The Making of British Unionism, 1740-1848: Politics, Government and the Anglo-Irish Constitutional Relationship

Although Irish nationalism in its various phases has been the subject of numerous studies, its 19th-century antithesis – British unionism – has been comparatively neglected. For historians writing from an Irish perspective, the phenomenon of British unionism has tended to be taken as a given – a force which, once embraced, became (effectively) monolithic – at least until the Liberal party's reappraisal under Gladstone. As such, it could be assumed, it hardly required much in the way of elucidation. Viewed from the British perspective, the position is patchy. While there have been studies of Ireland's place in the British empire (1), historians of the empire have so far not produced any sustained examination of the evolution of British unionism. *Irish* unionism (more particularly, Ulster unionism) has received a good deal of attention, but Linda Colley's path-breaking study of the development of a sense of British identity in the 18th and early 19th centuries explicitly omitted Ireland from any but occasional mention.(2) Of course, biographical works, including John Ehrman on the Younger Pitt, and the late Peter Jupp on Grenville, have helped illuminate the policies of some key statesmen. Studies of particular decades – the 1780s, 1840s – as well as detailed attention to the passing of the Irish Act of Union (3) have shed light on British policies in those periods, but such studies cannot in themselves serve as substitutes for a dedicated study of the subject.

Douglas Kanter's book, which sets out to examine, from a British perspective, the origins and evolution of unionist views from the mid 18th until the mid 19th centuries, thus fills a significant gap. While he builds on – and occasionally offers a courteous corrective to – such studies as are noted above (and others) he has consulted a wide range of primary sources, including papers of leading statesmen, parliamentary journals and debates, newspapers and periodicals. Focusing chiefly on high politics, but also taking cognisance of

public opinion, Kanter sets out to trace the evolution of British thinking about union with Ireland from the 1740s to the 1840s. He sees the genesis of British unionism in the 1740s, when the idea of 'imperial federation' was finding support among a section of political thinkers and colonial administrators, in the context of the Anglo-French wars that were posing commercial and military challenges to Britain and her empire. Among those who held such views were the 'scientific Whigs', several of them Scots, who also sought to defend the Anglo-Scottish union against Jacobite attacks. At that time, it was assumed, 'imperial federation' would have included the American colonies. During the Seven Years War (1756–63) such ideas took on particular cogency. Even after that war had ended in victory for Britain, some continued to argue for closer imperial union for commercial, security, and fiscal reasons. In respect of Ireland, closer union would offer the additional prospect of enhanced control over a country whose Protestant elite (in the eyes of some) had failed to respond adequately to the problems stemming from confessional divisions.

However, the author argues that supporters of the idea of imperial federation always remained in a minority. When Lord North contemplated Anglo-Irish and Anglo-American federal union in 1776, he was preoccupied with the crisis posed by American events. As for Ireland, concessions on free trade in 1779–80 made closer union harder, rather than easier, to obtain. In the early 1780s some of the Rockingham Whigs, including Charles James Fox, indicated a preference for federal union, but the strength of Protestant 'Patriot' sentiments in this period meant that as far as Ireland was concerned this option was quickly overtaken by a different strategy, albeit one born out of government weakness. The granting of legislative independence ('Grattan's parliament') ushered in a decade during which the Patriot pride of the Protestant elite remained lively. Such sentiments proved inimical to the trading arrangements that Pitt was subsequently anxious for the Irish parliament to agree to, and which would have restored British supremacy in commercial matters, thus offering some of the advantages of a federal union. Had Pitt's commercial propositions of 1784 proved acceptable to the Irish parliament, there would have been less need later on to consider the possibility of a legislative union.

By rendering the Irish parliament more difficult to manage, the legislative independence granted in 1782–3 confirmed some British politicians, such as Henry Dundas, in their convictions of the need for a union, especially during the Regency crisis of 1788–9. But Kanter argues that ministers were mainly preoccupied with how that crisis would play out in domestic terms, and showed little interest in the Irish dimension. Moreover, the Foxite Whigs, preoccupied with winning power at Westminster, were prepared to encourage the Irish parliament to reject the government's Regency bill, a strategy which could have precipitated an Anglo-Irish constitutional crisis. Bearing in mind (although the point is not made here) that Anglo-Scottish union had been adopted by British statesmen in large part to prevent the English and Scottish parliaments diverging over the issue of the royal succession, such tactics demonstrated that there was still no emerging consensus among British politicians on the future of Anglo-Irish relations. All this reinforces the main thrust of Kanter's argument for the period before the 1790s: that the idea of union – whether federal or incorporating – was never more than one among various strategies for ensuring Ireland's continued dependence on Britain.

Even after the outbreak of the French Revolution, British statesmen took time to look favourably on a unionist strategy. The first priority, once a republican alliance between Irish Catholics and Dissenters seemed possible, was to consider additional Catholic relief. When the limited reforms granted in 1792 failed to satisfy Catholics, Pitt began to think about more extensive concessions, coupled with union. Such a strategy became even more attractive once war with France had begun in 1793, because of the potential accession of manpower that Catholics could offer once legally permitted to bear arms. The importance to British statesmen of the Catholic question in the context of war has been highlighted by other scholars [(4)](#), and Kanter endorses this view. However, he notes that, rather than pressing for a union, in 1793 Pitt settled for an extensive Irish Catholic relief act, which (among other things) permitted Catholics to bear arms. Moreover, many Whigs, both Irish and British, continued to support the independence of the Irish parliament.

Thus it was not until the Irish rebellion of 1798 that a unionist strategy came firmly on to the political agenda, by which time leading ministers were under severe strain from dealing with the European war. On Pitt's instructions, a discussion document on union was prepared by members of the Irish executive within a

month of the outbreak of rebellion. The Irish parliament now seemed a liability rather than an asset, and Kanter emphasises that from this time onwards, it was an incorporating, rather than a federal union, that was under discussion. Several other Cabinet members endorsed the principle of union, but differences emerged over whether it should be accompanied by a further measure of Catholic relief: the king was particularly hostile. The principle of union itself remained unpopular with many of the Foxite Whigs, no fewer than forty-four of whom voted against the union at some stage in 1799–1800. However, the fact that the Prince of Wales indicated his support for union weakened their stance, as did the wavering of certain Anglo-Irish Whig peers, and the measure passed the British parliament with quite comfortable majorities. Drawing on recent studies of loyalism, Kanter is able to show that there was a broadly favourable public response to union, with a general – though far from universal – willingness to follow the government's lead. At this point, this reviewer would have welcomed more comment on British manufacturing interests' response to union – there is mention of opposition in such quarters to union in 1800, but thereafter it drops out of sight. Did manufacturers eventually conclude that Ireland was not, after all, likely to pose much of a challenge? Or did wartime loyalism simply outweigh any anxieties?

A fresh perspective is afforded in a section dealing with the role of ideas in the passing of the union. On the government side, unionism drew on Utilitarian arguments, pioneered decades earlier by the 'scientific' and the Court Whigs, for whom closer union was the strategy most likely to result in the happiness of the people. The introduction of British capital would stimulate the Irish economy, which in turn would have social benefits, promoting 'the infusion of English manners', to quote Pitt (p. 103), and helping to eliminate the internal tensions that had become so marked during the 1790s. Security, too, would be enhanced. The Foxite Whigs, by contrast, used arguments informed by older 'Country' ideas, and rejected the prospect of greater centralisation inherent in the proposal for an incorporating union. However, the opposition was just as committed to British control of Ireland as the government, since (under the wartime circumstances) the only realistic alternative to union seemed to be French control.

It is because the author has given consideration to these matters that this reviewer wishes that he had found room for greater comparison between the circumstances that prevailed at the time of both the Scottish and Irish unions – such as the common wartime conditions, the French threat to England via the back door, and the difficulties faced by ministers in London in managing the neighbouring parliament. Some indication is, indeed, given of how the Scottish precedent was used during debate by both sides in the British parliament, and there are other references to the earlier union, but a more considered discussion of the parallels and differences would have been welcome.

At all events, when it came into force in 1801, the union was far from universally popular with the political class. The more radical section of the public, moreover, remained sceptical. The immediate problem for government – that pledges had been made to accompany union with full 'Catholic emancipation' – proved intractable, given the king's disposition. Administrative reform in Ireland, too, was hampered by the 'union engagements' entered into so as to extend support among Protestants for union. For some years, the Foxite leaders remained critical of the measure, insisting that it had been carried by corrupt means. Nevertheless, they soon faced inducements to relax their opposition. Government weakness after the resignation of Pitt prompted an alliance between Foxites and Grenvillites (based on mutual support for Catholic emancipation), but since Grenville had been one of the main architects of union, the need to work together in the event of taking office suggested that Fox should tone down his opposition to it. But as late as February 1806, on the eve of the formation of the 'talents' ministry, Fox was still prepared, in parliament, to call the union 'disgraceful' – though a fortnight later he would explain that he had meant the means which the union had been carried, rather than the measure itself, and that he did not feel bound to repeal it. Within weeks, the new government had pledged not merely to seek to consolidate the union, but also to honour the union engagements. From then on, the Foxites' rhetoric on the union conformed to that of Grenville and the Pittites. When an attempt was made by an Irish M.P. in 1812 to have repeal of the union debated in the House of Commons, it received no support, and no debate took place. This leads Kanter to conclude that by this time 'British anti-Unionism was, in elite circles, effectively extinct' (p. 137).

There was, however, still the question of how Ireland was to be governed. The Catholic question proved

highly divisive, with Tories (despite seeing themselves as the heirs of Pitt) rejecting emancipation. Some even preferred repeal to emancipation – though that view was very much a minority backbench one. Slowly, some leading Tories adopted a more positive view, and emancipation was finally granted in 1829. Much less controversial in Britain were the fiscal and commercial reforms of 1817–27, which amalgamated the two exchequers, and moved towards an Anglo-Irish free trade zone. Although matters were seen differently in O'Connellite Ireland, the British view was that taking on responsibility for the considerable Irish national debt was an act of generosity. The author points out that willingness to shoulder this burden reflected the strength of British commitment to union in the post-war period. British support for repeal had evaporated, save in some anti-establishment radical circles.

Accordingly, when Daniel O'Connell began his Repeal campaign, the first phase lasting from 1830 to 1834, it attracted virtually no support from the British elite. Since it coincided with the outbreak of the tithe war, Repealers came to be regarded in Britain as an ignorant rabble, heedless of the real benefits of union. Whigs proved willing to use coercive measures in an attempt to repress Repeal, although certain concessions to Catholics were made, including limited reform of the Church of Ireland. Efforts began to encourage the formation of a government party in Ireland, including Catholics. But coercion proved unpopular with some leading Whigs, leading to Cabinet splits and the fall of the government in 1834. The government's fall, Kanter argues, reflected the fact that while O'Connell may have regarded Repeal as a tactical weapon, in British political circles – where the union was now generally seen as vital to the United Kingdom's security and prosperity – any threat had to be taken very seriously. Hence the use of repressive measures, although these were never consistently applied, and never without some attempts at 'conciliation'.

The subsequent Whig government (in alliance with the O'Connellites from 1835–41) broke new ground. Although still willing to use coercion when necessary, there was also an explicit recognition (articulated by Lord John Russell) of the need for 'justice for Ireland' (p. 215): in other words, unionism was acquiring a moral dimension. This, Kanter notes, marked a switch away from the more pragmatic policies of previous Whig governments, and the beginnings of a principled commitment to reforms in the interests of the majority of the population. The implication was that, if justice were not done, Repeal would be vindicated.

The Conservatives (not being dependent on Irish support) took somewhat longer to reach that point. But when Peel took office in 1841, he and his leading ministers agreed on the need for equal treatment for Ireland. Meanwhile, in the early 1840s O'Connell revived the Repeal movement. The political elite remained hostile, although in 1843 the Whigs were critical of a government arms bill, and there was some sympathy for Repeal in areas with high levels of Irish immigration. But the sympathisers were few – in general, the British public was far more interested in parliamentary reform. As Irish support for Repeal grew more formidable, Peel announced a policy of 'justice and impartiality' (p. 263). However, the military presence in Ireland was significantly increased.

Underlying both parties' strategies was the idea that a large body of moderate Catholics could be won over by judicious concessions. But even the Whigs accepted that coercion might be necessary on occasions. They were unwilling to move much beyond their 1830s' agenda, and approved of the government decision in late 1843 to have some leading Repealers, including O'Connell, arrested, for seditious language. The government indicated that it was committed to maintaining the union and the established Church of Ireland, but that other matters were up for discussion. The only support for the O'Connellites came from a few Radicals. Against this background, O'Connell's brief flirtation with federalism in 1844 is portrayed as his final attempt to induce one of the main British parties to repeal or amend the union. Instead, Peel responded with what Kanter calls the most thorough attempt at constructive unionism between the union and the Famine, including the raising of the grant to Maynooth, the Charitable Bequests Act, and the establishment of the Queen's Colleges.

Nevertheless, at the 1846 general election O'Connell committed his 'Old Ireland' party to support of the Whigs. This renewed Whig alliance turned out to be short-lived, however – the Whigs were unwilling to build significantly on Peel's reforms, and the inadequacy of the new government's famine-relief measures undermined what good will existed among Irish nationalists. New coercive measures saw the O'Connellites

(since O'Connell's death under leadership of John O'Connell) move into opposition. When John O'Connell's repeal debate took place in July 1848 it produced little but apathy even among Irish M.P.s. The Young Ireland rebellion broke out and was defeated some days later. Kanter ends by noting that despite the scale and extent of Repeal agitation in Ireland, the British political class had remained remarkably united in its commitment to the union. Given the Famine conditions in Ireland, and the ineffectiveness of the British response, it was hard to escape the conclusion that the union was fundamentally designed to serve British interests, regardless of the situation in Ireland. Union would be supported under any circumstances, and by repression if conciliation seemed unavailing. As for the British public, although there was some limited support for Repeal in Catholic quarters, and among some Radicals and Chartists, it didn't survive the clampdown on Irish agitation that had been so decisive by the summer of 1848.

By concluding his study at this point, it is difficult for the author not to end gloomily – British unionism had never been so strong, yet never had it seemed so inadequate to Irish needs, nor union promises so hollow. Had he continued into the 1850s and 1860s, it would have been possible to finish on a more positive note; for it was arguably then that Ireland began to reap some real administrative, social and economic rewards from the union.(5) But this would have required a much longer book. What we have is a well-written, probing and thoughtful study, which sheds real light on the subject.

Notes

1. See, e.g., F.G. James, *Ireland in the Empire, 1688–1770* (Cambridge, MA, 1973); Thomas Bartlett, '"This famous island set in a Virginian sea": Ireland in the British empire', in *Oxford History of the British Empire*, ed. W.R. Louis (5 vols., Oxford, 1998–9), ii, 253–75.Back to (1)
2. Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837* (New Haven and London, 1992).Back to (2)
3. James Kelly, *Prelude to Union: Anglo-Irish Politics in the 1780s* (Cork, 1992); Kevin B. Nowlan, *The Politics of Repeal: A Study in the Relations Between Great Britain and Ireland, 1841–50* (London and Toronto, 1965); G.C. Bolton, *The Passing of the Irish Act of Union* (Oxford, 1966), and more recently Patrick M. Geoghegan, *The Irish Act of Union: A Study in High Politics, 1798–1801* (Dublin, 1999).Back to (3)
4. R. K. Donovan, 'The military origins of the Catholic relief programme of 1778', *Historical Journal*, 28 (1985), 79–102; Thomas Bartlett, '"A weapon of war as yet untried": Irish Catholics and the armed forces of the crown, 1760–1830', in *Men, Women and War*, ed. T.G. Fraser & Keith Jeffery (Dublin, 1993), 66–85.Back to (4)
5. R. V. Comerford, 'Ireland 1850–70: post-Famine and mid-Victorian', in *A New History of Ireland. Volume 5: Ireland under the Union I: 1801–70*, ed. W. E. Vaughan (Oxford, 1989), 372–95.Back to (5)

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