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tion, for at such times the basic political antipathies of the Association members and supporters came to the surface, and Scotland was the loser. But the two dominant British parties miscalculated badly. Far from destroying nationalism they were instrumental in creating it in its modern form, as a party committed to national independence. The older 19th century programme might not have satisfied Scotland for very long, for it was after all geared to the very different conditions of the last century, but in any event it was not tried. The major political parties missed an opportunity to head off an independence movement, and any attempt to do so now would in all probability be seen as a reluctant gesture dictated by the growth in support for full independence. So long as nationalists confined themselves to pressure for limited self-government they were scarcely taken seriously, independence would appear to be a demand which Governments are more likely to accept as real.14

Footnotes
2 The improved economic conditions are considered in Henry Hamilton: An Economic History of Scotland in the Eighteenth Century. (Oxford 1963)
4 Alexander Allardyce, editor: Scotland and Scotsmen in the Eighteenth Century, from the MSS of John Ramsay of Ochtertyre. (Edinburgh 1888)
5 Henry Cockburn: Memorial and Letters on the Affairs of Scotland, is representative of this tradition.
8 H.J. Hanham, op. cit., 77.
11 Formed in 1951 based upon the existing Scottish Convention established in 1936 to work for a domestic Scottish Parliament.
12 With the exception of the Communist Party.
13 There is still a marked reluctance on the part of SNP spokesmen to contemplate the refusal of independence even should they obtain the support of a majority of the Scottish electorate.
14 The evolution of Scottish Nationalism can be followed in:
H.J. Hanham: Scottish Nationalism
William Ferguson: Scotland, 1689 to the Present. (Edinburgh 1968)
J.M. MacCormick: The Flag in the Wind. (London 1955)

The Scottish Rising of 1820: A Re-interpretation

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THE POPULAR UPRISINGS and accompanying general strike that made up the Scottish General Rising of April 1820 have recently been dealt with in a number of secondary works. Much of the interest in this subject has been generated by the resurgence of Scottish nationalism since the 1960s and this has resulted in an historiographical problem. The popular nationalist interpretations of the rising, which is also called the 'Radical War' or 'Scottish Insurrection', are distorted by two fundamental errors which are contradicted by a systematic examination of the sources. First, the nationalist view asserts that the general rising in Scotland was a secessionist or separatist movement of Celtic liberation which occurred in virtual isolation from the parallel unrest in England. Second, the rising is thought to have been triggered by the activities of 'agents provocateurs' working on behalf of the central government in London and their 'puppet' officials in Scotland. The latter claim is based on the writings of one Peter Mackenzie whose views are not borne out by the official records of either the Home Office or the Scottish authorities. Writing more than twelve years after the rising when the Whigs had returned to power in Parliament, Mackenzie found a receptive public willing to believe his story of a sinister Tory spy system. The recent work of William Roach on Scottish radicalism of the post-Napoleonic war years has completely discredited Mackenzie as a reliable chronicler of these events and at the same time exonerated Alexander Richmond, the Glasgow weaver accused of being a government 'agent provocateur'. While the work of Roach is free from a crude nationalistic interpretation of the rising, he too fails to fully
appreciate the strength of the relationship between the co-incident unrest in Scotland and the north of England. During the first two weeks of April 1820 when the Scottish Rising was in progress, 2000 armed radicals made an unsuccessful attack on the town of Huddersfield in Yorkshire. Days later 400 Barnsley radicals marched to Grange Moor near Huddersfield in a second advance on the town. Smaller disturbances occurred at Wigan, Carlisle, Accrington and Sheffield. Manchester radicals failed to act in the face of a large military presence in that town, but in Mirfield (Yorks.), workers stayed home in support of a call for a general strike. The overwhelming evidence of both official and unofficial sources indicates that the radicals tried to co-ordinate a simultaneous rebellion on both sides of the Anglo-Scottish border.

Indeed the history of British working class radicalism in the years after the French Revolution is one of continued attempts at co-operation. In 1793, for example, radical delegates from both countries attended a National Convention in Edinburgh. In the post-Napoleonic war years, a resurgent popular radical movement in both countries adopted the organizational form of the ‘Union Society’ which financed its democratic political objectives by a weekly levy on each of its members of one penny a week. These societies formed the organizational basis for the mass political demonstrations which so alarmed the authorities in 1819, as well as the physical force response of 1820. The Rising of 1820 must be seen against a background of an increasing popular political consciousness, an intransigent government which answered demands for reform with repression, and an unstable economic situation which assumed crisis proportions. It is not the intention at this point to re-write the complete history of the Scottish Insurrection of April 1820 as several good descriptive accounts already exist. Rather our purpose is to re-interpret the insurrection in the light of a re-examination of the sources.

On 1 April 1820 the rising commenced with the wide circulation of a printed Address to the Inhabitants of Great Britain and Ireland in the counties of Ayr, Renfrew, Lanark, Dumbarton and Stirling. This proclamation called upon people to take up arms to re-establish their rights and for the soldiers to stand aside. At the same time it was not a levelling statement as it declared that, ‘the interests of all Classes are the same’ and demanded, ‘Equality of Rights (not of Property)’. It was hoped that the soldiers would come over to the people to regain the rights of Britons and nowhere did the proclamation mention the Scottish people in particular. ‘Liberty or Death’ was the motto, but more importantly it called for a general strike. In the next few days there were reports of a general stoppage of work in the industrialized district of Scotland. At Paisley the support for the strike was solid and the Provost reported that the ‘working classes here are all idle and assembled in crowds on the streets. Some of the cotton mills began in the morning to work but have struck since breakfast’. From Glasgow Lord Provost Monteith wrote to the Home Office: ‘Almost the whole population of the working classes have obeyed the orders contained in the reasonable proclamation by striking work’. There were similar reports from other towns and it is generally agreed that about 60,000 people in the Clyde region stopped work in general sympathy with the aims of the radicals.

The second part of the radical plan called for armed risings and this met with much less success. The physical force part of the rebellion was to begin on 3 April 1820 when word was received that the English radical forces had also commenced hostilities. One radical later explained:

There was a safety valve… The ambassadors who had been sent by us to Nottingham stated that, by an agreement with the English, we were not to move until we heard that 200,000 had taken the field in England.

As a signal that the English had indeed rebelled, the mail coaches were to be stopped. The authorities knew this and anxiously awaited the arrival of the coaches on 4 April 1820. At Paisley, for example, the Provost reported:

Information has been received here that the movements of the disaffected are certainly to depend on the arrival or non-arrival of the mail tomorrow morning. If it does not arrive they are to commence hostilities. If it does they are to return to their work. I have therefore to suggest to your Lordship the propriety of sending an express here as early tomorrow morning as possible informing us whether the English mail has or has not arrived so that we may be prepared.

The mail did arrive on 4 April and the next day news reached Scotland that no rising had taken place in the Manchester area. Once this became known, ‘a sense of betrayal and failure spread like lightning’ Accordingly, the ‘safety valve’ went into operation and the plans for armed risings were abandoned by most of the radicals. The members of
the union societies felt that they had been ‘hoaxed’ by their leaders and that the English radicals had not honoured their commitments to the cause. In fact, as the editor of the Glasgow Chronicle later pointed out, serious disturbances had taken place in Yorkshire on the appointed days for the rising. The Scottish rising, therefore, was largely aborted and those incidents of rebellion which did occur were the work of groups who either chose not to adhere to the plan or who were not properly informed about the overall situation. 

The authorities were genuinely frightened by the prospect of a widespread and well-supported uprising. They issued a counter-proclamation on 3 April 1820 and called out the yeomanry cavalry. They had at their command almost 2000 regular soldiers, mainly concentrated at Paisley and Glasgow, as well as the support of some armed loyalist groups. In spite of this, large parts of Ayrshire had to be abandoned to the radicals and no assurances could be given that even the outlying area of Paisley could be protected. For the week following the appearance of the radicals’ proclamation, Lowland Scotland was in a state of panic and few could have been unaffected by the course of events.

The armed risings which did take place in Scotland in the first week of April 1820 appear to have been ill-co-ordinated and confused affairs which probably were not representative of the true level of radical support. Hundreds of men were reported to be drilling openly south of Glasgow, but in the town itself, which was well-protected by the military, there were no serious disturbances. At Kilmarnock the radicals were indecisive:

At last the day arrived for commencing hostilities, but no banner was hoisted, no sword drawn; every one, indeed, seemed to expect that his neighbour would take the lead in the enterprise and none having the hardihood to do so, the whole affair proved abortive.

At the radical stronghold of Paisley 300 armed men had successfully closed the mills on 3 April and on the next day a man was killed in a small but violent encounter in which a dozen radicals tried to seize weapons from a private house. Once the news from England had arrived, however, there were no further disturbances at Paisley.

On 4 April 1820 a group of Glasgow radicals decided to make an effort to seize some cannon kept at the Carron Iron Works near Falkirk. About sixty union society men assembled that night at a designated meeting place where they were supposed to meet a hundred Anderston men. When the latter did not show up, more than half of the men decided not to take part. Therefore, only a small group of about twenty-five men set out to march to the works that night. They were led by Andrew Hardie, an unemployed weaver and ex-militiaman, who was determined to go ahead with the plan in spite of the lack of support. At 5 a.m. on the morning of the 5th of April they reached the village of Condorrat and were joined by about fifteen men led by John Baird, a veteran of the Peninsular campaigns. The group, now numbering about forty men, passed through Bonnybridge to find that the people of Camelon would not support them. They were resting on Bonny-moor while trying to decide whether they should proceed or turn back towards Glasgow when they were caught by a troop of about thirty-two cavalry. A sharp encounter followed which came to be known in later accounts as the ‘Battle of Bonnymuir’:

On observing this force, the Radicals cheered and advanced to a wall, over which they commenced firing at the military. Some shots were then fired by the soldiers in return, and, after some time, the cavalry got through an opening in the wall, and attacked the party, who resisted till overpowered by the troops.

There were a few casualties on each side and eighteen radicals were taken prisoner. The first reports reaching Glasgow stated that the radicals had won a great victory and crowds came out into the streets at Tollcross to rejoice. Four to six hundred armed radicals from Bridgeton and Colton took the field but quickly disappeared when the true outcome of the skirmish was known.

Another armed rising took place at Strathaven on 6 April 1820 when the local radicals, acting on out-dated information from an Anderston delegate, marched to Rutherglen. On the previous day the Strathaven radicals, about one hundred in number, had taken possession of their village and seized all the weapons to be found in the area. When morning came, however, only two dozen men were prepared to march to join the radical army. In spite of this setback the Strathaven men, led by an old Jacobin named James Wilson and one John Morrison ‘who had fought and beat the French often in the Peninsular wars’, started out as planned. They carried a banner which read on one side, ‘Strathaven Union Society, 1819’ and on the other side, ‘Scotland Free or a Desart’. Reaching Rutherglen they camped on a hill until the local radicals informed them that the
Scottish General Rising had collapsed in failure. The Strathaven men dispersed and most of them escaped capture or even an encounter with the authorities. Indeed, the fact that most of this group of insurgents completely escaped the net of the military weighs heavily against the theory that the whole affair was instigated by government agents.23 Elsewhere there were only minor incidents to trouble the authorities. At Galston, Stewarton, Balfon and Newmilns there were reports of small groups of armed radicals quickly dispersing when they realized the rebellion was a failure. Efforts to set up a forge at Kilbarchan to supply the radicals with weapons were abandoned and a march by forty Bridgeton insurgents to Kirkintilloch on 7 April 1820 came to nothing. The next day, however, there were serious disturbances at Greenock which were the bloodiest affair of the rising in Scotland. The 120 men of the volunteer Port Glasgow Armed Association were ordered to march from Paisley to their homes and to drop off some radical prisoners at Greenock. A large crowd gathered, broke open the gaol and released the five radicals. This was not accomplished without a fierce battle in which eight persons were killed and another ten wounded. These casualties were entirely on the civilian side and they included several innocent bystanders. By 9 April 1820 Lowland Scotland was pacified; the strikers had returned to work and the insurrection (which never really went ahead as planned) was over. Looking back over the events of the previous week Alexander Boswell, the commander of the Ayrshire Yeomanry, accurately reported:

The ferment for two days ... was excessive over the whole manufacturing district, but finding that the rising could not take place and learning that the troops were now determined to act with severity, at least the semblance of a great change has taken place.24

As might be expected, the handloom weavers were the most important occupational group which supported the policy of general rising in Scotland in 1820. However, it would be a mistake to argue, as William Roach does, that the failure of the rising can be largely attributed to the fact that it really only had the full support of the one occupational group.25 We must note too that weavers were a numerically important group in Lowland Scotland, certainly outnumbering cotton spinners and probably colliers as well. Secondly, the rising was, as we have seen, abortive so those appearing at subsequent trials may have simply represented extremist factions or particularly distressed trades. At the same time there is evidence that the support for both moral and physical force radicalism cut across sectional trade boundaries. During the general strike phase of the rising, the radical supporters included many groups other than weavers. At Paisley, for example, all the weavers were out but the cotton spinners, masons, wrights and other trades also struck work.26 When we examine the occupations of those tried for their part or implicated in those few armed insurrections that did take place, we find evidence of the involvement of many trades. Fewer than half of those radicals who were tried at Stirling in June 1820, including the 'Bonnymuir' rebels, were weavers. This group included eighteen weavers, ten sailors, two shoemakers, and one each from the following trades: labourer, blacksmith, bookbinder, tailor, muslin singier, smith, cabinet maker, stocking maker, grocer, changekeeper and wright.27 At Ayr on 4 July 1820 true bills were found against seventeen men mainly from the villages of Galston, and Stewarton and they included thirteen weavers, a tailor, a shoemaker, a slater and a flesher.28 In all of these disturbances, it seems, the weavers found valuable allies amongst the shoemakers, tailors, blacksmiths and occasionally they had the help of a school-teacher or printer. Meanwhile two of the men wanted by the authorities were cotton spinners from Anderston and almost all of the dozen men involved in an accident at Duntocher were cotton spinners. This evidence, while not conclusive, at least suggests a broadly based support for the rising amongst the urban industrial groups. At the same time the Scottish colliers and agricultural labourers appear to have remained outside the movement.

The general rising of 1820 had a lasting impact on Scottish society and history which the comparable risings in Yorkshire did not have on English society. In part this was due to genuine nationalistic aspirations and in part it was a result of the harsh measures handed out by the despotic Scottish regime. Three men, James Wilson of Strathaven, Andrew Hardie of Glasgow and John Baird of Condorrat, were executed as leaders of armed insurrections, while no Englishman suffered the death penalty for similar activity in Yorkshire. Many of the rebels were transported, including the remaining 'Bonnymuir' men, and some of their sentences carried the extraordinary provision that for seven years they would be confined to the hardest of convict labours — the chain gang.29 When the Whigs returned to power they granted an absolute pardon in 1835 to all of the rebels of 1820 who had been transported. Subsequent enquires found nine of the 'Bonnymuir' men working at their trades in Australia, but it would appear that none of them ever returned to Scotland.30
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In 1832 a monument was erected at Thrushgrove in memory of the Scottish rebels and in 1847 the Scottish Chartists erected a second such memorial in Glasgow. Numerous accounts of the rising appeared and the affair enters into many Scottish local histories. Even Keir Hardie could later enhance his radical reputation by claiming that Andrew Hardie was a distant relation of his. Given this deep impact on nineteenth century Scottish society, and even on twentieth century Scottish nationalism, we cannot agree with the contention of the nationalistic interpreters of the rising in Scotland that some preoccupation with English radicalism exists in historical studies.\(^{31}\) In fact it would only be after some searching that a reader would ever come across the names of the Yorkshire rebels of 1820, who were the co-insurgents of the Scottish radicals. Indeed no monument to the memory of those Englishmen transported for their part in the same rising has ever decorated the streets of Barnsley or Huddersfield.

Finally we may summarize our disagreements with the two existing interpretations of the general rising in Scotland. The 'liberal' interpretation of William Roach plays down the popular support for the rising and this conclusion is based on a misunderstanding of the nature of the joint Anglo-Scottish plan for a rebellion. In fact, as we have seen, the rising was called off, so its popular support cannot be determined from an examination of the few minor uprisings that did occur. At the same time we must agree with William Roach that government agents did not instigate the rebellion and this removes one of the main foundations of the 'nationalistic' interpretation. The rising was not a complete failure because the government agents betrayed or confused the radicals, but because the Anglo-Scottish pact broke down when Lancashire and other areas of England failed to rebel. Nor can we agree with the assertion that the rising had as one of its main objectives the secession of Scotland from the Union with England of 1707 in order to achieve national liberation. A reading of the radical literature of England, or Ireland of this period also reveals similar nationalistic expressions. A closer examination of these ideas will show them to be more inter-nationalist or federalist than 'nationalist' (in the narrow sense of that word). Early nineteenth century radicals preached the unity of the three Kingdoms (sometimes symbolized by the Shamrock, the Thistle and the Rose in radical heraldry) and, indeed, around 1800 there were three underground radical sister organizations: the United Irishmen, the United Scotmen and the United Englishmen.

Perhaps this spirit of inter-nationalism is captured in a letter from the Glasgow radicals to those in Lancashire which began: 'Dear Brothers', and concluded: 'We remain yours in Bonds of Union and Liberty'. The communications explained the reasons for the collapse of the Scottish rebellion of 1820:

...we are so much discouraged at our brethren not coming forward in a more tumultuous form that we are at a loss which way to pursue. It was useless for us to persevere unless England would have stepped forward with a helping hand.

Yet, without recriminations, they declared their continued loyalty to the cause:

We consider ourselves as Scotchmen and ready anytime to act upon a plan that would wear any probability of success. Let us hear either by letter or some friend for we have much more to say now than we are willing to communicate in this way....\(^{32}\)

It clearly would be wrong to ignore the contribution of this outward-looking and fraternal inter-nationalism to the General Rising of 1820 or to misinterpret it as a separatist-nationalist manifestation.

Further, the overwhelming evidence of Anglo-Scottish attempts to co-ordinate their respective rebellions in 1820 is completely at odds with the 'nationalist' school's belief that the 'Celtic fringe' has historically engaged in intransigent and bitter struggles against the domination of Anglo-Saxon England.\(^{33}\) An objective view of the general rising of 1820 must point out the similarities of the disaffected areas as relatively advanced and rapidly expanding industrial regions. More than anything else, these economic changes in Lancashire, West Scotland and the West Riding of Yorkshire explain their common involvement in this form of social conflict.

Footnotes

2. Sherry, op. cit., 3, 9, 11-12; Berresford Ellis and Mac A’Ghobhainn, op. cit., 112, 162, 212, 292.
4. P. Mackenzie, An Exposure of the Spy System pursued in Glasgow during the years 1816-17-19 and 20, with copies of the original letters of Andrew Hardie (Glasgow, 1833); The Trial of
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Eighty-eight persons in Scotland at various places on charges of high treason concerning the rising, but thirty-eight did not appear.

18 Two Scottish rebels were sent to New South Wales aboard the convict ship ‘Speke’ in December 1820. (P.R.O.), H.O. 11/3.

20 A broadsheet entitled The Transport’s Return, n.d. suggests otherwise in its description of an exile’s return to Scotland. I am indebted to Dorothy Thompson for this reference.

21 Beresford Ellis and Mac A’Ghobhainn, op. cit., 292 and Sherry, op. cit., 3.


23 Beresford Ellis and Mac A’Ghobhainn, op. cit., 294-99. It is important to note that the authors are not necessarily in sympathy with the views of the present Scottish National Party.