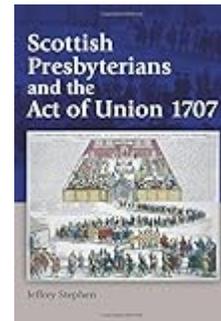




Jeffrey Stephen. *Scottish Presbyterians and the Act of Union, 1707.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007. vi + 274 pp. £50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7486-2505-5.



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Presbyteries and Politics

Jeffrey Stephen's monograph is the first extended attempt to explore the roles of Scotland's presbyterian churchmen in the debates leading to parliamentary union with England in 1707. Stephen takes issue with the claims of previous historians (whom he is strangely reluctant to identify) that the Kirk threatened to prevent the passage of the union through the Scottish parliament. If individual ministers were critical of union, Stephen argues, collectively the Church of Scotland's position was one of "political neutrality and ecclesiastical self-interest" (p. 99).

In his first chapter, Stephen describes the religious and political background to the union debates that dominated Scottish politics in late 1706 and early 1707. The religious settlement of 1690, which re-established presbyterianism in the national church, had critics among Scottish episcopalians and presbyterians, and was particularly detested by high-churchmen in England. The prospect of parliamentary union with England thus brought the fears of many Scottish presbyterians for the security of their church to a head. Stephen's second and third chapters provide a detailed narrative of the attempts of the Com-

mission of the General Assembly, the executive court of the Kirk, to negotiate with the Scottish parliament over the consequences of union for presbyterianism. Church lobbying resulted in an Act of Security, appended to the union, which appeared to guarantee the presbyterian settlement. Chapters 4 and 5 look beyond events in Edinburgh, analyzing addresses from presbyteries and parishes against union, and instances of crowd violence. Stephen's sixth chapter considers some of the pamphlet literature surrounding the union, while chapter 7 assesses reactions to the completed union in the general assembly of 1707.

Several of Stephen's conclusions ought to be recognized by future historians. First, Stephen correctly downplays the significance of William Carstares, principal of Edinburgh University and perhaps the best-known minister of the period. Carstares, who supported the union, certainly had some influence on his brethren, but the Commission of the General Assembly was not dominated by a single member, or by a powerful minority. Second, Stephen shows how controversial the petitions from the church's lower courts were among ministers. To

many, these petitions, which were uniformly hostile to the union, seemed unnecessary and disorderly, given the role of the commission as the church's representative. Third, Stephen draws attention to the variety of opinions concerning union among presbyterians. The commission failed to act in alliance with the parliamentary opposition, and no serious challenge to the union emerged from elsewhere in the church.

Stephen's book concentrates on the clerical elite, almost to the exclusion of grassroots worshippers. This is a significant weakness, not least because presbyterian ministers had less influence over their parishioners than Stephen assumes. He establishes that the Commission of the General Assembly was effectively neutral towards the union, and shows that presbyteries complained little about the commission's stance. Yet it will not follow from this that opposition from Scottish presbyterians was muted. The majority of presbyterians vehemently opposed the union, and remained hostile for at least a generation after 1707. By concentrating on the security of the church, moreover, Stephen fails fully to explain why many presbyterians opposed union. It was a standard presbyterian belief that the National Covenant (1638) and the Solemn League and Covenant (1643), oaths in favor of presbyterianism, were perpetually binding for all Scots. By confirming and extending the power of Anglican bishops in the proposed British parliament, the union constituted a breach of the Covenants, and a grave national

sin. Stephen quotes some ministers making this point, but does not recognize its significance. The Act of Security for the church may have allayed some fears that the British parliament would uproot Scottish presbyterianism. But it could neither remove the sin of perjury, nor neutralize popular hostility to the union.

In spite of its first chapter, the book's analysis lacks the sort of context required to understand the position of Scottish presbyterianism in the early eighteenth century. There is little literature on the post-1690 Kirk, and Stephen has missed an opportunity to ask searching questions about the relationship between presbyterian clergy and the civil government. How much did the Scottish parliament and (perhaps more importantly) the Privy Council do for the church in the years after 1690? What did churchmen fear they were about to lose? More obviously, what were the consequences of union for the church? Stephen sums up the period between 1708 and 1712 in six sentences. Yet in these years parliament abolished the Scottish Privy Council, restored lay patronage in the church, granted episcopalians toleration, and imposed the English oath of abjuration on Scottish clergy. The last two developments seemingly breached the 1707 Act of Security. Stephen's book is useful for its account of the Commission of the General Assembly's actions, but does not remedy the lack of a full analysis of the religious issues surrounding the union.

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