

## **REVIEW: DARING TO BE UNIONIST**

*Richard Parry*

Hodge, Patrick S. (ed.). **Scotland and the Union**, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, £9.95, pb, 1994, ISBN 074860510X, 127pp.

The cover of this small book, produced by the David Hume Institute, bears a tourist photograph of the oversized Union Flag that sometimes flies rather provocatively over Edinburgh Castle. After the introduction, by advocate Patrick Hodge, readers might expect to find a similarly confident account of why Scotland should renounce any suggestion of self-government in order to retain the fruits of the Union. Whatever sentiment might dictate, the hard-headed authors (and there are businessmen among them) are to remind us of the facts of modern life which make tampering with the constitution akin to amateur attempts at bomb disposal.

In fact, the introduction does not do full justice to the subtlety of many of the contributions, which draw upon wide experience on the part of the authors and are seldom crudely anti-devolutionist in their detail. They fall into three groups. Economists Andrew Bain and David King discuss respectively the exposure of Scotland to the withdrawal of business by the financial sector, and the way that it has ceased to be economically underprivileged in comparison with the rest of Britain and Europe. Both provide useful factual information: Bain on the structure of the Scottish financial services sector and King on the recent economic record (with the help of detailed tables not quite appropriate for a work of this kind). Such discussions of the economic risks of change may not have adjusted to the development of a single European market in which an independent Scotland would surely remain, and to the possibility that small nations may be more, not less, well placed to carve out a niche for themselves in a world of greater economic interdependence. Bain suggests that the main problem would lie in the

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*Richard Parry is a lecturer in the Department of Social Policy, Edinburgh University.*

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existence, or the threat, of a de-linking of a separate Scottish currency from sterling. He implies that economic and monetary union in the EU would remove most of any such risk. King examines the position of Ireland in the EU and concludes that Scotland as a member would not be likely to share its record of relatively fast economic growth. But his conclusion that 'it is difficult to see much scope for an independent Scotland within the EU pursuing policies very different from the rest of the UK and the rest of the EU' stands alongside Bain's in implying that the risks as well as the opportunities of independence would be moderated in contemporary conditions.

Roy Campbell, John Morrill, Colin Munro (of Edinburgh University) and Allan Massie take a historical perspective based upon the position that the Union was a positive historical development, perhaps ahead of its time but presaging trends towards internationalism and free trade. They show how the events leading up to 1707 have still not received a stable interpretation and almost remain part of contemporary history as the motives of the actors are examined. Campbell associates the Union with an internationalist attitude by Scots, and nationalism with a parochial introversion. As he discusses events nearer to the present his attack on distinctiveness becomes more and more tendentious; once he starts speaking of the 'fatal attraction to many in a small country of being big fish even in a small pond' we are left wishing he had stuck to his own precept that 'a historian has no special competence in looking to the future'.

Morrill has a splendid opening line -- 'The Union of England and Scotland in 1707 was a kind of shotgun marriage; but in many ways it was the English rather than the Scots who felt trapped into it'. He develops this argument in a sparkling revisionist vein, paying particular attention to the united British parliament under Cromwell in the 1650s. His conclusion is critical of Campbell and recommends the Scots to put their energies into decentralisation throughout Britain. Morrill is a historian to watch. Munro provides a careful discussion of the question of whether the Act of Union has any higher constitutional status than other legislation; he concludes that in practice it does not. He concludes with a recital of objections to all the various alternatives to the status quo. Allan Massie ranges widely in history and literature to celebrate his vision of the cultural richness of the Union, exemplified by Macaulay, Scott and Carlyle; even Evelyn Waugh, that scion of the Berwickshire Waughs, is pressed into service. Appealingly, Massie rests on his contention that 'we shall be less Scottish if we pretend that we are

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not also British' and does not seek to apply his argument too specifically to present-day constitutional options.

Perhaps most interesting are the contributions from two great and good Scots who are less frequent authors, business leader Sir Gerald Elliot and former diplomat Sir John Thomson. Elliot gives a robust, not unsympathetic critique of aspirations towards self-government on 'in the past they must remain' lines. He emphasises the importance of international free trade and the acceptance of private capitalism, and criticises the proposals of the Scottish Constitutional Convention as being damaging to both. He finds the emphasis on economic planning in the Convention's document obsolete and even contrasts it unfavourably with the SNP's stated policies. Setting good government (essentially policies favourable to business) as his aim, Elliot seems particularly worried that a Scottish Parliament would give a new lease of life to unreconstructed Labourism. One suspects that he could do business with both 'new Labour' and the SNP.

Thomson makes a useful comparison of Scotland with other smaller European nations in terms of the diplomatic and security overheads of independence, which he sees as being relatively costly. He traces, perhaps rather pessimistically, the processes of disengagement and re-engagement by which an independent Scotland would establish itself in the EU. To him, 'it is likely that Scots have more influence within the EU now than they would have as an independent state, especially as the disparities in influence among the five bigger members of the EU and the rest grow'. Discussion of these practicalities is always welcome, but it concentrates on variables that are unlikely to be decisive in choices about independence, let alone devolution. Unlike some of the authors, he does not disparage the place of emotional nationalism, but his world-weary diplomat's sense that it is a distressing intrusion on the calm progress of life is not likely to capture the approach of any real electorate.

The essays share a common characteristic: they present sound material on the author's area of expertise tailed with less sophisticated political analysis. Even Andrew Bain, most measured in tone and apparently happy with devolution as part of 'a rational reform of the system of government in the UK' pulls out 'slippery slope' arguments to be set as a destabilising factor alongside his conclusion that 'the prosperity of the Scottish financial sector need not therefore be much affected, either favourably or adversely, by the fact of devolved government'. The sense is of an adult speaking to a child more in sorrow than anger that the fruits of freedom should not be tasted.

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This works less well as a defence of the status quo than as an argument against full independence. In international terms, the natural equilibrium position for a nation of Scotland's history would probably lie in federally-sustained self-government, most stably as part of devolution throughout Britain, but if necessary as a unique exception to a unitary British constitution. To argue against this while retaining a Scottish national consciousness risks pitting heart against head in a way that may no longer be necessary.

Colin Munro invites us to consider 'the potential benefits and potential costs of possible reforms, rationally and unemotionally, and from a UK perspective. The opposite path may lead to the Balkanisation of Britain, and that way madness lies'. It is the word 'may' in the last sentence that stands out. All the decades of doubt by industrialists, academics, immigrants, politicians and others come down to the reluctance to give up the English nurse for fear of getting something worse. In Scotland's case the emotions of anti-nationalists can be even more visceral than those of nationalists, which in the case of the SNP's leaders are respectable and measured to a fault. In the last paragraph of his introduction Hodge concedes that new frameworks at the European level may produce some constitutional change. But this follows his unremitting catalogue of alleged dangers in an introduction which, though spirited, to my mind points up all the anti-status quo arguments of the rest of the book at the expense of those that might be read the other way. By conflating arguments against independence with those against all change the authors (with the honourable exceptions of King, Sowill and Massie) seem engaged on a rather desperate gamble that they are on the right side of history after all.

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