Scotland and Ireland in the Eighteenth Century: the British Dimension

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Though the mid-eighteenth century is usually thought of as the century in which the first British empire reached its apogee and the late eighteenth century as the period when the second British empire took off, within the British Isles a much older process of imperial aggrandisement was ending. For centuries English kings had sought to extend their authority over the other states and territories of the archipelago, with very mixed results. Between 1707 and 1801, this objective was finally achieved. By 1802 the London-centred alliance of crown and Parliament held sway over the entire British Isles.

Prima facie this looks like the triumph of English imperialism, and there are elements of the new order that strongly suggest this remained a vital part of the process. But there was more to it than this. In both Scotland and Ireland strong support for absorption by a ‘British’ polity developed across a broad constituency, and in both cases this constituency proved vital to the process. Westminster could not easily force union on either the Scottish or Irish Parliaments, but London could assist its allies to achieve this end, albeit at the price of having those allies become its agents in the new British regions the process created. The creation of a pan-British state was then, a collaborative effort in which London-based governments, working through Scots and Irish political alliances, subordinated the British Isles to the metropolis.

In Scotland the political impetus that carried the polity into union with England came from an old-fashioned dynastic crisis. When her only surviving child, William, duke of Gloucester, died in 1700 it became clear the future Queen Anne was going to be the last of the Protestant Stuarts. The English Parliament promptly passed an Act of Succession consolidating existing legislation that decreed that Anne was to be succeeded by her nearest Protestant collateral heirs, the Guelf Electors of Hanover, and belligerently wrote the legislation to include Scotland and Ireland. Some Scots politicians were genuinely angered at English presumption and others joined them for a mix of reasons, some to increase their personal price, others to advance party agendas. In consequence, when the only Scottish Parliament of Anne’s reign met in 1703 it quickly slipped out of ministerial control and in 1704-5 passed a raft of legislation designed by some to bolster Scotland’s independence, and by others to force the English to seek a union of the two kingdoms. This provoked confrontation between the legislatures and a policy decision in London by the Marlborough-Godolphin administration that the only way to secure the Hanoverian succession was a constitutional union of England and Scotland. That way the then overwhelmingly anti-Jacobite English political nation could outweigh Scots constituencies who might favour a restoration of the Catholic Stuarts after Anne’s death. There was already a body of opinion in Scotland that favoured union with England, but since 1688 they had faced hostility at home and indifference/sneers at Westminster. From 1705-6, however, they enjoyed the full support of the English state.

London’s support took many forms. Some Scots politicians were forthrightly bribed, ‘bought and sold for English gold’, in the words of a famous song. Most were not. Instead the English government promised economic uplift for Scotland through legal access to England’s global empire, and the opportunity to play a role on a larger stage. Special deals for powerful constituencies such as the lawyers and Kirk, and promises of honours and jobs in the new polity tipped
Despite vociferous popular opposition on the streets and a passionate defence of Scotland’s independence by a coalition of Jacobites and Country party Patriots in Parliament, the Union finally passed in 1707.

This was, however, only the beginning of the process of creating a British polity. Many Scots were angry and unreconciled to the Union and the large pro-Jacobite minority proclaimed a Stuart restoration the only hope of ending it. At Westminster the Union was structured to add only a diminutive Scottish representation to an overwhelming English majority, who, once the Union became law, lapsed into indifference to Scottish affairs when not irritated by them. And the promised economic uplift was so slow to arrive in Scotland that the economy was only showing partial improvements in a few places (such as Glasgow) two generations later.

All of which meant that until the nineteenth century government in Scotland tended to be crisis driven. Scotland only received any attention when it forced itself onto the Westminster radar by dint of vexed political disputes that intersected with politics in London, Jacobite rebellions and economic calamity. The problem of persuading the Scots that the Union was in their best interest was, too, compounded by deals made to help ease the Union’s passage through the Scots Parliament. These included the preservation of Scotland’s separate (Roman-Dutch centred) legal system, which required separate legislation for Scotland and intermittantly clashed with its English counterpart, a Presbyterian Kirk that was suspicious of the Anglican hegemony built into the British Parliament and anomalous bodies like the Convention of Royal Burghs, which doggedly sought to advance its members’ economic interests regardless of Westminster’s policies.

Rather than address these problems, successive governments in London ignored them except in times of crisis, and then their interventions were not necessarily conducive to good order and government. When Scots law clashed with English law, as in 1712 over the issue of religious toleration for non-Presbyterian Protestants, the English majority in Parliament intervened to end the Kirk’s Union-guaranteed right to persecute such dissidents. The English majority was moved by the disingenuous presentation of the Scots Episcopal church as simply a law-abiding Scottish counterpart to the Church of England set upon by vicious Presbyterian fanatics, and however much this intervention might seem sympathetic to modern minds, it rested on profound ignorance of Scots socio-political dynamics. The net effect was to throw the Kirk into schism for over five years. Likewise when major Jacobite rebellions broke out in Scotland in 1715 and 1745 the government was caught unawares, slow to act and when they did finally commit troops and matériel sufficient to suppress the uprisings it did so brutally and vindictively. Little or no attempt was made to prevent government troops pillaging Scotland in the aftermath of the ‘15, leading to long-term economic damage to loyalists and rebels alike, and in 1746 William, duke of Cumberland, indiscriminately harried the Highlands as a punishment for the ‘45. In the same vein, little attention was paid by Westminster to the financially unsound proliferation of banking credit in late eighteenth-century Scotland until the collapse of the Ayr Bank threatened to set off a banking crisis in London.
In the end what prevented the British polity from permanently alienating the majority of Scots, and eventually secured acceptance of the Union, was the fact that the day-to-day administration of life and government remained under local control. Despite being denounced as traitors by many other Scots, and regularly having to bear the brunt of popular annoyance at Westminster’s crass interventions, the Scots Whigs tenaciously fought to preserve Scotland’s de facto local autonomy and worked hard to secure the Scots nation a goodly share of the sweets of empire. They did so for patriotic and self-interested reasons, but the consequences were positive for Scotland and the stability of the British polity. Their rearguard defence of Scotland’s separate-but-(un)equal status and aggressive lobbying for jobs outwith Scotland for their kith and kin allowed the survival of Scotland’s core civil institutions into the industrial age, and by the late eighteenth century Scotland was experiencing an economic uplift associated with the onset of industrialisation and the repatriation of capital earned overseas by Scots emigrants. These were no small achievements, and supplemented by the military exploits of the Scottish soldiers who made up a disproportionate part of the British army, softened English attitudes towards the Scots. These still tended towards indifference with respect to distinctly Scottish interests, yet by the end of the eighteenth century the English viewed the Scots more as partners than prisoners in the British imperial enterprise. This partnership meant more to the Scots than the English, but it fostered a common sense of Britishness that helped consolidate the British polity in the hearts and minds of two key ethnicities within the British Isles.

Ireland’s encounter with the eighteenth century British polity was profoundly different. They began in the same place: at the beginning of the eighteenth century the English generally regarded the Irish with the same contempt they viewed the Scots. Ireland, however, also began the century with a great deal less bargaining power. Ireland had its own Parliament and government, but both were ultimately controlled from London, in that all Irish legislation was subject to review and alteration by the English Privy Council, and English administrations used government offices in Ireland as political patronage in England. Ireland’s ruling elite had been reinstalled by English military force (1689-91) and was in consequence very aware of its dependence on English support. English/British control of Ireland was thus relatively solid in the early eighteenth century and did not require extraordinary measures such as a union to secure it.

England/Britain did, though, have an ‘Irish problem’, and at its core lay the fact that most of the Irish people were Catholic. Protestants constituted only 25% of the Irish population, and at least half were non-Anglican and therefore second class citizens. Early to mid-eighteenth century English/British governments thus controlled Ireland, but only through a narrow elite, and since that elite knew they were London’s only option other than a hugely expensive military occupation, they used London’s need of them to bargain for offices and rewards. This was not necessarily to the disadvantage of Ireland as a whole. Ireland’s Parliament and government sought to defend, and where possible, advance, Ireland’s economic interests. Protestant Irish officialdom also tended to value social peace and thus worked to fend off potential clashes between London’s expectations and the sensibilities of the Catholic
masses who farmed the Irish elite's estates, hewed their wood and drew their water. The Irish elite thus acted as patrons and defenders of their people, and created an attenuated form of the social bonds that held society together throughout the rest of the archipelago. The upshot was that Ireland experienced a long period of relative social peace between the mid-1690s and the 1780s.

Though it was something they sought, this peace had repercussions for Ireland’s rulers. Confronted by English/British indifference at best whenever their interests were in play, elements within the Irish Protestant community began to identify with Ireland rather than hearking back to their Anglo/Scots ethnic origins. In fits and starts from the 1690s to the 1760s this promoted the rise of a Protestant Patriot interest. This interest intermittently enjoyed a good deal of popular support and during the imperial crisis, brought on by the American Revolution, the Patriots gained the support of an armed popular movement: the Volunteers. These began as regiments of patriotic civilians pledged to defend Ireland against the wicked Americans; they quickly became hothouses for Irish patriotism. And the focus of both the Patriot politicians’ and Volunteers’ ire were the administrative structures through which London controlled Ireland’s government and limited its economic potential. Hence when it became clear by the most disastrous stage of the American war that the Volunteers and the Patriots could potentially become the nucleus of an American-style revolution, which Britain would have been hard pressed to put down, the North government glumly gave way and yielded a raft of economic concessions. It was, though, too late for such douceurs to halt the Patriot movement, and its leaders (notably Henry Grattan) immediately began demanding Ireland’s return to near full sovereignty and particularly the repeal of Poyning’s Law, the basis of the British government’s right to revise or veto Irish legislation. With the fall of the North administration and the coming to power of the Patriots’ allies, the Rockingham Whigs, in London, this became politically possible at Westminster and a rush of further concessions followed, so that by 1782 Ireland was effectively constitutionally autonomous (though not fully sovereign).

The triumph of the Protestant Ascendancy was, however, not to last. The core problem in Ireland remained the total disfranchisement and day-to-day discrimination against its Catholic majority. Now Ireland was self-governing they wanted relief, and while there was substantial Protestant support for such reforms a short-sighted majority within the elite obstinately blocked almost every attempt to emancipate the Catholics. In this context London came to seem the best hope of further reform, and Catholic Ireland’s leaders began to solicit British intervention. British governments still had enormous influence within Irish politics, and the government of William Pitt the younger was open to the idea of Catholic emancipation.

At that point, however, the French Revolution rudely intruded. Alarmed and disgusted by the violent excesses of the French revolutionaries, Pitt and the majority of the British elite turned against reform. This left the Irish Catholics and reformist Protestants (notably strong among the Ulster Presbyterians) frustrated and angry, and elements within this axis came together as a new organisation, the United Irishmen, which was drawn towards French
Revolutionary principles. The conservative Protestant bloc responded with draconian legislation to repress United Irish ‘sedition’ and in parts of Ireland (notably Ulster) ancient fears of ‘popery’ revived, leading to the appearance of backwoods Protestant organisations that coalesced in the Orange Order. This attacked Catholics believed to be threatening Protestant interests, provoking retaliation by the primarily Catholic secret society known as the Defenders. By the mid-1790s the cycle of outrage and retaliation between the two had put Ireland on the path to civil war. The United Irishmen had meanwhile been thoroughly radicalised by these events and their enthusiasm for the French Revolution, and in alliance with the Defenders were (successfully) negotiating for a French invasion of Ireland.

This culminated in an ill-organised United Irish/Defender uprising in 1798, which was belatedly supported by a small French force. British military intervention crushed both of these and brutally suppressed the Defenders, but the Irish Protestant elite was discredited in the process. It was clear they could no longer rule Ireland, only prevent anyone else from doing so. Despite being as hostile to the French Revolution and Defenderism as the Ascendancy, the hierarchy of the Catholic church and the surviving Catholic peerage and gentry, had lost all faith in the ability of Ascendancy government to maintain social order, and they looked to London for a solution. They were joined in this by the shattered remnants of the Patriot coalition of the 1780s, and this nexus, plus the disgust felt in London at the Ascendancy’s incompetence, brought on a determination in London to force through a constitutional union. Henry Grattan and a handful of Patriots opposed this, cynically backed by Ascendancy politicians bent on squeezing one last drop of patronage out of their control of the moribund Irish state, and the first union bill was defeated in 1800. Pitt therefore simply bought enough Ascendancy votes to pass it in 1801, ironically only to be forced to leave office when George III obstructed the emancipation of Britain’s Catholics that Pitt had promised would follow. It was a fittingly ignominious and tawdry end to a failed state.

Though the absorption of Scotland and Ireland by the pan-British state is sometimes regarded as both inevitable and good for all concerned, it is not clear this interpretation is well founded. Despite its apparent poverty, it is possible that Scotland had the potential to make its own way; and it is instructive to note that in 1708 and 1745 the French, who were not sentimental about such things, thought a Scottish state allied to France could be economically and politically viable. By contrast the Irish state was probably not viable in the long term. Barring a sudden inclination to self-sacrifice on the part of the Protestant elite its contradictions were going to endure, and they eventually proved fatal. Yet this, too, was contingent. Britain defeated revolutionary France, but a French victory could have created a revitalised, democratically-inclined Irish state. Ultimately perhaps the most important single factor in the creation of the British mega-state of 1801 was the determination of England’s rulers to make it happen. That they decided to do so (as opposed to keeping Scotland and Ireland as satellite states) was entirely in response to contingent circumstances in 1700-1707 and 1789-1801. If Queen Anne had given birth to a fecund line of Protestant Stuarts, or Louis XVI successfully crushed the French Revolution, there would have been no need for drastic measures to
secure England’s interests and the Scots and Irish states might have survived a great deal longer.

NOTES


2 SP 55/10 f. 20, Secretary Roxborough to the Lord Advocate, 16 January 1722

3 SP 54/6 f. 144, General Assembly of the Kirk’s address to George I, 27 September 1714


10 Macinnes, *Union and Empire*, pp. 291-5.


19 SP 37/14 ff. 71-6, memo on the roads of Scotland

20 SP 35/57, Undersecretary Pringle to Secretary Townshend, 03 August 1725


25 SP 67/12 f. 48, Secretary of State Fox to the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, 29 November 1755


31 Eighteenth-Century Ireland, pp. 196-235.


33 Eighteenth-Century Ireland, pp. 245-74.


35 Eighteenth Century Ireland, pp. 306-8.


FURTHER READING


A. Macinnes, Union and Empire. The Making of the United Kingdom in 1707 [Cambridge, 2007]


I. D. Whyte, Scotland Before the Industrial Revolution. An Economic and Social History c. 1050 - c. 1750 [London, 1995]

CITATION


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