Introduction to 1996 Edition

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Scotland in the Age of Improvement was published in 1970 at what turns out to have been an interesting historiographical moment. Historians' views of the history of modern Scotland always have been, and always will be, shaped by their attitudes to the Union. William Ferguson and P. W. J. Riley had already developed a formidable account of the Union as a job, engineered by the exasperated and apprehensive ministers of William III and Anne, working hand in glove with a venal unprincipled and unpatriotic nobility (a view of the Union which was shared by Andrew Fletcher of Saltoun). At the same time, T. C. Smout, whose sight-lines were fixed by the activities of the merchants and lairds, had more or less completed his portrait of post-Union Scotland as a country in which economic, social and cultural leadership was provided by a practically-minded, principled, patriot class which was largely drawn from the so-called middling-ranks of Scottish society. These two apparently contrasting lines of thought generated a characteristically acrimonious debate about the origins and significance of the Union which is now best forgotten. They also focused attention on the fact that the existing, arid historiography of post-Union Scotland, with its obsessions with Jacobitism and 'Anglicisation', had overlooked the central fact that while the Union had dismantled the Scottish state, it neither intended nor succeeded in dismantling civil society. The Union not only left Scotland with its kirk, legal system and educational system; it was left with its own electoral system, its own system of local government, its own banking system and its own system of public finance. We knew of several scholars who were sensitive to these developments. We hoped that this book would open up the history of civil society in post-Union Scotland. Perhaps most of all, we hoped that it would throw a little light on the most fascinating problem of all: why the Union should have succeeded when so many similar experiments in early-modern Europe had failed.

As things turned out, we were outstandingly lucky in the timing of this book. Quite apart from the debate about the Union, the time was ripe in the profession for a book of this sort. The late 1960s,

when these essays were written, were years of optimism and expansion in the universities. Enlarged academic recruitment brought in new people and weakened departmental segregation; funding by the research councils and the British Academy made possible new types of research and released more manpower. New people and new projects affected the historiography of the small country, Scotland, disproportionately. Political, economic, social and cultural historians were thinking hard about the relevance of the social sciences to their disciplines. There was, for a while, a relative shortage of journals for the publication of new work and there was plenty of good work looking for alternative printed outlets.

These essays catch some of the themes on which significant work on Scottish history was being done in the 1960s and 1970s, notably on the workings of the political system, the kirk, the educational system, the law and the highlands, and they opened up wider questions about the ideological significance of the Union for the upper classes in the second half of the century. In two important cases, the essays written here directly encouraged research of the first importance. John Simpson's 'Who Steered the Gravy Train, 1707–1766?' posed questions and suggested possibilities which Alexander Murdoch pursued at length in his seminal *The People Above: Politics and Administration in Mid-Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (Edinburgh 1980). This was the first major study of the political management of Scotland after the Union and it paid particular attention to the question of how far that management lay under the control of Scottish or English ministers. Ian Clark's 'From Protest to Reaction: The Moderate Regime in the Church of Scotland, 1752–1805' likewise prepared the ground for Richard Sher's equally important work on the much-maligned moderate party, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment; the Moderate Literati of Edinburgh* (Princeton and Edinburgh 1985). Here Sher was able to show how the kirk responded to the challenges of the Union, the Enlightenment and to the campaign for the regeneration of Scotland which lay at the heart of eighteenth-century patriotism.

There are various important themes which these essays do not touch, notably the demographic history of Scotland which was being developed by the late Michael Flinn, Rosalind Mitchison and T. C. Smout; and, equally strikingly, large-scale work on the cultural and intellectual history of the Scottish Enlightenment – a project which has attracted and continues to attract an extraordinarily wide interest from scholars in America, Canada, Japan and continental Europe. Equally significant, we did not invite discussion of the tobacco trade and its significance for the economic development of

Scotland nor were we responsive to the first signs of a serious interest in women's history. And there are other omissions too.

For all that we felt in 1970, and we feel now, that this collection of essays did play a small part in sensitising a wider historical public to the problems and intellectual possibilities that this new and relatively unexplored territory offered modern historians. And it does, perhaps, suggest that collections of exploratory essays are not a bad way of opening up new fields of research.

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