

## **REVIEW: THE STUART KINGDOMS**

*Alexander Murdoch*

Allan I Macinnes and Jane Ohlmeyer (eds), **The Stuart Kingdoms in the Seventeenth Century**, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2002, 272pp, hb, £35.00, ISBN 1 85182 532 0.

This book is based on a seminar series and conference held at the University of Aberdeen from 1996 to 1998 under the title 'Scotland, Ireland and the "Awkward Neighbour"'. The change in title from conference to book is significant, indicating as it does an alteration of perspective from perceived conflict between centre and periphery to a more holistic view of the Stuart monarchy and their kingdoms during the seventeenth century. The central premise of the book and its many contributors is that of the 'New British History', moving away from an anglocentric view of British History to a more pluralistic perspective incorporating the histories of Ireland and Scotland. To this the editors, specialists in Scottish and Irish history respectively, have added a call to incorporate a European dimension. It is in this respect that the book makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of the broader context of Scottish History in the seventeenth century.

The essays by Edward Opalinski on the union between Poland and Lithuania in the seventeenth century, and by Steve Murdoch on 'Scotland, Scandinavia and the bishops wars 1638-40' are particularly valuable in this respect. Historians of Ireland, and Scotland and Wales have expressed some unease at the 'New British History', as a threat to the national historiography (and history departments) that have established themselves in each country over the past century. It is almost as if renewed English interest in the history of the other British nations has aroused fears which mirror the imperialistic expansion of English power and influence in the British Isles before the

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formal establishment of a British state in 1707 and its extension to incorporate Ireland in 1801.

The essays by Tim Harris and John Young in this collection are particularly valuable in emphasising the limitations of the 'New British History'. Harris publishes another in a series of essays marking his progress in writing a study of the British revolutions of 1688. Harris emphasises that the revolutions in England and Wales, in Ireland, and in Scotland, were all separate and unique. The famous device whereby English Tories were able to rationalise their support for James II's daughter and nephew Mary and William in 1688, by arguing that James had abandoned his subjects rather than been overthrown by rebellion, could not be employed in Scotland and Ireland. These kingdoms had lacked the personal presence of a monarch for the entire seventeenth century in the case of Scotland, and for far longer than that in the case of Ireland. Thus the Scottish convention which offered the throne of Scotland to William and Mary jointly came closest to embracing the idea of a contractual relationship between ruler and ruled in declaring that James had 'forefaulted' the Scottish throne and had been a bad monarch who had attempted to undermine the traditional rights of his Scottish subjects. In Ireland, James actually turned up in 1689, the first Stuart king to live in Ireland, and his nephew William came personally to eject him from the kingdom of Ireland by war, a war which continued after each of them had departed from Ireland and ended only with the Treaty of Limerick in 1691. It is hardly new to point out that the revolution of 1688 in Ireland involved war and conquest rather than the glory of a pacific revolution in government, but Harris makes the point that 'the revolution was messier in Ireland than it was in England and Scotland, in the sense that it was much less clear precisely when allegiance to one king ceased and the new one began, and thus whether one was actively resisting the king's authority or not' (p.225).

John Young's essay emphasises how much 1689 in Scotland owed to the covenanting days of 1641, a point often missed by those who attempt to accommodate events in Scotland to a British interpretation of the revolutions of 1688. Harris recognises this as well, stating that while the events of 1688-91 'need to be set in a Britannic perspective', this 'does not mean that there was one revolution; the three kingdoms each had their own, distinctive revolutions' (p.205). What made the Scottish Revolution distinctive was the memory and precedent of the covenanting revolution in Scotland two generations before. Andrew Fletcher of Saltoun's ideas of a federal Britain

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owed much to Scottish experience of resisting Stuart monarchy. The lack of popularity of the Williamite regime in Scotland at the end of the seventeenth century owed much to the reluctance of William's servants in Scotland to give ground on the issue of royal prerogative. After William's death the key moment in the loss of Scottish parliamentary sovereignty in 1705 occurred when the Duke of Hamilton sprang a sudden proposal to have Queen Anne nominate the commissioners to represent the Scottish Parliament in union negotiations with England, a return to a recognition of royal prerogative which undid much of what had been so hard won in 1689 and 1690 with the abolition of the Lords of the Articles that had allowed the Stuart monarchy to set the agenda in the Scottish Parliament during the seventeenth century.

In any collection of this nature the variety of the contents can defeat the efforts of editors to give them coherence and readers to perceive them as such. In this case the difficulties of dealing with the histories of multi-kingdom dynasties in the seventeenth century are not unique to the Stuarts. What is especially praiseworthy about this project, however, is a willingness to cross customary boundaries in search of new answers to old questions. Now that Scotland has a parliament again, albeit one with devolved powers from Westminster, the history of Scotland and its parliament as but one of the three British Stuart kingdoms of the seventeenth century deserves greater scrutiny as we consider just what represents continuity and what represents change in the Scottish historical tradition.

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