

Lowland Presbyterian Unionist Politicians and the Union

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A review of

Christopher A. Whatley, with Derek J. Patrick, *The Scots and the Union* (Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, 2006/2007), ISBN 978 0 7486 3470 5, xvi+424pp.

As a title for the general reader, *The Lowland Presbyterian Unionist Politicians and the Union* does not, perhaps, have quite the same ring to it as *The Scots and the Union*. But whether Christopher Whatley and Derek Patrick's book is intended for a non-academic readership is something of a mystery. The reader who doesn't need to be told what the *squadrone volante* was, but does need to be told James VI was Scottish, may not exist. Such stylistic anomalies, coupled with a pattern of early references missing from the index, suggest that the existing introduction was prepared late in the day in an attempt to lure a general audience (or at least the 'MSPs and media commentators' alluded to in a blurb from the *Sunday Herald*); and that an earlier introduction lives on, in some form, as chapter one.

Each of the first three chapters, indeed, reads like the introduction to a book about something else. This is not to say that they are not filled with interesting and useful information, particularly about the culture of the Netherlands, comparative naval strengths, population sizes, and the emergence of various industries. The product of a monument of research that the authors, admirably, admit did not fit their initial hypotheses, *The Scots and the Union* is an uneasy mixture: historiographical fight-picking couched in a style that is 'introductory' while remaining resolutely non-narrative until p.139. (The reader actually new to this topic and looking for a simple explanation of who the union commissioners were and what they did should begin and end with Chapter 7.) The book's sentence structures tend to the complicated, with occasional weird eruptions of slang, but on learning that 'leading members continued to hum and haw about the best way of securing pole position for their party', some readers will begin to question whether the book was edited at all.

The Scots and the Union's stated purpose is twofold. First, it is an attempt to clear Scotland's 'statesmen' of 1707 of the stuck mud of three centuries: that is, that they were utterly without principle and, as a corollary, that bribery was instrumental in the achievement of union. Second, it is an attempt to rehabilitate the importance of the economy, and economic predictions, to the union debates of 1688-1707. These economic analyses, in particular, are well presented, and welcome additions to the historiographical landscape. The authors should likewise be applauded for demonstrating, along the way, that the foundations of both the Scottish Enlightenment and the so-called fiscal-military state were not imported from Holland to Torbay in a warship but laid down during the reign of Charles II. In regard to the 'statesmen', of course, their point is fairly easy to demonstrate: nearly everyone ever born has had some principles. But one wonders whether the discovery of some principles among the makers of the union is a cause for celebration in its own right. Worse, in articulating certain of these principles the authors come very close to reproducing them.

The legitimacy of the 1688-9 revolution, even in its immediate and militarily contested aftermath, is treated as a given; so is the illegitimacy of dissent from it, whether political or religious. The Claim of Right is treated as an unmixed good. Jacobitism and Episcopalianism are continuously denigrated as secretive, treacherous and foreign.

'Plotting' in their 'strongholds', these 'malcontents' (unless actually in the moment of being beaten up, dispossessed or massacred by Presbyterians) are never alluded to without the inclusion of words like 'covert', 'scheme', 'subversion', and 'threat'. This contrasts with the 'Revolution men, whigs committed to the Protestant cause on the blood-stained battlefields of Europe.... who could be depended upon when the chips were down'. Ormiston and Stair 'were of steadfast Revolution stock'; Sutherland had a 'gilt-edged Revolution pedigree'; and so forth. All versions of patriotism that are anti-Williamite are dismissed as essentially impossible; as lies. The Jacobites 'worked diligently to portray themselves as lovers of their country to conceal the fact that they were agents of an exiled dynasty': as if being exiled, even at gunpoint, somehow destroys monarchical legitimacy. (Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands was very lucky that the British state and public of 1940 were not as harsh on this point as are Whatley and Patrick.) Lockhart of Carnwath's love of his country was 'a cover'. The scale of opposition to the union was amplified 'deviously' by Jacobite 'agitators'. The return of James VIII was a 'worst-case scenario'. The sale of lead to France in the period 1689-1697 is referred to, not as 'illicit' (say), but 'unpatriotic'. The Seven Years' War, as much as the War of the Spanish Succession, was waged for 'the survival of the Protestant faith'. Jacobites with the temerity actually to take their seats in parliament cease to be describable as human beings: 'in August 1700 their tails rose higher'.

Like Linda Colley, Whatley and Patrick inflate the Catholicity of France – referred to on p.141, perhaps mistakenly, as 'Rome and arbitrary government', and later as a 'spectre' – to a point where many readers will find themselves waiting for the wooden shoe to drop. As a rhetorical strategy to excuse much of the virulence of Presbyterian and Unionist responses to internal enemies, it backfires badly. The Scots and the Union is memorable, in short, chiefly for this apparent assertion of the rightness, or at least the justifiability, of British nationalism as against the internationalism of an imaginary proto-fascist France and its supposed Episcopalian stooges. Admirably, again, Whatley and Patrick don't hide the ball: their heroes sympathise with the judicial murder of the freethinker (and juvenile) Thomas Aikenhead, abolish their nation's parliament in part to fulfil the dying wish of William of Orange, and labour under a 'recurrent fear' that Queen Anne will instigate 'a drive towards toleration'. Such figures need not be either corrupt or unprincipled to be despicable.

Generations of undergraduates as yet unborn will no doubt mine this unnecessarily long book (and its less-than-brilliant index) and find quotes about almost any aspect of the union's early history and historiography, and numerous other assorted aspects of the history of northern Europe to 1727. They are considerably less likely actually to read it.