

Union and Unionisms

Political Thought in Scotland, 1500–2000

Colin Kidd



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Although the dominant political ideology in Scotland between 1707 and the present, unionism has suffered serious neglect. One of the most distinguished Scottish historians of our time looks afresh at this central theme in Britain's history, politics and law, and traces the history of Scottish unionist ideas from the early sixteenth century to the present day. Colin Kidd demonstrates that unionism had impeccably indigenous origins long predating the Union of 1707, and that it emerged in reaction to the English vision of Britain as an empire. Far from being the antithesis of nationalism, modern Scottish unionism has largely occupied a middle ground between the extremes of assimilation to England or separation from it. Nor is unionism a simple ideology to interpret: at its most articulate, Scottish unionism championed the British-Irish Union of 1800, not the uncontroversial Anglo-Scottish Union of 1707. At a time when the future of the Anglo-Scottish union is under scrutiny as never before, its history demands Colin Kidd's lucid and cogent examination, which will doubtless generate intense and profound debate, both within Scotland and beyond.

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UNION AND UNIONISMS

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PREFACE

The purpose of this book is not to produce a comprehensive history of Scottish unionism as a political phenomenon, but to offer a taxonomy of Scottish unionist discourses from the vantage point of the historian of political thought. Indeed, the book is an expanded version of the Carlyle Lectures in the History of Political Thought given in the University of Oxford during Hilary Term 2006 under the title, 'The varieties of unionism in Scottish political thought, 1707–1974'. I am grateful to the Carlyle Electors for their invitation, and particularly to George Garnett, who organised the social side of things, including the Carlyle Dinner, and to Peter Ghosh, who steered me towards the neglected topic of Scottish unionism. I also feel an enormous debt to the Warden and Fellows of All Souls who took the opportunity presented by the Carlyle Lectures to rescue me from a prolonged period of quondamnation. Several Fellows of the College were staunch supporters of the lecture series, and I owe special thanks to the political scientists, Peter Pulzer and Chris Hood, for congenial discussions of problems beyond the immediate ken of the historian, to Fergus Millar for generous support on several fronts and to Charles and Carol Webster and the wider Webster family for their kindness and hospitality. Elsewhere in Oxford John Robertson and Brian Young welcomed my participation in the wider life of the University, and I have very fond memories of the seminars at the Voltaire Foundation. Back in Glasgow, I should like to thank my

Heads of Department, Thomas Munck and Don Spaeth, and my teaching colleagues, Martin MacGregor and Irene Maver, for their indulgence of my lecturing jaunts to Oxford. I should also like to thank Dauvit Broun for discussions over many years on the origins of Scottish political thought, Karin Bowie for conversations on the Union itself and Gerry Carruthers for insights into the Scottish literary tradition. I also owe a special debt to my colleagues in Law at Glasgow, especially Lindsay Farmer who first showed me several years ago how one might put together a lecture series on this topic and who read a couple of chapters in draft, Adam Tomkins, Tom Mullen, Scott Veitch, John Finlay, Ernie Metzger and Mark Godfrey. Furth of Glasgow John Cairns, Paul Brand, Clare Jackson and Kenneth Campbell have been helpful in matters juridical. I owe a special debt of thanks to Ewen Cameron of the University of Edinburgh for his kind offer to read the entire text in draft. Roger Mason read [chapter 2](#), which is profoundly indebted to his own pioneering work in this field. Any mistakes that remain are entirely my responsibility. It has been an unalloyed pleasure to work with Richard Fisher at Cambridge University Press. I should also like to thank Teresa Lewis, Rosanna Christian, Jo Breeze and Linda Randall at Cambridge University Press for their various endeavours. Valerie Wallace did another splendid job on the index. Lucy, Susan and Adam tolerated – or perhaps relished – my absences, though they also made a trip to Oxford over half-term, and I am grateful to all those people who made them most welcome in Oxford. My daughter's first question on arrival at All Souls was: 'Does this College have cheerleaders?' Special thanks, therefore, to Gerry Cohen who improvised an All Souls cheerleaders' routine to amuse my children.

The text of this book had been completed and I was tinkering with footnotes and the like when in the summer of 2007 I experienced a brain haemorrhage. I was overwhelmed by the messages of support I received from so many quarters, and I should like to thank family, friends and colleagues for their kindness during that difficult period. To two of my hospital visitors I already had enormous obligations stretching back over thirty years: to my cousin, David McIver, who hosted my first visits to the archives in Edinburgh, and to my former Latin teacher at Glasgow Academy, Vic Hadcroft.

My father, George W. Kidd, died suddenly a few months after the lectures were delivered. He did good by stealth; possessed a fund of fine jokes, which he knew how to tell; and had a boundless enjoyment of the antics of animals, babies and small children. This book is dedicated to his memory.

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

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.

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*, III (ed. A. Calder, G. Murray and A. Riach, Manchester, 1988), pp. 213, 289.

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

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.

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).

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

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), I, p. 436.

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

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).

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

unionism.¹⁰ Of course, the history of Unionism is only a small, though revealing, portion of the history of Scottish unionism. Nevertheless, with the blurring of Unions and unionisms, it becomes very difficult for historians and political scientists to disentangle Unionism as a partisan platform from unionism as a non-partisan or cross-partisan discourse about the British state. Yet the Liberals and Labour were unionist parties for whom home rule was a way of reordering the Union for its ultimate preservation. Indeed, during the period from 1958 to 1974 the Labour Party explicitly repudiated Scottish home rule and was at this stage a more decidedly centralist party than the Unionists.¹¹ However, as Michael Keating and David Bleiman note, there was a significant difference between Labour's instrumental commitment to the British state and the Unionism of the Unionists. Labour, with its emphasis on the unity of the working class, never developed 'a coherent ideology of the British state' beyond a 'contingent' support for the state in which it found itself operating, unlike the Conservatives, or Unionists, for whom the United Kingdom was a cherished value in itself.¹²

The historiographical eclipse of unionism by Unionism is closely related to the further problem of banal unionism, which will be discussed more fully later in this chapter. Prior

¹⁰ Catriona Macdonald's fine edited collection *Unionist Scotland 1800–1997* (Edinburgh, 1998) deals largely with the impact of the Ulster question on Scotland and on the history of the Unionist Party.

¹¹ M. Keating and D. Bleiman, *Labour and Scottish nationalism* (London, 1979), pp. 146–68.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 16–17.

to the emergence of the Scottish Question in the 1970s, there had been no pressing need to articulate the case for the Union or to analyse the nature of the Union. A few platitudes about the importance of the Union in laying the foundations of Scottish commercial and industrial prosperity within the Empire sufficed. On the other hand, the British-Irish Union of 1800 and the Irish Question had been a dominant feature of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century British constitutional debate, in Scotland as much as at Westminster. Irish migration into Scotland during the nineteenth century had sharpened indigenous Lowland Protestant hostility to Ireland's Catholic nationalism and encouraged sympathies with the predicament of Ulster Scots. Articulate Scottish Unionism took the curious form of an ideology supportive of the British-Irish Union of 1800 – not the uncontroversial Anglo-Scottish Union of 1707.

This curious set of affairs provides a useful warning that the historian of Unionism in Scotland should not fixate on the Anglo-Scottish relationship to the exclusion of British-Irish and Scottish-Irish relationships. Bill Miller in his classic study *The end of British politics?* notes that, however important 1707 is to an understanding of Scottish government, the 'visitor to Scotland is most unlikely to find "1707" chalked or painted on the walls of derelict buildings. Indeed he would be much more likely to come across "1690".'¹³ This is a reference, of course, to the Battle of the Boyne, an event in Irish history. Graffiti reveal a stark truth about Irish influences on Scottish popular political

¹³ W. L. Miller, *The end of British politics? Scots and English political behaviour in the seventies* (Oxford, 1981), p. 1.

culture. Indeed, historians are aware that Unionism emerged in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Scotland not as a response to Scottish nationalism – which was then a very marginal phenomenon – but to the more potent threat of Irish nationalism to the territorial integrity of a United Kingdom which comprehended Ireland as well as England and Scotland. Ironically, the strong Scots presbyterian associations of this form of Unionism meant that – much more than a nascent and still politically irrelevant Scottish nationalism – it was Unionism which for some decades thereafter became, arguably, the primary party political vehicle for the expression of the values of Scottish nationality – albeit within the Union. Michael Dyer has argued that during the early parts of the twentieth century ‘Irish nationalism was more important in Scotland than Scottish nationalism’, and that at this period the Unionists emphasised ‘their defence of traditional presbyterian institutions and cultural values’ against ‘the secularism and Roman associations of Labour’.¹⁴ According to Graham Walker, one of its leading historians, Unionism ‘fused the appeals of Empire, religion, Ulster, and a definition of Scottishness which derived to a large extent from Presbyterian mythology’.¹⁵

This strain of Unionism was far removed from the co-option of an anglicised elite imagined by MacDiarmid. Although Unionism was indeed an anti-nationalist ideology,

¹⁴ M. Dyer, *Capable citizens and improvident democrats: the Scottish electoral system 1884–1929* (Aberdeen, 1996), p. 177.

¹⁵ G. Walker, ‘Varieties of Scottish Protestant identity’, in T. M. Devine and R. Finlay (eds.), *Scotland in the twentieth century* (Edinburgh, 1996), pp. 250–68, at p. 260.

its inflections were neither English nor metropolitan,¹⁶ but rather those of an embattled presbyterian provincialism somewhat distrustful of the motives of the English core of the United Kingdom. Unionists celebrated connections with kith and kin in Ulster and, further afield, in the white dominions of the Empire. On the other hand, Unionism was inescapably linked to Protestant sectarianism and was fuelled by a powerful anti-Catholic nativism which was one of the most pronounced features of nineteenth-century Scottish culture. Already by 1851 there were 207,367 Irish-born immigrants out of a total population of 2,888,742.¹⁷ Although the Irish-born constituted only 7.2 per cent of the Scottish population, this population was unevenly distributed within Scotland – being concentrated in the major industrial centres, such as Glasgow, Greenock, Paisley and Dundee, and the figure does not include people of Irish descent born in Scotland. While the majority of immigrants from Ireland were Roman Catholic, there was also a significant minority of Ulster Protestants who imported the Orange movement into Scotland, further reinforcing an indigenous Scots hostility towards Roman Catholicism.¹⁸ The Liberal Unionist split in 1886 was not simply a matter of constitutional principle for Scots, but also capitalised upon Scots Protestant antipathy to the pretensions of Irish nationalism and aligned itself with a contemporary movement for the defence

¹⁶ C. Harvie, 'Introduction', in Harvie, *Travelling Scot: essays on the history, politics and future of the Scots* (Glendaruel, 1999), p. 13.

¹⁷ J. E. Handley, *The Irish in modern Scotland* (Oxford, 1947), p. 43.

¹⁸ E. McFarland, *Protestants first: Orangeism in nineteenth-century Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1990).

of the established Church of Scotland against Liberal calls for disestablishment.

Settlement of the Irish Question – for the time being at least – compelled a subtle degree of Unionist reorientation. The Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 provoked some dissent among Unionists, but was generally accepted by the party. Acquiescence in the new Anglo-Irish relationship opened up room for the party to disengage from its primary commitment to Irish issues and to broaden its electoral appeal, if not immediately to Scotland's large Catholic electorate at least to elements of progressive or polite opinion alienated by overt expressions of sectarianism. Although the party did not lose its sectarian overtones, it maintained a polite distance from the militant anti-Catholic movements which emerged in Edinburgh and Glasgow during the inter-war era. Nevertheless, Unionism as an ideology continued to be inflected by religious bigotry and a preoccupation with Scotland's relationship to Ireland. In 1923 the Church of Scotland – arguably the Unionist Party at prayer – approved a special report by a committee of kirkmen entitled *The menace of the Irish race to our Scottish nationality*.¹⁹ The leadership of Unionism shared some of the petty bigotries of the rank-and-file. Sir John Gilmour, who became the first Secretary of State for Scotland, also served as Deputy Grand Master of the Orange Order.²⁰

¹⁹ See S. J. Brown, 'Outside the covenant: the Scottish presbyterian churches and Irish immigration, 1922–1938', *Innes Review* 42 (1991), 19–45.

²⁰ D. Seawright, *An important matter of principle: the decline of the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party* (Aldershot, 1999), p. 80.

Notwithstanding its associations with sectarianism and a reactionary commitment to the unity of the British Isles, Unionism was in several respects a progressive ideology with a broad social catchment. The Unionists somehow contrived to appeal not only to anti-Catholic sentiment (though without alienating respectable opinion) but also to the radicalism of the Liberal Unionists. After all, the Unionist Party was a hybrid which owed its existence to the fusion of the Conservatives with a wing of the Liberals. The electoral appeal of the Unionists was not confined to the middle class and the party won a number of working-class constituencies – including the Glasgow constituencies of Govan, Glasgow Central, Maryhill and Partick – at different times between 1918 and 1959. Another case in point is Motherwell, which the Unionists won in 1918, 1923 and 1931, though losing it to the Communists in 1922.²¹ Nor was the Unionist appeal simply an anti-intellectual one based on brute sectarianism. Iain Hutchison notes that during the inter-war era there was a ‘well-supported’ Glasgow Unionist Teachers’ Association, which by 1933 had 800 members.²²

The inter-war Unionists were not simply the Scottish wing of English Conservatism. The party’s intellectual leaders – Walter Elliot (1888–1958) and Noel Skelton

²¹ J. Kellas, ‘The party in Scotland’, in A. Seldon and S. Ball (eds.), *Conservative century: the Conservative Party since 1900* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 671–93, at p. 678.

²² I. G. C. Hutchison, *Scottish politics in the twentieth century* (Houndmills, 2001), p. 34.

(1880–1935) – were progressive and statist. They favoured public sector housing, land reform and state intervention in the economy – including the establishment of industrial estates, the application of science and planning to social problems and the fostering of a welfare state. Elliot, indeed, was a self-described ‘White Marxist’, capable of appreciating Marxist arguments and of responding to them with a progressive conservatism informed by modern science and sociology. This outlook was apparent both in his influential book *Toryism and the twentieth century* (1927) and in his ministerial career which encompassed the Ministries of Agriculture and Health, as well as the Scottish Office.²³ The Unionists made a distinctive and enduring contribution to political thought. In *Constructive Conservatism* (1924) Noel Skelton coined the expression ‘property-owning democracy’ which would become an important term of art in conservative political argument. Skelton’s original prescription was envisaged as a plan to restore equilibrium to a political system dangerously unbalanced by the accession of newly enfranchised groups through a broader extension of property-holding. Conservatives, so Skelton warned, had responded in a sensitive and progressive fashion to the rise of democracy.²⁴ Katharine, Duchess of Atholl (1874–1960), who sat as Unionist MP for Kinross and West Perthshire adopted

²³ Harvie, ‘Walter Elliot: the White Marxist’, in Harvie, *Travelling Scot*, esp. p. 127; P. Ward, *Unionism in the United Kingdom, 1918–1974* (Houndmills, 2005), ch. 2.

²⁴ Noel Skelton, *Constructive Conservatism* (Edinburgh and London, 1924), p. 17.

a pro-Republican stance during Spanish Civil War and introduced the Unionists to women's rights by way of her book *Women and politics* (1931).²⁵

The Unionists are not easily pigeon-holed. Nor were they any less slippery on the question of Scotland's place in the United Kingdom. Indeed, it would be a mistake to presume Unionist consistency on the subject of a Union – that of 1707 – which was little thought of by Scottish Unionists, at least until the emergence of the Scottish nationalist movement in the late 1920s and early 1930s; and even then Unionists did not regard that Union as under any serious threat. In general, Unionists were opposed to Scottish home rule as a threat to the integrity of the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, during the first two decades of the twentieth century some Unionists did explore the possibilities of home rule all round – that is devolved government for all the nations of the United Kingdom, not just for the Irish – or a federalist reordering of the United Kingdom as potential solutions to the Irish Question. A subordinate parliament for Scotland was not out of the question. Indeed, the willingness to explore any avenue which might bring about a resolution of the Irish problem created some ideological space within Unionism for a measure of Scottish home rule, albeit as a means to a larger constitutional end. There was an awareness among Unionists that the maintenance of the Union required some breathing space for the nationalities of the United Kingdom.

²⁵ S. Ball, 'The politics of appeasement: the fall of the Duchess of Atholl and the Kinross and West Perth by election, December 1938', *Scottish Historical Review* 69 (1990), 49–83; Hutchison, *Scottish politics*, p. 50.

The standard Unionist interpretation of Scotland's constitutional position within the Union combined a straightforward commitment to the status quo, a concern for administrative as opposed to legislative devolution and an awareness that the overall needs of the British Empire might necessitate some reordering of the constitutional relationships of the home countries. Nor did Unionism preclude all expressions of Scottish nationalism. Skelton took the view that Scottish MPs of all parties should form a Scottish lobby for Scottish interests. When the House of Commons discussed Scottish home rule in November 1932 the occasion brought out variations in the tone and mood music of the Unionist response to the Scottish nationalist movement. Sir Robert Horne (1871–1940), the Unionist MP for Hillhead, took the view that, on balance, much as he disagreed with socialist policy, he would ‘rather have the United Kingdom governed by a body which was Socialist than I would have different political legislatures in the two ends of the island’. On the other hand, John Buchan (1875–1940), who sat for the Scottish Universities, proclaimed that ‘every Scotsman should be a Scottish nationalist’ and that, if it could be demonstrated that the merits of a Scottish parliament outweighed the disadvantages, then ‘Scotsmen should support it.’ Nevertheless, there was agreement on practicalities. Both Horne and Buchan favoured further measures of administrative devolution as the preferred method of soothing nationalist grievances.²⁶

²⁶ Hansard HC Debs. Vol. 272, 24 Nov. 1932, cols. 235–53, 259–67, esp. 248, 261.

Unionists were no less prone to exploiting Scottish national consciousness than other political parties. Certainly, Unionist commitments did not entail surrendering the Scottish card when it was there to be played. During the late 1940s, for example, the Unionists ostentatiously defended Scottish nationhood against Labour's misleading policy of 'nationalisation', which was as far as Scots were concerned really a form of remote centralisation. In 1949 the Unionists issued a policy paper entitled 'Scottish control of Scottish affairs', which promoted administrative devolution in preference to straightforward nationalisation at the United Kingdom level.²⁷ Administrative devolution to Edinburgh was a shibboleth of Unionism throughout its history.²⁸ By the 1940s it had become a way of differentiating Unionism from Labour's policy of centralism. Moreover, the Unionists had also encouraged initiatives such as the Grand Committee which carved out a semi-autonomous role for Scottish legislation under the umbrella of a united Westminster parliament. Nationhood just short of legislative devolution was a constant element of Scottish Unionism.

Clearly, it is important to point out that Unionism was very far from being the antithesis of Scottish nationalism, despite what is sometimes assumed. Indeed, some former Unionists played an influential role in the partial reinvigoration of Scottish nationalist politics during the 1930s. In the winter of 1932–3 the Cathcart Unionist Association on

²⁷ Cf. *Scotland and the United Kingdom: the Unionist Party's practical policy for Scottish administration of Scottish affairs* (1948).

²⁸ For administrative devolution, see J. Mitchell, *Governing Scotland: the invention of administrative devolution* (Houndmills and New York, 2003).

Glasgow's south side established an Imperial Committee led by Kevan McDowell, a Glasgow solicitor, committed to reform of the Empire. The Cathcart Unionists subscribed to the unity and cohesion of the Empire but believed that this greater cause also required Scottish legislative autonomy in domestic affairs. In 1932 the dissident Cathcart Unionists joined with other right-leaning Scottish nationalists to form the Scottish Self-Government Party, which in turn united with the existing National Party of Scotland to form the Scottish National Party in 1934. After 1932 Unionist rhetoric – including hibernophobia – surfaced in Scottish nationalist polemic, not least in the writings of Andrew Dewar Gibb, who had been a Unionist candidate in the elections of 1924 and 1929.²⁹

Unionism – with its allusions to the Irish Question – retained its ideological purchase in Scotland much longer than it did south of the border. During the 1940s the Conservative Party chairman Lord Woolton favoured changing the name of the Conservative Party in England to the Union Party, because some felt that Conservative was a vote loser. This plan came to nothing, fortunately in the view of the Conservative historian, Lord Blake, because of the ‘similarity to the old but now irrelevant name of “Unionist”’.³⁰ However, the Unionist label was far from outdated, it seems, north of the border, notwithstanding the passage of time and events since the Liberal Unionist

²⁹ L. Farmer, ‘Under the shadow over Parliament House: the strange case of legal nationalism’, in L. Farmer and S. Veitch (eds.), *The state of Scots law* (London, 2001), p. 155.

³⁰ R. Blake, *The Conservative Party from Peel to Churchill* (1970: London, 1979 pbk), p. 261.