

1715: The Great Jacobite Rebellion

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The 1715 rebellion has never really sparkled in the heroic iconography of the Jacobite cause. Within the old received narrative of doomed chivalry and defeated virtue, it inhabits a melancholic role, untouched by the colour and charisma of Charles Edward Stuart and the '45, or the epic afterglow of Viscount Dundee's earlier stand at Killecrankie. The historians' judgement has typically taken its cue from the cries of the Scottish rebels at the battle of Sheriffmuir, who called out for 'an hour of Dundee' as the earl of Mar led them to a deadening stalemate that neither crushed nor advanced the cause. The tardy landing of the pretender, James Edward Stuart, coldly received by some of his supporters, became a neat epitome of Jacobite failure and frustration in 1715, as the Hanoverian regime overcame the early challenge to tighten its grip on the polity.

But this unpromising image makes the '15 fertile territory for those scholars who have sought to rediscover the Jacobite movement as a genuine challenge to the post-Revolution, post-Union British state. Indeed, after a steady stream of scholarship from authors such as Eveline Cruickshanks, Paul Monod, and Murray Pittock over three decades, it is perhaps surprising that Daniel Szechi's new book offers the first sustained modern account of the dynastic rising (1).

There are, as this latest writer acknowledges, certain constraints to writing about a rebellion that was 'not very interesting' (p. 195) as a military moment, and ultimately failed to amass the force necessary to pose a danger to London. Szechi's contention that the 1715 rising was a more formidable challenge than its illustrious successor runs up against the fact that there was no sweeping march to Derby, no sign of panic in London nor—unlike in 1744–45—any real chance of intervention from overseas. The rise of Regent Orleans at Versailles—his speculative claims on the French throne hinging on Britain sticking peacefully to the

Treaty of Utrecht—effectively put paid to that option. Instead, Szechi explores his argument with a wider scope and scale, stepping back from the battlefield to probe the ideological dynamics of the kingdoms that produced the rebellion. Supported by a wealth of previously unexamined official sources, he is most at home in the context of post-Union Scotland, where a conjunction of national grievances and high-political chicanery created a wellspring for Jacobite activity, and drew a wider section of the aristocracy into the web of the Stuarts than would be the case in 1745. The '15, in this light, is redefined as the inarticulate expression of a genuine national disorder, striking at the political foundations of the British Isles on the accession of George I. When concepts of rights, titles, and legitimate rule appeared thrown into flux, the *conditions* for Stuart triumph held greater promise in 1715 than in 1745, even if the military effort was less impressive.

How far this thesis holds is not an immediately easy judgement to make, in view of the author's overwhelming—and somewhat traditionalist—concentration on the Scottish theatres of action. For those less familiar with his earlier study of *Jacobitism and Tory Politics* (2), greater consideration of the potential sympathizers in England and Wales would have been welcome (one major legacy of 1715, after all, was the enduring proscription of the Tories from public office). However, the book's reconstruction of the mental world of early-Hanoverian Scotland is often masterly, offering a pithy anatomy of the political choice, religious zeal, and military braggadocio that impelled approximately 20,000 men to enter into violent insurrection. 'Rebellions, like politics, are always local' (p. 110), Szechi reminds the reader, but behind the disparate collection of insurgents centred on the Highlands and the north east was a deeper phenomenon, the polarization of the nation's elite along religious and political lines, so that signs of rising conflict could be detected as much in the affairs of private households as in the trends of public debate. Beset by what one observer called the 'snares and temptations' (p. 71) towards civil conflict, the common social altercations of patrician life—duels, quarrels, and family splits—increasingly reified into a clash of dynastic loyalties.

1715, seen in this light, was the climax of a struggle for Scotland's national and political identity—'the Protestant soul of a Protestant polity' (p. 29) as Szechi dubs it (the Stuarts' Catholicism notwithstanding). By 1714, the opposing factions were already starting to group into organized units and formations, working practically and rhetorically to bring the country to 'a mirror-image siege-like state of hostility' (p. 24). Both sides had their part to play. In the Hanoverian corner, Szechi succeeds in rescuing the Whig-Presbyterian contingent from their old characterization as passive figures propping up the status quo. Never forgetting the pounding they had taken between 1660 and the Glorious Revolution, these new defenders of George I are revealed as increasingly urgent, coherent, and aggressive, preparing for a counter-insurgency that would impose their own, unshakeable partisan settlement on the Scottish nation. In a reminder that the old Covenanting spirit was far from dimmed, Jacobite agents warned that Presbyterian firebrands were ready 'to go to Armes before they quit their Kirks, so 'tis feared we may have a war of religion' (p. 68).

At the same time, Whig partisanship was matched by the escalation of Jacobite hopes—part political, part providential, as Queen Anne's reign drew to a close—into a frenzy that could only find military gratification. Linking itself to a mood of hostility to the Union, the dynastic restoration movement had taken on the character of a struggle for national liberation, transforming the nature of the Stuarts' appeal and strengthening not just the numbers but also the political resolve of James III's supporters. Before the Jacobite army had established regimental discipline, the military adventure had already begun, ignited by a series of independent, volunteer actions at local level, including the attempted seizure of Edinburgh Castle by Scots Guard veterans. Social, cultural, and personal pressure was at work, operating in a way that could turn each isolated incident into a chain of rebellious activity. David Smythe of Methven explained his actions:

The plain treuth was that there being ane appearance made in favours of what I had always professd to be my principalls, I thought I could not ward off the imputation of couhardice otherways than by embarking in it (p. 74).

Such words neatly revealed how a scattered, clandestine community could effectively talk themselves into insurrection. ‘Very little is inevitable in history’, writes Szechi, ‘but the Scots Jacobite rebellion of 1715 comes very close’ (p. 76).

In explaining the gathering storm, *1715* shows how the issue of the Union and the rhetoric of patriotic loss was grafted onto an earlier disruption: the wreckage of the Episcopalian church—supreme almost from the point of the Restoration, and now cast out on a tide of resurgent Presbyterianism. Behind the Jacobite rebellion lay the grandiose, frustrated world of this older leadership, lay and clerical—a community heavy in gentry and aristocratic patronage, whose grip on the instruments of state power had been traumatically prised apart after 1688. Episcopalian clergyman, so it was claimed, responded by conflating their principles of religion with matters concerning ‘the people’s civil rights’, teaching that ‘it is as unchristian not to believe their notions of government as it is to disbelieve the gospel’ (p. 24). In effect, this meant opting for a line of Catholic émigrés over the incumbent Lutheran Guelphs, a decision made with serene conviction by patriarchs of the north-east such as Lord Pitsligo, who damned the ‘illegal and unwise’ Revolution as the root of Scotland’s troubles, even as he continually lamented the policies of James II (p. 58).

Faced with the threat of dispossession, Episcopalian political thought intensified beyond simple preference for James over George into a mystical mode of expression, freighted with a rhetoric of national destiny, Zion, and salvation, which duly bewildered many of the Stuarts’ less high-flown Catholic adherents. ‘We are buzzed with prophesies, dreams and visions’ said a perplexed Bishop Thomas Nicolson, with even ‘verie anticatholik’ ministers claiming to see the victory of James III writ large in heavenly portent (p. 63). Jacobitism, in the eyes of Episcopalian elders like George Lockhart of Carnwath and Dr George Garden offered a complete moral and spiritual plan for the recovery of the legitimate order; a panacea that fed the yearning for unity in a society disturbed by political cleft.

In following the rebel leaders, *1715* becomes of necessity a part-social study; an investigation into the state of Scotland’s gentry order and its capacity to foster armed allegiance, on either side of the Highland line. Jacobitism flourished in the milieu of the squirearchy, and the Stuart cause drew strength from ancient patterns of mobilization, transmitted and aroused by the bond that joined the tenant to his landowner, the clansman to his chieftain. In Lowland regions, as much as the Gaelic north and west, Jacobitism emerged from ‘a latent military potential more associated with landownership’ (p. 25), not so much because the movement behoved a feudal sensibility, but because a force acting against the state had to rely on an alternative cultural apparatus for protection and preservation.

But if gentry passions precipitated near civil war in 1715, they also contained it, with the ferocity of the conflict kept in check by a culture of civility, even class solidarity, underpinned by kinship networks that crossed the political divide. This public dispute of government, faith, and dynasty was ‘not the quarrel of private gentlemen or noblemen’, Alexander MacDonald of Glengarry reassured the Whig commander at Fort William (p.111). In the military zone, such inhibitions reduced the burning and looting of enemy territory, and limited the extent of lasting social and economic disarray. Intellectually, the appeal to common gentry solidarity meant that, for all its visionary fervour, the Stuart cause carried strong, irenic overtones. Episcopalian Jacobitism had to promise prosperity and tranquillity, and it duly came to shadow so closely the normative customs of Scottish society that rebels in Perth and Dundee took to reading out traditional ‘No Popery’ proclamations as they took the towns for a Catholic prince. If Szechi occasionally appears somewhat airy in glossing over the complicated phenomenon of conflict *and* camaraderie within the elite, the enigma was clearly in evidence, and merits further investigation.

Although the ‘chronic tension’ (p. 61) between its supporters’ clashing national and confessional aspirations ultimately thwarted the chance of Jacobite success, the essential weakness of the ‘15 really stemmed from the underlying paradox of a gentry-led revolt. In order to convince the nation of their ability install an effective, legitimate order in the three kingdoms, Stuart ideologues had to distance themselves from exactly the sort of brutal, implacable action needed to overthrow the Hanoverian order (at least, without the assistance of troops from abroad). James III’s genteel body of supporters—and there were many—would

ultimately prove too averse to social violence, too haunted by memories of Civil War, to countenance a reckless, bloody onslaught against their fellow countrymen. Correspondingly, the existence of these restraints helped to map out a strategy for supporters of the government, after the disorder had come to an end. One of the most compelling passages in the book is Szechi's account of how Scotland's victorious Whig grandees, led by the guiding hand of the duke of Argyll, worked patiently and assiduously to reconstruct civil society, moving to drain the Jacobite swamp through a policy of exemplary punishment, limited retribution, and the coaxing of erstwhile rebels into tight networks of dependency.

Szechi argues convincingly that a demilitarized Jacobite was not a depoliticized Jacobite, and there remained plenty to pluck the conscience of rebellious spirits when one consequence of the '15 was the creation of a Scottish Episcopalian diaspora, out of sight but far from out of mind. The account of these defeated, yet still ardent individuals, wandering through the suspicion and hostility of Catholic Europe, offers a poignant epilogue to the rising. However, the Stuart cause in Scotland was forced to contend with the resources of the Argathelian faction (led by Argyll and his sibling Lord Islay) in ushering selected Jacobites over the bridge of constitutional politics, when the disarmed, vulnerable patricians held far too much social and political capital for an ambitious statesman to ignore. Not all families made such a complete conversion to the Hanoverian realm as the Gordon dukes of Gordon, whose shift from Catholic Jacobitism to vocally Protestant Whiggery began with the wining and dining of government officers barely more than a month after the rebellion's collapse. But Argathelian ingenuity—aided by the duke's careful hint of ambiguity over his own dynastic preference—drew enough of them under the safer canopy of 'patriot' opposition politics to dampen support for another insurrection.

The study of Jacobitism remains fraught and contested, with a last word on the subject refreshingly far out of sight. In the hands of the strongest authors, it can provide piercing enlightenment on the terrain of eighteenth-century Britain. How great a threat was really posed to the first two Georges by the phenomena of Jacobite rebellion needs an analysis that draws in England and Europe as much as disaffected 'North Britain'. However, as a sensitive grasp of the Scottish political imagination in the aftermath of Union, Szechi's new book deserves a wide readership.

Notes

1. Notable works include, *Ideology and Conspiracy: Aspects of Jacobitism, 1689–1759*, ed. E. Cruickshanks (Edinburgh, 1982); P. K. Monod, *Jacobitism and the English People 1688–1788* (Cambridge, 1989); and M. Pittock, *The Myth of the Jacobite Clans* (Edinburgh, 1995). The most comprehensive previous account of 1715 is offered in J. Baynes, *The Jacobite Rising of 1715* (London, 1970). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. D. Szechi, *Jacobitism and Tory Politics 1710–14* (Edinburgh, 1984). [Back to \(2\)](#)

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