THE UNION IN BRITISH HISTORY[1]

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'BRITISH history', or 'the new British history' – a field which the present writer is over-generously credited with inventing some twenty-five years ago – seems to have reached a point of takeoff. At least two symposia have appeared in which the method and practice of this approach are intensively considered, and there are monographs as well as multi-author volumes – though the latter still preponderate – in which it is developed and applied to a variety of questions and periods.[2] Its methodology remains controversial, and it may be in its nature that this should continue to be the case; for, in positing that 'the British isles' or 'the Atlantic archipelago' are and have been inhabited by several peoples with several histories, it proposes to study these histories both as they have been shaped by interacting with one another, and as they appear when contextualised by one another. There must be tensions between such a history of interaction and the several 'national' histories that have come to claim autonomy, and it is probable that these tensions must be re-stated each time a 'British history' is to be presented – as is the case in the present paper.

For a variety of reasons, the emphasis of 'new British history' has so far fallen on the early modern period preceding the formation of a unitary state and its disruption in the twentieth century. The Union of 1800–1 is of course cardinal to the latter process, and may be placed on the hinge or *Sattelzeit* marking the transition from early modern to

[1] An earlier version of this essay was delivered as a paper to the conference in Belfast. It has been revised in the light of that conference, but contains little that was not heard there.

[2] To the bibliography attempted on p. 491, n. 2, of David Armitage, Jane Ohlmeyer, Ned C. Landsman and Eliga H. Gould, '*AHA* Forum: the New British History in Atlantic Perspective', *American Historical Review* (IV, 2, April 1999) there should now be added that symposium itself; Tony Claydon and Ian McBride (eds.), *Protestantism and National Identity: Britain and Ireland, c. 1650–c.1850* (Cambridge University Press, 1998); Glenn Burgess (ed.), *The New British History: Founding a Modern State, 1603–1715* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999); S.J. Connolly (ed.) *Kingdoms United: Great Britain and Ireland since 1500* (Dublin: the Four Courts Press, 1999); Laurence Brockliss and David Eastwood (eds.), *A Union of Multiple Identities: the British Isles, c. 1750–c.1850* (Manchester University Press, 1997); Alexander Murdoch, *British History, 1660–1832: National Identity and Local Culture* (London: Macmillan, 1998); Keith Robbins, *Great Britain: Identities, Institutions and the Idea of Britishness* (London: Longman, 1998).

modern 'British history'. In this paper I attempt to review and re-periodise the earlier period as leading to the formation of the Union, so as to suggest some ways in which the modern phase of this history may be pursued. The bibliography reveals that the 'new history' has advanced beyond the seventeenth into the eighteenth century, and is venturing into the nineteenth; the history of the twentieth century awaits perspective. In this sequence the Union must appear a pivotal event, though its claim to that role cannot be exclusive of others.

The 'Age', 'War' or 'Wars' of the 'Three Kingdoms' are concepts that dominate our understanding of the early modern period, in which dynastic and parliamentary unions precede the formation of a comprehensive state. There has however begun to appear a new multi-volume 'history of the British Isles', which valuably proposes subdividing the early modern period under the headings of 'the two kingdoms' and 'the double crown' – the transformation of the one into the other falling at 1603.[3] Useful as this suggested re-periodisation is, the series displays the guiding hand of the late Geoffrey Elton, for whom (it sometimes seemed) only the sovereign state was real and had a history. Scotland and England were sovereign kingdoms; Ireland was not, and seems likely to appear in the new series only as part of the 'empire' which the English and their British state exerted over realms not included in its structure.[4] In this essay an attempt will be made to recognise a greater autonomy of 'Irish history' within the 'British' pattern and contributing to its shaping; and partly to that end, but also for larger reasons, there is proposed a somewhat different conceptualisation of the relations between 'state' and 'empire'.

The 'two kingdoms' may be seen entering on an 'early modern' history if we focus for the moment on the English kingdom and its marcher lordships. There are three crucial statutes enacted at Westminster and Dublin during the fourth decade of the sixteenth century. First must stand the Act in Restraint of Appeals (1533), which defines England as an 'empire', less in the sense that it exercises dominion over others – as of course it does – than in the sense that it exercises sovereignty over itself: that unshared sovereignty both ecclesiastical and civil, which the crown exercises both in parliament and out of it, and

[3] *A History of the Modern British Isles* (founding editor: Sir Geoffrey Elton; general editor: John Stevenson). Mark Nicholls: *1529–1603; The Two Kingdoms*; David L. Smith: *1603–1707; The Double Crown* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999). Other volumes are to follow.

[4] The volumes in preparation for the Blackwell series are listed as three further volumes on 'the History of the British Isles' to the present, a further volume on '*The British Empire, 1500–1997*' and 'in association with the series: *A History of Ireland, 1798–1998*.' Keith Robbins (above) also, though for other reasons, relegates Ireland to separate treatment. It should perhaps be emphasised here that 'national' histories can, should and will be written alongside cross-national histories and co-exist with them.

which must from now on be agreed upon and exercised if England is to be a sovereign kingdom and define itself as a Christian community. 'Empire' is henceforth a precarious and deeply contested term, to be exercised in dynasty, parliament and church all together if 'England' is to be governed and have meaning. It is exercised by England over England, as well as by England over subordinate realms; but failures of 'empire' in the latter sense may entail failures of 'empire' in the former, and for this reason no separation between internal 'state' and external 'empire' is satisfactory.

The subordinate realms must now be brought into the picture, and allowed historic autonomy, if 'British' history is not to be collapsed into 'English'. The Statute of Wales in 1536 liquidates the marcher lordships and completes the incorporation of 'Wales' into 'England' – an assimilation of a society still Celtic to an Anglo-Norman model so uniquely successful that Welsh nationalist historiography consists largely in examining the costs of its success. Since there had at no time been a functioning kingdom of Wales, this union does not figure in the sequence of Unions punctuating the history of the 'Three Kingdoms,' and the statute of 1536 is therefore antithetical with that enacted at Dublin in 1541, which erected the English king's 'lordship of Ireland' into a 'kingdom'. This inaugurates a history of the Three Kingdoms, and at the same time renders it problematic, for the reason that 'Ireland' is at best a subordinate kingdom and may not be one at all. The English monarch is king in Ireland, but this does not necessarily mean that he has there a kingdom in the sense of a body politic of which he is the head. There are, however, from an early date elite groups in Ireland who desire that status for themselves – these are as likely to be settler as indigenous, loyalist as rebellious – and there is a history, and a historiography, turning on the question whether Ireland is a colony undergoing conquest or a body politic shaping itself within a multiple monarchy.[5]

It is crucial that, whereas the elites within Wales by and large accepted the Anglican church-state brought into being by the Act in Restraint of Appeals – and were in the next century divided by it along lines not unlike those dividing the English – the elites and the governed classes of Ireland did not. There exists a literature which enquires, with respect to both the Gaelic Irish and the Old English, why it was that they remained Catholic and what kinds of Catholic they remained.[6]

[5] See, classically, Brendan Bradshaw, *The Irish Constitutional Revolution of the Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 1979), and the ensuing debate among Irish historians.

[6] The Welsh and Irish cases are compared by Bradshaw, 'The English Reformation and identity formation in Ireland and Wales', in Brendan Bradshaw and Peter Roberts (eds.), *British Consciousness and Identity: the making of Britain, 1533–1707* (Cambridge University Press, 1998).

The persistence of a Catholic majority deeply separates the history of the Irish from that of the two other Kingdoms, and is of course inseparable from the continued status of Ireland as a kingdom imperfectly conquered and still undergoing conquest. A crucial process in the history of the 'Two Kingdoms' of the island properly termed 'Britain' is the occurrence in Scotland of a Protestant Reformation more sharply Calvinist and presbyterian than was the Anglican. This gives the relations of church and monarchy, and therefore the structure of the Scottish kingdom, a distinct and ultimately unassimilable character; but for a hundred years it was not unreasonable to imagine a convergence of the two monarchies along episcopalian–presbyterian lines. This was imaginable to the Protestant churches in Ireland, but not to the Catholic majority. The Old English who so resolutely proclaimed their loyalty to James VI and I at the conclusion of the Nine Years War must either imagine him as their secular protector, or imagine that the Catholic aspects of his Anglican kingship might be extended to a point where they came close to the Gallican formula of empire over the church coupled to communion with Rome. James's ecumenical interests held out hopes which were to prove delusive.[7]

In 1603 a dynastic union replaces the 'Two Kingdoms' with the 'Double Crown', leaving the status of the Third Kingdom more ambiguous than before – but not (it is important to stress) to be excluded on those grounds from 'British history'. The fall of the Gaelic-Tudor earldoms leaves the Old English exposed to competitors from the Protestant New English influx, while promoting that momentous innovation, the colonisation of Ulster by Scottish and English Protestants. This is an event in the history of all three kingdoms, and could not have come about but for King James's interest in consolidating his properly British realms. The history of early modern Scotland is imported into that of Ireland, but is so by the authority of the Crown of Westminster rather than that of Scone. Taken in conjunction with events in Argyll and the Hebrides, it may properly appear that the colonisation of Ulster was part of an attempted Protestantisation of the northwestern Gaeltacht which had always bridged the North Channel; but it occurred in the further context of a kingdom of Ireland which was a realm of the English crown, and the Scottish colony in Ulster was not a colony of the Scottish kingdom. Simultaneously, the colonies of settlement which were extending the empire of the Crown to the

[7] W.B. Patterson, *King James VI and I and the Unity of Christendom;* (Cambridge University Press, 1997). The nature of Irish Catholic royalism has been explored in a number of studies. The proposition of Brendan Fitzpatrick (*Seventeenth-Century Ireland: the Wars of Religion*, Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 1988) that Old English Catholicism was para-Gallican, Gaelic Catholicism Franciscan and ultramontane is suggestive, though his understanding of both Anglicanism and Calvinism is deeply flawed.

North American seaboard and the West Indian islands were deemed to be English and the Scots had none of their own; it might have been otherwise.

We now enter upon the problems of church and state – of empire as defined by the Act in Restraint of Appeals – in the multiple monarchy of a single dynasty, and may look forward, at the usual risks of foreshortening and telocentricity, to the Fall of the British Monarchies and the Wars of the Three Kingdoms. The coupling of these terms is the most trenchant move which has yet been made towards a 'British history' of the English themselves, since it entails the assertion that their internal dissensions would never have led them to civil war, and that this was a consequence of a breakdown of government and a failure to control the sword first in Scotland and then in Ireland – in each case produced by attempts to impose English modes of 'empire' in church and civil government.[8] While it is intensely salutary that we have ceased using 'the English Civil War' as a term comprising the wars in all three kingdoms, it should not be forgotten that there was such a war, discussed in great intellectual depth precisely because it had been undesired and unexpected and was desperately hard to understand;[9] or that the memory of this conflict, and the operation of institutions designed to prevent its recurrence, governed English history to the end of the eighteenth century. This is a fact of 'British' as well as 'English' history; we have arrived at a point where 'empire' in the sense of governance of realms beyond England is capable of devastating 'empire' in the sense of England's civil sovereignty over itself. The Cromwellian union of 1651–60 was imposed on Scotland and Ireland largely to ensure that these realms should have no power over the settlement of a dispute the English were having with themselves.

No revolutionary settlement being available, the year 1660 sees a partial return to empire in the government of all three kingdoms. In Ireland the defeat of the Confederation underlines the hopeless position of the kind of Catholicism represented by the Old English; to that extent, Protestant rule is on the way. In Scotland, the willingness of the aristocracy to consider episcopacy as a means of controlling the clergy opens a road to Erastianism and Enlightenment. In England, a separate

[8] The bibliography may be summarised by mentioning Conrad Russell, *The Fall of the British Monarchies, 1637–1642* (Oxford: the Clarendon Press, 1991); John Morrill, *The Nature of the English Revolution* (London: Longman, 1993); and Martyn Bennett, *The Civil Wars in Britain and Ireland* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

[9] J.G.A. Pocock, 'The Atlantic Archipelago and the War of the Three Kingdoms,' in Brendan Bradshaw and John Morrill (eds.), *The British Problem, c. 1534–1707* (London: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 172–91; 'Thomas May and the Narrative of Civil War', in Derek Hirst and Richard Strier (eds.), *Writing and Political Engagement in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 112–44).

periodisation is necessary; we embark on 'the long eighteenth century', lasting till 1832 and marked by parliamentary determination to maintain an established church.[10] This is the form in which Tudor 'empire' was maintained through the Hanoverian era; but it took time and a revolution to bring the Stuart monarchy back to support of the church of which it was the head. In 1688–9 a 'glorious revolution' which was also a 'second Restoration'[11] achieved this end at the high cost of expelling James VII and II from all three of his kingdoms. The war cycle that moved from Torbay through Killiecrankie to Limerick was not a Second War of the Three Kingdoms of the same order as the First, since it was not a breakdown or dissolution of government in all three realms as much as a re-ordering of government in the face of a European power struggle threatening to engulf the multiple monarchy. King William landed at Torbay and crossed the Boyne in order to enlist the island kingdoms in his war against Louis XIV in Flanders, and the War of the English Succession was the archipelagic face of the War of the League of Augsburg or Nine Years War. On the other hand, the enlistment of the Three Kingdoms transformed European power politics by consolidating that parliamentary and military fiscal state, the Kingdom of Great Britain, capable of exercising empire in the archipelago, intervening at times decisively in the power politics of the peninsula, and pursuing empire in the modern sense on the oceans and in America and India.[12] This was the true revolution achieved in the quarter-century following the Dutch intervention of November 1688.

With the Kingdom of Great Britain we may begin to write 'British history' in more than a conceptual sense, but there remains the difficulty that the state of which it is the history is preponderantly English and activated by English politics in a sense nearly exclusive of all others. The kingdom was formed by the parliamentary Union of 1707, largely the result of a Scottish decision that their kingdom could no longer maintain a separate political economy and that a merger with the English parliamentary fiscal structure was the only recourse. On the English side, however, there were reasons, some of them religious in character, why the maintenance of empire in the Tudor sense required

[10] J.C.D. Clark, *English Society, 1688–1832* (Cambridge University Press, 1986; revised edition, 2000).

[11] For 1688 as 'second Restoration', see Jonathan Scott, 'Radicalism and Restoration: the shape of the Stuart experience', *Historical Journal*, xxi, 2 (1988), and *Algernon Sidney and the Restoration Crisis, 1677–1683* (Cambridge University Press, 1991).

[12] Jonathan I. Israel (ed.), *The Anglo-Dutch Moment: Essays on the Glorious Revolution and its World Impact* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), Dale Hoak and Mordechai Feingold, *The World of William and Mary: Anglo-Dutch Perspectives on the Revolution of 1688* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996); John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State, 1688–1783* (New York: Knopf, 1989).

a union of king and parliament so close that there could be no thought of a federal relationship in which the king would be responsible to more parliaments than one. For the same reasons, however, what had to be an incorporating union of parliaments had to be a federative union of church-states. The year 1689 had seen a presbyterian revolution in Scotland, where the extrusion of the Episcopal Church kept the kingdom in a state of latent civil war till 1746; and the Kingdom of Great Britain, in which theoretically the Kingdoms of England and Scotland ceased to exist, remained one in which the sovereign was head of the church in England and something other than that in Scotland. Theoretically again, this entailed a drastic separation of civil and ecclesiastical sovereignty; practically, it entailed no such thing, since the maintenance of established religion continued to be vital in both kingdoms.[13]

The ecclesiastical dimension can never be omitted from the study of early modern history; nor can 'Enlightenment' – defined as the subordination of religion to civil society – be omitted from that section of it denoted by the term 'ancien regime'.[14] In English history, 'the long eighteenth century' is the period during which an established church, with an apparent monopoly of civil office, must be maintained by king-in-parliament, but the purpose of doing so is to ensure that neither orthodoxy nor dissent can disturb the civil order. This is the late form taken by Tudor 'empire', the national sovereignty in church and state, and its purpose within England is to prevent any recurrence of the disorders of the seventeenth century. In the larger fields of British, archipelagic and as we shall see Atlantic history, this objective merges with that of maintaining empire in the sense of sovereignty over the larger system (this is the commonest meaning of 'empire' in eighteenth-century anglophone discourse). It is with 'empire' in all these senses, including the ecclesiastical and Enlightened, that the Scottish kingdom is merged by the Union of 1707, and this is the point at which to introduce a periodisation of British history moving from an Age of the Three Kingdoms to a First Age of Union, lasting from 1707 to 1801. The Anglo-Irish Union can be considered in the setting this provides, as inaugurating a Second Age of Union from 1801 to 1921; this will be succeeded by an age or ages to which it would be premature to give a name, since the end is not yet and it is not our business to foresee it.

All such periodisations are verbal devices intended to focus our attention in selected ways, and it is not inappropriate to employ a

[13] John Robertson (ed.), *A Union for Empire: political thought and the Union of 1707* (Cambridge University Press, 1995).

[14] J.G.A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion, volume I: The Enlightenments of Edward Gibbon* (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

diversity of them in conjunction. In English history, 'the long eighteenth century' overlaps 'the First Age of Union'; in Irish history, an age of 'Protestant ascendancy' has a beginning and end of its own. There is also imperial history, in which it has been customary to distinguish between a 'First British Empire' and a 'Second', the moment of transition occurring about 1783, when the recognition of American independence coincides with the acquisition of massive state power in India. The various meanings assigned to the term 'empire' in this essay may suggest some modifications in the last of these, but several periodisations may be employed in interpreting the Union of 1800–1.

The ecclesiastical-Enlightened dimension sketched above is far from explaining everything that happened, but provides a useful key that may be employed in setting the events in order. In the English kingdom it accounts for significant tensions within the Church of England; in so far as the regime needed to rest upon a church universal, that church must be apostolic and maintain the fulness of catholic tradition, but in so far as it was a pillar of civil society it upheld rational and sociable concepts of the Christian life which might move in directions Arian, Socinian or crypto-deist.[15] A current of non-trinitarian thinking persisted within the Church of England, and about 1772 emerged in alliance with a more radical unitarianism of nonconformist origin, to form the peaceable yet subversive movement which we know as Rational Dissent.[16] In its extreme development, conspicuous if not representative, this reduced all worship to freedom of opinion; it called for an actual separation of church and state, a goal attainable only under revolutionary and millennial conditions; and in denying any ecclesiastical character to political authority, it encouraged radically and even democratically Lockean views of the latter. Though it had little revolutionary potential within the kingdom of Great Britain, Rational Dissent was vocally and disturbingly active in its support of both the American and French Revolutions, and joined with other currents of discontent, Whig and Tory in origin, to act as progenitor of that British Left whose language has always been more revolutionary than its practice.

It plays this not insignificant role in a cycle of rebellions, revolutions and reconstructions, datable from 1776 through 1801, which may be compared with the War of the Three Kingdoms and the War of the English Succession for the way in which it brought to a close both the First Age of Union and – if we retain the term – the First British

[15] For the former, see Clark, *English Society*, 1985; for the latter, B.W. Young, *Religion and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century England; theological debate from Locke to Burke* (Oxford: the Clarendon Press, 1998).

[16] Knud Haakonssen (ed.), *Enlightenment and Religion: Rational Dissent in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

Empire. In this critical period the Irish crisis of 1782–1800 is conspicuous and important, but we should approach it by way of a detour though the other provinces of the Hanoverian multiple monarchy and empire. In Scotland, the last war fought within the Kingdom of Great Britain – the reconquest of the northwestern Gaeltacht following the Anglo-Lowland victory of 1746 – is to be viewed alongside the relative peace of the Protestant kingdom within the Union of 1707. There is some potential for radical Covenanting and perhaps proto-nationalist discontent with the abandonment of the militancy of the seventeenth century, but this is checked and pacified by that combination of lay patronage, Moderate oligarchy and civil philosophy known as the Scottish Enlightenment.[17] The remarkable success of this experiment in containing the ecclesiastical within the civil can be measured by comparing it with the case of the Scottish colony in Ulster, where Moderate control did not take shape and New Light anti-trinitarianism joined with Old Light Calvinism in the rebellious societies of Belfast.[18]

Before turning to the Irish aspects of the story, we must take account of an American dimension, in which the politics of the archipelago are enlarged into those of the Atlantic and the cis-Appalachian seaboard, and there appear new areas in which the problems of empire endanger the stability of the kingdom in church and state. The colonies and conquests in North America and the Caribbean had not been organised into viceroyalties or subordinate kingdoms on either the Spanish or the Irish model. They were largely, and considered themselves to be, English; though their populations contained – additional to large numbers of enslaved Africans – sizeable ethnic minorities including Scots-Irish (as Presbyterian emigrants from Ulster were beginning to be known in American historiography). These colonies were of diverse and often ill-defined juridical and political status, and from one point of view their history in the eighteenth century is that of their search for a more clearly defined political character, entailing demands for political autonomy greater than can be met within the existing structures of empire, so that in the end they take the revolutionary step of proclaiming themselves independent states.[19] We may look on these events as phenomena in the history of settler nationalism, if by that term – 'settler' is preferable to 'colonial', though 'nationalism' may not be preferable to 'patriotism' – we denote the processes which occur when settler populations begin to make claims against the state, and

[17] Richard B. Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment: the Moderate Literati of Edinburgh* (Princeton University Press, 1985).

[18] I am greatly indebted here to Ian McBride, *Scripture Politics: Ulster Presbyterians and Irish Radicalism in the Late Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: the Clarendon Press, 1998).

[19] Jack P. Greene, *Peripheries and Center: Constitutional Development in the Extended Polities of the British Empire and the United States, 1607–1788* (New York: Norton, 1990).

sometimes the people, that originally sent them forth: claims to conduct their own relations with the sovereign, claims to be enracinated in the land they have conquered from, or now share with, indigenous cultures from whom they sometimes derive part of their legitimacy. Phenomena of this kind are ancient in Irish history, where Old English, New English and Ulster Scots constitute three settler populations and as many religions; it is a key to medieval history that the Old English and Gaelic populations interacted, a key to early modern history that they remained Catholic and did not fully accept Anglican empire.

Publicists writing on behalf, first of the Old and then of the New English, had developed the argument that the Irish parliament was or should be subject to the English crown but not the English parliament – a contention increasingly unacceptable in England as the crown increasingly became a crown-in-parliament. It was taken up, during the 1760s and 70s, on behalf of American colonial assemblies claiming a similar autonomy, and claiming to be representative of bodies politic which they rendered autonomous by representing them. It is a question whether this claim to autonomy and sovereignty constitutes a 'nationalism' or not; but had it been systematically developed, it would have had the effect of converting the empire into a confederation of states held together by autonomy under a single crown. It is one of the keys to 'British history' that English history rendered this impossible.[20] Not only was there an ancient tradition of regarding Ireland as a conquered realm subordinate to the English king in parliament; in order to govern themselves, and resolve the deep tensions inherent in their polity, the English had effected so close a unity between crown and parliament that it could scarcely be shared with any confederate equals. If the king were responsible to any parliament but the English (British), his unity with that parliament would be broken and the twin spectres of absolutism and rebellion would rise again. That unity, furthermore, was never free from threat. No sooner had George III been freed of the challenge from Jacobitism than he had found both aristocratic politicians and enemies of aristocratic politics accusing him of delegitimising his rule in new ways, so vehemently as to challenge his own legitimacy. The American crisis grew as part of what Edmund Burke called 'the present discontents'. In these circumstances the King was no more likely to listen to American claims to autonomy early in his reign than

[20] J.G.A. Pocock, 'States, republics and empires: the American Founding in early modern perspective', in Terence Ball and J.G.A. Pocock, (eds.) *Conceptual Change and the Constitution* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1988), pp. 55–77; 'Empire, state and confederation: the War of American Independence as a crisis in multiple monarchy', in Robertson (ed.), *A Union for Empire*, pp. 318–48; *La Ricostruzione di un Impero: sovranità britannica e federalismo americano* (Macerata: Biblioteca del Laboratorio di storia costituzionale Antoine Barnave, 1996).

to Catholic claims to emancipation towards the end of it; he was insufficiently secure in his position at the apex of empire in state and church.

The imperfect legitimacy of the Hanoverian dynasty may help explain the ease with which figures as diverse as George Washington and Theobald Wolfe Tone found themselves patriots in arms against a monarchy and empire they might otherwise have served; though due weight must be allowed to an ideology of universal right to rebellion which had conservative ideologues asking how any government could persist in face of 'the rights of men'. This, however, did not simplify all problems out of existence. The Americans by 1776 were reduced to proclaiming the empire a confederation in order to proclaim that confederation dissolved by reason of the crown's refusal to recognise it. This entailed proclaiming the absolute independence of thirteen states; at the same time, however, the Declaration of Independence announced the purpose of dissolving the ties which had bound 'one people' to 'another'. In a certain sense, both 'the American people' and 'the British people' are American inventions, though it remains possible that processes more complex than invention were bringing both into existence. The former, held to consist of thirteen states and one people, was by the Declaration committed to entering upon a discourse of federalism, precluded by the nature of parliamentary monarchy from forming part of a British discourse. At the same time, however, the completeness of the separation pronounced between American and British history meant that the Declaration had nothing further to say about the latter and uttered no call to revolution within it. However great the shock of American independence to British empire, the first great secession from British history left the latter's politics much as they had been before it. The second great secession, that of the Irish in the twentieth century, is a very different story.

The crisis of empire in the last quarter of the eighteenth century was the crisis of an empire in church as well as state. Since the American colonies had not been organised as subordinate kingdoms, like Ireland in one sense and post-Union Scotland in another, the Crown had not been obliged to consider an establishment of religion in them, and the Anglican and even Catholic confessions – where these existed and were sometimes strong – had something of the character of sects in a multi-congregational ecclesiastical polity. Though the Crown had no sustained intention of erecting American bishoprics, the fear that it might do so was remarkably persistent, especially after the Quebec Act of 1774 seemed to establish the Catholic church in newly conquered French Canada. If religion cannot be considered a major cause of the American Revolution, it did much to determine the character of the society that

emerged from it.[21] The English-speaking United States were a model of late-Enlightened Protestant culture, unitarian, liberal and deist at one extreme, sectarian, evangelical and millenarian at another; and the separation of church and state, achieved by these forces in combination, seemed to Rational Dissenters in Birmingham and New Light Presbyterians in Belfast the revolutionary fulfilment of a dream. Anti-trinitarian enmity to all establishments is a recurrent if not a necessary feature of the revolutionary ferment in the British ecumene.

If the wars of America were not wars of religion, those of Ireland notoriously have been and are of that character. The 'new British history', precisely because it views each particular history in the context afforded by some other, leans away from regarding national identities as primordial, while accepting that there are good reasons for their formation where this has successfully occurred. The history of the Irish response to the imperial crisis, the American Revolution and later the French, culminates with the United Irishmen's attempt to put together a national republicanism which, after its failure and the imposition of the Union, became the foundation of a republican nationalism; but the pluralist approach of the new British history tends to treat this story in terms of the convergences and divergences of three ethnic groups confessionally defined. The strongly Whiggish leadership of the Church of Ireland ascendancy reacted to the ineffective government of the American war by seeking greater autonomy for their own parliament, and by organising a national Protestant militia for the patriot purpose of demanding it; a programme natural to what we are calling settler nationalism. In proportion as they came close to achieving a confederal status unattainable by the Americans with whom they sympathised, they faced the problems generated by church ascendancy: the denial of many and various rights to those not of the Church of Ireland, first those significantly known by the English term 'Dissenters' – though they were Scottish Presbyterians, 'Covenanters' and 'Secessionists' when they dissented from their own kirk, as some but not all of them did – secondly the Catholic majority, no longer distinguishable into 'Old English' and 'Gaelic', and beginning to enter into new forms of middle-class and peasant organistation. There was an underlying problem of empire: was the government of Ireland by means including an established church so narrowly based that it would lead to revolutionary resistance, or could it be broadened and legitimised by measures of relief and emancipation? In England and Scotland, Enlightenment was a means of moderating established religion, but there was also an Enlightenment which attacked it at its root.

[21] J.C.D. Clark, *The Language of Liberty, 1660–1832: political discourse and social dynamics in the Anglo-American world* (Cambridge University Press, 1994).

There appeared radicals within the Protestantism that was not Presbyterian who aimed to break with both established religion and the executive's control of the Dublin parliament – with 'empire', therefore, in both Tudor senses of the term – and were attracted to American and later French revolutionary models. They came to propound an Enlightened republicanism which offered to include, but at the same time to assimilate, all three confessions. The parallel developments within Belfast and Ulster Presbyterians appear of a special character once we begin seeing them as produced by a history peculiar to that people – as the pluralism inherent in 'British history' encourages us to do. A history Scottish but not Moderate turns first towards a revolutionary pursuit of religious and civil emancipation – as 'the Scots-Irish' among others in America are doing already – but there remains the alternative of a hard-core or Old Light Calvinism that either rebels against the state or joins in supporting it.[22] To see this as key to the journey of Northern Protestants from rebellion towards loyalism is to say that they have a history of their own, unshared with others; but it has become the aim of republican nationalism to deny them such an autonomy.

The crucial encounter at all levels is that with a reorganised, largely lay, Catholicism; and here we ourselves encounter a problem in historical demarcation. There were levels, British and Canadian as well as Irish, at which relief and recognition of Catholics could be discussed as matters of public policy and the Catholic hierarchy and laity might negotiate with the state. Here the state might be moved to reconsider its own history, as built upon a repudiation of papal sovereignty so strong as to exclude Catholics from civil society and history condemning them as inherently disloyal to both. Enlightenment very often inherited this condemnatory attitude from Protestantism before it. The state was under strong pressures to continue a rigorous exclusion of Catholics from both state and society, resting on an established church. On the other hand, Enlightenment, the absorption of religion by civil society, might mitigate the rigors of both establishment and its opposites, Catholic and Dissenting; and in the last third of the eighteenth century, that delusive interval between the fall of the Jesuits and the Bonapartist captivity of the papacy, it was possible on both sides of the divide to believe that civil society and Catholic authority could come to terms. The Gallican strategy of separating civil sovereignty from sacramental communion was one which Enlightenment continued and with which the Church might perhaps negotiate, and the Protestant empire of the Hanoverians made offers of conciliation and concession to which the hierarchy responded. There was, however, a Catholic history going on,

[22] For all of this see McBride, *Scripture Politics*.

in which such offers were sometimes embraced and sometimes rejected, and neither statesmen in the eighteenth century nor historians in the twentieth have always known that history well enough to respond to it in the ways demanded of them.

The revolutionary response to the same question, when it appeared, was not other than a more radical version of Enlightenment. The offer to divorce the state from all recognition of religion, granting equal civil rights to those of all confessions, carried the implication that all were equally in harmony with civil society; and Catholics, like other Christians, had to decide whether they were content with the status of civil beings with a set of beliefs peculiarly their own. It is notorious that neither hierarchy nor laity, nor both in dialogue with each other, have been of one mind in this matter, and the debate is continuing. In Irish history this meant that the programmes favoured by Wolfe Tone rested on the assumption that Irish like French Catholics would accept the status offered them by the Civil Constitution of the Clergy; it was the Enlightened, not the Catholic, view of Catholicism. In the larger pattern of British history as the history of empire, the debates leading to Union in 1801 and Emancipation in 1829 turned on how the Westminster if not the Dublin parliament was to handle relations with a Catholic majority that must somehow be modified.

At other levels, a Catholic resurgence took the form of peasant organisation which was met by responses, escalating towards violence, of two kinds. The first was Protestant counter-organisation at the same social levels, which in due course shaped the evolution of the Northern Presbyterians towards a loyalism initially Orange, in which they had not shared; it is of interest that the turn towards loyalism was connected with a great debate resulting in the condemnation of Arianism, though that was many years later.[23] The presence of conditions intermittently anticipatory of ethnic cleansing is a reminder that political development in Ireland had a character of its own, imperfectly controlled by the state which might either co-opt or be co-opted by it. This points to the second quasi-violent response, that of the state, which at one level develops machinery of police and espionage slower to develop in the island of Britain, where conspiracy is less endemic; but at another helps bring about the rebellions of 1798 through responding to Catholic agitation by dragonnades, that is by military repression supported by regular soldiers but carried out by sub-regular forces, militia, yeomanry and fencibles. It recurrently occurs in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that the state in Ireland is not perfectly in command of its own military responses. This, however, is a phenomenon of the Second

[23] McBride, ibid., pp. 219–22.

Age of Union, when empire is no longer being exercised in senses confined to the early modern.

If American independence – the first revolutionary outcome of the crisis of the late eighteenth century – leaves the structures of empire in church and state much as they had been before it, the Union with Ireland is revolutionary in the sense that it deeply transforms them (as the Revolution of 1688–89 had begun doing a century before). The Union has certainly to be seen in the context of other transformations, brought about by war with revolutionary France and the growth of Indian and maritime empire;[24] but from the perspective adopted in this paper, it is desirable to focus on the interval between Union and Emancipation. That the former made little sense without the latter was known to Pitt and Cornwallis, but it was delayed nearly thirty years – setting on foot processes which acted in the ultimate failure of the Union – due in some measure to the opposition of George III. It is a useful exercise to take the King's attitude seriously. Would he have had so much difficulty granting Emancipation if it had been unaccompanied by Union? Queen Anne had had fewer problems with her coronation oath over the Union of 1707, but that had been a union of parliaments, not of churches, which left the Church and Kingdom of England intact (since no one believed for a moment that they had disappeared). 1801 was a union of parliaments, not of administrations; but Ireland was being united with the Kingdom of England, of which it had been an appanage, and if the Church of Ireland was being more closely linked with the Church of England, Emancipation meant, as it did in 1829, a major modification of that special position of the Church within the Kingdom that the King was sworn to uphold.[25] 1829 was in a real sense the end of the Tudor church-state established four centuries before, the 'national apostacy' of the Oxford Tractarians; it is unhistorical to employ the language of Enlightenment to suggest that this is without significance.

The Union, then, foretells what does not happen until 1829–32: the end of 'the long eighteenth century', that *ancien regime* period in which the Crown governs through the historic parliament and church, and 'empire' in the English sense of the Act in Restraint of Appeals is modified by the exercise of 'empire' meaning sovereign dominion over realms other than England. As an experiment speedily resolved and carefully planned by practical politicians too busy, as usual, to consider the meaning of what they were doing, the Union entailed Emancipation but not Reform; there was no reason to anticipate the conjunction of

[24] C.A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: the British Empire and the World, 1780–1880* (London, Longman, 1989).

[25] Clark, *English Society*, pp. 383–408.

repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts with reconstruction of the system of parliamentary representation. Yet what came about in 1800–1 both was and was not a powerful extension of parliamentary, if no longer of ecclesiastical, empire. The Second Age of Union was one in which a post-revolutionary parliamentary state confronted, and helped engender by way of reaction against itself, a modern democratic nationalism (and, by way of reaction against the latter, a counter-nationalist loyalism in the distinctive history of the North). A romantic republicanism with its roots in 1798 maintained a tradition of political violence, which it succeeded in legitimating after 1916; while this was going on, however, the Union established in Ireland a parliamentarism (the parliamentarism of Parnell) more effective and deeply rooted than any achieved by the parliament of the pre-Union kingdom. Republicanism, which had to contend with the Catholic Church, had also to contend with a parliamentary style of politics; and this is one reason why the revolution of 1916–22 did not result in a fascist revolution like its Italian contemporary – as it might have done – but in a middle-class Catholic democracy. The Union was an extension of parliamentary empire which ended in revolution within that empire and independence from it (complicated by the Protestant North); but there is a history in which we continue to study 'empire' as the distribution of sovereignty shaped by forces operating within the Atlantic archipelago. At the time of writing, there are two sovereign states joining to contain the violent politics of a border province which can no longer be allowed to destablise either of them.