REVIEW


Union historians have long recognized the significance of the church to the debates surrounding the Treaty of Union, but tend to pay only cursory attention to the church itself. Indeed, many historians subscribe to the belief that the church was the most worrisome and most vocal opponent of union. Yet, as Jeffrey Stephen acknowledges in his preface to Scottish Presbyterians and the Act of Union, 1707, ‘the attitude and role of the church and other Presbyterian groups in relation to Anglo-Scottish union has never been the subject of a specific study. Consequently, treatment of the subject by historians, including church historians, has tended to be marked by brevity, generalisations and assumptions’ (p. vi). Stephen’s monograph is an attempt to rectify the situation by examining the role of Presbyterian churchmen in the debates that led to the passage of the union treaty.

Stephen first turns his attention to the political and religious environment leading up to the Treaty of Union. The first chapter is a discussion of the Presbyterian settlement of 1690 and its fallout. Unfortunately, Stephen falls short in providing enough context to understand the post-1690 Kirk and just how important the National Covenant of 1638 and the Solemn League and Covenant of 1643 were to the majority of lay people. He all but ignores the effect of more than 100 years of fighting to protect their Kirk from the bishops of the Anglican Church since the Union of the Crowns in 1603 and the impact that might have on the national, albeit Presbyterian, psyche. In chapter two,
Stephen details the attempts of the Commission of the General Assembly to gain security for the Kirk in the event of union by addressing the Scottish parliament. The third chapter continues along the same lines with a discussion of the commissioners’ behind-the-scenes lobbying of members of parliament.

Stephen next looks at popular protests against and opposition to the union. In chapters four and five, this took the form of parochial and presbytery addresses to the Scottish parliament, as well as mob violence. It is in these chapters that Stephen expands, although minimally, his narrow focus on the nobility and government and church elite. He also discusses the reaction of the Kirk and the government to such protests. Somewhat surprisingly, the Kirk denounced the presbytery addresses as out of line and overstepping the role of the presbyteries. While the government readily blamed ministers for inciting riots and uprisings, Stephen makes the case that the use of the pulpit for anti-union sermons was limited. Most ministers were either pro-union, undecided, or believed it was inappropriate to interfere in civil affairs. The next chapter is an examination of pamphlets pertaining to the union. Stephen details the support for a federal, rather than incorporating, union, but the numerous schemes for federal union were too divisive. The opposition was never able to rally around one scheme and propose it instead of an incorporating union.

The main problem with this work rests with the final chapter. It is a rather disappointing discussion of the 1707 General Assembly, which, despite expectations, managed to avoid debates about the union. The disappointment lies in the fact that Stephen barely mentions the aftermath of union and how the fears of the Kirk came true in a matter of a few short years. Episcopalians were granted toleration, lay patronage was restored, the Scottish clergy was subject to the oath of abjuration, and the Scottish Privy Council was abolished. In essence, nearly all of the issues the Commission was concerned with preventing did, in fact, occur. Stephen spares only a few lines to mention these huge blows
to the security of the Kirk on the very matters for which the commissioners lobbied so diligently.

Regardless of the problems with this monograph, Stephen does advance several new ideas. First, he highlights just how seriously the rest of the Kirk viewed the role of the Commission. The addresses from the three presbyteries of Lanark, Dunblane, and Hamilton were extremely upsetting to many ministers and ruling elders resulting in them overstepping their bounds and infringing on the role of the Commission, which was entrusted to secure the rights of the Kirk. Second, Stephen shows how divided Presbyterians were concerning the union. The opposition was unable to effectively challenge the union treaty for two reasons. The Commission would not ally itself with the parliamentary opposition, nor could the opposition produce an acceptable alternative to the incorporating union. Finally, and most importantly, Stephen rejects the notion that the Kirk was ‘the bulwark of opposition, that it was the most formidable opponent of the project’ (p. 232). Instead, Stephen asserts that the role of the Commission ‘was not to protest against union or support it … Its role was to act in the interests of the church and to secure those interests in the events of a union’ (p. 233). Stephen may not have totally succeeded in his goal of filling a gaping hole in union historiography, but he has made a great deal of progress.

Jodi Campbell
University of Guelph