

# **The Acts of Union and the Shaping of British Identity**

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The Acts of Union of 1707 represented a major turning point in the history of England and many historians consider it the birth of the British nation. However, the evolution of the concept of British identity began further back and continued to be forged and redefined long after the creation of Great Britain. Rather than being the outcome of an inevitable trajectory of politics and cultures merging, the Acts of Union were instead a hotly debated and contested measure which left various impressions about the nature of the relationship between the two kingdoms. The union ultimately secured Scottish assimilation into a larger English empire and created not a unified British identity, but a diverse and multifaceted one. The lack of consensus between the English and Scottish on what it meant to be British ensured the retention of regional identity over the organic development of a hybrid culture.

Terms such as assimilation and acculturation express the separate approaches to union taken by the English and the Scottish. The English expectation was that British identity could serve to acculturate the Scots into becoming more English. To acculturate was to reduce the differences that existed between the Scottish and the English in order to form a more stable British nation. Assimilation is more accurately used in the context of the Scottish vision of British identity in which Scots and Englishmen were each other's equals. This more equitable vision entails Scottish assimilation into a British state where Scottish identity is preserved independent of English identity. These radically different approaches to the role of union would shape the concept of British identity and ensured its contested status.

By the year 1706, the idea of an English and Scottish union was an old one which had been around for over one hundred years. James I and VI pioneered the concept of combining his two kingdoms beyond that of a personal union, though this was far from a realistic option at the time. King James himself appointed an English parliamentary commission in 1603 to meet with a Scottish commission to arrange a political union; a venture which quickly failed. Repeated attempts to arrange such a union were made in the years before 1706; the failures serving as testaments to the general resistance to the idea of union on both sides of the border. While many in Scotland did recognize the cultural and commercial ties they had with England, there was fear that Scottish identity would be jeopardized by the idea of union.<sup>1</sup> The English perspective was defined by a general anti-Scottish sentiment, one shared by Queen Anne herself. Fear of Scottish Jacobitism only fanned the flames of this prejudice. The strength of English identity led to the belief that union with Scotland was the surest way of achieving dominion over it.<sup>2</sup>

The Acts of Union themselves demonstrate the favorable nature of the union toward English customs and institutions. The new Parliament of Great Britain would hold session in Westminster Palace in accordance with English parliamentary traditions while the unicameral Scottish parliament would be dissolved. Instead sixteen Scottish Peers were selected to sit in the House of Lords along with forty-five Scottish representatives elected to the House of Commons.<sup>3</sup> English currency, weight and measuring standards, trade regulations, duties on goods, and customs on imports and exports all became the standard for the new United Kingdom.<sup>4</sup> Though

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<sup>1</sup> Leith Davis, *Acts of Union: Scotland and the Literary Negotiation of the British Nation, 1707-1830* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1998), 26-27.

<sup>2</sup> Murray G. H. Pittock, *Inventing and Resisting Britain: Cultural Identities in Britain and Ireland, 1685-1789* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 26-32.

<sup>3</sup> Scotland, *The articles of the union, As they Pass'd with amendments in the Parliament of Scotland together with the Act for securing the protestant religion and presbyterian church-government* (London: Andrew Bell at the Cross-Keys and Bible in Cornhill, 1707), 10.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 4-8.

the economic articles of the union did allow for greater Scottish participation in global trading networks, it did so within existing English institutions. Perhaps the most crucial article of the Acts was the second, which firmly placed the succession of both kingdoms in Sophia of Hanover and the heirs of her body.<sup>5</sup> The English push for the passage of the Acts of Union stemmed from fears of the Scottish Parliament investing the succession of its crown separate from that of England. The resurgence of an independent Scotland, potentially under a French-backed Stuart king, was to be avoided at all cost.

No figure was more important advancing English interest in the proposed union with Scotland than Daniel Defoe. A prolific author and pamphleteer, Defoe was sent to spy on the proceedings of the Scottish Parliament as an advisor from the English Government. Writing numerous works on the union, his *Essay at removing national prejudices against a Union with Scotland* embodied the English vision of union. Defoe's portrayal of Scottish power is contradictory to itself, on one hand emphasizing the lack of Scottish capacity to challenge England while on the other praising their potential contributions to the nation. As a Presbyterian himself, Defoe argued the natural alliance between Protestant churches and dissuades fears that the Scottish church would encourage dissidents or undermine Anglican supremacy within Britain.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, he argued that the provisions of the union would increase English trade with Scotland. At the heart of the work is the argument that any advancement of Scottish interests would be of greater benefit to England itself.<sup>7</sup> Defoe's Britain presents a mutually beneficially relationship where Scottish participation did not diminish English supremacy.

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<sup>5</sup> Scotland. *The articles of the union*, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Daniel Defoe, *An essay at removing national prejudices against a Union with Scotland. To be continued during the treaty here. Part I* (London: B. Bragg, 1706), 16-17.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

More important to Defoe than the English benefits from union was the method in which it would be achieved. Hundreds of years of military incursion and attempts at occupation had sullied Scottish opinion of the English. This opinion was further aided by the failure of the English to successfully acculturate Scotland even after the personal union of crowns. Peace between England and Scotland was not just a product of union according to Defoe, but also the best means to achieve it. He saw war between the two countries as ultimately being of benefit to the Scots, with even successful conquest draining English resources and ensuring continued resistance to attempts at acculturation.<sup>8</sup> By bringing the Scots into union peacefully, it would ensure Scottish acculturation and the domination of English culture throughout Britain.

While Defoe labored to persuade the English public of the advantages of union, Scottish opposition was just as virulent as English opposition. While Defoe was the most vocal supporter of union, he had to contend with the equally prolific John Hamilton, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lord of Belhaven and Stenton. Lord Belhaven served as a champion for Scottish independence and was strongest voice in the anti-union movement. As one of the leaders of the Darien scheme, he longed for recognition of Scottish deeds, both economic and military, which he felt were overshadowed by English colonial achievements.<sup>9</sup> Despite the failure of Caledonia and the financial stress it put on many of the Scottish elite, it signified the ability of Scotland to at least fund and organize colonial ventures as well as any other European power. In a speech to the Scottish Parliament in 1701, Belhaven painted a picture of the Scottish people as a unique, unconquered people who were now unwittingly prepared to surrender their freedom and accept a subordinated position.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Daniel Defoe, *An essay at removing national*, 21-22.

<sup>9</sup> Leith Davis, *Acts of Union*, 30.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 31-32.

His representation of the Scottish nation was a powerful one which held a strong place in popular imagination.

Being the ultimate expression of his opposition to union, None of Belhaven's other writings or speeches would ever be as influential as his address to Parliament in November of 1706. His words conveyed a great deal of passion, portraying the English push for union as Hannibal storming the gates and destroying the throne of Scotland.<sup>11</sup> Inflammatory rhetoric served to create a sense of urgency and convey the palpable nature of the threat to Scottish independence. Where English proponents like Defoe touted the benefits of Scottish participation in English trade, Belhaven argued that trade represents the golden chains of English slavery.<sup>12</sup> He even implied that the English had a hand in the failure of the Darien scheme to prevent Scotland from achieving independent economic prosperity.<sup>13</sup> Despite the negative light that Belhaven cast on English intention, there still were many Scots who saw value in a federal union with England. To challenge the virtues of the Acts of Union, Belhaven argued that the creation of the new heterogeneous nation proposed by Defoe was made impossible by the preservation of English institutions in the new British state.<sup>14</sup>

Of foremost importance to Belhaven was the royal succession, the issue which could cause the undoing of over a hundred years of personal union. The passage of the Act of Security demonstrated Scottish resentment at English attempts to alter the succession without consent from the Scottish Parliament.<sup>15</sup> The ability of Scotland to determine a succession independent of England would have confirmed Scotland's sovereignty. Belhaven asserted the English push of

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<sup>11</sup> Baron Belhaven, John Hamilton. *The Lord Beilhaven's speech in Parliament the second day of November 1706. on the subject-matter of an union betwixt the two kingdoms of Scotland and England* (Edinburgh, 1706), 8.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>15</sup> Murray G. H. Pittock, *Inventing and Resisting Britain*, 26.

union was to avoid Scottish separation and to accept the union would be a surrender of sovereignty to the English desire for a common succession.<sup>16</sup> The second article of the union also specifically forbids the succession of the British crown to "Papists" as was already determined by the 1701 Act of Succession under William and Mary.<sup>17</sup> This served to undercut Scottish support for the independent restoration of James VIII or any other Catholic Stuart in exile. Future British monarchs would lack any significant ties to Scotland and subsequently the crown was therefore made to serve English interests.

Protestantism was key to the English concept of Britain and theoretically served as a common link between its various regions. The importation of the German Hanoverian dynasty over the preservation of the Stuart dynasty demonstrates the English value attributed to Protestantism. Anti-Catholic pamphlets and almanacs circulated throughout Britain during the period following 1707, printed in larger numbers than even the Bible.<sup>18</sup> During periods of war with Catholic nations or during the numerous Jacobite uprisings, persecution of Catholic Britons occurred in England, Wales, and Scotland. While this alienation was a common occurrence through Britain, other barriers remained between the various denominations of Protestantism. Article XXV of the Acts of Union details the preservation of the Presbyterian Church, assuring its governance within Scotland and its independence from Anglican interference.<sup>19</sup> Defoe lamented that the French often got more respect in England than the Scots did, despite their common religion, tongue, and crown.<sup>20</sup> He was forced to assure English readers that Presbyterians in Scotland would not encourage religious dissenters to destroy the Anglican

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<sup>16</sup> Baron Belhaven and John Hamilton, *The Lord Belhaven's speech in Parliament*, 9-10.

<sup>17</sup> Scotland, *The articles of the union*, 3.

<sup>18</sup> Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707 - 1837* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 22-23.

<sup>19</sup> Scotland, *The articles of the union*, 12.

<sup>20</sup> Daniel Defoe, *An essay at removing national prejudice*, 11.

Church or join the Scots in a potential invasion of England.<sup>21</sup> While Protestantism was useful in alienating Catholics and giving a sense of nominal unity, the Acts of Union reinforced denominational divisions and a heterogeneous religious identity.

The creation of Great Britain was by no means an uncontested or uniform event. The years following the passage of the Acts of Union show a continuation of the debate over national identity. John Free, an Anglican Vicar from Cheshire, wrote a lengthy pamphlet on the subject of the loss of English identity within the broader British context. His *Seasonable reflections upon the importance of the name of England* expresses an English response to this new national identity. Free argues that it is the duty of Englishmen to preserve English identity as a separate and superior group above all other peoples who identify as being British.<sup>22</sup> His own sense of English superiority stems from his disdain for the other people of Britain, primarily the Scots. He portrays the Scots as publically identifying as Britons but privately preserving their own culture.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore Free laments the use of the term "British", saying it would be as bad if James I had used "King of Scotland" as his primary title.<sup>24</sup> However, Free's work should be understood as a more alarmist reaction to the creation of a new nationality, with considerable biases. Traditional stereotypes motivate his work and inform him on the nature of non-English peoples. He at one point asserted that that the "Wild" Irish and Highland Scots could not be counted among the British since their loyalty must belong to France.<sup>25</sup> However outlandish, his views reflected popular English resentment of Scottish inclusion in previously English institutions and the perceived loss of independent identity.

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 14-16.

<sup>22</sup> John Free, *Seasonable reflections upon the importance of the name of England*, (London: E. Owen at the Griffin in Holborn, 1755), 9-10.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>25</sup> John Free, *Seasonable reflections*, 8.

The British state took numerous steps in the years following 1707 to incorporate the Scottish Highlands into the rest of Britain. Measures were taken to strip the Highlands of their distinct features, such as banning the wearing of tartan, requiring oaths of loyalty to the Hanoverian king, and reducing the power of chieftains.<sup>26</sup> The loss of aspects of cultural identity is never a welcome development, but creeping English attempts at acculturation were offset by growing opportunities for Scots within Britain and abroad. Increasing participation of Scots within trading companies and government institutions in turn allowed for greater Scottish patrimony. This trend played into English fears of losing preeminence within Britain and was exploited by anti-Scottish activists. Scottish stereotypes were increasingly used in English writings, plays and cartoons. English prints such as *The Caledonians Arrival in Money-Land* depict Scots exploiting the riches of Britain to aggrandize themselves and their fellow countrymen.<sup>27</sup> Such resentments did nothing to slow Scottish participation in British institutions and enterprise, embracing their own vision of British identity. Scots living in England represented the best example of British identity as a hybrid between English and Scottish culture. Forced to adopt many English customs as a result of their professions, these people were both alienated from both cultures and gladly identified as Britons.<sup>28</sup>

Economic provisions made up the bulk of the Acts of Union and subsequent Scottish participation of trade was to be one of its biggest impacts. Defoe noted in his *Tour thro' the whole island of Great Britain* that the number of Scottish immigrants to Virginia would soon make it a Scottish colony rather than an English one.<sup>29</sup> Glasgow was quickly becoming the heart

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<sup>26</sup> Linda Colley, *Britons*, 120.

<sup>27</sup> Anonymous. "The Caledonians Arrival in Money-Land" Illustration. 1762. From the British Museum Collection online.

<sup>28</sup> Linda Colley, *Britons*, 125-126.

<sup>29</sup> Daniel Defoe, *A tour thro' the whole island of Great Britain, divided into circuits or journies...with which is included a set of maps* (New York: A. M. Kelley, 1968), 748.



of Scottish economic life, the union allowing it to become the center of highly profitable trade with the American colonies.<sup>30</sup> Defoe even felt that Glasgow and other towns on the coast of Scotland were in a better trading position than London, able to avoid the hazards of the English channel and reach the colonies sooner than English merchants.<sup>31</sup> Increased Scottish involvement in what had previously been an exclusively English empire caused insecurity among Englishmen around the middle of the eighteenth century. John Free observed that where Scots and Irish who had previously passed themselves off as English abroad, it was now Englishmen who hid their identity behind the term 'British'.<sup>32</sup> The favorable conditions of the Acts of Union toward the English did not stop Scots from participating in trade, which they considered themselves equally entitled.

Despite Defoe's predictions of Scottish economic development that would result from union with England, not all areas benefitted in the way Glasgow did. Most areas of Scotland were merely exporting raw materials such as wool and coal to England, but were not consuming much in the way of manufactured goods. Defoe blamed this trade imbalance on the removal of the court and nobility from Scotland to England, who chose to invest their wealth in their English estates rather than at home.<sup>33</sup> While many Scottish merchants and gentry individually benefitted from the opportunities presented by British trade networks, the majority of Scots remained in the same if not worse positions than before union.<sup>34</sup> Defoe argued that Scotland would greatly benefit from wool manufacturing, and it was the duty of Scottish gentlemen to take advantage of

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 745-746.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 749.

<sup>32</sup> John Free, *Seasonable reflections*, 29-30.

<sup>33</sup> Daniel Defoe, *A tour thro' the whole island of Great Britain*, 781-782.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 783.

their favorable economic positions created by the union to enrich their own country.<sup>35</sup> While Scottish elites had the means to participate in English companies and government institutions, other opportunities in Scotland were harder to come by. The unequal distribution of economic opportunity within Scotland following the union gave the majority of Scots little reason to favor a new British identity.

The story of the creation of Britain is one centered around unanticipated Scottish ascendancy in the face of overly favorable conditions toward the English. Predications of peaceful and advantageous subjection were touted as the English drive for union and were seemingly guaranteed by institutionalized English preeminence. However, the resilience of Scottish cultural identity within Britain, inspired by the exemplification of Lord Belhaven and other anti-unionists, was aided by the unanticipated consequences of the union. Reinforced denominational disparity contributed to Scottish distinctiveness, aided further by Scottish elites who embraced British identity at the perceived expense of English interests. Fear and prejudice on the part of the English toward the Scottish post-union was the result of unforeseen conceptual alteration by the Scots. British identity was no longer a tool of English acculturation, but a compromise of regional and cultural preservation.

It would be untrue to claim that there were none who came to identify themselves primarily as Britons, and in the long term the development of British identity did become more organic. That being said, the Acts of Union and the conditions created by them ultimately did help preserve regional identity within the context of British nationality. English and Scottish identities, both of which saw themselves being threatened in the wake of union, attempted to mold British identity to serve their respective interests. A shared government was not enough to

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 786-787.

replace existing identities with a constructed one; a challenge reinforced by enduring historical prejudices, denominational differences, unequal economic prosperity, and mutual fear of cultural erosion. Though British identity would continue to evolve long after 1707, the legacy of the Acts of Union endured in the resilience of regional identity with British consciousness.

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