

John Knox
for Armchair Theologians

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(RE)INTRODUCING JOHN KNOX

There are very few theologians whose lives have been quite as turbulent and dramatic as that of John Knox. His life could be the stuff of historical novels, from being a prisoner in chains on a French warship to being the fearless scourge of monarchs. The sixteenth-century equivalent of the gossip columns even managed to find plenty of material in his somewhat unorthodox domestic life for some scandalous rumormongering.

There are also very few theologians who could be named as a driving force in the shaping of a nation. You can't trace

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the history of the Scottish Reformation—a defining moment in Scotland’s story—without placing the towering figure of Knox close to the center, theologically and politically. And a very ambivalent figure he is.

What is your picture of Knox, if you have one? A fiery preacher, fulminating from the pulpit? A haranguing bully who made Mary, Queen of Scots, cry? The writer of a book with the unforgettable title, *The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*? Or the patient, caring pastor whose letters were treasured for a lifetime? Or one-half of a popular husband and wife team whose supper invitations guaranteed a lively evening?

Knox is all of these things and more. If you have never encountered John Knox before, I hope this book will give you a rounded introduction to his life and writing. If you have already met Knox through cameo portraits or folklore, I would like to reintroduce him to you so that perhaps you will find that there is more to him than you thought. For everyone, I also hope that this book will help you to understand those aspects of Knox that you find difficult to like or relate to—even if you still find them difficult to like or relate to when you’ve finished!

If you have read other books in this Armchair series, this venture into the life and writings of John Knox is going to take a slightly different format to the usual. You might have seen in the table of contents that there are six chapters, and interspersed between the chapters some “Key Texts” sections. The chapters tell you the story of Knox’s life. They will mention some of the works that he wrote and some of the theological ideas and issues but won’t go into much detail about them. That is the task of the key texts sections. Each of these is designed to give you some more information on one or two significant works, either by Knox or strongly associated with Knox, in the period of his life

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covered by the preceding chapter. Especially if you are not very familiar with Knox's life and times, you might like to read the chapters straight through first, without pausing to turn to the key texts so that you can get an uninterrupted overview of his life. Then you can come back to the key texts for more about his writing and ideas, situated in the context of his life. Obviously, we can't cover everything that Knox wrote, or even very much detail on the texts that I've chosen to include. The task here is simply to shine a spotlight on some significant works and to highlight some themes that Knox draws out and develops over the course of his life. There are some suggestions for further reading at the end if you would like to find out more.

The reason for this approach is because while it's never possible to separate a theologian's ideas from his or her personal life story and historical context, for someone like Knox you can't even begin to understand his writings unless you also immerse yourself in his life and circumstances. In fact, it is only because he is in the thick of history-making events that he writes at all. Most of his writing is a direct response to presenting issues, and most of his theological thinking is worked out in the midst of dramatic circumstances as they unfold. You will soon see—when you plunge into his life story—that Knox is not a man with much leisure time to sit down and write on matters that don't have an immediate bearing on the issues swirling around him. And in any case, he is not the kind of person to produce extended works of theology. He sees his calling to be above all a prophet, a preacher, and a pastor, not a theologian and writer. In his own words, he says, "For considering myself rather called of God to instruct the ignorant, comfort the sorrowful, confirm the weak and rebuke the proud by tongue and lively voice in these most corrupt days, than to compose books for the age to come. . . . I decreed to

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contain myself within the bonds of that vocation whereunto I found myself especially called.”¹

This means that we cannot expect to be able to construct neat accounts of “Knox’s theology of *x*.” He writes only one large treatise on a particular theological topic (predestination). For most issues we have to do what Knox himself did: explore his thought in the context of his responses to whatever crises were confronting him at the time. The best way to get a sense of his theological thinking and its development is to follow along with Knox as he writes rather than trying to tell his life story and then stand back and reflect on what he wrote in abstraction from what was happening in his life when he wrote it. His theological ideas are woven into the story of his life because that is how his theological ideas were developed and expressed. This is why what you have here is an account of his work that is interspersed, like pauses for breath, in the fast-paced story of his life.

Although it is always arbitrary to divide someone’s life up into neat periods, Knox’s story does allow us to do this in a more straightforward way than others’ stories. The first chapter will take us from Knox’s birth in 1514 until the end of his time as a galley slave in 1549. The key text that goes with this part of his life is his revision of a treatise on the central Protestant doctrine of justification by faith.

The next phase of his life sees him in England during the reign of the Protestant King Edward VI, until his exile in 1554, when Edward’s Roman Catholic half-sister, Mary Tudor, ascends the throne. The key texts associated with this chapter are a tract against the Roman Catholic understanding of the Mass and some public letters that he wrote to Protestants in England with advice on how to live under the new Roman Catholic regime.

For Knox, exile was both invigorating and turbulent. He spent time in Geneva and in Frankfurt where he was up to



his neck in the troubles of the church for English exiles. He met and corresponded with some of the most important theologians of his day, including John Calvin. He wrote his most famous book. He kept a close eye on the situation in his homeland of Scotland and traveled there to assist the cause of Protestantism. The key texts related to this period are his book, *The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*, and his public letters to Scotland, urging resistance to the Roman Catholic ruler, the regent Mary of Guise.

In 1559, Knox left exile to return to his native country and to a Protestant revolution that his letters had helped to provoke and his presence helped to inspire. Chapter 4 charts Scotland's steps toward becoming an officially Protestant country and Knox's role in that. The key texts here are the founding documents of that Protestant settlement:

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the *Book of Common Order*, the *Book of Discipline*, and *The Scots Confession*. Although Knox is not the sole author of any of these, he is involved in writing all of them, and they show us the priorities of the movement that Knox had done so much to shape. A look at *The Scots Confession* also means a brief consideration of Knox's own writings on predestination and the Lord's Supper.

Chapter 5 opens with Knox thundering from the pulpit at St. Giles in Edinburgh with even more vigor than before as Mary, Queen of Scots, arrives in 1561 to take personal control of her realm and then flounders as her life and reign descend into chaos. With Knox increasingly on the margins when it comes to official political and theological life and declining in health, the chapter closes with Knox barely able to whisper his sermons and with his death in 1572. The final key text is his five-volume work *The History of the Reformation in Scotland*.

The last chapter is devoted to the other women in Knox's life. Most of us who know a little bit about Knox from what we have learned in school, in history books, on the Internet, or from folklore, know about Knox and a lot of rulers called Mary: Mary Tudor of England; Mary of Guise, the Regent of Scotland; and the regent's daughter Mary, Queen of Scots. How many know about Knox and Elizabeth Bowes? Or Anne Lock? Or his two wives, Marjorie and Margaret?

Painting a fuller portrait of Knox also means helping to erase caricatures of him. This is nowhere more clearly illustrated than in the popular perception of Knox and women. The persistent myth is simple: Knox hated women and did not know how to cope with them or treat them with the respect due to any fellow human being. If all we know about him is that he wrote a book against women rulers and that he berated poor Mary Queen of Scots so much that he reduced her to tears (tears more of frustration and fury,

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incidentally, than intimidation), then perhaps the stereotype is no surprise. The closing chapter of this book reflects on how Knox engages with the less-famous but equally important women in his life. I hope it will help us to see that the caricature of Knox as nothing more than a misogynist oaf is unwarranted.

Following from this, the conclusion helps us to ask some questions about Knox for today. Where do we continue to see the legacy of this sixteenth-century firebrand prophet and preacher, and what can he still teach us?