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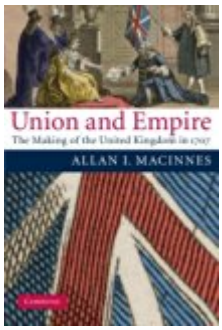

Allan I. Macinnes. *Union and Empire: The Making of the United Kingdom in 1707.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. xv + 382 pp. $35.99, paper, ISBN 978-0-521-61630-0.

Reviewed by Bruce P. Lenman

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Commissioned by David S. Karr (Columbia College)

The tricentennial of the incorporating Union of 1707, which created the United Kingdom of Great Britain that morphed into the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland in 1800 and then into the existing United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in 1922, provoked a barrage of writings from the professed Scottish historians, who seem to be more numerous and professional than ever before. The reluctant establishment of general devolution for the non-English parts of the United Kingdom by New Labour Premier Tony Blair after 1997 has made the non-devolved incorporating Union of 1707 a matter of ongoing and relevant controversy. The Scottish parliament has been reborn, but the politicians and constitution of the United Kingdom are in unparalleled disrepute with British opinion, which is hardly surprising when, for example, the second chamber of the Westminster legislature has a membership fast approaching one thousand men and women, all nominated products of pure cronyism. Allan I. Macinnes has written a book exploring a very different political world in which the Crown was still a real force, not a fig leaf on prime-ministerial power, and the House of Lords an exclusive gathering of powerful aristocratic figures, many of whom were formidable regional and political powers in their own right.

This volume is substantial. It rests on an enviable series of research grants, which are detailed in the preface and which enabled Macinnes to deploy a team of researchers, some of them, like Esther Mijers, already promising scholars in their own right. There was also a raft of established scholars in the Scottish historical field who were available for consultation and advice, so the book has about it an air of exhaustive compilation. It will always retain value for its bibliographical material and manuscript references, some of them to fresh sources of substance, like Danish diplomats' comments, or the correspondence of Colonel William Dalrymple of Glenmure or of Sir David Nairn, secretary of state for Scotland both before and after the Treaty of Union. In an introduction that explains the main sources used, Macinnes makes the point that though Dalrymple

of Glenmure, a member of the Scottish parliament, was a supporter of the treaty, his letters make it clear that an incorporating treaty was no foregone conclusion.

Despite the cooperative dimension of the book, the text is the product of one man. The result is a deeply personal, acceptable, but hardly fluent style. Macinnes studied in St. Andrews and acknowledges his old teacher, Ronald Gordon Cant, reader in Scottish history, who lectured charismatically on Scottish history, but paralyzed development of his subject by treating it as a personal fief. This book is the fruit of belated but vigorous academic developments. It is a survey of a series of current debates on the approach to as well as content and consequence of the Union. Text is dwarfed by footnotes on some pages. Its opening deconstruction of the historiography of the Union makes the important point that every work on the subject has to be seen as embedding an agenda. The unionist pundits of the Scottish Enlightenment, for example, were inclined to convey a view of Scotland before 1707 as a barbarous intellectual desert. Self-flattering for them in the extreme, this propaganda belongs to rhetoric and belles lettres. As history it was and is deeply misleading.

Macinnes then covers the numerous earlier proposals for some form of political union in Great Britain between 1603 and 1707, stressing just how varied they were. His section on the Irish dimension is not his strongest. He never quite spells out clearly the basic dilemma of an Anglican political nation in an island whose population was 80 percent Roman Catholic and where the one province where this was not true, Ulster, contained a large alienated Protestant Dissenting community. From the point of view of the Irish majority, there was not so much an Irish problem as an English one that prevented them from achieving an independent and strongly Catholic state. Anglican Ireland feared, rightly, much the same fate as had befallen Copts in a nationalist Egypt, or Jews in a Baghdad dominated by Arab nationalism: terminal erosion as a community by an unsympathetic newly empowered surrounding culture. For Irish Anglicans, an incorporating union like the Scottish one would have been an assurance that the political nation at Westminster was truly committed to their long-term survival. When they found no response to their union proposals, they rightly concluded that they needed to look to themselves, which is why their parliament, next to Westminster the most powerful legislature in the British world, could be assertive and awkward. Proposed legislation was backed by the same sanction as in Westminster--refusal of supply. Macinnes's view that the Irish Parliament was slavishly dependent is just not right.

He gets back on a more assured note when he looks at the transatlantic dimension of the Union. His central point is the extent to which the Scots had in various ways--from smuggling to exploiting their close relationship with the Stewart dynasty--already deeply penetrated the English colonies in North America before 1707, and the considerable commercial and demographic potential they offered to the continent. He does explain what he means when he describes one set of options available to the London government as "Gothic policy-making," but one could have done without yet another private language (p. 155). As is so often the case with modern scholarship, a central assumption of both the title and the text of this book is just assumed rather than proven. Even an imperial historian like this reviewer would argue strongly that the Anglo-Scottish Union of 1707 was not in the least primarily driven by imperial considerations but, on the English side, by dynastic and European considerations and, on the Scottish, by domestic and economic ones. It had imperial consequences, but that is a different matter.

Macinnes, obviously helped by his association with Mijers, provides fresh and important material on the alternative models for future development suggested around 1700 by the contemporary

Dutch Republic, which solved the problem of a very limited demographic base, and restricted domestic consumption potential, in a variety of ingenious ways. In the Atlantic, the United Netherlands had a commercial, not a territorial, empire. The Scots, who had profound commercial, military, cultural, and religious involvement with the Netherlands, were well aware of all of this.

Finally, a fresh and detailed account of the genesis and contemporary politics of the Act of Union of 1707 closes this difficult but significant book. Its final conclusion tends to rather get lost in the detail. It is there to be extracted if you work at it, but is much more lucidly stated in the blurb. The Scots did not want a totally incorporating union and ended up with one because of their inept handling of the protracted negotiations and their failure to maximize their opportunities and options. This matters even now because the 1707 structure survived Jacobite rebellions to be legitimized by prosperity and Victorian parliament-worship. It was destroyed after Margaret Thatcher alienated the Scottish working and middle classes by arrogantly misusing within the 1707 framework the power of the minority-based elective dictatorship, which rules--or more often misrules--the United Kingdom. Ironically, New Labour, from Blair's accession to power in 1997, pushed that elective dictatorship to offensive extremes. New Labour's post-Blair leadership sometimes looks like a Scottish *raj*, yet under the Scot Gordon Brown the power of the U.K. premier has increased, is increasing, and urgently needs to be diminished. The 1707 Union looked impregnable for centuries, but we can now see it was originally always a means to an end, not an end in itself. Its radical modification was perhaps the first small step on a hard, necessary path for all four British nations if they wish to curb their political masters. They still have a long way to go.

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