

Julian Hoppit, ed.. *Parliaments, Nations and Identities in Britain and Ireland, 1650-1850*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003. xii + 255 pp. ISBN 978-0-7190-6247-6.



Reviewed by Jeremy Black

Published on H-Albion (November, 2004)

Based on a colloquium held in London in 2001 following Joanna Innes's Neale lecture, "Legislating for Three Kingdoms: How the Westminster Parliament Legislated for England, Scotland and Ireland, 1707-1830," this interesting book includes, beside the editorial introduction and the lecture by Rosemary Sweet on "Local Identities and a National Parliament, c. 1688-1835," Grayson Ditchfield on "Church, Parliament and National Identity, c. 1770-c. 1830," Hoppit on "The Landed Interest and the National Interest, 1660-1800," David Hayton on "Patriots and Legislators: Irishmen and their Parliaments, c. 1689-1740," Bob Harris on "The Scots, the Westminster Parliament, and the British State in the Eighteenth Century," Peter Jupp on "Government, Parliament and Politics in Ireland, 1801-14," David Armitage on "Parliament and International Law in the Eighteenth Century," Joshua Civin on "Constructing Imperial Identity through Liverpool Petition Struggles," and Miles Taylor on "Colonial Representation at Westminster, c. 1800-65." All the essays are of a high quality and several of them are innovative in topic and/or method. Innes's statistical work is particularly impressive, while Armitage, Civin,

and Taylor valuably advance the parameters, and Sweet offers an instructive English dimension. She points out that Parliament had a duty to protect local interests: not because of any perceived virtue in such interests in themselves, but because such chartered rights and local liberties were fundamental to the British constitution as then understood. She suggests that, whatever influence Benthamite notions of the greatest good for the greatest number may have had over MPs in the first decades of the nineteenth century, such ideologies had still to compete with firmly entrenched particularist views of rights and interests. The latter frequently led to an emphasis on the antiquity and historical status of individual towns.

Harris argues that Scots fully recognized the importance of having their interests and views fully represented in Parliament, especially because, in the first half of the century, the Scottish economy was in a precarious state. He suggests that this representation, and the ability of the Scots from the 1720s to shape ministerial policy and parliamentary legislation (at least on occa-

sion), were factors that helped facilitate Scotland's integration into the British state. In contrast, Hayton shows that the Irish parliamentary constitution eventually proved inadequate to bear the weight of expectations. He notes that the cumbersome method necessary to circumvent Poynings' Law placed a premium on the time available for legislating and restricted the number of bills that could be debated and passed. This is seen as a problem from the mid-eighteenth century, and led some to press for full independence.

Ditchfield argues that political discourse suggested that the parliamentary elite still perceived the country as fundamentally Christian, but that this proved divisive, especially as the increase in non-Anglican numbers led not to a consensual pluralism but to an aggressive denominationalism and to parliamentary battles, particularly over education. Hoppit claims that although the landed interest often claimed to represent and embody the national interest, its ability to do so was vitiated by its tensions and contradictions. As editor, he writes that "superficially, the parliamentary unification of the British Isles in this period created a unitary state. What this volume shows is how conditional and uncertain that unity was. Unification produced a highly complex state which was difficult to use and hard to imagine as a whole" (p. 11). Maybe so, but the absence of an international comparative dimension is a major problem with this judgment. There is a wealth of scholarship on composite states, but this has not been probed in this volume. This indeed is a major problem with the "discovery" of the British dimension approach to the history of the period. Aside from the misguided emphasis on discourse, which it shares with so much contemporary scholarship, this approach is apt to ignore, or at least underrate and misunderstand, the European context, a fault that contemporaries would not have shared. So, this is a good book, containing important essays, but it suffers from the fault of the dominant school of British scholarship on the period. As they are the

orthodoxy and control the levers of patronage and power, it is difficult to see this changing.

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Citation: Jeremy Black. Review of Hoppit, Julian, ed. *Parliaments, Nations and Identities in Britain and Ireland, 1650-1850*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. November, 2004.

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