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James I and British Identity: The Development of a British Identity from 1542-1689

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I would like to thank Dr. Jacob Selwood for inspiring and guiding this article.

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The creation of the Kingdom of Great Britain in 1707, which unified the kingdoms of Scotland and England into a single political unit, was the result of an Act and of current political circumstances. It was also, however, a culmination of over two centuries of proposed unions and of a merging British identity. Beginning in the 1540s, the English began to desire a union with Scotland in order to solve the "British problem" of two hostile kingdoms inhabiting the same island.[1] The ascension of James I (or VI, as King of the Scots) to the throne of England in 1603 would provide a real possibility for the natural unification of the kingdoms into a single British kingdom.[2] James believed that the unification of the two kingdoms was not only practical because of his kingship over both of the kingdoms, but also because of God's willing the two kingdoms, his divine right of succession, and the king being the natural father of his people.[3] James, while king of the Scots, also created what might be viewed as a British court culture in the 1580s and 1590s by inviting several English poets and musicians to his court.[4] By proclaiming himself as the "King of Great Britain," appealing to a common culture between the English and Scots not only in in his court culture but legally as well, and the assertion of the idea of a natural Kingdom of Great Britain in both his royal styling and the popular print culture during the union, the reign of James provided a framework for the ideological and spiritual union for the future Kingdom of Great Britain a century before the political union occurred.

James, however, was not the first to utilize the idea of a unified Britain. The identity of a British kingdom had been proposed in the 1540s and union between the kingdoms was set by a past precedent in which Brutus, a Trojan, became the first British king. After his death, the kingdom was divided between his sons.[5] This would lead to English claims that the oldest son of Brutus became the king of England, therefore making both Wales and Scotland junior kingdoms

that owed England homage and subservience. This would be the justification of King Henry VIII of England for his invasion of Scotland in 1542.[6] Furthermore, the religious differences between the kingdoms in the 1540s (as Scotland was still a Catholic kingdom) would provide some justification for bringing Scotland "to order."[7] In these original conceptions of British unity, it was England leading the unity and having the responsibility to lead the union with its superior culture and right confession. England would rely upon, perhaps, the annexation of Wales to England as the precedent, and example, for the "union" between England and Scotland.

Some Scottish writers would argue for union on the basis of trade, and that union with England would be great for the merchants and markets of Scotland.[8] Furthermore, a sort of geographic condition along with the commercial and religious provided for a convenience of union between the kingdoms.[9] The union of the two kingdoms would provide not just a historic wholeness of Britain, but also benefits of "peace, prosperity, and Protestantism."[10] The Scottish monarchy resisted any form of dynastic union with England, betrothing Queen Mary of the Scots to the French dauphin instead of to King Edward VI of England.[11] The Scottish writer Robert Wedderburn would argue that the historic unity of Britain never existed and that Scotland was merely a colony of England in ancient times.[12] Wedderburn would also question the legitimacy of the King of England to his very title in the first place, arguing that he had no right in any way to claim the estates of Scotland.[13] Scottish resistance to unity, as was English affirmation of unity, was based in past precedent and classical ideas of what Britain once was.

Dynastic union between the two kingdoms would occur, however, with James and the House of Stuart. He was crowned king of Scotland in 1567 at the age of one due to his mother, Mary Queen of Scots, being deposed and escaping to England where she would be executed by

Queen Elizabeth I of England. When it became apparent that Elizabeth I would have no child heirs to continue the Tudor dynasty, James became the apparent heir to the throne in the 1590s. While King of the Scots, James had not just established himself as a stable monarch, but he had also proven himself as astute. He was able, during a time of religious change and political instability, to manage the two representative institutions of the realm: the Scottish parliament, and the general assembly of the kirk.[14] To an extent, James identified with the past English mission to "civilize" those in his realm by enforcing Lowland standards onto the Gaelic clans and to consolidate the exercise of power and authority by the crown.[15]

The death of Elizabeth in 1603 and the coronation of James I of England would mark the dynastic union of the two kingdoms that was seen as needed for the unification. James would begin to try and enact the unification through the parliament of England in 1604, though he met with initial failure. He would continue to press for the unification and the debate over political unification would dominate parliament until 1607, when legal union met its final defeat. James shifted his focus to forging a symbolic union between the two kingdoms by achieving lesser goals via parliament than outright political union: the abolition of hostile laws towards Scots, the establishment of a commercial union between the kingdoms, and the naturalization of all subjects as English and as Scot after the crowning of James in 1603.[16]

There are two prevailing reasons for why James could not convince the English parliament to agree to the union of kingdoms, though the Scottish parliament was agreeable to union with England primarily on economic grounds.[17] The first reason centered on the make-up of James's court. Upon taking the crown of England, James abolished his court chamber and created a unified Anglo-Scotch Privy Chamber consisting of twenty-four Englishman and

twenty-four Scots.[18] Issues with the Bedchamber, however, would recur with the English as James gave the majority of the positions, which allowed for access to the king and his patronage, to Scots.[19] This denial of representation, and patronage, to the English seems to have outraged the Lords in parliament, causing them to retaliate by opposing political union (and breeding opposition in the commons).[20] The second reason is less dramatic, but very plausible: parliament opposed the change in name and the merging of the kingdoms as being against common law. The combination of the kingdoms would create a new set of laws, and it would go against all prior precedent and tradition.[21] Union in this manner would constitute an "imperfect" union, in which both kingdoms kept their existing institutions (such as Castile and Aragon), as opposed to the "perfect" union of England and Wales.[22] The idea of English cultural superiority and the desire for union on English terms, as expressed in the 1540s, would prove to be the hurdle that would prevent actual union when the opportunity was most possible for it.

James issued a proclamation in 1604 styling himself not as the King of England and Scotland, but as the unitary "King of Great Britain" and using the full styling of "King of Great Britain, France, and Ireland."[23] In the proclamation, James appealed to historic bonds, common laws, common language, a common faith, and a common island that welded the people together. James ascended to both thrones not only out of dynastic succession, but to complete the God-ordained "reuniting" of the kingdoms.[24] James had not failed to politically unify the kingdoms at the issuing of this proclamation, but the sudden issuance makes clear that James wanted to be seen as a common king to both kingdoms by establishing one title. The proclamation allowed for the continued differences between the kingdoms in areas such as currency, but the union cannot be denied because the island is now under one sovereign and will continue to be so.[25]

James wrote of kingship as being absolute through the monarch and without a need for parliamentary consent.[26] He would, however, work through the English parliament in order to achieve some legal and political equality between his subjects in Scotland and in England. Unwilling to become primarily a king of England as his new subjects may have wanted him to be, he sought to establish equal status in both kingdoms for all of his British subjects. James did not see himself as a King of England or a King of Scotland, but as the King of Britain.[27] The borders that divided the kingdoms were unnatural, divided culture, and were merely a formal legality: the union was natural and the work of God.[28]

Views external to the two kingdoms show that James's goal of creating a British kingdom seemed to take hold, primarily because the two kingdoms shared a common foreign policy. The English nobility resisted being redefined as being representative of a British nation, or of representing "Great Britain" (as the court of Spain referred to the origin of the English ambassador), often insisting that they represented the interests of England and Scotland but not of a unified Britain.[29] A distinction in national identification, and not just cultural identification, still resonated with the English nobility and parliament.

The print culture of England, however, would embrace the new unification of the kingdoms through James. In 1605, just two years after James became the king of both kingdoms and one year after he issued his proclamation claiming the title "King of Great Britain," a pamphlet was published celebrating the reunification of Britannia under James. The precedents for his kingship of "Great Britain" were traced to Brutus, the original King of Britain, and the last King of Britain, King Egbert. The legacy of the Kingdom of Britain, according to the pamphlet, stretched back to just after the fall of Troy in the Trojan War and before the building of

Rome.[30] In 1606, a new history of "Great Britain" was written framing the story of the island as a united people being invaded by the Romans, Danes, and, finally, the Normans.[31] Another history was written of "Great Britain" by John Speed in 1611, which continued telling the story of the island of Britain, and its British peoples, as opposed to that of England, and its English peoples.[32] Speed would also, in 1612, frame the idea of "Great Britain" as constituting a part of the "Empire of Great Britain," and would use the term "British Empire" to refer to all of James's holdings. Speed, in his description of the components of the "British Empire," included the separate political entities of Ireland and the Isle of Man (he referred to both as respective kingdoms, as he did with Scotland and England).[33] James, when referring to himself as "King of Great Britain," seemed to mean the island itself as he made clear in dividing the island of Britain (which contained only England and Scotland) from Ireland. It is also difficult to discern whether James embraced the idea of an "Empire of Great Britain," as he never clearly seemed to make any pretense to be an Emperor of Great Britain, or to include the Isle of Man or Ireland as being British. Regardless, the identity of England and Scotland seemed to be merging in the views of outsiders coming into the kingdoms after James proclaimed himself King of Great Britain. In 1619, Christopher Angel, a Greek taking refuge in England, would refer to his new home as the "Kingdom of Great Britain."[34] The idea of Great Britain, and of a British identity, seemed to take hold in print culture during the reign of James. Furthermore, formulations and ideas of a "British Empire" seemed to also become more apparent and established during the reign of James.

The impact of James' claim to the kingship of Great Britain and of a cultural unity would also become apparent in the migrations of both Scots and English to Ireland in the late-sixteenth

and early-seventeenth centuries. An original pamphlet set out the proper rules and procedures for the escheated lands in Ulster, using terminology that clearly differentiated between English and Scots settlers in 1608.[35] The pamphlet would be issued two years later with a simple addition: the new settlers from both England and Scotland were referred to as "British."[36]

The idea of a united Britain would continue after the death of James in 1625 and the coronation of his son and heir, Charles I. However, Charles's disastrous reign would lead to war with Scotland in 1638, and his eventual trial and execution in 1649 by the English parliament. After the death of its monarch, England became a Commonwealth, but was still faced with the "British problem," as England and Scotland (and Ireland) were linked at this point. The Commonwealth would temporarily offer a very English solution to the problem by the forced union of England, Scotland, and Ireland into a single, "British" political unit.[37] With the king's execution in 1649 and the declaration of England as a republic, the dynastic link between Scotland and England became severed, but the proclamation of Charles Stuart, the son of Charles I, as the new King of Britain provoked the English into a war with Scotland which ended by the English rendering Terms of Union to Scotland.[38] All of Britain was now under the rule of the English nation, something past kings of England from Edward to Henry VIII, had sought to accomplish through force and English sovereignty. Oliver Cromwell had managed to unite the British islands through force in the space of his dictatorship, though this forced union would eventually bring down the republic and lead to the restoration of the monarchy.[39] James's idea of British identity was put to the side, and the blurring of Great Britain and England, that is, the idea that Great Britain was synonymous with strictly English identity, was prevalent from 1642 to 1660.[40]

The restoration of 1660 would see the continued use of the "King of Great Britain" styling by the monarch, though England, Scotland, and Ireland became separate political entities once again.[41] The idea that the two kingdoms formed a united entity called Great Britain and a common British culture continued to exist because of two outstanding factors. The first was that the kings (and queens) continued to use the royal styling that James established in 1604 with his proclamation, well past his death, during the interregnum (while in exile), with the restoration of the monarchy, and after the Glorious Revolution of 1688.[42] The second involved the perpetuation in print culture of the use of the titles of the Kingdom of Great Britain and the King of Great Britain well into the late seventeenth century.[43]

James's kingship of England and Scotland and its role in the formation of a British monarchy, a British identity, and a singular British kingdom is well exhibited through his combining of the English and Scotch courts, the creation of the title "king of Great Britain" through royal proclamation, and his legal efforts to reconcile both his English and Scottish subjects to similar naturalization laws, free trade between the kingdoms, and the repeal of hostile laws. James could not, however, persuade the English parliament to effect a whole political union with Scotland, but he may have done more in his other actions for common identity and unity to create a British identity and nation. James may have written about the divine rights of kings, but in his actual kingship he showed a remarkable ability to negotiate and compromise with existing political and ecclesiastical structures.[44] The print culture of the time furthered the ambitions of James by recognizing, and to some extent, embracing the idea of a common British identity and of a natural Kingdom of Great Britain, both in the contemporary time and historically. The importance of James in forging, at least, a spiritual idea of Britain cannot be

underestimated. In looking at the culturally English idea of Britain in 1602, and viewing the inclusionary policies of James to include a broader British identity and the common heritage then written about in print culture from 1605 onwards, the impact of James on British cultural thought is apparent. James was never legally the king of Great Britain, but his efforts may have entitled him, in the historical perspective, to claim the title as first King of Great Britain.

[1] David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 36.

[2] Jenny Wormald, "James VI & I," *History Today* 52, no. 6 (June 2002): 29.

[3] King James VI of Scotland, *The True Law of Free Monarchies* (Edinburgh, 1598), 8.

[4] Wormald, "James VI & I," 29.

[5] Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire*, 37.

[6] King Henry VIII of England, *A Declaration Containing the Just Causes and Considerations of this Present War with the Scots* (London, 1542), 22-26.

[7] Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire*, 38.

[8] James Harrison, *An Exhortation to the Scots* (London, 1547), 21-25.

[9] Ibid., 32.

[10] Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire*, 42.

[11] Ibid., 43.

[12] Ibid., 44-45.

[13] Robert Wedderburn, *The Complaint of Scotland* (n.p., 1550), 148-149.

[14] Maurice Lee, Jr., "James I and the Historians: Not a Bad King After All?," *Albion* 16, no. 2 (March 1984): 154.

[15] Armitage,*The Ideological Origins of the British Empire*, 55.

[16] Conrad Russell, "James VI and I and rule over two kingdoms: an English view," *Historical Research* 76, no. 192 (May 2003): 162.

[17] Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire*, 41.

[18] Neil Cuddy,"Anglo-Scotch Union and the Court of James I, 1603-1625," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 39 (December 1989): 110.

[19] Ibid., 116.

[20] Ibid., 117.

[21] Russell, "James VI and I and rule over two kingdoms: an English view," 161.

[22] Ibid., 151-152.

[23] King James I of England, *Proclamation of 1604 Establishing the Title King of Great Britain* (London, 1604), 2-3.

[24] Ibid., 1.

[25] Ibid., 3.

[26] James, *The True Law of Free Monarchies*, 29.

[27] Wormald, "James VI & I," 29.

[28] James, *Proclamation of 1604 Establishing the Title King of Great Britain*, 1.

[29] Russell, "James VI and I and rule over two kingdoms: an English view," 153-154.

[30] Anthony Munday, *The Triumphs of a Re-United Britannia* (London, 1605), 4-5.

[31] Josh Clapham, *History of Great Britain* (London, 1606), vi-vii.

[32] John Speed, *History of Great Britain* (London, 1611), 155-161.

[33] Speed, *The Theatre of the Empire of Great Britain* (London, 1612), ii.

[34] Christopher Angel, *An Encomium of the Famous Kingdom of Great Britain* (Cambridge, 1619), 2.

[35] Anon., *A Collection of Such Orders and Conditions, as Are to be Observed by the Undertakers Upon the Distribution and Plantation of the Escheated Lands in Ulster* (London, 1608), 1-2.

[36] Anon., *Conditions to be Observed by the British Undertakers of the Escheated Lands in Ulster* (London, 1610), 1-2.

[37] Derek Hirst, "The English Republic and the Meaning of Britain*," Journal of Modern History* 66, no. 3 (September 1994): 453.

[38] Ibid., 457-459.

[39] Ibid., 484-486.

[40] Anon., *England's Absolute Monarchy, or Government of Great Britain* (London, 1642), 1-2; Hirst, "The English Republic and the Meaning of Britain," 454-455.

[41] William Smith, *Carmen Triumphale, or England's Triumph for Her Restored Liberty* (London, 1660), 1.

[42]King William III of England, *Abstract of the Treaty of Peace Between William and Louis, King of France* (London, 1697), 1.

[43] John Whittie, *An Exact Diary of the Late Expedition of his Illustrious Highness the Prince of Orange (Now King of Great Britain)* (London, 1689), 1-2.

[44] Wormald, "James VI and I," 31.

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