

## **REVIEW: UNIONIST SCOTLAND**

*Graeme Morton*

Catriona M.M.Macdonald (1998) (ed.), **Unionist Scotland 1800-1997**,  
Edinburgh: John Donald, pb, £14.95, ISBN 0859764710, pp.ix+142  
pages.

The analysis of discourse has become fashionable despite the impenetrability of so much of its practice. Catriona Macdonald introduces this edited collection from a recent conference at Strathclyde University with a guide to the various meanings attached to the label 'Unionist'. Each is presented as a discourse, and in most respects the contributors to this volume deal with one or more of these definitions. Four of the chapters analyse Unionism as a parliamentary political ideology, most notably premised on its Ulster meaning, and the two concluding chapters take the Scottish-English Union of 1707 as their focus.

The problem with discourse is that because there are so many methodologies to choose from, there is often more than one discourse of analysis to analyse too. The question 'whose discourse?' is universal; for this study it translates as 'whose Union?'. I therefore have two concerns, neither of which finds fault with the individual essays which are scholarly and important. My worries are with the conception of the book. As I have alluded, despite the semantic clarity we are encouraged to employ by the contributors, there remains a confusion of 'which Union' we are referring to. Both 1707 (Scotland-England) and 1801 (Ireland-Britain) are germane. The latter of course is important to Ulster identity, to the Protestant Ascendancy and the Ulster Presbyterians, as Walker and Officer make clear in their chapter. This union, the co-authors argue, sustained the orange and green divide in Ulster, but it also informed Scottish politics. The Liberal Unionists of Scotland's west coast supported the Ulster Unionists at the time of the debate about Irish Home Rule, sustaining a belief in the myth-history of the 'Ulster-Scot' (pp.16-19). Here we shift from the 1801 Union to the 1707 one. As Walker and Officer argue, the 1920-70 period saw increased concern with Scottish (Unionist) issues and a much

---

*Graeme Morton is a lecturer in the Department of Economic and Social History,  
Edinburgh University.*

*Review: Unionist Scotland*

reduced support for the Unionist minority in Ireland in comparison with the pre-1914 years (pp.22-3).

The ease in which the language of Union slips between unions is also seen in Elaine McFarland's excellent chapter on the 'Orangeman's Unionist vision'. We are told that the Orangeman's support for 'legislation Union' was based on the Catholic and Protestant divide (p.28) and, indeed, that Orange support for the Conservative party (and thus the Unionism of 1707) was, post 1880s, 'contingent on the latter's handling of Protestant issues' (p.38). This created what McFarland has called a new version of the links between the Orange Order and the Conservatives - ignoring the rhetoric of the past, but with the mainland party in admiration of the success of the Order in protecting the Unionist cause in Ulster (p.45). This slippery transition between the rhetoric of Union is contained within these essays in their respective historical contexts, but there is no (concluding?) chapter on this transformation per se.

My second concern is with the dates of the book, which in all but one of the chapters gives very little information on the pre-1885 period. For example, the political distinctiveness transmitted to Scotland since 1707 was ascribed by the editor to 'the establishment of the Scottish Office (1885) and other distinct legislative measures ...' (p.3). There is no attempt in the introduction of the essays to explain how the Union of 1707 developed as a political concept, or as a focus of national identity, in the first two centuries of its existence. Only Mitchell in the concluding essay, through a reprise of his important distinction between the unitary state and the union-state, stresses the centrality of the Union settlement to Scottish civil society as much as to the contingencies of particular political policy making and rhetoric.

Macdonald herself provides a neat spin on the language symbolism of social class which is associated with the work of Patrick Joyce. Whereas Joyce has dissected how the 'plebeian invention of tradition fused liberal sentiments and socialist thought' in towns and cities in England, Macdonald demonstrates how an alternative radical version of Unionism did the same in Paisley (p.55). She explains how the local Liberal Unionists were formed out of the Liberal Party split over the issue of Gladstone's Irish Home Rule Bill. This set the scene for competing versions of radicalism in the town, even following the alliance between the Liberal Unionists and the Conservative Association in 1908 (which created the Paisley Unionist Association). Her analysis of the ways in which local political parties can compete for the same radical heritage (or moral high ground) is, I think, an important one (pp.64-7).

The version of Unionism discussed in a finely crafted piece of archival research by Iain Hutchison is explicitly a Conservative one, and implicitly,

therefore, a Unionism of 1707. Hutchison notes that in the inter-war period the Tories were doing better than ever in Scotland (since pre-1832 that is) and within 85% of the level of support that party enjoyed in England. Various explanations are offered for this relative success: good quality MPs and a successful party organisation, new campaigning techniques such as cinema vans, focussed leafleting campaigns, the mix of political events with social occasions, and the active encouragement of women as well as the Junior Imperial League, the Young Unionists/Young British, and, in 1932, the Young Unionist Choir (pp.73-8). Despite this organisational strength, we are warned, subscriptions were low throughout the 1930s, and the more likely route for success lay in the Conservative attachment to key institutions of Scottish society and the successful capture of the 'progressive' moral high ground against the perceived inroads of socialism. The Church of Scotland was strongly Unionist, as was the majority of the press, and the Tories took on the mantle of reformists when in the Scottish Office (pp.80-7). This chapter is most impressively researched and is thorough in its examination of the electoral conditions and the policies which facilitated the success of the Scottish Conservatives. But we are not told what being a Unionist actually meant. What did a vote for the Conservative party in 1930s Scotland indicate of one's identity, be it a political, religious, social or national identity? Quite justifiably this was not the concern of Hutchison who had so much to say already in his allotted word count. But Unionism as an identity, other than in its Ulster/religious variant, is not explicit in this volume.

The theme of Thatcherism as the gravedigger of Conservatism, first aired by Steve Kendrick and David McCrone (1989), allied to an overview of Scotland's economic and industrial policies since 1918, based on the analysis of Gavin McCrone, provides the basis for the chapter by Richard Finlay. Being the historian with the longest period to cover, 1918-1997, Finlay has of necessity had to provide very much a summary, eschewing the conceptual approach followed by the political scientist James Mitchell in his chapter which links 1707 to 1997. It is of course a well written account which is important for this collection in that, as we would expect from Finlay's earlier work (for example, Finlay 1997), he brings the discussion back to the Union of 1707, and discusses a twentieth century version of Home Rule in terms purely of Scotland vs. Britain. The Labour Party's volte-face on Home Rule in the late 1920s is explained by a realisation that British finance (and that of the Empire) was needed to cope with the level of social dislocation (p.102). The extra money garnered from the Treasury is the theme for the survival of Unionism throughout the century, where the spectre of nationalism was enough to harden and even extend this additional public expenditure. Finlay acknowledges that this is a measurement of visible expenditure only, and not

*Review: Unionist Scotland*

a measure of 'unaccountable' funding like mortgage interest tax relief and infrastructural projects, but this qualification (the 'Scotching the myth' thesis) is confined to the final footnote of the chapter. Perhaps it deserved more?

The concluding chapter to this collection is well placed. The unitary state/union-state distinction made by James Mitchell offers a useful means of explaining the impact of the 1707 Union on Scottish society and politics in the late twentieth century. Mitchell argues that the union-state appellation is the most accurate for explaining the pluralist nature of post-1707 governing in Scotland. It allows him to argue that Unionism has been a form of state nationalism. Where Empire and Britishness were one half of Scots' dual identity, this duality, he argues, 'was contingent on the success or the perceived success of the state' (pp.117-20). The Tories' decline in 1997 was symptomatic of their loss of 'any convincing articulation of union-state unionism' (p.129).

Several of the contributors are keen to distinguish between small 'u' and capital 'U' unionism, but they neglect to distinguish between small 'p' and capital 'P' politics. We have here Unionist Scotland as it impinges on the parliamentary political process, particularly through an analysis of support for the Unionist parties. Perhaps the implicit starting date of 1885, rather than the headline date of 1800, is in effect an acknowledgement of this. Scotland has been a Unionist nation since 1707, but of course its Unionism was only linked to the party political process from the Home Rule negotiations of the 1880s. But the Unionist identity was earlier and more broadly spread. The clue comes from Mitchell and the union-state. A highly developed civil society was the result of the 1707 settlement: looking there will uncover a version of Unionist Scotland not confined to political parties.

**REFERENCES**

- Finlay, R. (1997), **A Partnership for Good? Scottish Politics and the Union Since 1880**, Edinburgh: John Donald.
- Kendrick, S. and McCrone, D. (1989) 'Politics in a cold climate: The Conservative decline in Scotland', **Political Studies**, XXXVII.

*April 1998*