



The Scottish History Society Learning Resource

The Union of 1707: the Historical Context

The Events

Anglo-Scottish Relations before 1689

From 1603 Scotland and England were joined in a loose union known as the Union of the Crowns, under which they shared a monarch. The death of Elizabeth I of England without heirs meant that the English Tudor dynasty came to an end. Her nearest relatives, as members of the Stuart dynasty of Scotland, assumed the thrones of England and Ireland as well. Under the Union of the Crowns, Scotland and England maintained separate parliaments and privy councils. The Privy Councils operated as the representatives and advisors of the monarch, and acted as a form of executive power, which was particularly important in the Scottish context where the monarch was rarely present. By the later seventeenth century, a number of disadvantages of this arrangement had come to strongly manifest themselves, from the Scottish point of view. As the largest and most powerful of the three kingdoms, England would always command the bulk of the monarch's attention, to the neglect of Scotland and Ireland. As the monarch controlled foreign policy, he would determine when Scotland and England went to war, but would make these decisions based on the interests of England. When England made war on the Dutch Republic three times between the 1650s and the 1670s, the decision ignored the fact that the Dutch were a major trading partner of Scotland. And while Scotland might have to participate in wars against England's rivals, Scotland was excluded from the commercial benefits of the developing English empire, as the Navigation Acts, passed in the second half of the seventeenth century, stipulated that England's colonies in North America and the West Indies could only trade with England, to the exclusion of the Scots and the Irish.

The dynastic issue

The revolution of 1688 offered an opportunity for those Scots who were dissatisfied with this arrangement to imagine change. The Union of the Crowns had been a dynastic accident, and would persist only as long as the Stuart dynasty. In 1688, this dynasty was ruptured by a revolution that affected the kingdoms of Scotland, England, and Ireland. James VII of Scotland (James II of England and Ireland) was deposed from the throne as his Catholic faith had made his position untenable. His infant son, who would be brought up as a Catholic, would be excluded from the line of succession by the English Parliament on the same grounds. Those who supported the Catholic Stuarts as the true line of succession became known as Jacobites, and would be a thorn in the side of the British Protestant establishment for decades to come. The English Parliament therefore decided that James's Protestant daughters, Mary and Anne, would be next in line to the throne. But as they were both childless, and likely to remain so, it seemed likely that the Protestant Stuart line would fail. In 1701, the English Parliament decided that if or when this eventuality came about, the English throne would pass over

any Catholic claimants and come to rest with the Protestant House of Hanover, from Germany. But the English Parliament could only make this decision on behalf of England and Ireland. Would Scotland choose to adopt the same line of succession? The Revolution of 1688 and its aftermath therefore offered an opportunity to those Scots who wanted a better deal from Scotland's relationship with England.

The troubles of the 1690s

In the years between 1689 and 1707 the Scottish Parliament was in a bullish mood, keen to demonstrate its separateness from England. This stemmed from a number of events and challenges of the 1690s, during the reign of Mary, as the eldest daughter of James VII and II, and her husband William. Firstly, a decision was taken after the Revolution to restore the Presbyterian church as the established church of Scotland. Whereas before, bishops had sat in the Scottish Parliament, and had been reliable supporters of the Crown, the Presbyterian church had no bishops, and therefore one channel that the Crown had formerly used to influence Parliament, was lost. Secondly, the Massacre of Glencoe of 1692 was a public relations disaster for the Crown. The massacre was intended to make an example of a clan that had been slow to swear allegiance to William and Mary, and was thus an anti-Jacobite measure. However, it emerged that the orders to carry it out had come from the highest level, from the Lord Advocate, Dalrymple of Stair, and it therefore harmed the reputation of William and Mary's rule. Thirdly, the Scottish economy was in desperate straits in the 1690s. Severe famine struck in four years of that decade. In addition, from 1695 a Scottish plan to acquire a colony, at Darien on the Isthmus of Panama, captured the imagination of the Scottish people and attracted massive investment. When the scheme failed, Scotland was left sorely lacking in capital, and with her national self-esteem severely battered. It was alleged that William, acting in the interests of England, had sabotaged Scotland's endeavour. On the other hand, some questioned whether Scotland could survive as a small kingdom in a Europe dominated by large states and empires.

Negotiations for Union

In 1701, the English Parliament passed the Act of Settlement which stipulated that in the event of the death of Anne, the last remaining Protestant heir of James VII and II, England would implement the Hanoverian succession. In the years that followed, Scotland could play upon England's fear of the Jacobite threat. In the English imagination, there could be no greater threat than that Scotland might welcome back the Catholic Stuart line, and re-forge her ancient alliance with France. Such an arrangement would leave England sandwiched between a hostile Scotland to the north, and a hostile France across the Channel. The session of the Scottish Parliament that met in 1703-4 passed two provocative acts that fed these fears. The Act of Security stated that Scotland was not bound to support England's choice of a successor to Queen Anne. And the Act anent Peace and War stated that following the death of Queen Anne, Scotland would retake control of her own foreign policy, thus refusing to be dragged into wars based on English interests. Scotland was threatening to walk away from the Union of the Crowns, to reassert her independence. If this was blackmail, then England responded in kind. The Alien Act of 1705, passed by the English Parliament, stipulated that unless negotiations for Union were underway by Christmas of that year, then Scots would be considered as 'aliens' in England, that is, they would be prevented from trading with or in England. England's threat worked, and representatives of the Scottish Parliament were ready to negotiate for a Union. The negotiations proceeded with relative smoothness. By January 1707 the Scottish Parliament had voted itself out of existence, and the Union came into effect on the 1st of May 1707.

The Treaty

So what did the Union consist of? Article 2 emphasised the issue that had been England's concern all along: Scotland would accept the Hanoverian Succession after the death of Queen Anne, thus ensuring that Great Britain remained committed to Protestant monarchy, and opposition to the Jacobite threat. Article 4 is suggestive of what Scotland had to gain from the Union: it stipulated that the all subjects of the new Great Britain were to enjoy the same rights, including rights to trade with the colonies that had been English but were now British. Of the twenty-five articles, most were concerned with trade and taxation, in easing Scotland into a new fiscal system through tax-breaks. These might suggest that the Union negotiations had been hard fought, with valuable concessions gained by the Scottish representatives. On the other hand, it has long been alleged that the Union was accomplished by the bribing of Scottish MPs to secure their votes. Article 15 provided Scotland with a significant sum of money (nearly £400,000) known as the Equivalent, which was ostensibly to compensate Scotland for her adoption of England's national debt. This is one of the longest and most complicated of the articles, and with good reason. Once the jargon is stripped away, it becomes evident that a significant portion of this money was to be paid to shareholders in the Company of Scotland – the company that had overseen the failed scheme to build a colony in Darien. As many of the investors in this scheme were also members of the Scottish Parliament, they were being offered the chance to get their money back if they supported the Union. There are many other examples of what might be seen as bribery greasing the passage of the Union, from the payment of 'salary arrears' to the plum jobs and pensions that were distributed afterwards. However, the key question that must be debated is whether bribery changed people's minds, or merely shored up the support of those who would have voted for Union anyway.

Changing perspectives

In the later decades of the twentieth century, and possibly in connection with the resurgence of Scottish nationalism, the prevailing orthodoxy held that the Union was a dirty deal, made possible by the bribes paid to unprincipled politicians, while public opinion 'out of doors' protested against the loss of Scottish independence. In recent years, however, and stimulated particularly by the three-hundredth anniversary of the Union in 2007, new research has challenged this view and opened further channels for investigation.

The importance of religion – and principle?

Recent research has challenged the thesis that the Union was made by bribery and the self-interest of the Scottish political class. Instead, greater weight is being given to the factors of religion, and even principle. Put simply, the Presbyterian church that was restored in Scotland following the Revolution of 1688 was a staunchly Protestant one, and adherents of this faith therefore had a compelling reason to view union with England as the best defence against the related threats of Jacobitism and the power of Catholic France. It thus seems likely that many of those who voted for the Union were doing so out of self-interest, but were also doing what they believed was best for their country and their Protestant faith.

What about England?

Until recently, the Union of 1707 has been studied largely as an event in Scottish history, to the neglect of its English and British dimensions. Historians had been slow to ask the same questions of English politicians connected to the Union as they had of Scottish politicians: what were their allegiances, their interests, their career paths, their family connections? However, new research is throwing greater light on the English side of the Union, particularly in terms of considering the presence of Jacobite sentiment in England, possibly at the highest social and political levels, and in considering the greater interests of England and later Britain in terms of ongoing war with France and the expansion of empire.

What kind of union?

The Union that took place in 1707 was an incorporating Union, wherein the Scottish and English Parliaments ceased to exist, and were replaced by the new Parliament of Great Britain. However, historians are increasingly coming to emphasise that the implementation of such a Union was far from inevitable, and that many possible forms of Union were discussed and debated, both in the public sphere and at the highest political levels. In particular, the notion of a looser, confederal union was a significant contender. By considering the different types of union that were debated, historians are better able to situate Anglo-Scottish relations in a broader European context, in comparison with other unions such as in Spain or Poland-Lithuania.

William Seton of Pitmedden

At first glance he might appear typical of the slippery and unprincipled politics that has been seen as a shaping force upon the Union. His background led some to suspect him of holding Jacobite sympathies, while the fact that he enjoyed advancement as a consequence of his vociferous support for the Union might lead to the conclusion that he pursued his own interests at the expense of those of his country. However, Seton's rhetoric, in his speeches to the Scottish Parliament, bears deeper examination, and reveals him to have been deeply concerned with the welfare of Scotland. In his mind, neither the Union of the Crowns nor the Jacobite alternative could secure the peace and prosperity of the Scottish people – only Union with England could accomplish these hopes.

Andrew Fletcher of Saltoun

In a similar vein, to take Andrew Fletcher of Saltoun at first glance would be to encounter a celebrated patriot, whose opposition to the Union shaped his popular reputation in his own time, and has made him an icon of Scottish nationalism to this day. Again, however, Fletcher is a figure who demands greater investigation. While his speeches, and the pamphlets he published in the years before the Union opposed the proposals that were emerging from the negotiations, Fletcher's ideas were much more than a sentimental defence of Scottish independence. In truth, he was more deeply concerned with good government than with national identity, and he saw in the years 1703-1707 an opportunity for Scotland to demand more effective government, through the reform of the Union of the Crowns. By proposing 'Limitations' that would guarantee certain Scottish rights, therefore, Fletcher was an opponent of the incorporating union that eventually did take place, but a supporter of a different, looser kind of union between Scotland and England.

Suggested reading

Recent Works

Karin Bowie, *Scottish public opinion and the Anglo-Scottish Union, 1699-1707* (Woodbridge, Royal Historical Society / Boydell Press, 2007)

Stewart J. Brown and Christopher A. Whatley (eds) *Union of 1707: New Dimensions* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2008)

T.M. Devine (ed.) *Scotland and the Union, 1707-2007* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2008)

Allan I. Macinnes, *Union and Empire: the making of the United Kingdom in 1707* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007)

Christopher A. Whatley, 'Bought and sold for English Gold?' *Explaining the Union of 1707* (Glasgow, Economic and Social History Society of Scotland, 1994)

Christopher A. Whatley with Derek J. Patrick, *The Scots and the Union* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2006)

Classic Works

Keith M. Brown, *Kingdom or Province? Scotland and the regal union 1603-1715* (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1992)

William Ferguson, 'The making of the Treaty of Union of 1707', *Scottish Historical Review*, 43 (1964)

P.W.J. Riley, *The union of England and Scotland: a study in Anglo-Scottish politics of the eighteenth century* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1978)

P.H. Scott, *Andrew Fletcher and the Treaty of Union* (Edinburgh, Saltire Society, 1992)