History of Scots Affairs*, Vol. 3, pp. 227-29; Scott, *Fasti*, Vol. 6, pp. 36-7.

accusations of laziness stemmed from his retired and monastic style of living, and that, far from being a drunkard, he was a grave and austere man.⁴⁵ Following his deposition he retired from public life. Dr. John Forbes of Corse (1598-1648) was the second son of Patrick Forbes, Bishop of Aberdeen. Forbes studied at Kings and was appointed Professor of Divinity in 1620. The leading light among the Doctors, he was deprived of his professorship and deposed in 1641 for refusing to sign the Covenant. He went to Holland in 1644 where he lived in exile until 1646, when he returned to Scotland and lived at Corse until his death in 1648.⁴⁶

The number of ministers summoned before the Assembly to explain their non-subscription was surprisingly small. They included John Gregory of Drumoak, deposed for non-subscription but restored the following year at St. Andrews. John Ross of Birse offered to subscribe and was eventually restored. Andrew Logie of Rayne was accused of being an anti-covenanter as well as of having quarrelled continuously with his parishioners. The parishioners refused to testify until assurances were given that Logie would be deposed. They were afraid that if they testified and he was not deposed their life would be intolerable. He was deposed but subsequently restored upon the intervention of General Leslie because Logie was a relation of Leslie's wife. However, he was deposed again in 1643 for making slanderous speeches from the pulpit. Despite being "deposed, without return to that church for ever", he was finally restored in 1661. Richard Maitland of Marnoch was accused of having complied with the introduction of the service book and of having set up a stone font in his church. He subscribed the Covenant and his case was referred to the following Provincial Assembly to remove his suspension. This was done after he preached a penitential sermon, which according to Gordon, was not sincere but pleased his covenanting audience. He was deposed again in 1647 when he was found guilty of a breach of the Solemn League and Covenant. John Guthry of Duffus, son of the Bishop of Moray, was deposed for non-subscription and never restored.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ *History of Scots Affairs*, Vol. 3, p. 231.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, Vol. 3, pp. 233-34.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, Vol. 3, pp. 244-47.

3. The nobility

The third major argument upon which the case for the “conservative north” has been built was that the Marquis of Huntly, one of the north’s most powerful nobles, “remained an unrepentant royalist during the years of the Covenanters’ ascendancy”.⁴⁸ According to Donaldson, Huntly was loyal to the Episcopalian establishment, and “it was in vain that the covenanters tried to win him over by offering money to relieve his financial embarrassment”.⁴⁹ Charles could also rely on the extended Gordon family and some other gentry like Sir Alexander Irvine of Drum. However, none of this sufficiently takes into account the substantial support for the Covenant among the rest of the northern nobility and gentry, particularly during the first and second Bishops’ Wars, when the covenanting movement was able to draw upon the support of the families of Forbes, Fraser, Keith, Burnet, Creighton, Innes, Grant, Tolquhon, and Farquharson among others.⁵⁰

Both sides had been preparing for a military confrontation since the summer of 1638. Charles was convinced that only force would bring his disobedient subjects back into line and the Covenanters prepared for that eventuality. In the north the leading covenanting family was the family of Forbes, traditional northern rivals of the Gordons, whose head was Arthur, ninth Lord Forbes. Active leadership of the Forbes family came from his son, Alexander, Master of Forbes, who succeeded his father in 1641. Alexander was a veteran of the Thirty Years’ War. He served under Gustavus Adolphus and fought at Lutzen, after which he spent nearly two years in captivity. His military experience was used to good effect during the first and second Bishops’ Wars, when he commanded a regiment raised on his father’s estates. He also served in Ulster during 1642-43. Forbes’s first appearance for the Covenant was at the Mercat Cross in Aberdeen, alongside Andrew, second Lord Fraser, and other northern gentry, when the Protestation drawn up by the Tables on 19th February 1638 was read out.⁵¹ He was also part of the delegation that arrived in Aberdeen on 20th July to encourage subscription to the

⁴⁸ Donaldson, *Scottish Church History*, p. 191.

⁴⁹ Donaldson, *Scotland: James V-James VII*, pp. 319-20.

⁵⁰ *History of Scots Affairs*, Vol. 1, p. 61; Vol. 2, p. 211.

⁵¹ The Tables were small groups of commissioners elected from each of the four estates: nobility, gentry, burgesses, and ministers. A fifth table comprised representatives from each of the other four tables. For the protestation, see Peterkin, *Records of The Kirk of Scotland*, pp. 59-60.

Covenant. Furthermore, on 5th October 1638 both men were part of a delegation protesting at the Cross in Aberdeen against a declaration made by Huntly on behalf of the king.

On 30th January 1639, in defiance of Huntly, Forbes and other leading north-east Covenanters met at Turriff to choose commissioners for a meeting of the Estates in Edinburgh. A few days later the Lovat Frasers and the Mackenzies seized Inverness burgh and castle for the Covenanters. Two weeks later the Covenanters met again at Turriff with orders from Edinburgh to prepare for the recruitment of regiments. After receiving intelligence about the meeting from Sir George Ogilvy, later Lord Banff, Huntly responded with a show of strength by mustering north-eastern royalists in an attempt to prevent any meeting. The Covenanters were undeterred and, strengthened by the arrival of Montrose and a body of southern Covenanters, met as planned.⁵² At this point Sir George Ogilvy was on the royalist side but, being distrusted by Huntly's friends, probably with good cause, he soon joined the Covenanters. His kinsman, James Ogilvy, first Earl of Findlater, had already declared his support for the Covenant.⁵³ Findlater was subsequently appointed as a member of the committee of war for Banffshire in August 1643 and raised a retinue the following year that served in Argyll's first north-eastern campaign.⁵⁴

On 16th March, Huntly's appointment as Lord Lieutenant was proclaimed at Aberdeen and he immediately issued a proclamation commanding men in the north to arm themselves for the king's service. Warrants were sent to covenanters like the Master of Forbes and Lord Fraser to join the king, but they were ignored.⁵⁵ That the warrants were ignored was hardly a surprise. Between 14th and 18th March the northern Covenanters attended a meeting in Perth to discuss strategy at which both Montrose and Argyll were present. Their response to Huntly was to order a rendezvous of northern Covenanters, including those north of the River Spey, for 28th March at Kintore. Huntly responded by gathering over two thousand men at Inverurie on 18th March, only to disband them some time before the Covenanters met.⁵⁶

⁵² *History of Scots Affairs*, Vol. 2, p. 212; Spalding, *Memorials*, Vol. 1, pp. 136-8.

⁵³ *History of Scots Affairs*, Vol. 2, p. 214.

⁵⁴ Edward M. Furgol, *A Regimental History of the Covenanting Armies 1639-1651* (Edinburgh, John Donald, 1990), p. 216.

⁵⁵ *History of Scots Affairs*, Vol. 2, p. 216; Spalding, *Memorials*, Vol. 1, p. 146.

⁵⁶ *History of Scots Affairs*, Vol. 2, p. 220-24.

Following the Perth meeting, the leading north-eastern Covenanters set about raising regiments from their estates and around two thousand men, horse and foot, turned up at Kintore on 28th March.⁵⁷ Attended by some of the leading north-eastern covenanting nobility, the gathering was a significant demonstration of strength. Apart from the aforementioned Master of Forbes, their number included Andrew, second Lord Fraser, who raised a retinue from his estates around the family seat of Muchalls castle; Sir William Forbes of Craigievar, who was the colonel of a retinue raised on his Aberdeenshire estates; James Hay of Dalgety and Kinninmonth, who was colonel of Dalgety's retinue and who led the Earl of Erroll's men on two occasions during 1639; and Alexander Forbes of Boyndlie, Tutor of Pitsligo, who had raised Lord Pitsligo's men in March 1639.⁵⁸ The following day at Tullo Hill they joined the covenanting army from the south led by Montrose. This army had picked up more northern Covenanters along the way, including forces under the command of William, seventh Earl Marischal, who was a significant figure among northern Covenanters and sometimes regarded as the unofficial leader of the movement in the shires of Kincardine, Aberdeen, and Banff, and Alexander Keith of Ludquharn, who was colonel of a company of men raised among the Earl Marischal's tenants in Buchan. The Covenanters entered Aberdeen on 30th March and their show of strength proved too much for Huntly, who met with Montrose at Fyvie on 4th April. Montrose persuaded Huntly to return with him to Inverurie where he signed a modified form of the Covenant. From there Huntly was taken to Aberdeen where, at the insistence of leading northern Covenanters, he was seized and transported south.⁵⁹

While in Aberdeen the Covenanters formed a committee that included the Master of Forbes, Burnet of Leys, and David Lyndsay. The committee called on all ministers, nobles, barons, burgesses, and commons, who had not yet subscribed the Covenant, to do so. A few

⁵⁷ Spalding, *Memorialls*, Vol. 1, p. 153.

⁵⁸ Other Covenanters among the northern gentry included Arthur Forbes of Echt, Sir William Forbes of Monymusk, James Skene of that ilk, Sir Alexander Fraser of Philorth, James Crichton of Frendraught, and James Burnett of Craigmyle, who was the brother of Sir Thomas Burnett of Leys. Craigmyle was at the forefront of a series of negotiations in 1639 that led to royalist forces standing down, including talking Huntly out of a confrontation with a superior covenanting force that had been charged with the task of enforcing acts of the 1638 Assembly. Along with Robert Gordon of Straloch, he succeeded in persuading the royalists, who had only a week earlier been victorious at the Trot of Turriff, to disband. See Spalding, *Memorialls*, Vol. 1, pp. 147-8 and 189-90.

⁵⁹ *History of Scots Affairs*, Vol. 2, pp. 230-1; Spalding, *Memorialls*, Vol. 1, pp. 160, 170.

days later, the lairds of Gight, Haddo, Foveran, Pitmedden, and Harthill, who had all been allies of Huntly, signed the Covenant.⁶⁰ On 13th April a group of around three hundred Covenanters from west of the Spey arrived in Aberdeen, including the Earl of Seaforth, Lord Lovat, the Laird of Innes, the Provost of Elgin, and others. Sir Robert Innes of Innes was colonel of a company raised from his estates in Moray and Nairn. While in Aberdeen he, along with the Lairds of Benholm and Auldbar, was part of a committee formed for the visitation of King's College.⁶¹

With Huntly in captivity and travelling to Edinburgh, his son Lord Aboyne, upon the advice of the lairds of Banff, Gight, Haddo and Foveran (several of whom had signed the Covenant), returned to Strathbogie to muster men in defence of the King's interests.⁶² The Covenanters responded to Aboyne's muster by calling out their support from Moray, Nairn, Inverness, Caithness, Ross, and Sutherland. The Covenanters mustered a force in excess of 3,000 men and the Earl Marischal re-occupied Aberdeen on 25th April. A meeting had been convened at Turriff on 24th April, to which all those who had not yet subscribed were called to appear. Two days later around 1,600 Covenanters arrived but quickly left as most of the covenanting leadership was at Aberdeen. In early May, Aboyne disbanded his men and sailed south for an audience with the King. The remaining royalist lairds marched to Ellon and challenged the Lairds of Kermuk, Wattertoun, and Auchmacoy to sign the King's Covenant. All three were Covenanters and refused. On 10th May the royalists laid siege to Towie-Barclay castle but were repulsed by the inhabitants who included Lord Fraser and the Master of Forbes. The Covenanters agreed to rendezvous at Turriff and arrived there on 14th May to find a royalist force waiting for them. In the ensuing skirmish, known as the Trot of Turriff, the Covenanters fled the town. The following day the royalists occupied Aberdeen.

The situation was sufficiently serious for the Covenanters to send Montrose north with a force. By the time he arrived, the Earl Marischal had re-occupied Aberdeen. On 30th May Marischal and Montrose left Aberdeen and marched in a show of force through Aberdeenshire,

⁶⁰ Spalding, *Memorialls*, Vol. 1, p. 163.

⁶¹ *ibid.*, Vol. 1, pp. 165-6.

⁶² *ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 172.

visiting Udney, Kellie House, and Gight House before returning to Aberdeen on 5th June. The following day royalists under Aboyne occupied Aberdeen. On 15th June Marischal won a skirmish against Aboyne's men at Megra Hill near Stonehaven. Montrose followed this up with a victory over the royalists at the Battle of Brig o' Dee on 18th June. He entered Aberdeen the following day. Two days later General Leslie's army disbanded at Duns Law after the Treaty of Birks was signed, bringing the first Bishops' War to a close. The following day Montrose's occupation of Aberdeen ended and he disbanded his army.

Conclusion

This paper began with Professor Gordon Donaldson's claim that the political and religious conservatism of the north-east in relation to the reception given to the National Covenant was evident upon even the most superficial examination. He identified three factors in support of his claim: the resistance to the Covenant by the burgh of Aberdeen, the intellectual opposition offered by six theologians at the town's Colleges commonly known as the Aberdeen Doctors, and the military opposition offered by the Marquis of Huntly. However, what is also evident upon even the most superficial examination of the sources is that, while the forces of conservatism and anti-covenanting were at their strongest in the north-east, the north-east was by no means conservative and anti-covenanting. In fact the National Covenant enjoyed significant and substantial support in the region. Aberdeen may not have signed the Covenant but all of the other northern burghs did; the Aberdeen Doctors may have offered some resistance and no doubt influenced many northern ministers but many others of the ministry did subscribe; and while Huntly and other branches of the Gordon family offered military support to the royalist cause, all of the other major families in the region came out for the Covenant. Sadly, covenanting in the north-east continues to be a significant omission from covenanting historiography. This study has been limited in scope and it is to be hoped that further, more comprehensive studies, will be made of such an important subject.