Anglo-Scottish Relations

Professor Christopher Smout FBA, Historiographer Royal in Scotland, reflects on the relations between England and Scotland following the Union of the Crowns.

ON 24 March 1603, Queen Elizabeth of England died, naming James VI of Scotland as her successor. Thus began the Union of the Crowns of the two kingdoms, developing just over one hundred years later into the Union of Parliaments, and enduring to the present day, in altered, devolutionary form, as the cornerstone of the British state. The fourth centenary of so momentous an event seemed a good time to take another look at Anglo-Scottish relations in the long run, and the British Academy and the Royal Society of Edinburgh came together to organise a triple commemoration. The first part was a lecture given in the Academy's rooms in London on 24 March 2003 by Dr Jenny Wormald of St Hilda's College, Oxford, describing the drama and tension of the accession and the history of the Union of the Crowns in the lifetime of James. Then, on 17–18 September, this was followed by a symposium on the broad theme of 'Anglo-Scottish Relations 1603–1914' and, on 6–7 November, by a further symposium in the Royal Society of Edinburgh's premises in Scotland carrying the same theme forward to the present day and attempting, also, to peer into the future. The first two occasions were the sole province of historians, albeit inclusive of historians of law and literature as well as of politics, economics, ideas and culture. The third was a wider interdisciplinary occasion, with political scientists, historians and sociologists all involved, and with its eye much on contemporary affairs. I have edited a volume that brings together the papers from the first two occasions, while Professor Bill Miller FBA, of Glasgow University, has edited a volume from the third. Here I want to reflect on the first two meetings, on the Union up to 1914.

What are we to make of the first three centuries of Anglo-Scottish union? It is impossible to try to summarise eleven very different papers, that ranged from some so particular as Dr Clare Jackson's exploration of judicial torture in Restoration Scotland and Professor Rosemary Ashton's account of Thomas and Jane Carlyle in nineteenth-century London, to some as wide as Professor Keith Brown's and Professor John Morrill's overview of the first six decades of the Union of the Crowns and Ian Hutchison's survey of Anglo-Scottish politics in the nineteenth century. This is rather one person's gleanings and reflections from this extremely lively and fruitful symposium and the preceding lecture.

Painted wooden figure of James VI and I, crowned and enthroned, wearing his coronation robes of 1604
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The first point (well made by the early speakers) is that the Union of the Crowns, though long anticipated in both countries, was neither inevitable in its making nor in its short-term success. Anticipated as a possibility since the marriage of Margaret Tudor and James IV in 1503, it was widely expected to happen and fervently hoped for by the Stewarts in the last four decades of the sixteenth century, yet nearly derailed with the deposition of Mary Queen of Scots in 1567 and the subsequent Civil War, and in particular with her execution in 1587 when the Scottish nobility pleaded with James VI to invade England to avenge his mother's death. Then there was the small matter of Henry VIII's will which declared that no foreigner should inherit the throne of England, and which had to be set aside on Elizabeth's death. Once the new king had arrived in England, he was regarded with deep suspicion as much on account of his policy of European peace as for any matter of domestic or ecclesiastical policy. Certainly his English subjects were not keen on any new British state or any more than the very minimum sharing of their valuable privileges with the poverty-stricken Scots. James and the Union survived partly because he lived so long after inheriting the throne, so that his ways became familiar, and his courtiers and ministers had time to put down their own network of vested interest. He also survived because the old Tudors, so raddled with disease, left no plausible alternative inheritors around which disaffected Englishmen could rally. Once set up for a quarter of a century, mere survival ensured that the Union of the Crowns had a good chance of continuing thereafter.

Fast forward, however, to the first centenary of 1603, and there was almost universal belief in both kingdoms that the existing Union of the Crowns had become a disaster. The English held the view that the Scottish parliament was an ungovernable mess of faction and party that could not be trusted in the long run even with the security of the north. The Scots believed that it had ruined their chance to maintain any sustainable economic growth, a view for which, in Professor Chris Whatley's opinion, there was much to be said. Parliamentary Union (leaving intact a Scottish Presbyterian Church

and Scottish civil law) was imposed at England's bidding on a divided Scotland and did little immediately to improve Anglo-Scottish relations. The security problem was not settled until after Culloden. Economic dividends for Scotland from Union only appeared about the same time. 'Sawney', the itchy, lousy, sneaky Scot, as Professor Paul Langford showed, remained a stock figure for English cartoonists until the 1790s. In Scotland, as Professor Colin Kidd demonstrated, the Union of the Crowns was blamed by Enlightenment intellectuals for having given rise to an overmighty Scottish nobility unrestrained by royal presence and tyrannising their dependents – a fault not considered cured in 1707, which left much private Scottish privilege intact, but in 1747, with the abolition of the heritable jurisdictions, bringing English and Scottish systems of local law closer together.

But gradually there emerged a change of mood in the eighteenth century, some of it prefigured and long incubated by necessity, as Dr John Ford showed in his study of the law of the sea, some of it created by immediate opportunity, as Professor Tom Devine showed in his study of the Scottish landed classes in an imperial state. It was a mood of accommodation, where the Scots realised how a genuinely conjoined Britain solved certain of their long-term structural difficulties in operating successfully at home and abroad, and the English realised that it was, after all, better to have Scots doing their thing from inside their tent than from without. England had wealth and force. Scotland had an educated elite ambitious for success in commerce and arms. Not for nothing came the first and most enduring popular usages of the prefix 'British': the British Empire and the British Army. Being generally Protestant and anti-French no doubt helped, as Linda Colley has insisted, but shared elite ambition was in itself a sufficient cement.

The consequence was a new atmosphere where it gradually became natural – for example as Dr Bob Harris emphasised, for the Scottish radicals of the period 1790–1820 – to maintain close links with London and to speak of the strength of one British movement for liberty. Similarly it became natural for Thomas Carlyle to refer to Robert Burns 'not only as a true British poet but as one of the most considerable British men of the eighteenth century'. Britain was now to many Scots on many occasions the name of the theatre where Englishmen and Scots acted out, independently or together, their roles on life's stage. At this point the Scottish people internalised the notion of Britain, as perhaps the English never did. For the English (as for most foreigners), the usual name for their state and for the theatre of their lives was still England. The residual irritations that the Scots had concerning their neighbours in the nineteenth century usually revolved (just as in the revolutionary decades of the seventeenth century) round England not being British enough – that is to say, not recognising that English laws and customs were not the appropriate norms for the whole island of Great Britain. Yet there were now actually quite clear limits to this English sense of hegemony over the island. In the nineteenth century, England and Scotland did not merge. As Ian Hutchison wisely put it, they meshed. No one supposed that the extraordinary couple who lived in Cheyne Walk, Chelsea, were or should pretend to be English: Thomas Carlyle exercised a huge influence on English thought, but he and Jane were ostentatiously Scots. No one seriously supposed, even as the Presbyterian Church in Victorian Scotland was wrenching itself apart, that the right solution to the tormented ecclesiastical politics of Scotland was to embrace an Anglican Episcopalianism that would celebrate Christmas and be relaxed about the Sabbath. No one considered it wise at Westminster, once the Scottish MPs had decided that the peculiarities of Scottish parliamentary affairs demanded a specialised unit of government, to oppose the creation of a Scottish Office. If the previous three centuries had taught the English anything, it was that if the Scots wished to be peculiar they were certainly best left to be so, and it was this flexibility that made the Union not only workable but unshakable, even in the century of the rise of European and Irish nationalism.

It became clear from the symposium that the Scots worried and worry a lot about Anglo-Scottish relations. The English worried and worry hardly at all about them, except at times of quite exceptional stress, such as under Charles I and Queen Anne (and perhaps when oil was discovered in the North Sea). This is reasonable, as the Scots, outnumbered in the Union 5:1 in 1603 and 10:1 by 1914, had most to worry about, most to gain and most to lose by the way the relationship works. Union survived not because of any acts of brilliant statesmanship along the way, but because it was the best *modus vivendi* available between two unequal partners. It became eventually a cultural and political norm that by 1914 it seemed eccentric even to question. Today one cannot be so sure, but that was the business of the following meeting.

The speakers at the meeting on 17–18 September were:

Professor Keith Brown FRSE, St Andrews University

Professor John Morrill FBA, Cambridge University

Dr Clare Jackson, Cambridge University

Professor Chris Whatley FRSE, Dundee University

Dr John Ford, Cambridge University

Professor Paul Langford FBA, Oxford University

Professor Colin Kidd FRSE, Glasgow University

Dr Bob Harris, Dundee University

Professor Rosemary Ashton FBA, University College, London

Professor Tom Devine FBA, FRSE, Aberdeen University

and Dr Iain Hutchison, Stirling University

The papers from these meetings are being published in two volumes of *Proceedings of the British Academy*: Volume 127, *Anglo-Scottish Relations, from 1603 to 1900*, edited by T.C. Smout; and Volume 128, *Anglo-Scottish Relations, from 1900 to Devolution and Beyond*, edited by William L. Miller.
