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Colin Kidd

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Introduction: the problems of Unionism and banal unionism

Does Scottish unionist political thought merit serious historical analysis? Is there, in fact, a body of unionist political thought worthy of the name? Certainly, the topic has not generated much enthusiasm in the field of Scottish studies. While not all Scottish historians or literary scholars are partisan nationalists, Scottish history and Scottish literature as subjects nurture a non-doctrinaire nationalist outlook by way of their understandable emphases on the distinctiveness of Scotland and Scottish historical and cultural trends from wider developments in the rest of Britain. Unsurprisingly, Scottish academics have paid vastly greater attention to nationalism than to unionism, out of all proportion to the former's representativeness of public opinion. It would be hard to gauge the overwhelming dominance of unionism in Scottish political culture between the 1750s and the 1970s if one read widely in Scottish historiography, even harder if one immersed oneself in Scottish literary studies. The perceived stolidity of unionist values would appear to hold less attraction for academics than the romantic stirrings of nationalism, however faint the electoral ripples. While a few books have examined the political phenomenon of Scottish unionism, there has been no study of the ideas which underpinned it. An assumption appears to prevail among Scottish academics that unionism is dull and monochrome, and its political thought unlikely to exhibit much in the way of originality or sophistication – an

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intellectual dead end. After all, the Scottish intelligentsia as a whole tends to view unionism as un-Scottish and inauthentic, a form of false consciousness which is passively derivative of English values, aims and interests. As such, Scottish unionism is held not to be a branch of indigenous political thinking so much as it is a parrot cry, which mimics the voice of its English masters.¹

It is not difficult to trace the source of these received assumptions. They arose during the Scottish Renaissance, a movement for literary renewal which began during the inter-war era, and were most clearly articulated by its presiding genius, the poet and polemicist Christopher Murray Grieve (1892–1978), who is better known by his pen name Hugh MacDiarmid. His bequest to Scottish intellectual life was an uncompromising and Manichean nationalism which viewed Anglo-Scottish relations in rigid black-and-white terms. MacDiarmid's *Who's who* entry gave his hobby as 'anglophobia', and for him, unsurprisingly, Scottish unionism constituted nothing more than a form of capitulation to an alien oppressor. Indeed, he considered unionism to be an object rather than a subject, symptomatic of colonial passivity and 'the whole base business of people who do not act but are merely acted upon'. Unionism involved merely a kind of collaboration on the part of the cravenly provincial establishment of what MacDiarmid mocked as the colony of 'Anglo-Scotland': the politicians, divines, professors and teachers he denounced as the 'toadies and lickspittles of the English Ascendancy'.

¹ See e.g. Hugh MacDiarmid, *To circumjack Cencrastus* (Edinburgh, 1930), 'The parrot cry', p. 22.

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Unionists were inevitably drab, conventional and uninspired, for ‘English Imperialism’ had induced a cultural cringe among Scots, compelling ‘conformity’ with English attitudes and inhibiting the free creativity of the Scottish psyche. Unionist culture – except as a kitsch deformation of Scottish tradition – was a misnomer.²

Unionism retains these pejorative associations for the Scottish intelligentsia. MacDiarmid’s legacy endures, largely unchallenged, in Scottish studies, a field which operates on binary principles, namely that there is an antithetical relationship – and always has been – between Scotland and England. This notion leads to the further conclusion that nationalism is somehow natural and that unionism, assumed to be a pale imitation of an alien Englishness, is, by contrast, an unnatural perversion. Tom Nairn, for example, has described ‘British Unionism’ as a ‘short-lived pseudo-transcendence’ of the basic national unit.³ Furthermore, MacDiarmid’s view that Scotland’s experience within the Union was colonial, has been recycled by a new generation of intellectuals influenced by post-colonialism. As far as the post-colonialists are concerned, the ideology of Scottish unionism existed only as a rhetoric of negativity, a strain of inferiorism which denounced pre-Union Scotland as backward and praised the colonial power for improving and enlightening the natives. It is worth pointing

² A. Bold, *MacDiarmid* (1988: London, 1990 pbk), p. 469; Hugh MacDiarmid, *Lucky poet: a self-study in literature and political ideas* (1943: London, 1972), pp. 148–9; Hugh MacDiarmid, *The rauchle tongue: hitherto uncollected prose*, 111 (ed. A. Calder, G. Murray and A. Riach, Manchester, 1988), pp. 213, 289.

³ T. Nairn, *After Britain* (2000: London, 2001 pbk), p. 154.

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out here that the very terms ‘improvement’ and ‘enlightenment’ – conventionally used to describe economic and cultural developments in eighteenth-century Scotland – have also become taboo. These terms have acquired pejorative connotations – indeed are reputed unionist shibboleths – because they seem to convey the implication that Scotland before the Union of 1707 was unimproved and unenlightened.⁴

Unfortunately, articulations of unionism in recent decades – at least since the coming of Thatcherism – have done little but confirm nationalist caricatures of the phenomenon. Today’s Scotland knows the phenomenon largely by way of the lopsided unionism of the Thatcher era when it came to mean simply resistance to a Scottish parliament, or even to the idea of any reconstruction of the Union or the British constitution. Moreover, Thatcherite unionism also upheld a stridently unitarist conception of the British state, which left little scope for the defence of Scottish particularity within the Union. Unitarism was a reflection of political realities: a Conservative government, which drew its electoral support predominantly from England, was determined to remake Scotland in its own image, but was faced with a Scottish people reluctant to honour it with a mandate. As the sociologist David McCrone noted: ‘By the late 1980s Unionism as a political creed had grown thrawn and defensive, and reduced to its most simple meaning of doing Westminster’s bidding.’⁵ Unionism – in its reduced

⁴ C. Beveridge and R. Turnbull, *The eclipse of Scottish culture* (Edinburgh, 1989).

⁵ D. McCrone, *Understanding Scotland: the sociology of a stateless nation* (London and New York, 1992), p. 144.

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Thatcherite formulation – prescribed the narrow conformity of recalcitrant corporatist or socialist Scots to the free market values of the south of England. Stridently integrationist and relentlessly negative in its implacable opposition to devolution, Thatcherite unionism had turned into the cartoonish unionism depicted by its opponents, an un-Scottish fifth column within Scottish public life bent on the assimilation of Scottish society to English norms and values.

But was Scottish unionism always like this? Under the twin influences of Hugh MacDiarmid and Margaret Thatcher Scottish intellectuals had forgotten the fluidity of older strains of Scottish unionism, some of which were highly sensitive to the claims of Scottish nationhood. A caricature unitarism had obliterated the contours of traditional unionism from popular memory. Unionism was not necessarily about capitulation, assimilation, integration or emulation – though, to be fair, it could be sometimes – but was more often about the maintenance of semi-autonomy or nationhood within Union, by means of compromise, adjustment and even nationalist assertion when required.⁶ Pre-Thatcherite unionism had contained many mansions.

This book will present the case that there were a variety of unionisms in modern Scottish history. Not only did formulations of unionism vary significantly over time and in different political contexts, but unionism also took divergent forms in the major arenas of Scottish discourse – juridical,

⁶ Cf. N. Phillipson, 'Nationalism and ideology', in J. N. Wolfe (ed.), *Government and nationalism in Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1969); L. Paterson, *The autonomy of modern Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1994).

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constitutional and ecclesiastical – as well as in ethnological and historical writings. The volume eschews an overly narrow definition of the history of political thought to embrace political argument in its broadest sense as debate over the institutions of a society, including its legal system and its established churches. Scholars have hitherto been oblivious of these important variations in unionist discourse; nor have they attempted to offer a taxonomy of unionisms, which is one of the central aims of this book.

Another important objective is to show how some of the varieties of Scottish unionism overlapped significantly with certain expressions of Scottish nationalism. The unionist spectrum ranges from assimilation and anglicisation to the outspoken defence of Scottish rights within a strict construction of the Union – a position which verges on nationalism and is sometimes interpreted as such. It is a category error, therefore, to think of unionism and nationalism as opposites. Rather the relationship of unionism and nationalism is very complicated and defies easy parsing. Nationhood as well as provincialism have both been conspicuous – and integral – aspects of the Scottish unionist tradition. For much of modern Scottish political history there was an ill-defined – and neglected – middle ground where moderate unionism and moderate nationalism were in surprisingly close proximity.

As we shall see, unionism's grammar of assent did not preclude criticism of England. Unionists loudly criticised English misinterpretations of Union, in particular the casual assumption that the Union was indeed a kind of English empire. On occasions, the excesses of anglicisation also provoked outbursts from otherwise loyal unionists. Nor did

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unionism preclude a healthy amount of outright anglophobia, when required. David Hume (1711–76), a supporter not only of Union but also of the anglicisation of eighteenth-century Scotland, complained that the unenlightened ‘barbarians who inhabit the banks of the Thames’⁷ remained in thrall to the dangerous errors and delusions of English political mythology, having failed to absorb the lessons of Hume’s own corrective philosophy. Yet in general it was the ecclesiastical sphere which resounded to the most vigorous protests from Scottish unionists against English iniquities. As the volume will make clear, the fundamental faultline within the Union was for most of its history religious rather than political. Against the legend of unionist lethargy and complacency needs to be set the outspokenness of Scottish unionists in their critique of English Erastianism and the ways in which it had been insinuated into the British constitution in defiance – as they saw it – of the Union of 1707. Indeed, the more seriously Scots read the hallowed texts of 1706–7, the more likely they were to challenge conventional assumptions of British statehood. Strict unionism was a potential solvent of the Union, at least as the English understood it.

Unionism was, moreover, quite compatible with strains of cultural nationalism, including legal nationalism and, most defiantly, religious nationalism. The contentious ecclesiastical expression of unionism serves as a reminder that Scots unionists often defined Britain and the Union with a Scots inflection which was incomprehensible or even

⁷ David Hume to Rev. Hugh Blair, 26 Apr. 1764, in J. Y. T. Greig (ed.), *The letters of David Hume* (2 vols., Oxford, 1932), 1, p. 436.

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offensive to English ears. The chapters which follow will attempt to show the deep native roots of Scottish unionism. Unionism has been a venerable and indigenous element in the Scottish political tradition, though rarely honoured as such. Although the late Thatcherite variant of unionism was a clear exception to the general rule, unionism was not a programme imposed from without or an ideological import. Rather unionism was very much a Scottish coinage. Indeed, it is one of the central arguments of this book that Scottish unionism originated long before the English connection: it predates not only the parliamentary Union of the Kingdoms of 1707, but also the Union of the Crowns of 1603. Deep-rooted and native, Scottish unionism was no English transplant, which partly accounts for the ways in which unionists for long happily deployed what have come to be appropriated as exclusively nationalist positions.

The book will also highlight Scottish assertiveness *within* the Union: sometimes, of course, Scottish unionists were calling for more anglicisation than was on offer, at others for decentralisation and greater autonomy. Above all, Scots insisted on equality within the Union. In the eighteenth century this took the form of reformist claims that the civil and political rights of Britons should be the same on both sides of the border, in particular that the Scots should be liberated from the burdens of their distinctive feudal laws and institutions. The focus during the age of Enlightenment was on the equal rights of the individual, whether Scots or English. Thus an open emulation of English ways and practices, rather than the prickly defence of Scottish distinctiveness, characterised the

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eighteenth-century Scottish aspiration to equality.⁸ However, during the nineteenth century the emphasis shifted towards the collective rights and privileges of the Scots as a nation, and Scots now invoked the equality of Scotland as a nation with England in a partnership of equals. National dignity within the Union – now including the very preservation of Scottish institutional distinctiveness which an enlightened North Britain had disdained – had come to supplant an earlier conception of political equality.⁹ Nevertheless, it is important to notice that the demand for equality – of one sort or another – has been a consistent theme of Scottish unionist argument within the Union. What follows is not, therefore, as conventional wisdom might have it, the story of timid and defensive Scottish unionists and the narrow parameters within which they were circumscribed, but a history of unionist agency and creativity within a loosely defined multi-national state and empire. The history of unionist political thought turns out to be richly – and unexpectedly – cross-grained. However, before we embark properly upon the story of Scottish unionisms, there are further obstacles to its telling which we need to confront.

⁸ C. Kidd, 'North Britishness and the nature of eighteenth-century British patriotisms', *Historical Journal* 39 (1996), 361–82.

⁹ H. J. Hanham, 'Mid-century Scottish nationalism: romantic and radical', in R. Robson (ed.), *Ideas and institutions of Victorian Britain* (London, 1967); C. Kidd, 'Sentiment, race and revival: Scottish identities in the aftermath of Enlightenment', in L. Brockliss and D. Eastwood (eds.), *A union of multiple identities: The British Isles c. 1750–c. 1850* (Manchester, 1997); G. Morton, *Unionist-nationalism: governing urban Scotland 1830–1860* (East Linton, 1999).

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The problem of Unionism

For a start, the historian needs to be aware of the problem that Unionism had a very specific meaning in modern Scottish history. Unionism was the creed of the Unionist Party – a fusion of Scottish Conservatives and Liberal Unionists – which was a serious force in Scottish electoral politics between 1912, when the party formed as the Scottish Unionist Association, and 1965, when the party changed its name to the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party. From our perspective, the problem of Unionism is not only that Unionism stands both for a general acceptance of the Union and for a particular party known as the Unionists, but that in this secondary and more precise meaning, the Union being referred to is not the Anglo-Scottish Union of 1707. The Union alluded to in the name of the Unionist Party is the British-Irish Union of 1800, the Liberal Unionists having broken with the Liberal Party in 1886 over Gladstone's plans for Irish home rule.

This slippage of terms bedevils the study of Scottish unionism. Most studies of Scottish unionism inevitably focus upon an institutionalised Unionism (at the expense of the less clearly defined culture of unionism), and as a consequence have relatively little to say about the Anglo-Scottish Union of 1707 compared to the British-Irish Union of 1800 and the problems of Irish home rule. In addition, they tend to concentrate upon the constitutional views of Scottish Conservatives to the comparative neglect of their political rivals, which leads to the casual assumption – perhaps reinforced by the politics of recent decades – that the Conservatives monopolised