

Female Covenanters 1637 – 1676

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Introduction

Women were key players in the Covenanting venture from the beginning of dissent in 1637 to the martyrs of the 1680s. This poster assesses how women displayed dissent in the early and later covenanting periods with a focus on petitioning and rioting.

Early Dissent and Covenant Subscriptions

The opponents of Charles I's policies elicited support from women in 1637 through petitioning and rioting. The role of women at this point was very prescribed: they were to assist men in the re-establishment of the religious and political status quo. This can be seen in the pre-planned riots of 1637 led by women across the Lowlands, and in the submission of a petition to the Secret Council written by Robert Blair and submitted by clerical and burghess wives which asked for nonconformist Ulster ministers to be granted charges in Scotland. Women were then given a stake in the Covenanting venture through swearing, and in some cases subscribing, the 1638 National Covenant and the 1643 Solemn League and Covenant.



Solemn League and Covenant with female signatures from the parish of Newbattle

<http://www.scran.ac.uk/database/record.php?usi=000-100-067-655-C&scache=3dov3bsnd3&searchdb=scran&PHPSESSID=ftjpe052t586pvjk5qkrc9q9u5>

Dunning Riot

The riot at the kirk of Dunning in 1652 is evidence of increasing female activism in the ecclesiastical realm and of gender expectations. Around 120 armed women chased synod elders out of the town to protect the ministers of Dunning and Auchterarder from deposition for 'malignancy'. The leaders were the wives of the deposed ministers, but there is little other evidence of male involvement. *Mercurius Politicus* recorded that this was an 'ominous disaster' for the hardline regime whereas the Kirk downplayed the female aspect of the riot, stating that this was supported by 'men... cled w[i]t[h] womens cloaths'.



Kirk of Dunning, Perthshire

<https://arts.st-andrews.ac.uk/corpusofscottishchurches/site.php?id=157980>

Female Dissent 1660s and 1670s

Women displayed unprecedented levels of agency during the Restoration period through rioting and petitioning. There were well documented riots in the Ayrshire parishes of Kirkcudbright and Irongray when Episcopalian clergy attempted to preach in 1663. The 1670 Conventicle Act attempted to curb female dissent by making heads of household responsible for the actions of their wives and daughters, but this had little impact. An attempt was made to place a new minister in the kirk of Symington in 1676 but the kirk officials were 'assaulted w[i]t[h] a multitude of ignorant furious and mad women who were all armed [with] w[ea]pons'. There is little evidence of male involvement in these episodes which suggests that women took a more direct role in organising and leading protest in the Restoration period.

Women's Petition 1674

In 1674 women took a leading role in dissent and formed the public face of the Covenanters. Petitioning had been outlawed by this point and around 200 women filled Parliament close to deliver a petition to the Privy Council asking them to allow Presbyterian ministers to preach freely. Unlike 1637, it was not written in the name of Presbyterian ministers but 'several women in the city of Edinburgh... and in the name of many who adhere thereto'.

Conclusion

From 1637 to 1676 there was a significant change in the nature of female dissent. In the early Covenanting period, women were deployed as assistants to leading dissenting men by carrying out riots and submitting petitions. By 1676 there is ample evidence of women being the instigators and organisers of protest and petitioning. The Covenanting period is a significant epoch in the history of female activism in Scotland and one of the most important legacies of the Covenanting venture.

Works Consulted

Laura Stewart, *Rethinking the Scottish Revolution* (Oxford: OUP, 2016), pp. 56-60; Thomas M'Crie, *The Life of Mr Robert Blair* (Edinburgh: Wodrow Society, 1848), pp. 153-154; *Mercurius Politicus* (17-24 June 1652), 1682, 1686-7 [E668:13]; Perth and Stirling Synod Records, NRS CH2/449/1, p. 188; Scott Spurlock, *Cromwell and Scotland: Conquest and Religion 1650-1660* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2007) p. 103; Lanark Presbytery Records, NRS CH2/234/2, p. 139; Robert Wodrow, *History of the Sufferings of the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh: James Watson, 1721), i, p. 383. ; Alan McSeveney, 'Non-Conforming Presbyterian Women in Restoration Scotland: 1660-1679' (PhD thesis: University of Strathclyde, 2005), p. 139.