

## REVIEW: THE UNION OF 1707

*Christopher A. Whatley*

Paul Henderson Scott, **The Union of 1707: Why and How?** Edinburgh: The Saltire Society, 2006, 85 pp, pb, £6.99, ISBN 0 854511 097 6.

Readers of **Scottish Affairs** will be familiar with Paul Scott's trenchant views on the Union of 1707, an arrangement he heartily detests – as evidenced not only in the articles he has written for this journal, but also in his much-admired book, **Andrew Fletcher and the Treaty of Union**. Scott's pamphlet offers little that is new, but it is an admirably succinct statement of his position on the Union of 1707. In nine short chapters the reader is taken from Scotland's difficult experience as the junior partner to England under the Union of the Crowns, through the failed but profoundly patriotic Company of Scotland's venture at Darien, to the angry upsurge of nationalist sentiment that followed in its wake – as witnessed in the parliamentary sessions of 1703 and 1704, when the Scottish Act of Security – a 'declaration of independence' – was passed. Chapter 8, written by J. G. Pittendrigh, an accountant by training, provides some background on the Equivalent, the sum of £398,085 10 shillings sterling that was to be paid to the Scots at the Union for assuming a share of England's national debt, as compensation for Company of Scotland investors and to cover the costs of standardising the Scottish coinage with that of England. Scottish public debts – mainly salary arrears for military officers and government officials – were also to be paid. The catch apparently was that the Scots were to repay this through the increased customs and excise duties that were to be imposed after 1707 – the supposition being that through Union the Scottish economy would grow and ease the burden of such payments. (Actually, the compensation sought and obtained for Darien can be seen as a reward for those thousands of patriotic Scots who had invested in the Company of Scotland and who by no other means than union would get their money back.) The pamphlet concludes with Scott's explanation of why Scottish MPs voted for the Union in

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*Christopher A. Whatley is professor of history at Dundee University.*

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1706-7: 'they had been persuaded by financial inducement of one kind or another' (that is bribes, which included the Equivalent); and the threat of invasion from England.

Commendably, the Saltire Society has since the 1930s led the way in promoting Scottish culture and the arts, history and literature – and has published several of Paul Scott's works. Yet surely a measure of a nation's political maturity – and confidence – is its capacity to grapple with its history and comprehend the complexities and contradictions of historical development. This is not for Scott however. For him, the Union was forced upon the Scots by England, the achievement of an ambition nurtured since the days of Edward I. *England* and *the English* are portrayed as single undifferentiated political entities, determined to crush the Scots. Not a hint is given that English Whigs and Tories had very different attitudes to Scotland. Nor is there any suggestion that by 1706 responsible politicians on both sides of the border, who had watched in alarm as their respective countrymen came close to drawing their swords in 1704-5, were anxiously seeking a peaceful solution to the succession crisis; if there had been bloodshed in 1706 or 1707, in part at least this would have resulted from civil war in Scotland, certainly involving English troops, but fought too between Scottish presbyterians on the one side and, on the other, the Jacobites, whose aim was to restore the Catholic Pretender. In this sense, union simply postponed what would happen in 1708, 1715-16, 1719 and 1745-46. Scotland was a divided nation.

In Scott's eyes the Union was an unmitigated disaster. For the economy for fifty years after 1707 (a judgement Scott ascribes to Adam Smith, whose skills as an economist and moral philosopher were considerably in advance of his understanding of recent economic history), and for Scottish society until 1999 when the devolved Parliament was established in Edinburgh. That a distinctive Scottish culture has survived three centuries of English domination is a surprising and unintentional accident.

Scott's interpretations of the causes and consequences of the Union of 1707 will please many. Indeed there are parts of his pamphlet with which few historians could quibble, as for instance the strength of popular opposition to the proposed union (although unacknowledged is the existence of many early eighteenth-century 'don't knows', who prayed to God for guidance). But there are too many half-truths or, more generously, partial depictions of events. Thus for Scott the end of the Darien venture in 1699 reinforced 'the conviction that Scotland had to free herself from English control and assert her independence'

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(p.20), and revealed once again the disadvantages for Scotland of the regal union. Correct – as far as it goes. Yet not a word is said about the other reaction, which was to conclude that a parliamentary union might improve Scotland's position. This resulted in actual negotiations in 1702-3, although they failed as Scottish demands were not met: they would be in 1706, when the Scottish commissioners struck a harder bargain. Not only is this development skipped over, but even more significant is the omission, either by intent or perhaps plain (and forgivable) ignorance, of any reference to the calls made from Scotland to William in 1689 for an 'entire' or full parliamentary union – on the grounds that this would secure the political and religious gains made at the Revolution. To claim, as Scott does (p.36), that it was the 'English', in 1706, who sprang the concept of an incorporating union on the unsuspecting Scots, is patently untrue. Several of the men who had called for such a union with England in 1689 were active in this cause again in 1702 and, in some cases – notably the earls of Leven, Marchmont and Stair – played prominent parts in steering the measure through the Scottish Parliament in 1706-7. Scott may disagree about the significance of this, but silence is no way of conducting serious historical debate. It challenges, to the core, assertions that the Union was driven solely by 'England'.

There is little sense anywhere in this pamphlet of alternative explanations for the Union. Writings on the subject that do not fit with Scott's own are simply ignored. The concept of the Briton has no place here, although it was an idea in the minds even of politicians who in 1706 would oppose Union – lord Belhaven and the duke of Hamilton for instance – if earlier they had been keener on agreeing a treaty with England. Scott accepts as valid the views of the Union- and House of Hanover-hating Jacobite, George Lockhart. Yet Lockhart's enemies thought him a liar: the *possibility* that he was less than a fair commentator should at least be *considered*. The single alternative explanation for Union that Scott does acknowledge – that economic considerations swayed Scottish MPs – would, if valid, blow a hole in his argument. Accordingly, selectively, Scott swats at parts of it and turns a blind eye to the hard evidence there is that in many cases there is a direct route from appreciation of Scotland's struggling economy to support for incorporating union.

No reference is made to the opportunities and benefits that arose from the Union. The economy as a whole began to strengthen, perhaps from the 1730s and certainly the 1740s (ironically, *partly* because it had been recognised at Westminster in the 1720s that the Union was not working and Scotland should

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be treated as a special case). To claim, as Scott does (p.15), that the seventeenth century was a period of 'steady economic decline' flies in the face of mountains of published work on the period. Scottish landowners and merchants in the seventeenth century were ambitious; they looked abroad and wanted more, financially and culturally. For some Scots at least, union was a means by which economic modernisation, self-consciously the policy of the Scottish state after the Glorious Revolution, could actually materialise in an era of muscular mercantilism. If Scotland was to flourish, so many believed, Scottish merchants needed access to England's Atlantic empire, closed off by the Navigation Acts. If the threat from aggressive, Catholic France was to be contained and the prospect of the old pretender with the Scottish crown on his head dispelled, the support and assistance of a powerful state – England – seemed highly desirable. In these respects independence in name was a price worth paying, although few Scots felt comfortable with what they had lost.

With the 300th anniversary of the Union in the offing, interest in its causes and consequences and relevance for contemporary Scotland is growing, with Scott's pamphlet being an early contribution to what promises to be a lively debate. Stimulated by provocative statements like Scott's, it is to be hoped that our understanding of the Union and the issues surrounding it will be deepened, and captured and revealed by the Saltire Society in future publications.

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