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Introduction

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Imagining Scotland: Scottish political thought and the problem of Britain 1560–1650

Roger A. Mason

Blessed as they are with the benefit of hindsight, historians may legitimately look back on the decade of the 1560s as one of the great watershed moments in Scottish history. These years witnessed a series of interrelated crises – confessional, constitutional and diplomatic – the roots of which certainly lay deep in the past, but which came to a head in the years associated with the personal rule of Mary Queen of Scots. In many respects, the contents of this volume are concerned with the ways in which this ‘multiple crisis’ resolved itself over the ensuing century and with how the political and clerical elites came to terms with the dramatic changes it wrought. The dates 1560 to 1650 are intended to provide only a rough indication of the book’s chronological scope. If one wanted to be precise one might well begin with the outbreak of the Congregation’s rebellion in May 1559 and end with the execution of Charles I in January 1649. But the history of political thought and culture is hardly amenable to such exact dating. Inevitably, some of the chapters that follow look back to the period before 1560 and some look forward to the period after 1650 – and some do both. Maurice Lee, Jr, for example, in criticizing the idea of a mid-seventeenth-century ‘general crisis’, sets Scotland in a broad European context which stretches from the break-up of medieval Christendom to the formation of modern nation-states. Significantly enough, however, he highlights in the process the immense importance of the 1560s as well as the 1640s in the historical development of early modern Scotland (chapter 2). Periodization can, as he suggests, create as many problems as it solves for historians. Nevertheless, there is a great deal to be said for taking the period from 1560 to 1650 as a basic unit of study and for seeing these years as a relatively coherent whole.¹

¹ Standard general works covering the period include Gordon Donaldson, *Scotland: James V–James VII* (Edinburgh, 1965); Jenny Wormald, *Court, kirk and community: Scotland 1470–1625* (London, 1981); Keith M. Brown, *Kingdom or province? Scotland and the regal union 1603–1715* (Basingstoke and London, 1992); and Michael Lynch, *Scotland: a new history* (London, 1991). In addition, Maurice Lee, Jr, *Great Britain’s Solomon: James VI and I and his three kingdoms* (Urbana and Chicago, 1990) and Arthur H. Williamson, *Scottish*

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For a start, it places the union of the crowns of 1603 at almost the precise mid-point rather than at the end or the beginning of an era. It is all too easy for historians of England to think in terms of a sixteenth-century Tudor age and a seventeenth-century Stuart age. For historians of Scotland there is no such dynastic caesura conveniently coinciding with the turn of the century. Yet they too are inclined, for obvious reasons, to view James VI's accession to the English throne as a major turning-point. In a sense, of course, this perception of 1603 as a significant watershed in both Scotland and England is perfectly justifiable. If nothing else, it created the multiple British monarchy which has aroused so much historical interest in recent years and which gave rise to the seminar on which this collection of essays is based. While this book is certainly intended to address the 'problem of Britain', however, it does so from a specifically Scottish vantage-point. Its purpose is to explore the distinctive nature of Scottish political thought and culture as well as to examine the impact of the union of the crowns upon them. Seen in this perspective, 1603 is not so much the beginning or the end of an era, but a pivotal moment in an ongoing process of Scottish self-definition – and redefinition – which began with the Reformation of 1560 and was to culminate (though not to end) in a second Reformation in the late 1630s and 1640s.

With this extended chronology in mind, it is worth returning to the 1560s to examine in more detail the nature and implications of the critical events of that decade. Most obviously, it was marked by a confessional revolution which saw the Scottish parliament of August 1560 repudiate the authority of Rome, abolish the mass and adopt a Protestant Confession of Faith. While these statutes did not immediately receive royal assent, and while a counter-reformation remained at least a possibility so long as Mary Stewart was on the throne, this rejection of centuries of Catholic tradition proved in the event to be a decisive break with an immensely rich ecclesiastical and cultural heritage.² The complex origins of the religious revolution need not detain us here, but the manner in which it was carried through is of crucial importance. For this was not a magisterial reformation initiated and controlled by the crown. On the contrary, it was a reformation from below, fuelled by the changing expectations – if not necessarily the outright com-

national consciousness in the age of James VI (Edinburgh, 1979) are both essential reading for the concerns of this volume.

² For detailed studies of this and what follows, see Ian Cowan, *The Scottish Reformation: church and society in sixteenth-century Scotland* (London, 1982); Gordon Donaldson, *The Scottish Reformation* (Cambridge, 1960); Gordon Donaldson, *All the queen's men: power and politics in Mary Stewart's Scotland* (London, 1983); David McRoberts (ed.), *Essays on the Scottish Reformation* (Glasgow, 1962); Michael Lynch, *Edinburgh and the Reformation* (Edinburgh, 1981); and James Kirk, *Patterns of reform: continuity and change in the Reformation* (Edinburgh, 1989).

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mitment to Protestantism – of a vociferous class of lairds and burgesses and led by a powerful faction of the aristocracy in open defiance of the crown. The long-term consequences of this were manifold. At one level, it gave rise to the strident debate over the crown's place in the reformed kirk which lay at the heart of James VI's clash with the Melvillian presbyterians just as it was central to Charles I's confrontation with the covenanters. Yet a bitterly polarized ecclesiological conflict, large as it looms in the chapters of this book, was by no means the only consequence of the 'popular' character of the Reformation in Scotland.

There was also, as this suggests, a significant social dimension to the revolutionary events of the 1560s which is well worth further comment. In many respects, the term 'popular' is highly misleading, for the critical factor was not so much the role of the common people – about which we know so little – as the unprecedented attendance of over one hundred lairds at the Reformation Parliament of August 1560. This is not to suggest that the revolutionary changes of the 1560s were the direct product of a 'social crisis' precipitated by the increased prosperity of a lairdly class demanding a political voice commensurate with their enhanced economic power. Yet one might plausibly argue that their role in the Reformation was part of a longer-term process of economic and social transformation which began sometime before 1560 and continued through to the 1640s and beyond. The so-called 'rise of the lairds' may or may not constitute a century-long 'silent revolution' the full consequences of which only became manifest in the social dislocation of the covenanting era.³ Quite clearly, however, the prominence of lairds on the post-Reformation political stage, and not least their displacement of the clergy in government administration and the legal profession, profoundly affected the nature of Scottish political culture and the terms of Scottish political debate. For just as the emergence of a literate, often highly educated, Scottish 'gentry' served to broaden and deepen the social base of the political community, so it encouraged the development of a print culture capable of sustaining sophisticated political discussion characterized by the complex interplay of humanistic, legal and clerical modes of discourse.

Even if it is legitimate to talk of the rise of the lairds, however, it does not necessarily follow that it was accomplished at the expense of the aristocracy.⁴

³ The thesis of Walter Makey's *The church of the covenant 1637–1651* (Edinburgh, 1979), ch. 1. For the social background, see Margaret Sanderson, *Scottish rural society in the sixteenth century* (Edinburgh, 1982). The effects of these changes on the aristocracy are discussed further in two articles by Keith M. Brown: 'Noble indebtedness in Scotland between the Reformation and the Revolution', *Historical Research*, 62 (1989), 260–75, and 'Aristocratic finances and the origins of the Scottish Revolution', *EHR*, 104 (1989), 46–87.

⁴ In so far as the lairds considered themselves part of the nobility, the distinction is of dubious relevance. On this and other aspects of contemporary aristocratic culture, see in particular

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As we shall see, in the post-Reformation period, a number of new models of noble conduct were devised, to which the aristocracy were urged to aspire. Yet such attempts to persuade the nobility to exercise their authority differently were clearly based on the assumption – whether implicit or explicit – that it was the nobility who remained the key repositories of power within Scottish society. Despite such efforts, moreover, it proved hard to eradicate the traditional feudal–baronial conception of politics which had regulated crown–magnate relations in Scotland since the later middle ages. Aristocratic discontent with the policies of both Mary Queen of Scots and Charles I could be formulated in highly conventional terms as a ‘problem of counsel’ to be resolved simply by ridding the monarch of evil advisers.⁵ In a sense, however, such strategies were no more than an ideological fig-leaf which, if they salved conservative aristocratic consciences, did little to conceal the more profound constitutional issues raised by the events of the 1560s and reformulated in the 1630s. The Reformation was, after all, initiated by a rebellion against royal authority and made safe by the deposition of a queen. The insistence that Mary abdicated voluntarily in 1567 may well be construed as evidence of the instinctive conservatism of an essentially aristocratic political community. But the ensuing debate over the nature and location of sovereignty clearly indicates that the broad ideological consensus which had sustained the Stewart monarchy in Scotland since the late fourteenth century was shattered beyond repair.⁶ The emergence of divine right theories of kingship in response to the ‘populist’ politics of John Knox and George Buchanan polarized Scottish political debate in a manner which was not just unprecedented but which was to resonate profoundly through the constitutional conflicts of the seventeenth century.

If the events of the 1560s destabilized the crown’s constitutional position, however, they also raised serious questions about the Stewart dynasty’s traditional role as a symbol of the Scottish kingdom’s historic and continuing autonomy. For more than a century and a half, between 1371 and 1542, the dynastic interests of the Stewarts were generally perceived to coincide with the ‘national’ aspirations of the Scottish political community. As a result, the crown became the most potent available symbol of the kingdom’s integrity and identity. In 1542, however, the succession of a female monarch, and the prospect of her marriage into a foreign royal house,

Jenny Wormald, *Lords and men in Scotland: bonds of manrent 1442–1603* (Edinburgh, 1985) and Keith M. Brown, *Bloodfeud in Scotland 1573–1625* (Edinburgh, 1986).

⁵ See Roger A. Mason, ‘The aristocracy, episcopacy and the National Covenant of 1638’, in Terry Brotherstone (ed.), *Covenant, charter and party* (Aberdeen, 1989), pp. 7–24.

⁶ On the basic nature of this consensus, see Roger A. Mason, ‘Kingship, tyranny and the right to resist in fifteenth-century Scotland’, *SHR*, 66 (1987), 125–51.

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set dynasticism and nationalism on a collision course of momentous proportions. Arguably, it was the problem of reconciling the irreconcilable demands of her roles as queen of Scots and European dynast which destroyed Mary Stewart and came close to destroying her kingdom.⁷ As it was, by the end of her personal rule, her Scottish subjects had effectively rejected the Auld Alliance with France and thrown in their lot with the Auld Enemy of England. Once again, the origins of this diplomatic revolution, inextricably bound up with the revolution in religion, need not concern us here. More important is the fact that in the event it proved irreversible and that it was finally made secure in 1603 when England resolved her own dynastic crisis by grudgingly accepting the accession of a Scottish king to the English throne. Among the most remarkable – and least well-researched – aspects of this revolutionary break with the past is the speed with which the Scots became reconciled to the prospect of union with England and their reluctance to sever it once it was finally accomplished. As far as the Scots were concerned, the ‘problem of Britain’ was not a problem with union *per se*, but with the form which that union might take and the way it was perceived in England.⁸

The idea of Britain as a single geo-political entity was not of course a new one. Not only did it have distinguished medieval antecedents, but more pertinently it had been strongly touted in the 1540s in the unionist propaganda orchestrated by Protector Somerset. It is argued here, however, that the vision of Britain which emerged from the ‘Edwardian Moment’ was loaded with connotations of English hegemony which, stemming from the age-old claim of the English crown to feudal superiority over Scotland, gave rise to what is best characterized as an ideology of Anglo-British imperialism (chapter 7). In their enthusiasm for union, a number of Scots in the late 1540s, and again in the years after 1603, were happy to subscribe to – and develop – this thoroughly Anglocentric idea of Britain. But many others expressed grave misgivings about its implications for Scotland’s status and identity within the union. As Jenny Wormald shows, while xenophobia lay behind much of the mutual suspicion and distrust evident in 1603, the situation was aggravated by the difficulty of finding a mutually acceptable solution to the problem of governing a multiple or composite monarchy.

⁷ For a variety of different perspectives on Mary’s reign, see Antonia Fraser, *Mary Queen of Scots* (London, 1969); Gordon Donaldson, *Mary Queen of Scots* (London, 1974); Jenny Wormald, *Mary Queen of Scots: a study in failure* (London, 1988); and Michael Lynch (ed.), *Mary Stewart: queen in three kingdoms* (Oxford, 1988).

⁸ See Gordon Donaldson, ‘The foundations of Anglo-Scottish union’, in his *Scottish church history* (Edinburgh, 1985), pp. 137–63, on the background to union. On the Scots’ persistent unionism after 1603, see Brian Levack, *The formation of the British state: England, Scotland and the union 1603–1707* (Oxford, 1987). A number of the essays in Roger A. Mason (ed.), *Scotland and England 1286–1815* (Edinburgh, 1987), also broach the topic.

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James himself, whose initial enthusiasm for ‘perfect union’ proved unpalatable to Scots and English alike, may well have come round to thinking, as many of his Scottish subjects evidently did, in terms of the formula ‘king of all and king of each’. But the parity of status which this implied was never likely to sit comfortably with English self-perceptions (chapter 1). Under the circumstances, it is perhaps surprising that the union survived at all. That it did so may well owe something to the fact that, while Scots and Englishmen were acutely conscious of the differences between them, they were also increasingly aware of the common threat they faced from continental Catholicism. Although it is not a theme pursued here, it is at least worth suggesting that, in ideological terms, the vision of Britain as a ‘beleaguered isle’ menaced by the massed forces of the papal Antichrist did as much as anything to cement the diplomatic revolution of the 1560s, to ensure that union was peacefully realized in 1603 and to prevent its dissolution thereafter.⁹

That said, however, as far as the Scots were concerned, the problem still remained of articulating a vision of Britain which would be something more than England writ large and within which Scotland could continue to be imagined as a distinct community. In fact, in a sense irrespective of union, the revolutionary events of the 1560s had already confronted the Scots with what amounted to an acute crisis of political and cultural identity which forced them to redefine who and what they were. A key figure in the process of reimagining Scotland in terms more appropriate to the post-Reformation world was undoubtedly George Buchanan, and it is no surprise that he figures so prominently in the chapters that follow. Yet, as Arthur Williamson demonstrates, this was an agenda addressed by many contemporary Scottish intellectuals, including a group of distinguished Edinburgh mathematicians – among them Robert Pont and John Napier of Merchiston – whose vernacular writings on prophecy and the apocalypse spoke with urgency to a wide spectrum of Scottish society and testify to the remarkable sophistication of late sixteenth-century Scottish political culture (chapter 8). For the purposes of this introduction, however, it is perhaps more appropriate to concentrate, not on the works of individual writers, but on certain key institutions – the monarchy, the aristocracy, the law and the kirk – which separately and in their interrelatedness provided the means through which the Scots could imagine and define the community to which they belonged. In so far as each of these institutions was a focus of power and authority in Scottish society, each may be said to have generated patterns of

⁹ See Carol Z. Weiner, ‘The beleaguered isle: a study of Elizabethan and early Jacobean anti-Catholicism’, *Past and Present*, 51 (1971), 27–62. Although the ‘beleaguered isle’ is in this instance purely English, the argument is capable of sustaining a British construction.

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thought and discourse in terms of which contemporary Scots could conceptualize their political world. By looking at each of them in turn, therefore, it should be possible to convey some sense of the dynamics of Scottish political thought and culture in the post-Reformation period and the impact of the union upon them.

The most important of these institutions was undoubtedly the monarchy, the traditional focus of the Scottish kingdom's independence and identity. As was suggested above, however, the events of the 1560s, particularly the deposition of Mary in 1567, shattered the ideological consensus which had sustained the Stewart dynasty and initiated a debate on the nature of sovereignty which polarized around 'constitutionalist' and 'absolutist' views of royal authority. The case for elective monarchy and the accountability of kings to their subjects was most influentially stated by George Buchanan, while the counter thesis in the form of a divine right theory of kingship was formulated by no less a person than Buchanan's pupil, James VI himself. Both men were, of course, contributing to a controversy which extended well beyond the borders of Scotland and were doing so in terms applicable to realms other than their own. Nevertheless, it was with Scotland that they were primarily concerned and it was Buchanan's account of the workings of a specifically Scottish 'constitution' which aroused the ire of James VI just as it attracted the attention of the three exiled Catholic critics of Buchanan's theory examined by J. H. Burns. From his analysis of the political ideas of Ninian Winzet, Adam Blackwood and William Barclay, it emerges that their Scottish roots and Marian sympathies led them to develop far less radical – indeed, increasingly conservative – interpretations of Scottish kingship in particular as well as to reflect on the nature of monarchy in general (chapter 6). The extent to which these and other Scots were contributing to a debate of European scope should alert us to the fact that James was able to draw on a wide variety of sources, continental as well as native, in his efforts to relegitimize his rule in the face of his tutor's subversive legacy. It was a task which this most literate and intelligent of kings took very seriously. It was also one which, as Rebecca Bushnell demonstrates, informs much more than his overtly political writings. Her exploration of the influence of literary neo-classicism on both Buchanan and James VI reveals not only the extent to which political and poetic theory interpenetrated in their thinking, but also how different perceptions of the relationship between nature, law and custom gave rise to equally different conceptions of the nature of the Scottish polity and the location of sovereignty within it (chapter 4).

That James VI felt deeply threatened by Buchanan's political ideas is beyond dispute. But it was not in fact his tutor's influence alone which drove the king to assert the 'free' and 'absolute' nature of his authority. It was Buchanan as interpreted by the radical presbyterians. For just as

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Buchanan's republican politics were quickly internalized by presbyterian clerics such as Andrew Melville, so James's development of a divine right theory of kingship was intimately related to his efforts to establish an English-style royal supremacy over the Scottish kirk (chapter 5). James, in short, responded to the inherent anti-imperialism of presbyterian thought by embracing whole-heartedly the imperial ideology developed in England to underwrite the Tudor monarchy's assertions of supreme authority over both church and state. In the late 1540s, and again after 1603, this essentially English ideology, validated by appeals to English historical precedents, was reinterpreted in explicitly British terms. Yet the result, as already suggested, was a vision of an Anglo-British imperial monarchy to which the Scots could subscribe only by repudiating their own kingdom's historic autonomy and identity (chapter 7). In the later middle ages, the crown's role as a symbol of Scotland's freedom from English overlordship had generated an elaborate historical mythology, which located the foundation of the kingdom by Fergus I in 330 BC and traced a continuous line of over one hundred kings down to the reigning monarch himself.¹⁰ After 1603, the Scots continued to cling to this *mythistoire* as the linchpin of their historic and continuing identity. Its effective abandonment by the monarchy, however, divested it of much of the meaning and authority which it had previously possessed. In the seventeenth century, such interest as the Stewarts displayed in their fabled Scottish ancestry was as occasional and opportunistic as their visits to their ancient Scottish patrimony. Indeed, as Keith Brown shows, the successors of James VI and I proved increasingly indifferent to maintaining even the illusion of Britishness which he had fought so hard to foster. Gradually, in the course of the century, crown and court alike became identified – and identified themselves – as essentially English institutions (chapter 3).

An absentee and increasingly Anglicized monarchy was hardly an ideal symbol of Scotland's uniqueness and integrity. The aristocracy, however, who had traditionally played a disproportionately important role in Scotland's decentralized political culture, appeared to offer more promising material.¹¹ During the sixteenth century, the conventional feudal–baronial image of the nobility, compounded of the martial ethos of the chivalric code and the feudal obligation of service to the crown, was challenged by the emergence of two alternative models of noble conduct and, by extension,

¹⁰ On this, see Roger A. Mason, 'Scotching the Brut: politics, history and national myth in sixteenth-century Britain', in Mason (ed.), *Scotland and England*, pp. 60–84.

¹¹ The works of Wormald and Brown cited in note 4 above provide essential background to what follows in this and the next paragraph. In addition, see Jenny Wormald, 'Bloodfeud, kindred and government in early modern Scotland', *Past and Present*, 87 (1980), 54–97, and

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two alternative conceptions of the community they dominated. Firstly, the writings of Hector Boece, George Buchanan and David Hume of Godscroft presented an ever more classicized picture of Scotland as an aristocratic republic founded on civic humanist principles. In this case, the nobility, schooled in Ciceronian virtue, were charged with preserving the welfare of the community as a whole and, where necessary, with restraining a vicious monarch's abuse of royal power. The image this conjures up of the Scottish nobility striding across the heather in tartan togas clutching well-thumbed copies of Cicero in their hands, while certainly a caricature, is still highly suggestive. If instead of Cicero, however, they were carrying well-thumbed copies of the Bible, a rather different image of the aristocracy – and of Scotland – emerges: that is, of a godly magistracy ruling a godly commonwealth according to the law of God. For Scots, the *locus classicus* of this Calvinist model of an inferior magistracy was the writings of John Knox where noblemen are repeatedly reminded that their office and authority derives from God and that they are duty bound to protect the 'true religion' from the tyranny of ungodly rulers. It was a paradigm of aristocratic conduct which was not only espoused by the reformed ministry in Scotland, but which could also, as E. J. Cowan makes plain, inform and legitimize the behaviour of even the greatest of noblemen. His study of *MacCailein Mor*, the first and only marquis of Argyll, shows that while the 'covenanting earl' could draw on native Gaelic sources to justify his opposition to Charles I's regime, he was equally well aware of his duties and responsibilities as an inferior magistrate of the realm (chapter 10).

To these three images of the aristocracy – feudal–baronial, civic humanist and Calvinist – it is as well to add a fourth one – and one which was a good deal less flattering to noble self-esteem. For whereas the three discussed so far were predicated on the relative independence of the nobility from crown control, the fourth in its most extreme form saw them as little more than functionaries of a centralized royal administration with powers and privileges wholly dependent on the will of an absolute monarch. The extent to which James VI's attitude to the aristocracy was informed by the ambition to fashion an absolutist Scottish state is a matter of some debate.¹² Nevertheless, his efforts to 'civilize' their behaviour – to uproot the feud, for example, with all that this implied in terms of the exercise of independent

Keith M. Brown, 'In search of the godly magistrate in Reformation Scotland', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 40 (1989), 553–81.

¹² Sparked initially by Maurice Lee, Jr's *John Maitland of Thirlestane and the foundations of Stewart despotism in Scotland* (Princeton, 1959), and rumbling through a good deal of the literature on the king's relations with the nobility already cited. The most recent contribution is Julian Goodare, 'The nobility and the absolutist state in Scotland 1584–1638', *History*, 78 (1993), 161–82, where further references to the debate can be traced.