

# Priestcraft, the Devil and the Union of 1707

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## The author

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## The paper

Historians have long been aware that religion played a central role in the debates which accompanied the Anglo-Scottish Union of 1707. Britain was created as a hybrid mixed-unitary state, with a single spine of shared political institutions and separate church establishments north and south of the border. Not that this package was altogether acceptable to Presbyterians of Scotland's established Kirk. Whereas a confederal union might have offered some constitutional protection for Presbyterianism, an incorporating (or semi-incorporating) Union of the kind which prevailed in 1707 left the Kirk's privileged position precarious, dependent on the parchment guarantees of a seemingly anomalous settlement.

However, this paper aims to recover a further ecclesiastical context for the Union of 1707, one which has hitherto been largely ignored, especially by Scottish historians, though a canonical feature of post-Revolution historiography in England. Contemporaries on both sides of the border were obsessed from the mid-1690s with the rise of irreligion, anticlerical scoffing at priestcraft, and satirical raillery at traditional beliefs. Critics of religion raised concerns about the legitimacy of ecclesiastical institutions and exposed the impostures of churchmen. Did clerics rule by divine right, or were they perhaps imposters, or worse, instruments of Satan? North of the border, Presbyterian Kirkmen had no truck with deism, but they too were quick to anathematize every non-Presbyterian form of church government - Papacy, prelacy, Erastianism - as Antichrist's usurpation of Christ's headship of the Church. The era of Union and anti-religious ridicule was also an era of patristic learning in the churches; even in Scotland. The history of the primitive church not only yielded examples of primitive practice and convenient precedents to be used in inter-confessional warfare, but was also a fount of heresy. One could not read the fathers without being exposed to the arguments of their pagan opponents. Nor could one immerse oneself in the history of the early church without coming

across disturbing cases of imposture, which called into question the supernatural authority of Christ and his Church.

The Union, with its unusual biconfessional establishment, emerged at a time of crisis for ecclesiastical authority. The arguments deists and sceptics launched at ecclesiastical authority in general posed a more fundamental challenge than the rival assaults of Presbyterians and Episcopalians/Church of England men at the forms of church government espoused by the other. The ecclesiastical implications of a Union with Presbyterian Scotland were, however, one part of a wider set of English Tory concerns that the Church of England was in mortal danger. However, in Scotland too there were parallel concerns that an incorporating Union endangered the security and, moreover, discipline and doctrinal orthodoxy of the Kirk. After all, the filth of heresy seemed to be flowing into Scotland in good part from the southern kingdom - a sink of iniquity, error and filth - to which it would soon be joined. However, England was by no means the sole source of theological error. The early eighteenth-century Scottish Kirk was particularly convulsed by anxieties about the arrival on its shores of the strange mystical heresies associated with Antoinette Bourignon.

The Devil remained a live presence in Scotland during the Union debates, which saw a series of major witchcraft prosecutions and anxieties about other forms of deviant religious behaviour. On both sides of the border during the era of Union and its implementation, the orthodox spluttered with outrage at the seemingly blasphemous enthusiasms of the French Prophets. In England from the late 1690s the theology of the Anglo-Scottish Low Church cleric Gilbert Burnet constituted a red rag to High Church heresy-hunters. Furthermore, these concerns about heresy spilled over from England and Scotland to the Protestant establishment of Ireland: the forgotten third party, excluded much to the annoyance of Jonathan Swift from the mongrel Anglo-Presbyterian Union of 1707.

Some of these issues were integral to the Union debates, others were merely coincidental, but still worthy of note as they elicited feverish comment on both sides of the border. Together, moreover, these various controversies serve to question proto-nationalist readings of 1707, which assume that early eighteenth-century Scots were largely focused upon temporal matters of national independence (including, by extension, concerns for the autonomy and status of Scotland's ecclesiastical institutions). However, contemporary Scots of the 1690s and 1700s were just as exercised by the perceived presence in their midst of Satan and his miscellaneous emissaries, whether blaspheming sceptics like Thomas Aikenhead or witches in places like Renfrewshire and Fife. In the first place, this paper simply wishes to thicken the context of Union historiography; but it also raises questions about how that historiography is framed. Fundamental theological debates, which called into question supernatural sources of authority in church and state, loomed just as large in the era of Union as agitation about particular forms of ecclesiastical polity, indeed just as large as, if not larger than, existential questions about the passing of Scottish nationhood.