

Margaret MacLaughlin and Margaret Wilson: The “Two Margarets”

Historical Background

The Reformation took different paths in the kingdoms of England and Scotland. During the reign of Henry VIII the Church of England separated from the authority of the Pope, but having done so it did not follow the Bible either. Episcopacy suited the Tudors, and was embraced by James Stewart (James VI of Scotland) when he became king of England. The Scottish Church followed the Presbyterian form of church government, though this meant a continual struggle with the Stewart monarchs who embraced the notion of “the divine right of kings”. The accession of the Stewarts to the throne of England brought the conflict to a head. James failed to impose episcopacy on the Scottish Church, but his son Charles I (a thoroughgoing episcopalian) ordered that a new prayer book to be used in services. The Protestants fought against this and drew up the National Covenant (1638) binding themselves to stop the monarch telling them how to worship. This was the period of the Second Reformation and those who signed the National Covenant are known as the Covenanters.

Charles I was executed after the English civil war, Oliver Cromwell dispensed with Parliament and then filled it with men chosen by him, taking to himself the title Lord Protector, in effect making himself king. Cromwell was widely considered as a stern ruler, but England prospered under this Christian man who had acted for the good of the people and the Protestants in Europe looked up to him. When Cromwell died on 3rd September 1658 there was no obvious successor to him. During Cromwell’s leadership Charles II had fled to France and upon Cromwell’s death took the opportunity to return.

On 29th May 1660, Charles II returned to England as monarch and the Commonwealth was ended.

Prior to his restoration Charles II signed the National Covenant and the Solemn League and Covenant, in effect committing himself to maintaining the liberty of the Church to organise itself along Biblical lines. He had, however, no intention of keeping these promises, and once power was in his hands he made life awful for Puritans and Presbyterians. The Act Rescissory, March 1661, obliterated the Second Reformation; episcopacy was legally established in May 1662; the Covenants were publicly burned at Linlithgow in May 1662; and as a result of the Abjuration Act, 1662, and the Act of Uniformity, 1662, many ministers were thrown out of their parishes and forbidden to minister to their congregations. Some of the leading figures in the Second Reformation were arrested and executed.

In Scotland the people who followed the “outed” ministers were forced to meet in illegal “conventicles”. The number of ministers, however, dwindled as a result of Charles’s cynical use of “indulgences”, by which outed ministers were able to return to their livings under episcopal oversight.

The persecution of the Covenanters intensified at the start of 1681, following the death of Richard Cameron at Ayrsmoss, and lasted until the Glorious Revolution of 1688. This seven year period is known as “the Killing Times”. Charles II died in 1685. His brother James was a confessed Roman Catholic, and his accession to the throne on 6 February resulted in a brief intensification of the persecution. It was during the reign of James II that Margaret MacLaughlin and Margaret Wilson were martyred.

Howie estimates that in 28 years of persecution (1662-90) above 18,000 people suffered death or the utmost hardships and extremities. 1,700 were banished to the New World, many of whom became slaves in the plantations. 750 were banished to the northern islands of Scotland. 3,600 were imprisoned, outlawed or sentenced to be executed when arrested. 680 were killed in skirmishes or died of their wounds. 7,000 voluntarily left Scotland for conscience sake, many to the north of Ireland or the Netherlands. 362 were executed after process of law, and 498 were killed without process of law. In addition, the number of those who perished from hunger, cold, or other distresses cannot be calculated, but would easily make up the balance of the 18,000.

The Story of the Two Margarets

The execution of the “Two Margarets” by drowning occurred during the era now known as “the Killing Times” during the reign of Charles II and his brother James II. Margaret MacLaughlin (there are variations on the spelling of her married name) nee Milliken, was aged somewhere between 60 and 80 years. She was widowed and resided with her daughter and son-in-law. She was a country woman

noted for her piety, refusal to swear oaths and devotion to attendance at meetings for preaching by Presbyterian ministers and for prayer.

Margaret Wilson was aged somewhere between 16 and 23 years, most likely 18 years. Her parents attended, outwardly, the conformist line and were wealthy. However Margaret and her younger siblings refused to attend the parish church. Eventually her parents were ordered not to harbour their own children or see them on account of their refusal to follow the conformist line. They were crippled with financial fines and penalties for the actions of their children.

Mother Margaret, as Margaret MacLaughlin is sometimes nicknamed, was accused of being "disorderly"; in other words her views were not sympathetic to the established regime of church and state and she was taken from off her knees in her home and thrown into prison and from there to other prisons.

Maid Margaret, as the younger Margaret Wilson was nicknamed, along with her sister Agnes was similarly accused of being disorderly, and the girls were thrown into the thieves' hole and then into prison.

On 13th April 1685 Margaret MacLaughlin, Margaret Wilson and Agnes Wilson were put on trial for rebellion by failure to swear the abjuration oath and for being present at field and house conventicles. They received their sentence to death without discouragement, with a composed smiling countenance judging it their honour to suffer for Christ's truth that he alone is King and Head of his Church. Agnes was a girl of 14 and her father was able to secure her release upon the payment of a heavy fine of £100.

The execution of the two older women was carried out by drowning in the estuary of the river that flows out at Wigtown. The story of their execution is told by Robert Wodrow (1679-1734), historian and presbyterian minister:

This barbarous Sentence was executed the foresaid Day, May 11. and the Two Women were brought from Wigtoun, with a numerous Crowd of Spectators to so extraordinary an Execution. Major Windram with some Soldiers guarded them to the Place of Execution. The old Woman's Stake was a good Way in beyond the other, and she was first dispatched, in order to terrify the other to a Compliance with such Oaths and Conditions as they required.

But in vain; for she adhered to her Principles with an unshaken Stedfastness. When the Water was overflowing her Fellow-martyr, some about Margaret Wilson asked her, what she thought of the other now struggling with the Pangs of Death. She answered, what do I see but Christ (in one of his Members) wrestling there. Think you that we are the Sufferers? No, it is Christ in us, for he sends none a Warfare upon their own Charges.

When Margaret Wilson was at the Stake, she sang the 25 Psalm from Verse 7. downward a good way, and read the 8 Chapter to the Romans with a great deal of Cheerfulness, and then prayed. While at Prayer, the Water covered her: But before she was quite dead, they pulled her up, and held her out of the Water till she was recovered, and able to speak; and then by Major Windram's Orders, she was asked, if she would pray for the King. She answered, she wished the Salvation of all Men, and the Damnation of none. One deeply affected with the Death of the other and her Case, said, Dear Margaret, say, God save the King, say, God save the King. She answered in the greatest Steadiness and Composure, God save him, if he will, for it is his Salvation I desire.

Whereupon some of her Relations near by, desirous to have her Life spared, if possible, called out to Major Windram, Sir, she has said it, she hath said it. Whereupon the Major came near, and offered her the Abjuration, charging her instantly to swear it, otherwise return to the Water. Most deliberately she refused, and said, I will not, I am one of Christ's Children, let me go. Upon which she was thrust down again into the Water, where she finished her Course with Joy.

These 2 women were among thousands of humble and obscure people who prized freedom above life, and sacrificed all to ensure Christian liberty would not perish in Scotland.