

REVIEW: IRELAND AND SCOTTISH UNIONISM

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Catriona Burness, **Strange Associations: The Irish Question and the Making of Scottish Unionism, 1886-1918**, Phantassie, East Lothian: Tuckwell Press, 2003, pb, xii + 235 pp, £20, ISBN 1 86232 194 9.

Catriona Burness has produced a useful study based largely upon administrative archives of party organisation. Her book offers some reflections upon the long-term challenges to the Conservative party in Scotland around a more specific kernel of postgraduate research. There is a dual focus: politically upon the Liberal Unionists, and geographically upon the city of Glasgow. As she demonstrates, it is impossible to look at the former without assessing the Liberals, from whom they seceded, or the Conservatives, with whom they became allied. The window that Glasgow provides into Scottish politics is sometimes a murky one. The city's population equalled those of Aberdeen, Dundee and Edinburgh combined, although with seven MPs it was under-represented in comparison with twelve groups of small burghs. Dominant within the country, but not typical of it: the Glasgow conundrum is a familiar one.

Those seven MPs, elected from single-member divisions, made their appearance in 1885. From 1868 to 1880, Glasgow formed a single constituency, with three MPs – but each Glaswegian had only two votes. The device, intended to secure representation for urban minorities (i.e. Tories), actually spurred Liberal party organisation: with careful marshalling of support, a 60 per cent vote could secure all three seats. In 1880, 24,000

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Liberals swept aside 11,000 Conservatives to take all three Glasgow seats. On the face of it, in 1885 the triumph was repeated: 'we are seven' the victors rejoiced. But, even allowing for Parnell's edict that the Irish should cast an anti-Liberal tactical vote, core Conservative strength had doubled. Several divisions were now so marginal as to be vulnerable to a Liberal secession.

In 1886, Gladstone dramatically espoused Home Rule. In modern terms, three forms of devolution were in the air. The Radical Joseph Chamberlain favoured Welsh-style pretend-parliaments all round, known as 'National Councils'. Others favoured the Holyrood option, leaving Irish MPs at Westminster to pose the Westmeath version of the West Lothian question. Gladstone invented a third version, modified Dominion status, a junior parliament in Dublin with no voice in London. His party split and Liberal Unionism emerged to swing the 1886 election. In Scotland, 17 Liberal Unionists and 12 Tories were returned, with three of the seven Glasgow seats falling. The seceders seemed to hold the trump cards: the alliance gave 8,000 Liberal Unionist voters two MPs, while 20,000 Tories at last managed to return just one.

Would the new party hold together? How deep were its roots? Liberal Unionism spanned two ill-matched streams. Chamberlain favoured radical reform, both constitutional and social. The Whigs, traditional grandees of inactivity led by Lord Hartington, preferred to do nothing. Would the party risk offending its moderates by adopting policy positions across a range of issues, or condemn itself to a negative single issue – especially, after the Lords massacred Gladstone's second Home Rule Bill in 1893, as an Irish parliament seemed impossibly remote? Here, the author's emphasis upon Committee minutes does not tell the full story. Liberal Unionist organisations sprang up with a speed reminiscent of the organisation of the Free Kirk forty years earlier. There may be a clue here, since one core element in the breakaway consisted of moderate Liberals distrustful of the Radical campaign for disestablishment. But separate organisations were formed for Glasgow and the west of Scotland, and for Edinburgh and the east and north (with Dundee making a faint bid to go it alone and annex Forfarshire). Burness says little about the leaders of the breakaway, and less about the mechanisms that enabled, say, Cameron Corbett to hold Tradeston until 1910, by which time commentators remarked that normal politics had virtually ceased in that part of Glasgow. William Thomson, Lord Kelvin from 1892, appears occasionally as President of the Glasgow organisation,

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and his death in 1907 is seen as a landmark. Thomson, for forty years the most famous name in the city's university, must surely have commanded local respect and perhaps a network of followers, although as an Episcopalian he was not ideally placed to manipulate a Protestant coalition. But Thomson does not appear in the index. He was Belfast-born – but, despite the book's sub-title, it is not really clear why the 'Irish Question' alienated so many ex-Liberals, while Home-Rule-All-Round, with its crucial Scottish implications, seems hardly to have bothered them at all.

Overall, the impression given is that, in leadership terms, Liberal Unionism in Scotland rather resembled the 1980s' SDP, with clusters of support around locally popular figures, rather than the 1970s' Scottish Labour Party which pivoted on the magnetism of Jim Sillars. But this points to the UK aspect of leadership, the uneasy Gang of Two, Chamberlain and Hartington. Chamberlain was the premier organiser and one of the dominant orators of British politics. In 1887 he made a three-week speaking tour of Scotland, which Peter T. Marsh, in his 1994 biography, regarded as an attempt to unite land-reforming crofters with middle-class Glasgow. This tour is barely mentioned here.

Scottish Liberal Unionists proved more durable than either the SLP or the SDP. Not until 1912 did the remnants finally merge with the Tories. Yet, at first, the party seemed to be going up and down, rocket-fashion. Two of its MPs soon returned to the Gladstonian fold. A key event here was the 1888 Ayr by-election, where the 2-1 Liberal Unionist majority of 1886 was replaced by a narrow Gladstonian victory. Again, Ayr does not make the index, and this important vote is not analysed. The 'swing' was evidently caused by Liberals who had abstained in 1886 but cast a protest vote against Lord Salisbury's Tory government. Overall, the durability of the Liberal Unionists is impressive. Some were shocked when their leaders joined the Tories in the Unionist coalition cabinet of 1895. In common with the Right generally, the party was ravaged from 1903 onwards when Chamberlain denounced Free Trade. In those days, about two per cent of the population of Scotland died each year. As male householders, Liberal Unionist voters were perhaps healthier than the average, but as adults they were also older. Thus by the election of 1900, when the Boer War factor enabled the Unionist alliance to proclaim 'we are seven' after sweeping Glasgow, it is likely that at least one quarter of the seceders of 1886 had relocated from metropolis to Necropolis. But Liberal Unionist candidates, even in such unlikely areas as

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Camlachie, not only maintained their vote but saw it grow, in line with the overall increase in the voting population. This was Scotland's great era of tenement and villa building, reflected in the rising numbers voting in seats as varied as Edinburgh South and the Dumfries Burghs. Few political secessions manage to renew themselves, so these changes merit closer attention.

What was Liberal Unionism all about? In **Industry and Ethos**, Sydney and Olive Checkland characterise the party as 'a bridge over which middle-class man could pass from Liberalism to Toryism without suffering any sense of betrayal' (p. 85). But the middle class does not usually need 26 years to make that transition. Moreover, as a single-issue party the Liberal Unionists seem about as well designed to resist the buffeting of everyday politics as that other contemporary exercise in bridge-building, that collapsed into the silvery Tay on a stormy night in 1879. In constituencies like Glasgow Bridgeton or North-East Lanarkshire, where Conservative and Liberal Unionist candidates alternated, the smooth progression of voting figures suggest that the irreconcilable local clusters of the latter were very small. Paradoxically, this may be a key to Liberal Unionist survival, or at least to the need to keep them in existence from the point of view of Scottish Conservatives otherwise condemned not to today's irrelevance but to the frustrating position of near-miss electoral also-rans. As Oscar Wilde's Lady Bracknell put it, Liberal Unionists 'count as Tories. They dine with us. Or come in the evening, at any rate.' So long as they turned out in their handfuls to clinch marginal seats on election night, Liberal Unionists had a role to play.

The 2003 Holyrood election confirmed that major parties need complaisant smaller allies to govern. At present, the Lib Dems can punch their own weight, but the example of Germany's minuscule Free Democrats is a reminder that Labour may one day have to prop up its coalition partner, just as Lord Salisbury's Conservatives used Liberal Unionism to secure two decades of power. David McLetchie's Tories are a long way further from the winning post than Salisbury's followers a century ago. Secessions continue from mainstream Scottish radicalism, but they are now not Orange in hue, but Green and Red, veering still further to the Left. Catriona Burness has told us a lot about the organisation of the Liberal Unionists. The more she reveals, the clearer it becomes that there is little here that can illuminate the politics of Jack McConnell's Scotland.

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REFERENCE

S G and O Checkland, **Industry and Ethos: Scotland 1832-1914** (The New History of Scotland) , London: Arnold, 1984.

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