

## **REVIEW: UNION, EMPIRE AND EXPLANATION**

*Neil Davidson*

John Robertson (ed.) **A Union For Empire**, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, £40.00, hb, ISBN 0-521-43113-1, 368 pp.

'The intention of this volume', writes John Robertson in the Preface, 'is to demonstrate that the Union negotiated between Scotland and England in 1707 should be understood within an intellectual as well as a political and economic context, and that it generated a significant body of political thought' (Robertson 1995, p.xiii). In fact the essays which comprise this collection deal with a far longer timescale and wider range of subject matter than this would suggest, stretching from religious realignments in Scotland after the Restoration to the outbreak of the American Revolution. A review of this length cannot therefore do justice to the full range of issues discussed; I will concentrate instead on those aspects which are of most relevance to the Scottish debate on the Union in the late 20th century.

In one sense this is unavoidable, since - despite Robertson's disclaimer to the effect that the book 'is not intended to serve as an argument either for or against the Union as it stands today' (p.xix) - supporters of the Union in the 1990s, like Michael Fry, have already pressed its contents into support of their cause, while its contemporary opponents, like Paul Scott, have condemned it for even suggesting that a 'negotiation' took place which was not simply a cover for English bribery and the threat of violence (P.H. Scott 1995). This is regrettable, since the essays in question deserve better than to

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*Neil Davidson is a full-time civil-servant at the Scottish Office and a part-time tutor-counsellor with the Open University in Scotland. He is the author of 'Combined and uneven development, dual power, and the last Jacobite revolt', which will appear in the History Workshop collection **Scottish Dimensions** later this year, and of a forthcoming book **The Scottish Revolution and the British State, 1688-1746**.*

### *Scottish Affairs*

be used as sounding boards for the grey certainties of British or Scottish nationalist ideologues.

In his outstanding essay, 'The English Debate Over Universal Monarchy', Steven Pinkus attempts to refute the claims of Jonathan Clark and Jonathan Scott that the primary divisions within Europe in the second half of the 17th century were religious: 'European debate was about universal monarchy, not about the true religion' (p.38). Pinkus notes that a superficial study of English political thought in the early Restoration period would suggest that the most likely source of a universal monarchy was regarded by all (except a Nonconformist and radical rump) to be the United Netherlands, which seemed poised to attain a total monopoly of world trade. Pinkus points out, however, that a closer inspection of contemporary publications reveals the real source of unease to be less the United Netherlands as such, than the dominant republican party of De Witt, with its echoes of Cromwell and the implicit threat it posed to the restored monarchy. The evident weakness of the Netherlands in the face of French ambition made it clear to the English ruling class that the real threat to them came not from the Dutch Republicanism to their Left but from French Absolutism to their Right, the replacement of De Witt by William of Orange facilitating a reconciliation of Dutch and English ruling classes in the face of the latter.

The consummation of this changed relationship between the two leading capitalist states in Europe (indeed, if we leave Switzerland out of the picture, the *only* capitalist states in Europe) was, of course, the Revolution of 1688, when it became clear that the Absolutist threat was manifest not only in the external French challenge but in the internal subversions of James II and VII. None of this, Pinkus argues, had very much to do with religion. He quotes one pamphlet of 1688: 'The question now on foot is a communion of state, not of faith ...'. Charles Davenant made the same point only a few years after the Revolution: 'The Late Revolution, and the war that happened upon it were both carried on upon the same foot of opposing the French Monarchy' (pp.56, 53). In so far as religious questions were of any relevance to these events, it was because Catholicism was seen as being inextricably linked to Absolutism - a proposition which the pattern of European monarchy appeared to bear out. As John Locke, for example, wrote of James in one of his few direct political statements: 'If he ever return, under whatever pretences soever, Jesuits must govern and France be our master. He is too much wedded to the one and relies too much on the other ever to part with either' (Farr and Roberts 1985, p.395).

*Review: Union, Empire and Explanation*

In the face of the idealist delirium to which Jonathan Clark and his acolytes have reduced certain aspects of early modern English history, this reassertion of the centrality of political and economic interest can only be welcomed. It is also relevant to developments in Scotland, however, if only as a source of contrast, for no comparable concern over the threat of Absolutism was expressed there until the last Jacobite Rising. (See, for example, Home 1747, pp.ii,205,208,217.) The great exception to this is, of course, Andrew Fletcher but, as we shall see below, this contribution was virtually unique. Why?

The reason for the disparity in political discourse between the two kingdoms lay in the different levels of development which they had attained by 1688. This fact is of absolutely central importance for the events which followed; yet one major criticism of this book must be that it emerges only implicitly in the essays. This is unfortunate, since nothing has more distorted discussions of the Union than the assumption that Scotland after 1688 was simply a smaller (and consequently weaker) version of England. To talk of 'Parliament', 'Whigs' or 'Jacobites' as if these meant the same things in both countries is to substitute labels for historical explanation.

In 1688 the British Isles was a composite monarchy, a multiple kingdom; but as Robertson shows in 'Empire and Union: Two concepts of the Early Modern European Political Order', this in itself was far from unique by the late 17th century: 'almost every ruling dynasty of consequence - Habsburg, Bourbon and Vasa as well as Stuart - had acquired multiple titles, and exercised authority over a number of territories, which might not even be contiguous.' Nor was the eventual Union an exceptional resolution to this situation: 'The Union of 1707 belongs within a European setting, and should be thought of as the British variant of a wider pattern' (p.4). Robertson cites the unification of Aragon and Castile at the beginning of the 18th century and the reconstruction of the Austrian Habsburg monarchy at the end as comparable examples. The relevance of these parallels is not in doubt, but, however welcome is this reminder that Scotland and England did not exist outside the general pattern of European development, there is one sense in which the British monarchy *was* unique.

This stemmed not from its status as a multiple kingdom but the nature of its principal component states. The monarchy of the later Stuarts differed from analogous regimes on the European mainland in that the territories which formed the latter were at comparable levels of development, with the dominant political entity ('nation' would be anachronistic here) being both home base to the monarch and centre of the local absolutist regime. Where

### *Scottish Affairs*

one of the territories had advanced beyond the level of the dominant power, it was either crushed, as Bohemia had been by the Austrian Habsburgs after the Battle of White Mountain in 1620, or it successfully seceded to form an independent state, as the United Provinces did from the Spanish Habsburgs after 1567. The problem for the Stuarts after 1660 was that, by contrast, their power base lay *in* the more developed state. They therefore presided over a dynastic union in which it was unnecessary to impose absolutist rule in Scotland (since the local lords were in a position to maintain control without reconstructing the state) and impossible to impose it in England (since the nature of the dominant class had changed to such an extent that they no longer required this form of rule). The coexistence of two states founded on such different principles was manageable during the Restoration period, since the Scottish ruling class relied on the English regime to re-establish their power, but was to prove impossible after the fall of the Stuarts, when the English polity was finally wrenched into line with the economy and society over which it presided.

The extent to which the joint monarchy was unviable was most starkly revealed in the events surrounding the Company Trading To Africa and the Indies, and the Darien debacle which emerged from it. In 'The Scottish Vision of Empire: the Intellectual Origins of the Darien Venture', David Armitage emphasises how much independent Scottish development depended on successful outcome in Darien: 'an alternative to dependency and corruption within Britain, and to poverty and universal monarchy within Europe' (p.102). Subsequent Scottish participation in the British Empire should not be seen, however, as the main reason for embracing Union after the failure at Darien: 'The architects of Union did not design it as the Scots consolation prize for their abandoned emporium, nor did the Scots join it hoping to gather the fruits of empire' (p.98). Two elements are missing, however, from this otherwise valuable account of the debates surrounding the expedition.

The first is any sense of the extent to which they were conducted against a background of massive crisis in Scottish society which was not solely, or even mainly, the result of existing constitutional arrangements. The shift in goal from a trading venture to attempted colony was accompanied by a catastrophic famine which indicated - all too disastrously for the thousands who died - the extent to which agricultural techniques and, more importantly, economic relationships had not yet transcended the feudal brake on Scottish development. In other words, behind the collective public optimism which accompanied the expedition was a desperate attempt to overcome, at

*Review: Union, Empire and Explanation*

breakneck speed, a developmental impasse. Although Armitage points out that the colonial aspect of the Company's activities had been a cherished project for at least a decade, it is unlikely that it would have been adopted in practice had the situation not become so serious.

The second missing element is the extent to which the Scottish state was incapable of achieving the goal it had set itself. Armitage wants to revise the 'traditional' account of Darien which sees the project as doomed from the start, emphasising instead the seriousness with which it was taken by the elite. In this case, however, the traditional view is nearer the truth, for whatever the level of intellectual ferment over Darien, and the level of public excitement, the most remarkable aspect of the whole affair is the absence of state support at either the financial or military level, the burden being thrown instead onto civil society in the case of the first and - disastrously - the English state in the second. This was not a fit of absent-mindedness on the part of the Scottish ruling class but an indication of their lack of weight in the international state system.

It may seem therefore that the classic encapsulation of the respective English and Scottish reasons for desiring (or at any rate agreeing to) a Union was correct, that it was 'a political necessity for England and an economic necessity for Scotland' (W R Scott 1907, p.101). This pleasingly symmetrical formulation is however deficient in two respects. First, it assumes that the 'economic' and the 'political' can be separated in reality (as opposed to conceptually). In fact, the French Absolutism to which Scotland seemed to offer a base threatened English economic interests quite as much as their political interests, and, equally, Scottish economic backwardness was a product of the continued political dominance of the nobility - a dominance which the Union did nothing immediately to overcome. Second, as the last point suggests, it does not specify *for whom* these necessities existed.

The matter is touched on in another valuable contribution by Robertson, 'An Elusive Sovereignty: the Course of the Union Debate in Scotland', in which he demonstrates that there was a genuine debate over the issues surrounding the Union, and that the major contributions were not confined to Andrew Fletcher. Nevertheless, as Robertson rightly observes: 'The quality of the Scottish union debate was due almost entirely to the inspiration of one man, Andrew Fletcher of Saltoun' (p.203). In particular, Robertson focuses on the central point of Fletcher's argument, that the 'fundamental problem ... lay not with England, but within the Scottish Parliament itself' (ibid.). And this brings us to the central issue at stake.

### *Scottish Affairs*

The matchless cogency of Fletcher's arguments was heard by a Parliament which was little more than a baron court, where seating arrangements still reflected the feudal ranking of the commissioners - justifiably, since as we have noted above, the economic basis of Scottish society was still predominantly feudal. Fletcher's ideas were in many ways an extension of those held by the Commonwealthmen and 'True Whigs' during and immediately after the Revolution of 1688 in England, and consequently were the most radical being advocated anywhere in the British Isles. Yet the fact that these ideas had been defeated in the southern kingdom meant that their chances of winning out in the more backward northern state were always unlikely; political arguments require a social basis in order to transform them into a material force and this is precisely what Fletcher lacked.

In his classic study of Anglo-Scottish relations (now thankfully back in print) William Ferguson wrote of Scotland at this time that: '*the tiers etat* was unequal to its mission, and the revolution failed' (Ferguson 1977, p.192). In fact, 'the revolution' was never attempted. Fletcher's aristocratic republicanism would not have allowed him to risk appealing to the disaffected plebeians and neither did the class of lairds to which he belonged have the political and economic independence to break with the nobility. Thus Fletcher's first and only triumph in the Scottish Parliament - the rejection of the terms offered for the Hanoverian Succession - was, as Robertson points out, a double bluff: 'first that a Protestant successor other than Hanoverian could be found, and second, that after having had the Scottish king in London for 100 years the English would be prepared to accept a restored, and separate Scottish monarchy. Neither eventuality was at all likely' (p.204). Indeed. And when the bluff was called it became clear that groupings in the Scottish Parliament which supported Fletcher had not done so because of the brilliance of his arguments but for tactical reasons which had now been superseded. Fletcher's position subsequently was, quite literally, Utopian: '[He] frankly acknowledged that [it] would involve the break up of the existing three Kingdoms ... into smaller political units' (p.209). This eventuality was even less likely, a fact of which the increasing rage and frustration of his contributions to the debate suggest he was quite aware.

Did the Scottish ruling class 'betray' its country by accepting the Union? The hypothesis is only valid if we consider that the lords who largely composed this group were somehow morally obliged to place 'Scotland' over their own socio-economic interests, but why would they do something so alien to their nature? As Robertson concludes: 'What mattered about sovereignty was what

*Review: Union, Empire and Explanation*

it enabled its subjects to do' (p.227). The surrender of sovereignty did not appear to threaten the interest of these 'subjects'; indeed it specifically protected them, most obviously in the retention of the Heritable Jurisdictions. Against this all the eloquence of a Fletcher or a Ridpath was of little avail.

At the level of ideas, therefore, this book is a valuable, if uneven, contribution to the debate on the Union. What it suggests, more than anything, perhaps, is the need for more works to shift the focus of that debate away from retrospective justifications for British Unionism or Scottish Nationalism, and onto the real possibilities open to the social classes in Scotland and England in the years between 1688 and 1707.

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*August 1995*