“PILLARS OF THE AUTHORITY OF PRINCES”: REFLECTIONS ON THE EMPLOYMENT OF BISHOPS IN THE BRITISH ISLES IN THE REIGN OF JAMES VI/I

This I must say for Scotland, and I may truly vaunt it, here I sit and govern it with my pen, I write and it is done, and by a Clerk of the Council I govern Scotland now, which others could not do by the sword.”¹ So spoke James I to the English parliament in the spring of 1607, as his hopes for a comprehensive union between England and Scotland began to become hopelessly derailed. For a king whose accession to the English throne had been greeted as the harbinger of “...peace under one king, one law, one religion,...and the true happiness of Britain...”², such a boast seems almost sullen when we realize that it was probably an attempt to calm English fears of being over-run by poor, ignorant Scotsmen, should hostile laws between the two kingdoms be eliminated.³

We know, of course, that James did not get his comprehensive union, and that England and Scotland were not formally joined as one state until 1707.⁴ Still,
the challenge of ruling a "Multiple Kingdom" would entail a degree of executive harmonization, and where possible, the use of representatives or institutions which would be common to all of the king's dominions. It is with this in mind that I propose some examples of the crown's use of the bishops of the established churches as vehicles for extending central authority in several of the more remote regions of the British Isles after 1603. Initially, however, some background information will be required to establish a sense of the political landscape, and the limitations under which the early Stuart regime worked.

Even if he had never succeeded Elizabeth I and become king of England, James VI of Scotland was well aware of the regional challenges presented by the British Isles, and the limited force of government authority in some of its more remote areas. Like his predecessor, James IV, who had suppressed the Lordship of the Isles in 1493, James VI considered the powerful clans of the Highlands and Western Islands throwbacks to a barbaric Gaeldom. More than this, however, the blood feuds, raids, and property losses, to say nothing of the difficulty of collecting taxes in the region, also undermined the authority of the crown. The only semblance of order in these areas was provided by powerful, client nobles like the Earls of Huntly or Argyll, whose own strength posed a threat to the crown. Therefore, James, in the later 1590s, made the infusion of "civilization" into the Highlands a priority.

Attempts to establish a colony of Lowlanders on the
Isle of Lewis in 1599 and 1605 were failures, as was a proposal to relocate Lowlanders on the peninsula of Kintyre. James himself seems to have contemplated a military solution, but the financial costs, logistical difficulties, and the reputations of the potential adversaries seem to have curtailed him.

Still, the clan politics of the region did provide the crown with some surprising opportunities to assert itself. In one of the most interesting twists in the convoluted histories of Ulster and the Western Islands of Scotland in the late sixteenth century, James, in 1596, was able to strike at the power base of one of his adversaries in the Western Isles, Angus Macdonald of Dunivaig, with the guarantee of support from Angus's Ulster clansman, James MacDonnell of Antrim. The king of Scotland did not forget MacDonnell's complicity when he ascended the English throne in 1603, and showed his gratitude by giving Ranald MacDonnell the securest title to his lands, among all the Ulster chiefs. Thus, we see something of James' experiences in attempting to govern his geographic fringes.

The next concerted attempt on the part of the crown to assert its authority in the Highlands came in 1608. James, in a pique over his administration's inability to settle the question of rents in the northern Hebrides, and smarting over a revival of Macdonald ambitions in the south west, sought to use his new powers as king of England by dispatching an expedition composed of English troops based in Ireland, which would finally pacify the Highlands, and assist in the planting of
Before the expedition departed, however, the Scottish Privy Council had sent a representative to London, to urge a more moderate course, and that James appoint a safe lieutenant to the man slated to lead the party, Lord Ochiltree.\textsuperscript{11}

The Council's representative was Andrew Knox, a native of Renfrewshire and a former member of the commission of ministers which had promoted subscription to the confession faith and the covenant in the first years of the 1590s. Despite his early adherence to strict Presbyterianism, Knox had risen in the king's favour in the later 1590s as a commissioner charged with apprehending Catholics, and in April 1606 was appointed titular bishop of the Isles.\textsuperscript{12} James' high opinion of Knox was confirmed when he heartily approved of the bishop's participation in Ochiltree's expedition, which sailed in August 1608.

When Knox departed on his mission with Ochiltree, it was difficult to determine whether he went as a minister of the crown, or of the kirk. James had been attempting for most of his adult career as king to bring the kirk under the control of the crown, and limit the power of local ministers and presbyteries. In order to do this, he had long believed that episcopal church government, with its bishops dependent upon the good graces of the sovereign, offered the best chance of achieving his aims.\textsuperscript{13} To this end, he had dragged the institution of episcopacy in Scotland from a position of near dormancy in 1597 to complete control over the kirk, which was eventually achieved at the Glasgow Assembly of 1610.
This had been a multi-staged process in which James had curbed the ministers of the General Assembly to the notion that they were to meet where, and when he determined, and that they would be represented in parliament by bishops chosen by the crown. The earliest appointments in 1600 and 1602 did not include temporalities, but all episcopal appointments after 1604 granted the new bishops significant benefices and lands which had been removed under the Act of Annexation of 1587. Further, unlike the situation faced by the bishops and clergy of the Church of England, many of whose incomes were jealously controlled by lay benefactors, the Scottish clerics were given recourse to a joint lay-clerical commission which was struck by parliament to ensure a minimum stipend.\(^{14}\)

Still, as W.R. Foster has pointed out, the episcopal office was largely a civil office before 1610, with the new bishops exercising no real authority over the General Assembly, and having no basis for performing episcopal functions such as visitations or ordinations.\(^{15}\) Politically, however, they were of great importance to the crown, both in terms of extending its reach over the kirk, and in secular matters, particularly in the parliaments of 1604 and after when James was no longer in the country.

The importance which he attached to the bishops as loyal servants of the crown can be seen in the appointments of Archbishop Spottiswood of Glasgow, and Bishop Gledstanes of Caithness to the commission conducting union negotiations with England. Of equal,
or greater importance for the ongoing governance of Scotland was the naming of five bishops to the Lords of the Articles, the executive committee which presented all draft legislation to parliament. This presence would grow to include eight bishops, who together with eight peers would choose eight minor barons and burgh representatives, thus giving the crown the ability to set the parliamentary agenda.16

As we have seen, the Privy Council was the moving force behind James' decision to place Knox on Ochiltree's commission to the Isles, and the actions of the bishop on this mission indicate his deep political sense. Briefly, Ochiltree's venture into the Highlands and Islands had been toned down significantly by the time it departed in August 1608. No longer charged with pacifying the region by force, instead persuasion and tolerance were to be used to bring about the submission of the Highland chiefs.17 In the end, however, the best which could be accomplished was to lure nine of the most prominent chiefs aboard Ochiltree's ship, with the promise of dinner, and an opportunity to hear bishop Knox's sermon, after which the whole company set sail for Ayr.

The kidnapping gave the Privy Council the opportunity to ward the Highland chiefs in the Lowlands, and attempt to intimidate them into accepting government terms. One effect of the whole business, however, was Knox's conclusion that the Highlanders could be bargained with, provided the crown's presence in the region did not appear to be coercive. Knox was
clearly uncomfortable with the manner in which the chiefs had been handled, as he made clear in a long report to the king.\textsuperscript{18}

In light of this report, Knox returned to the Isles the following summer, and on Iona gained the signatures of the leading Highland chiefs to the \textit{Statutes of Icolmkill}, in which the chiefs recognized the king as their sovereign; verified that they were subject to his laws; disclaimed the right to summon personal troops; agreed to present themselves in Edinburgh at least once a year and to send their eldest children to be educated in the Lowlands.\textsuperscript{19}

The subscription of the chiefs to these demands was naturally a significant victory for the crown in its attempts to assert itself in the region. Knox deserved most of the credit, and was rewarded by James with stewardship over the Isles, control of the castle of Dunivaig on Islay and with the Irish diocese of Raphoe, which he held along with the bishopric of the Isles until resigning the latter in 1619 in favour of his son.\textsuperscript{20} We should not, however, fall into the trap of drawing two obvious inferences about Knox’s triumph for the crown in gaining the chiefs’ agreement to the statutes.

First, as the editor of the \textit{Records of the Privy Council of Scotland} reminds us, the chiefs who had been kidnapped by Ochiltree in 1608, and who dealt with Knox the following summer, were not personifications of the contemporary stereotype of the Highlander; “...barbarous and cannibalistic” Gaels.\textsuperscript{21} In fact, they were men with some pretensions to membership in the
wider family of European nobility. Some of them spoke French, traveled to, and maintained connections with the continent, and were justifiably proud of the ancient prestige of their families. At the same time, the crown saw them as ambitious, predatorial, and ruthless in using their own kinsmen as fodder in the furtherance of their own designs. Therefore, the agreement reached on Iona was of strategic importance for both sides. The chiefs recognized that the moment called for a compromise with the crown, and that the deal might benefit them. Mackenzie of Kintail, whom Maurice Lee describes as the closest approximation of Machiavelli’s prince (creating law and order because it paid him to do so), was perhaps the greatest winner, gaining proprietorship over the north western isles and eventually a peerage. At the same time, the crown, for all intents and purposes, had been able to change the spirit and practice in which it dealt with the Highlands. In a formal sense, crown sovereignty had been recognized but it had also been forced to give tacit acceptance to the clan system.

The other item of note is that the Statutes of Iona did not completely pacify the region. The Macdonalds of Dunivaig made a last attempt to restore their ancient hegemony over the south western isles, and even captured Dunivaig castle in March of 1614. Knox, who was responsible for holding the castle, was captured, along with his son and nephew, in an attempt to re-take it the following September, and was only released so that he could carry the
demands of Angus Oig Macdonald to the Privy Council in Edinburgh.

The solution of this embarrassing situation underscores the difficulty the crown had in extending its authority in the region, and the compromises which were necessary if that authority was to be preserved. The Macdonalds were ousted from Dunivaig, and peace was restored, not by the crown *per se*, but by the old resort to the local authority of the Earl of Argyll and his clansmen. Thus, royal authority would continue to be recognized, but only as long as the chief of clan Campbell was amenable.\(^{25}\)

Still, Knox’s gaining of *The Statutes of Iona* was an important first step, and the utility of the episcopacy in this instance was mirrored in the part played by James Law, Bishop of Orkney, in bringing the archipelago of Orkney and Shetland under crown control between 1609 and 1615.

In these islands, the king’s cousin, Earl Patrick Stewart, controlled a virtual personal fiefdom, financed largely through piracy, tribute, and the largess of his creditors in Edinburgh\(^ {26}\). Not only did he hold crown and church lands for his own use; he also exercised a particularly brutal form of personal justice which had caused many Orkadians and Shetlanders to appeal for relief.\(^ {27}\) On a more basic level, Orkney and Shetland maintained many legal throwbacks to their Norse heritage which the crown was eager to eliminate in order that the law might be uniform throughout Scotland.\(^ {28}\)
Shortly after assuming the see of Orkney in 1608, Bishop Law caused a showdown with Earl Patrick over his possession of the church’s lands, which included the Earl's use of the Bishop's residence in Kirkwall. By March of 1609, Law had succeeded in obtaining a summons from the Privy Council requiring Patrick to appear before them and answer charges relating to the oppression of his tenants.29

When he finally presented himself in August of 1609, the Earl found that the charges against him had been changed to charges of treason, and that he was to be warded in Dunbarton. James for his part, had shown favour to his kinsman in the early part of the century and seems to have desired a compromise, which might have allowed Earl Patrick to return to Orkney. Notwithstanding, Law and the Privy Council prevailed in their view that the crown must take the opportunity to assert its rights in the Earldom, and accordingly, the bishop was made steward of the archipelago, and charged with affecting legal reforms.30 This was perhaps most apparent in the area of land leases, where the crown and church came to be the two most prominent landlords in Orkney and Shetland after 1611.31 At the same time, some of the island gentry remained loyal to Earl Patrick and joined his son, Robert Stewart, in rebellion against the crown in 1614.32 Law, with the assistance of the Earl of Caithness, and several pieces of artillery from Edinburgh Castle eventually suppressed the rebellion, and the two Stewarts and their accomplices were executed for treason.33
The end of the Earldom of Orkney holds significance for several reasons. First, it completed the abrogation of Norse laws in Orkney and Shetland, and brought the islands under the sphere of crown control. This prevented the development of any sort of home rule in the archipelago such as arose in the crown's relations with the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands, or the Danish crown's relations with the Faeroes. Secondly, it entrenched the church as both a social and religious force in the islands; one which clearly enjoyed a symbiotic relationship with the crown. Finally, the efforts of Bishop Law, and his role in convincing James that the crown must assume responsibility over the Earldom, reflect again upon the importance of episcopal presence to the crown, and the weight which James placed upon the views of his bishops.

The other important instance of the crown's preference to assert its presence in a remote region of the British kingdoms, via representatives of the established church, comes from the early years of the Jacobean plantations in Ulster. In 1605, Sir Arthur Chichester, the Lord Deputy of Ireland, proposed settling Ulster with English and Scottish colonists. The flight of the northern earls of Tyrone and Tyrconnell in 1607 expedited plans for Protestant settlement, and in 1608, a committee was appointed in London to formulate plantation policy, and see to the surveying and subdividing of the expropriated lands.

In monitoring the efforts of this commission, George Montgomery, Bishop of Derry, Raphoe and Clougher,
himself a Scotsman, a zealous harrier of the Earl of Tyrone, and a brother of Hugh Montgomery, the famous colonizer of Antrim and Down, was scrupulous in ensuring that the Church of Ireland received its due in the parceling of land.\textsuperscript{37} He seems to have garnered more than 25,000 acres of land for the church, above what the English commission had allocated.\textsuperscript{38} Further, Montgomery won the support of the king in a dispute with the Attorney General, Sir John Davies, over the return to the church of lands, rather than rents, which had been held by temporal lords in Monaghan and Fermanagh.\textsuperscript{39} In 1609, Montgomery was moved out of Ulster to Meath, and although he continued to hold the see of Clougher as well until 1621, he hereafter concentrated his attentions on wider Irish issues.\textsuperscript{40}

That the king may have been seeing the problems facing his established churches in a wider, British dimension, can be inferred from his appointment of Andrew Knox to the see of Raphoe in 1610 and two other Scots, Robert Echlin to Down and Connor and Dromore in 1612, and James Spottiswood, brother of the Scottish primate, to Clougher in 1620. Knox, it was hoped, would be able to achieve the same sort of triumph that he had recently accomplished in the Highlands.\textsuperscript{41} Accordingly he undertook extensive reforms within his diocese, and was particularly effective in providing preachers from Scotland who could speak the Irish language, or at the very least, readers who could provide the catechism to the natives. It is estimated that by 1622 every second parish in Raphoe
had some form of preaching minister, compared to a national average of one minister for every six parishes.\textsuperscript{42}

Knox was also active in recruiting new settlers for his diocese, and in 1632 claimed that he had settled some 300 families.\textsuperscript{43} This in turn benefited the financial health of the established church. When Knox assumed the see in 1610, Raphoe carried an annual income of £30. This had grown to £200 in 1616 and £650 in 1629.\textsuperscript{44} Of the clergy, previously mentioned who were brought over to Raphoe, in 1622 fifteen of them were either Masters or Bachelors of Divinity.\textsuperscript{45}

There can be no doubt that Knox was personally dedicated and diligent in his efforts to serve his Irish charge. Chichester himself claimed in 1611 that Knox had accomplished more for his diocese in two years than Montgomery had in five.\textsuperscript{46} He had an advantage, however, in that the church’s lands, rents and temporalties had been established by Montgomery’s efforts before the land commission. This was not the case for Bishops Echlin of Down and Connor, or Spottiswood of Clougher, who only succeeded to their sees after years of episcopal neglect, and private speculation. In attempting to restore the church’s rightful properties they faced the hostility of both English and Scottish undertakers, and made much slower progress in refurbishing their churches and staffing them with able ministers.\textsuperscript{47} Thus, the records of these two clerics are not nearly as impressive as Knox’s, although there may be great insight in Professor Perceval-Maxwell’s observation that Knox was the only one of the four
Scottish bishops not to have been softened by residence in England.48 Echlin, however, does seem to have done well for himself in land speculation, which, coupled with an income of £550 per annum from his see, made him a potent financial force among his neighbours.49

What conclusions may we draw about the relationship between episcopal participation and the extension of crown control in the remoter regions of the British Isles in the early seventeenth century? The first thing which seems to be indicated is a willingness on the part of James VI/I to establish a clear connection between church and state in the minds of the citizens or settlers of these regions. While it had been his expressed belief for many years that the church should be seen as a servant of the crown, the foregoing examples mark the first occasions in which the crown had been able to make this connection manifest. Thus, in making James Law steward of Orkney and Shetland, or favouring George Montgomery’s interpretation of the responsibility which landowners had to the church in Ulster, James was confirming that where necessary, the state would speak through the church in temporal matters, even if his political councillors were wary of clerical involvement in politics.50

The second thing I think the role of the bishops shows us is the degree to which the British Isles as a whole had entered into the formulation of royal policy, and the corresponding extension of royal authority. The reform of the Highlands and Northern and Western Islands of Scotland continued to be a priority for the
crown, even after James had ascended the English throne, and presumably could have turned his attentions to more mainstream problems. Like the resumption of colonization projects in Ulster, with the related assumption that such ventures would help "civilize" the region, the desire to affect legal and social reforms in the remote parts of Scotland indicates a desire to see a level of consistency in all of the crown's domains. James, as we know, was a passionate exponent of union, and the most formidable opposition to his schemes came from those who feared for their way of life and prosperity, lest they be saddled with the problems of "backward regions." In bringing legal and social uniformity to these regions, James could hope to lower the barriers between his native land (especially) and southern England. In achieving these reforms, the established church might potentially play an active and effective role in fostering unity and loyalty among his peoples.

Finally, the foregoing examples remind us that even a king who claimed to rule by divine right, and wished others to believe that he ruled his native land with his pen, was often forced to make compromises if royal presence and authority were to be forwarded. The diversity inherent in the British kingdoms could be accommodated by a common institution such as episcopacy, but the characters and efforts of the bishops themselves were of great importance in advancing the policies of the crown.

The reign of James VI/I saw the strengthening of the Court of High Commission in England, and the
introduction of similar institutions into both Scotland and Ireland. James and his English bishops began their long battle with Parliament to secure greater control over church finances, and the Scottish episcopacy was confirmed in its rights to undertake visitations and ordinations consequent with their episcopal powers as confirmed by the General Assembly of Glasgow in 1610. An Irish Convocation met for the first time in 1616, and drew up its own articles of religion; the first post-Reformation canons to emerge from the Church of Ireland. All of these examples indicated a desire for greater uniformity on the part of the crown. They also gave rise to debates over the theological directions of the established churches, and in some quarters caused concern for the national integrity of the Churches of Scotland and Ireland.

While it is not the purpose of this paper to address those issues, it is clear that James’ reign saw a strengthening of ties between the crown and the episcopacy. By 1625, bishops had become recognized, if not always welcomed participants in British politics. In many cases, they were playing an active role in asserting central dictates in the most remote regions of the British kingdoms.

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Endnotes


6 Register of the Privy Council of Scotland (RPCS) Vol. IX, 1610-13, xxvi.


10 Lee, ‘James VI’s government of Scotland’ p. 50.

11 RPCS, Vol. VIII, p. 73.


14 Ibid., pp. 16-20; Lee, Government by Pen, p. 64.

15 Foster, The Church before the Covenants, p. 19.

16 James Parker Lawson, The Episcopal Church of Scotland from the Reformation to the Revolution, (Edinburgh: Gallie and Bayley, 1884) p. 268. By 1621, the Earl of Melrose reported that all of the Lords of the Articles but one had been presented on a private list before being chosen. J. D. Mackie, A History of Scotland, (London: Penguin, 1975, 2nd. ed.) p. 192.


18 David Laing ed., Original Letters Relating to the


21 James VI, quoted in, Lee, Government by Pen, p. 77.


23 Lee, Government by Pen, p. 82.

24 Ibid., p. 80.


27 It has been suggested that a distinction must be drawn between supplications to the crown which came from settlers recently arrived in Orkney, and native Orkadians, who seem to have been better disposed to Earl Patrick’s form of justice. Peter Anderson, Robert Stewart, Earl of Orkney, Lord of Shetland 1533-1593. (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1982) p. 139.


29 Thomson, History of Orkney, p. 172.

30 Anderson, Robert Stewart, p. 140.

31 Frances J. Shaw, The Northern and Western Islands


33 Ibid., p. 178.

34 Ibid., p. 179.

35 DNB, Vol. 11, p. 670, 'James Law'.


40 Perceval-Maxwell, Scottish Migration to Ulster, p. 257.

41 RPCS, Vol. IX, pp. 16, 18, 30-3, 569-70.


43 Perceval-Maxwell, Scottish Migration to Ulster, p. 260.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid., Perceval-Maxwell’s favourable portrayal of Knox’s work in Raphoe is far different from Archbishop Ussher’s findings during his metropoli-

46 Perceval-Maxwell, Scottish Migration, p. 260; Calendar of State Papers, Ireland, 1611-14, p. 149.


48 Ibid., p. 264.


50 Lee, Government by Pen, p. 83.
