

## Review Article<sup>1</sup>

# Colony, County or Co-equal? Scotland And the Union

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IT IS FASHIONABLE within certain circles of Scottish studies to categorize Scotland's condition as a colonial one. Equally, those outwith these circles often fail to notice Scotland's existence at all. For one African postcolonial writer, John Buchan is an "English" novelist; for Edward Said, the case of Ireland is as colonial as the case of Burma, but the case of Scotland does not exist. Irish Britishness, a profound agency in the cultural and political life of what is now the Republic is expunged, while Scotland is still submerged in a generic Britishness, which too often finds its specific location in the valorization of or in an attack on certain features of elite ideology in the south of England (stiff upper lip, gentlemanliness, field sports, the rural Church of England — Jane Austen rather than Elizabeth Gaskell). Postcolonial theorists often fall into the classic trap of Whig history in reading the past in terms of the present. Ireland is no longer part of Britain, so it never was; Scotland is, so it does not exist. This kind of analysis is commonplace; it is in essence the reason why Linda Colley could exclude Ireland from her study *Britons: Forging the Nation 1702-1837* (1992), with hardly a voice raised in protest. Yet career Irishmen and women did (and still do) rise to heights in British society no nineteenth-century colonial could have countenanced. Irishmen led the British Army; they led French armies too, and there is little evidence of their being treated as native troops — less than in the case of the Scots regiments, whose disproportionate casualty rates in Britain's wars from 1756 on are well-attested. Yes, these leaders were (in Britain but not in France) Protestant Irishmen. But

what of that? Religion is a better key than nationality to understanding the scope of Britishness at its noonday. Here Linda Colley is right.

Yet clearly there are features of the Irish experience which are justly termed "colonial": attacks on difference via the racist critique highlighted in Lewis Perry Curtis's *Apes and Angels: An Irishman in Victorian Caricature* (1976); absentee landlordism by a colonial class; lack of opportunity; economic exploitation; linguistic oppression. Many of these apply to Scotland too. In 1975, Michael Hechter argued in his book *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development* that the Celtic nations shared an experience of marginality, and that in part that experience was brought about through the economic underdevelopment of the periphery in comparison with a favoured centre. These conclusions have been attacked many times with regard to Scotland in particular, for they do not, as has been pointed out, account for the speed, rapidity, and scale of Scotland's own industrial revolution which, as recent research is beginning to suggest, was itself partly funded by monies raised by the Scottish diaspora in the British Empire. Indeed, the critical distinction between Scottish and Irish experience lies perhaps in the unparalleled scale of Scottish military and commercial input into that Empire. While there was an Irish contribution too, the disproportionate casualty rates of Scottish regiments from the 1750s on was and is seen as a badge of pride in contribution to Britain, rather than a sign of British betrayal, as with the Irish and the ANZACS after Gallipoli.

The issue then is complex. Clearance, eviction, the downgrading of Scottish history, culture and language; the alienizing of Scottish difference first by English propaganda and then by the complicity of a Scottish elite; the stealthy provincialization of Scottish institutions written of by George Davie and others and castigated in Scott's version of Swift's *Drapier, the Letters of Malachi Malagrowther* (1826), are all indicators of an experience which partakes of the colonial. It is Scotland's role in the Empire rather than its domestic policy experience that rendered it British and no colony, and that is why the decline of Empire is so closely linked to the decline of traditional Scottish Unionism.

Scotland's real Act of Union is perhaps to be found in the colonizing experience, and the repatriation of that experience, its scope and sometimes its wealth to a country which had exported talent since the high Middle Ages, once to France, the Low Countries and Europe, and then to the British Empire. The search for an internal "Britishness," which Leith Davis undertakes, is thus especially challenging and raises questions as to why Robert Burns, who is taken as aiming for a "British literature," should be excluded from the canon of the great Romantics when he has a worldwide popularity that far exceeds the neglect or minimization of his contribution in much Anglocentric literary history, which localizes and renders couthy and particularist (New Year's Eve/Auld Lang Syne) the work of a poet of renown both in Continental Europe and the wider Anglophone world. If writing standard English is the key, then we are talking of colonization/assimilation, not Union; and the semantic struggle between these two concepts is one arguably understressed in Davis's study, which underestimates the deep-seated hostility to political and linguistic difference in the British polity, and its reiterated insistence on metropolitan norms. In the US, "national" newspapers do not have to be published in Washington DC; but in the UK, they are ipso facto "local" if they are not based in London, irrespective of their approach to news — hence it was recently reported that the (*Manchester*) *Guardian* became a "national newspaper" on moving to London — though it otherwise hardly changed. In other words, the demand for conformity and the dislike of significant difference are overpowering presences — which is why Scottish domestic difference long kept a low profile, which means that its very existence is to some a surprise. It is also a rule that when its profile rises, the demand for it to conform to generic British practice increases. Current examples include the "Not Proven" verdict in the criminal courts and the four-year Scottish MA undergraduate degree title. Thus identity and formation sit very uneasily with assimilation in the texture of the British experience.

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*Acts of Union* is the fruit of a decade of research by Davis into the languages of identification and formation attendant on the

development of Britain in the long eighteenth century. In her study, Davis foregrounds the idea of the negotiation of identities at key historical moments through the literature used to describe or on occasion (as in the Defoe/Belhaven controversy over the Union) to precipitate them. To explore this, she takes five pairs of English and Scottish writers. These range from the predictable (Johnson and Macpherson) to the more innovative (Burns and Wordsworth). In their writing, Davis finds the acts of negotiated identity, which presage the development of British selfhood: "Great Britain as it is commonly understood is in fact from its inception a bricolage of literary activity reflecting hegemonic struggles" (45) is her claim.

There are potential problems in this approach. From a historian's or a literary historicist's point of view, Davis's stress on the "thick facts" of literary encounter means that a vast hinterland of opinion, documentation, and cultural context is simply passed over. *Acts of Union* owes more of a debt in this regard to Benedict Anderson and Homi Bhabha than to Tom Devine, Bruce Lenman, Alexander Murdoch, or Christopher Whatley, though Lenman and Whatley are cited in the bibliography.

Does this matter in a literary study? It depends on the claims being made for it. To privilege ten largely canonical creative writers in the development of complex ideas of identity and nationhood is to risk implicitly endorsing the view that creative writers somehow "invent" nations, an idea already loosely prevalent in popular assessments of Sir Walter Scott, and one which both endorses the supreme value of creative artists and hallows those who interpret them in a neo-Romantic way. To some extent, Davis minimizes this problem by using texts of widespread cultural and propagandistic impact in their own day; but here additional problems present themselves. In her lively, informed, and innovative chapter on the literary contestation of Defoe and Lord Belhaven, which is worth remarking on because it is backed by a strong contextualized reading, Davis appears to give *some* of Defoe's propagandistic writing the status of a canonical text which conveys clear attitudes to the Union as a "happy Conjunction"; yet Defoe's views of Union were varied by a number of factors (self-interest, his status as a government

spy, and so on), which Davis pays little attention to. In different times and places, Defoe wrote of the Union in different ways; yet Davis places this notoriously slippery writer on a plane with Belhaven's simple and demonstrative Scottishness, as if one can level the discourse of a paid spy and a patriot. Lockhart of Carnwath called Defoe "that vile monster and wretch," and considering that Defoe could rejoice in the Union as the process whereby Scotland "is added to the ENGLISH Empire," and regard Scots law as constitutionally on a par with that of Lancashire and Durham before the Reformation, it is clear that he is an author who requires careful contextualizing before his praise of a "happy Conjunction" can be taken at face value. Davis's assessment of Defoe does not altogether meet this need; sometimes indeed she seems to give not only validity but primacy to Defoe's propaganda, as when she describes Belhaven's memories of a united Scotland as "logically unstable and anachronistic" (34), a view widespread among Defoe's Whig successors but hard to find among standard histories of mediæval Scotland today.

The chapter on Fielding and Smollett is rewarding, with its well-attested linkage between the novel form and political writing. Fielding's was one of the early attempts to pin the blame for the 1745 Rising on the Highlanders alone, both in his political propaganda and in *Tom Jones*, where his use of the term "Banditti" to describe the Jacobite army is possibly linked to the 1745 set of "Lilliburlero"; it later reappeared in *Waverley*. Davis's writing on Fielding is suggestive, as is her construction of the reasons for the absence of the 1745 Rising from Smollett's writing (would it not have been rather risky for him to mention it?). Davis's use of Macpherson and Johnson is thoughtful, and uses close readings of the *Journey* in an illuminating way, although she perhaps underestimates the extent to which Johnson's attitude to Scotland was driven by his views of the Reformation and the implicitly simoniac tendencies of Scottish Calvinism; his sympathy for the Highlands is thus partly a religious one.

The present reviewer found the greatest enjoyment in the less predictable juxtaposition of Burns and Wordsworth, while doubting whether Burns sought a "definition of British

literature" (109) as such. Burns's radicalism is also understressed; some stronger connections to contemporary scholarship on Scotland in the 1790s would have been welcome here. Nonetheless, Davis presents us with an excellent set of close readings of the imagined nation and community in Burns, and its wider implications. She also makes illuminating use of Wordsworth's "Poems Written During a Tour in Scotland," with Scotland presented as "an alien landscape which has to be interpreted by the Traveler" (132). Familiarity with scholarship on Scottish tourism (for example, that of Glendening or Grenier) in the period could have expanded this still further, and a comparison of the Lake District (this English evocation of the Burkean Sublime was already clear from guidebooks published when Wordsworth was a boy) with Scotland in Wordsworth's imagination would also have been informative. Nonetheless, it is a tribute to Davis's innovation and imagination that her approach to these poets stimulates enquiry into a wider range of issues than those she deals with directly.

The comparison of Scott and Percy is likewise suggestive, with its emphasis on Percy's interest in "the Gothic pedigree of his minstrels," with its implications of "an English identity that is essentially homogenous" (151). In her arguments, Davis underestimates the extent to which Scott's own views are driven by Teutonism (and the extent to which he appears to contradict himself as to the Celticity of Scotland), but nonetheless she usefully points out the importance of Scott's construction of the "Borderer" as a representative of the Anglo-Scottish discrete culture which predates Union (155). By contrast, the "Borderer" of Scott's fellow-borderer James Hogg was a "Scot" who fought the "Saxon," as in "Lock the Door, Lauriston." The discussion here could have been expanded by giving some attention to Scott's development of the idea of Scotland being emotionally Celtic but intellectually Teutonic, a kind of miniaturized version of the union of Saxon phlegm and Celtic imagination that proved so useful to the ideology of the later British Empire.

The conclusion offers a dynamic reading of Carlyle, with his theme of expanding Anglo-Britishness into the imperial space of Empire, and a shrewd assessment of Arnold's endorsement of the ownership of Celtic identity by English character, which

arguably repossesses as English the claims made on behalf of Scotland's contribution to British identity by Macpherson and Scott. Again, discussion of Arnold's views on Ireland would have usefully extended what is said — especially since Yeats's reaction against the feminization of the Celt in Arnoldian terms arguably led Ireland on the road to the Post Office and Oliver Sheppard's statue of the dying Cuchulain. The "negotiation" of Britishness is indeed a long and complex process.

There are some slips: it is not Colin Kidd but Geoffrey Barrow who develops the idea of the "community of the realm" (29); to claim that Scotland was more readily incorporated into "the hegemonic center" than Wales (168) is, despite the linguistic issue, to oversimplify, especially in the context of the lack of a discernible "national question" in modern Wales till the close of the nineteenth century. Similarly, the claim that "for the English, the unification of Scotland and England meant a readjustment of national identity" (5) is highly questionable, as is the suggestion that there was ever a "cultural . . . union" between England and Scotland (14); such was certainly called for by the Earl of Eglinton in the 1850s, but the demands for conformity and assimilation have traditionally steamrolled such claims for parity of esteem; "British" still means "English" to most of the inhabitants of the island and to the voices of its establishment and media, as has been often enough noted. But these criticisms should not detract from what is an interesting and ambitious book, on which a good deal of care has been expended, and which offers a slice of some of the more important literary "negotiations" of the idea of Britain in the long eighteenth century.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Leith Davis. *Acts of Union: Scotland And The Literary Negotiation of The British Nation 1707-1830*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998. Pp. xii + 220. £25.

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