

Scotland in the Union



by Gordon Craigie



Scotland Free Or A Desert – banner inspired by that carried during the Radical Rising in 1820

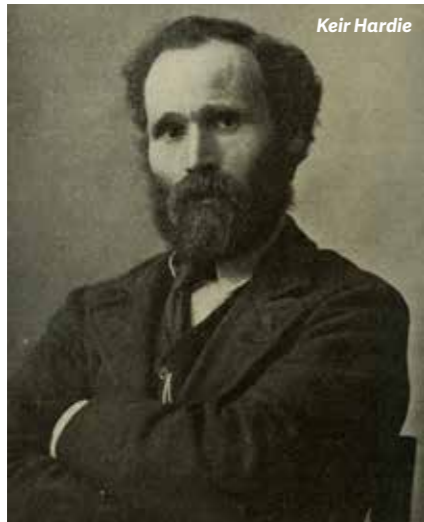
AS 2021 SEES our ancient nation of Scotland edge ever closer to regaining her independence, more so now than at any time since the Union in 1707, it is interesting to reflect on the timeline of events leading up to and around the establishment of the Kingdom of Great Britain through that Union, and its aftermath. Evidenced by historical analysis and political commentary, much of it published in the century following the Union, we'll conclude our look at how and why the Union came about and whether it has ever been the benefit to Scotland claimed by its supporters. Last month, in the fourth part of this series, we explained events during the nineteenth century that led to growing thoughts of Home Rule. This month, in the final part, we'll pick up the story at the end of the nineteenth century, as discontent with the constitutional settlement grew in both Scotland and Ireland, and look at how events led us to where we are today...

Part 5: Home Rule? Devolution? Independence!

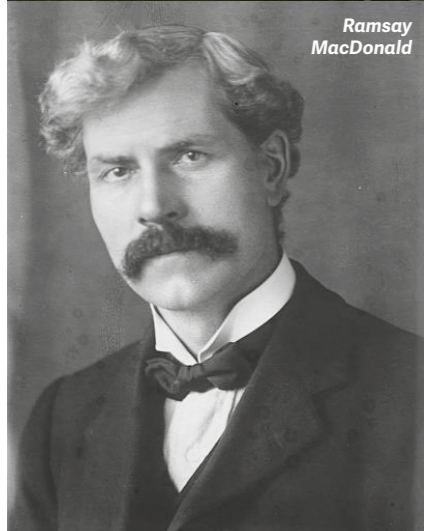
As we saw last month, albeit under similar duress to the Scots a century earlier, Ireland had agreed to union with Great Britain in 1801 and thus the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland was formed. The Irish "settlement" was deemed by many Scots to be far more generous than the "parcel o' rogues" had negotiated for Scotland and this led naturally to much comparison and public discussion of the constitutional settlement of the day. However, almost immediately there developed growing Irish disquiet at how their affairs and culture were being subjugated by the predominantly English parliament in Westminster. Indeed,

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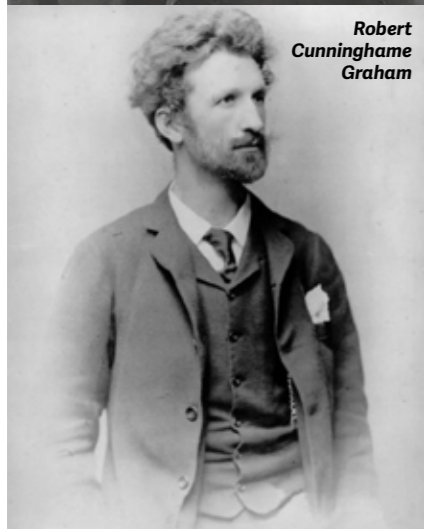
there were several early attempts at rebellion in Ireland aimed at dissolving the Union – notably in 1803, 1848 and 1867 – before the dominant Irish political ideology in the late nineteenth century became that of "Home Rule". Again, the parallels between the two Celtic nations are significant. After 1707, Scots had rebelled in 1715 and 1745 – to restore the Stuart Monarchy but also to end political union – and again in 1820, as part of the Radical Rising. In his book *The Scottish Nation*, Tom Devine casts doubt on whether this short-lived and ultimately unsuccessful campaign, also known as the Scottish Insurrection, actually had aspirations of Scottish independence underpinning it, but other sources claim it reportedly aimed to "sever the Kingdom of Scotland from that of England and restore the ancient Scottish Parliament". It is a fascinating story either way, again for another day, but it does leave us with the wonderful symbolism of the banner "Scotland Free or a Desert" and the memory of the Radical martyrs, commemorated by the Political Martyrs Monument on Calton Hill in Edinburgh.



Keir Hardie



Ramsay MacDonald



Robert Cunninghame Graham



John MacCormick

The new impetus for constitutional change came within an ace of success when a Home Rule Bill passed its second reading in the House of Commons in May 1914

In the late 1800s, as the Irish continued to press their Home Rule claims, many political commentators in Scotland had begun to propose a similar ideology, as we saw in last month's article. The Scottish Home Rule Association (SHRA) was formed in 1886 in an attempt to formalise the movement towards the restoration of Scotland's parliament, encouraged by the fact that the British Prime Minister, William Gladstone, was proposing a bill for Home Rule for Ireland in Westminster. The SHRA included men who would go on to be majorly influential political figures in both Scotland and Westminster – Keir Hardie, Ramsay MacDonald and Robert Cunninghame Graham.

The first two Irish Home Rule bills were defeated, in 1886 and 1893, but a third was successfully passed in 1914 – however, it never came into effect because of the outbreak of the First World War. In 1920, at the fourth attempt, an Irish Home Rule bill was finally passed which "created" Northern Ireland as an entity and attempted to keep "Southern Ireland" as part of the United Kingdom which, as we know, was doomed to failure and only exacerbated the move towards the establishment of, initially, the Irish Free State and, in 1937, the republic of Ireland. Interestingly, the first Scottish Home Rule bill had also been passed in 1914 but, like the Irish bill, was never enacted due to the outbreak of war. Unlike Ireland, however, there was no movement in Westminster to pick it up again after the war ended.

In *The Scottish Nation*, Devine credits another organisation, the Young Scots Society, as being highly influential in generating a growing enthusiasm for the Home Rule concept. Formed in 1900, and with more than 10,000 members in 50 branches, the principal focus of the Young Scots was that of social reform and they regarded Home Rule as being absolutely essential to achieving their aims. But, as Devine notes: "Scottish interest in Home Rule was nothing new; it had emerged in the 1880s, partly because of fears that the Irish were receiving preferential treatment ahead of the Scots and also because of concerns for administrative reforms that would make the Union with England function more effectively ... Between 1886 and 1900, seven Scottish Home Rule motions were presented [at Westminster]. Those submitted in 1894 and 1895 gained majorities but failed because of lack of parliamentary time." He goes on to question the depth of the Liberal government's commitment to Home Rule and speculates that they may only have wanted some "cosmetic administrative reform". However, he cites the Young Scots linking of Home Rule to social reform as being critical in reigniting the movement after 1910: "[They felt] social reform [was] being needlessly impeded in Scotland because of lack of parliamentary time in Westminster and was being delayed by the reactionary forces of English conservatism. It was claimed that 'there is not one single item in the whole programme of Radicalism or social reform today which, if Scotland had powers to pass laws, would not have been carried out a quarter of a century ago'... The new impetus for constitutional change came within an ace of success when a Home Rule Bill passed its second reading in the House of Commons in May 1914. Unfortunately, the chances of it reaching the statute book were killed off when war broke out. Nevertheless, the new centrality of the constitutional issue had important repercussions for Scottish politics. The Conservatives and Liberal Unionists closed ranks in defence of the Union and empire and in 1912 finally merged as the Unionist Party ... The patterns were already emerging that would contribute to the radical realignment of Scottish politics after 1918..."

That realignment would involve, in different ways, those mentioned previously in regard to the SHRA – Keir Hardie, Ramsay MacDonald and Robert Cunninghame Graham. Hardie and Cunninghame Graham had set up the Scottish Labour Party in 1888, while MacDonald had moved to

London where he became involved with a succession of socialist organisations. Both MacDonald and Hardie's political careers would go through several iterations of what would finally become the Labour Party, but Cunninghame Graham's fundamental belief in Scottish independence as a route to social reform led him to found the National Party of Scotland in 1928. He then became the first president of the SNP in 1934, when it was formed from the merger of the National Party of Scotland with the Scottish Party, which was a smaller and more moderate pro-Home Rule organisation.

We're now approaching more familiar territory in our journey through Scotland's relationship with the Union, with the principal players more or less in the forms that we would recognise today. Even though one of the SNP's founding principles was: "The establishment of a Parliament in Scotland, which shall be the final authority on all Scottish affairs, including taxation and finance", there was still a conflict between those who saw this as being best achieved through some form of Home Rule within the British Empire and those who favoured outright independence. One notable figure who continued to believe strongly in the Home Rule option was John MacCormick, who resigned from the SNP in 1942 in protest at the party's preference for independence. As Tom Devine explains, "MacCormick believed it was more important to develop a broad consensus among the Scottish people in favour of Home Rule than to pursue the goal of Scottish independence, which he regarded as having only limited electoral appeal ... [he later] established a body eventually named the Scottish Convention which would stand outside party politics but would seek to demonstrate to government the national desire for Home Rule by mobilising all sections of Scottish opinion in pursuit of that primary objective".

The Scottish Convention – later renamed as the Scottish Covenant Association – became famous for two principal achievements. First, for the collection of two million physical signatures in support of the Scottish Covenant, which was a clearly defined proposal for Home Rule – it was ignored by Westminster. Second, four members of the Association – Ian Hamilton, Kay Matheson, Gavin Vernon and Alan Stuart – were the young students responsible for retrieving the Stone of Destiny from Westminster Abbey on Christmas Day 1950! Devine recognises the significance of that act: "The Coronation Stone of the Kings of Scotland was a powerful symbol of national sovereignty and had been removed to London by Edward I during the Wars of Independence to demonstrate his suzerainty over the Scots. In one sense the episode was a stunt but it still provoked an excited public response. Eventually the Stone turned up again in Arbroath Cathedral, enveloped in the Scottish Saltire."

Despite those two million signatures, there is no doubt that the experience of the Second World War had fostered some lingering sense of Britishness in many Scots. The creation of the welfare state, the NHS, and other social reforms in the immediate aftermath, by the first majority Labour government, would certainly have turned most ordinary Scots' thinking away from any notions of Home Rule or independence, in the short term at least. As the Tory Prime Minister Harold MacMillan would later say, "most of our people have never had it so good", and through that immediate post-war period the majority of Scottish voters seemed to agree. But things would start to change towards the end of the 1950s, as the post-war economic boom started to recede, and the 1960s would herald a Scottish cultural revival alongside the discovery of oil in Scottish territorial waters. It would also be the decade that saw the SNP finally emerge as a truly credible – and electable – political force, and Scottish independence was firmly back on the agenda.



Home Rule campaign posters, 1951



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Printed & Published by SNP Publications, West Calder

SNP leaflet from the 1970s

Tom Devine notes the rise of SNP popularity, not only the breakthrough election of Winnie Ewing in 1967, but the achievement of 34% of the local election vote a year later. The Labour government was worried but it was the Tory opposition who started the ball rolling, in 1968, on what was now to be called “devolution” by committing their support for the establishment of a Scottish Assembly. Eventually the Labour Party would arrive at a similar conclusion, though there would be no concrete progress for another decade. But, arguably, the real game-changer in the 1970s was that North Sea oil began to flow. Devine explains: “The SNP oil campaign began in 1971 and brilliantly exploited the contrast between, on the one hand, the fabulous wealth found off Scotland’s coasts and, on the other, the fact that by then the Scots had the worst unemployment rate

It’s Scotland’s Oil posters from the 1970s



By now we should all be aware that there eventually was a Scottish Devolution referendum in 1979, which was gerrymandered at the last minute to ensure that the status quo was maintained

in western Europe and were yoked to a British state that stumbled from crisis to crisis. Oil also gave the nationalist argument a new credibility by demonstrating that an independent Scotland might indeed survive out of its own resources.” Devine’s analysis here was written before any of us knew the contents of the famous – infamous? – McCrone Report. This was commissioned by the British Government in 1974, but kept secret until 2019 – 45 years later! – because its content and conclusions would surely have seen a surge in support for Scottish independence that the British Government would not have been able to resist. Indeed, when the report was finally in the public domain, Devine was quoted as describing the document as, “political dynamite ... arguing that the economic case for independence was now transformed, it predicted that Scotland could become the ‘Kuwait of the North’ with the nation’s currency becoming the strongest in Europe with an inevitable rise in living standards”.

The McCrone Report is now easily searchable online, but some of its more “interesting” remarks include:

What is quite clear is that the balance of payments gain from North Sea oil would easily swamp the existing deficit whatever its size and transform Scotland into a country with a substantial and chronic surplus.

It must be concluded therefore that large revenues and balance of payments gains would indeed accrue to a Scottish Government in the event of independence provided that steps were taken either by carried interest or by taxation to secure the Government ‘take’. Undoubtedly this would banish any anxieties the Government might have had about its budgetary position or its balance of payments. The country would tend to be in chronic surplus to a quite embarrassing degree and its currency would become the hardest in Europe, with the exception perhaps of the Norwegian kroner. Just as deposed monarchs and African leaders have in the past used the Swiss franc as a haven of security, so now would the Scottish pound be seen as a good hedge against inflation and devaluation and the Scottish banks could expect to find themselves inundated with a speculative inflow of foreign funds.

[[It is now likely that transfer of North Sea oil to Scottish ownership would occasion much bitterness in England if not an attempt to forcibly prevent it.

The McCrone Report wasn’t the only document from the 1970s that the British state thought it best to keep from us rebellious Scots lest their precious union be endangered. In 2006, the BBC News website (I know!) published an article outlining how plans to actively delay devolution were in place:

Official papers which were previously secret have shown how ministers were advised to delay devolution to maintain control of North Sea oil revenues ... The 1970’s documents warned that if devolution increased calls for independence, the loss of oil income might leave the UK virtually bankrupt ... A senior Whitehall civil servant wrote: “Progress towards devolution should be delayed for as long as possible, consistent with honouring the government’s commitment to move down the devolution route and containing the SNP lobby in parliament.”

By now we should all be aware that there eventually was a Scottish Devolution referendum in 1979, which was gerrymandered at the last minute to ensure that the status quo was maintained. For the first and, so far, only time a democratic electoral event organised by the British Government – election or referendum – had conditions attached to the vote whereby a simple majority was not deemed to be decisive. The introduction of the so-called “40% rule”, an amendment proposed by a Scot representing an English constituency, meant that there



More than sixty countries have won their independence from the UK. Not one has ever asked to give it up again. Not one.

It’s coming yet!
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people with a common interest or purpose”. Aye, right!

Over the last five issues, this series of articles has attempted to chronicle Scotland’s place in the Union and highlight the continual struggle to resolve the injustices done to the country under the strictures of this “union of equals” ever since its inception. It’s impossible to not allow some opinions to come through but, by and large, the articles have relied on long-lost observations from people who were living through the events of the 1700s and 1800s as well as informed interpretations from credible historians. The hardest decisions have not been about what to include but more about what to leave out! I hope the right balance has been struck and there have been enough “I didn’t know that” moments to perhaps stimulate further interest. We, in the main, weren’t taught this stuff at school but it’s all out there, and it’s incredibly important to understand our history so that we can appreciate our present and plan for our future. We’ve been promised that in our immediate future, in the first half of the current parliamentary term, we, the people of Scotland, will be given the opportunity to vote again on exercising our sovereignty and restoring our nationhood. Let’s put our country before parties and personalities, let’s exorcise our 2014 demons, and let’s rise and be a nation again. No more talk of Home Rule, devolution or federalism, only independence will do. Saor Alba!

were two thresholds to be met in order for the vote to count: more than 50% of the voters AND at least 40% of the electorate had to vote Yes. On the day, the turnout of 64% meant that although 52% of the voters voted Yes this only represented 32% of the electorate and therefore devolution was denied. Once again, the power and duplicitousness of the British state to achieve their own ends by whatever means necessary had been laid bare.

In the aftermath of that disappointment, the independence movement formed the Campaign for a Scottish Assembly (CSA), an organisation consisting of politicians, clergy and civic leaders, which would eventually be credited with being fundamental in the campaign which led to the establishment of the devolved Scottish Parliament in 1999. In 1989 the CSA declared the sovereignty of the Scottish people through the Claim of Right for Scotland, which led directly to the establishment of the Scottish Constitutional Convention. With echoes of the tensions between devolution and independence over the preceding century, the SNP initially participated in the Convention but withdrew once it was evident that independence was not being seriously considered. Nevertheless, it was the Convention that effectively came up with the blueprint that led to the present settlement.

There are interesting debates to be had about exactly why Tony Blair’s government supported and voted through the devolution proposals leading to the 1997 referendum – there is a school of thought that attributes that to pressure from the EU, for example – but the 75% Yes vote (with no spurious additional hurdles this time!) was decisive. It allowed Donald Dewar, Blair’s Scottish Secretary, to deliver the verdict of the Scottish electorate in Westminster with the words:

There shall be a Scottish Parliament. I like that!

And, in 1999, Winnie Ewing, as the oldest qualified member opened the new era of Holyrood with:

The Scottish Parliament, adjourned on the 25th day of March in the year 1707, is hereby reconvened.

But, as the cliché goes, power devolved is power retained and, as we have become only too well aware in the past few years, Westminster is once again set on a path of “taking back control” not just from Europe but also from Scotland. Not only have they continued to retain critical powers – despite the promises of “the vow” and the sham of the Smith Commission – but Brexit and the lurch to the right in the English electorate has allowed them to start rolling back the devolved settlement and regain powers in all of the areas that were previously in the domain of the EU and should rightfully have returned to Scotland. And, as we hardly need remind ourselves, all of this from a government Scotland decisively didn’t vote for, a party Scotland has decisively rejected since 1955, and a Brexit clusterboursch that Scotland decisively rejected. One dictionary definition of “union” is “a state of harmony or agreement”, while another cites it as being “formed by

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