



The Scottish History Society Learning Resource

The Union of 1603

Background

The 'union of the crowns' was much less and much more than the name suggests. It was much less because there remained two kingdoms, and two crowns, until the union of parliaments in 1707. Charles I had two coronations and so did Charles II. It was much more because of its consequences for England and Scotland in both the long and short terms. Without it, there would have been no parliamentary union and no such thing as 'Great Britain'.

Origins

In 1503, James IV, king of Scots, married Margaret Tudor, daughter of Henry VII of England. Any children would have a claim to the English throne if the Tudor dynasty failed to produce an heir. But this marriage was not part of a plan to join Scotland and England under one monarch. It was just one of many marriages that European royal families entered into as a normal part of diplomacy.

The Tudors had a very difficult century. After Henry VII's death in 1509, his son became king as Henry VIII. Six marriages produced only three children that survived infancy, and all succeeded to the throne. Edward reigned from 1547 to 1553, dying aged 16, never having married. His sister Mary reigned from 1553 to 1558, married the Spanish king Philip II but died childless. Elizabeth reigned from 1558 to 1603, and never married. When Elizabeth died, the dynasty died with her.

The question of the succession

James VI's claim to the English throne was based on his descent from Margaret Tudor. His parents, Mary Queen of Scots and Henry Lord Darnley, were grandchildren of Margaret Tudor's first and second marriages respectively (you could call them 'half-cousins').

James's claim was the strongest around but there were problems:

- He was foreign. This might sound strange to the modern mind, but Scotland and England were entirely separate countries which had spent much of the past 300 years at war.
- He was the son of someone executed for treason against Queen Elizabeth. In 1587, James's mother Mary was beheaded for plotting the overthrow of her cousin Elizabeth. English law stated that any claim to property or title was lost by traitors and their descendants.
- The will of Henry VIII had excluded the descendants of his sister Margaret.

- There were other claimants, including James's cousin Arabella Stewart. She was also descended from Margaret Tudor (she was Darnley's neice). Because she was born and brought up in England, she was not foreign. There was also the possibility that one of the descendants of a younger sister of Henry VIII (Mary) might have a claim.

In spite of all this, James succeeded because:

- He was the senior legitimate descendant of the Tudor line.
- He was a man with three living children, two of whom were boys (the problems of marriage and succession with female rulers were prominent in people's minds after the reigns of Mary Tudor, Mary Queen of Scots and Elizabeth).
- He was an experienced monarch.
- He was not involved in English factional politics, unlike any English claimants might be.
- He had been in close contact with senior figures in Elizabeth's government for years before 1603, and had been receiving virtually annual payments of substantial sums from England, even though Elizabeth refused to name him (or anyone else) as heir.
- He was a Protestant and would secure the future of the Reformation in England.
- The idea of putting Scotland, England and Ireland under one monarch was attractive to England, as it removed the risk of France or Spain allying with Scotland against England.

Consequences of the Union

Short term:

- James left Scotland in April 1603 promising to return every three years.
- Day-to-day government of Scotland was left in the hands of the privy council in Edinburgh, much as before.
- No new institutions or government structures were put in place, except that, when parliament met, a royal 'commissioner' represented the king.
- A postal service was established between Edinburgh and London to keep the king in touch with his government in Edinburgh (the origins of the Royal Mail).
- A scheme for a 'perfect' (i.e. complete) union between Scotland and England was launched by James.
- James declared himself to be 'king of Great Britain', although for legal reasons, the separate kingdoms of Scotland and England continued to exist.

Medium term:

- James returned to Scotland only once, in 1617.
- The union scheme came to almost nothing, as neither the Scots nor the English wanted fundamental change – by 1610 it had been virtually abandoned.
- He put a lot of effort into bringing the Church into line with the Church of England. This involved changing its structure and the way church services were conducted.
- There were difficulties in ruling two countries with significant religious differences and that was one the main reasons why the Wars of the Three Kingdoms (popularly although very misleadingly known as the English Civil War) broke out as a result of rebellion in Scotland.

Long term:

- In 1603, Scotland lost an independent foreign policy. International affairs were relations between monarchs and the interests of the wealthier, more powerful country inevitably took precedence. This was difficult for Scotland whose major trading partners were France and the Netherlands, both of which went to war with England at different points during the 17th century.
- A certain distance grew up between the monarchy and Scotland as time passed: no reigning monarch set foot in Scotland between 1651 and 1822.
- Pressure mounted, especially in the second half of the seventeenth century, for incorporating union between England and Scotland.

Debates and issues

Government by Pen?

Historians have always had mixed views about 1603 and its significance. In 1607, James VI boasted to the English parliament that he could govern Scotland with his pen (by writing to the privy council in Edinburgh) in a way that previous monarchs had not been able to do with the sword. Historians have called this 'government by pen' but they are divided over what it means. Some argue that he kept close tabs on Scotland and that a very effective, efficient and flexible system developed. Some believe that James was happy to allow the privy council to take most decisions independently, insisting on only a few things. Others argue that he was merely trying to reassure the English that the Scots were a civilised people who were used to modern government, so the English had nothing to fear from union.

James VI good, Charles I bad?

The traditional view was that James, because he knew Scotland intimately, governed wisely, even at a distance, until his death in 1625. On the other hand, his son Charles I knew little of Scotland, having left aged three and had not visiting it again until 1633, eight years after he came to the throne. As a result, he has often been regarded as personally responsible for the breakdown of relations with Scotland in the later 1630s that led to wars throughout the British Isles. More recently, however, some historians have been tracing the problems which led to the Scottish revolution of 1638 to the reign of James VI. Many now believe that, as his multi-kingdom reign wore on, James became increasingly out of touch with Scotland. They argue that he began to impose unpopular policies on Scotland many of which were taken on by Charles I.

1603 leads inevitably to 1707

Scotland's union with England was unusual, in European terms, even though there were many European monarchs ruling over more than one kingdom. This was because, elsewhere, unions tended to be made by marriage or by conquest. Here, the monarch of a small country succeeded to the throne of a large and powerful one. Yet it was not inevitable that Scotland and England would become one kingdom. In 1649, Charles I was executed. England declared itself a republic and Scotland remained a monarchy, proclaiming Charles II king. This dissolved the 1603 union and, if Scotland had been able to find foreign allies, it might have stayed that way. Other European unions were dissolved, with Portugal recovering its independence in 1648 after over sixty years of Spanish rule, while some

European states remained federal, sharing monarchs but retaining separate institutions. Incorporating union (as happened in 1707) was just one possible outcome.

The role of chance in history

English monarchs occasionally tried to secure Anglo-Scottish union: Edward I and Henry VIII each sought to do it by marrying their male heir to an infant Scottish queen, which would lead to a single heir to both kingdoms. When that failed, they tried military conquest, equally unsuccessfully. Had the Tudor dynasty not been so disastrous at producing heirs (it lasted only three generations), the union of 1603 could not have occurred. Mary Tudor's marriage to Philip of Spain in the 1550s was intended to unite the Spanish and English thrones. If that had succeeded, the history of the British Isles would have been completely different. The marriage of James IV and Margaret Tudor in 1503 had been intended to cement a 'treaty of perpetual peace'. It failed to achieve that but its unintended consequence was that, when the Tudor dynasty became extinct in 1603, in James VI there was a handy solution to a number of England's problems.

Suggested reading

- Keith M. Brown, *Kingdom or Province? Scotland and the Regal Union, 1603-1715* (Basingstoke, 1992)
- Pauline J. Croft, *King James* (Houndmills, 2003)
- J. Goodare, *The Government of Scotland 1560-1625* (Oxford, 2004)
- Maurice Lee Jnr, *Government by Pen: Scotland under James VI and I* (Urbana, London, 1980)
- Maurice Less Jnr, *Great Britain's Solomon: James VI and I in his three Kingdoms* (Urbana, 1990)
- Alan R. MacDonald, *The Jacobean Kirk, 1567-1625: sovereignty, polity and liturgy* (Aldershot, 1998)