The Scots' Response to the American Revolution: A North British Vision of Empire, Constitution, and Representation

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As Linda Colley argued persuasively in *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (1992), Britishness was invented in the eighteenth century and has since been superimposed on preexisting identities without either replacing or merging with them. Yet eighteenth-century Scottish elites eagerly engaged in Anglicization while preserving many aspects of their distinctiveness. The contours of the resulting "North British" identity have been defined by Colin Kidd ("North Britishness and the Nature of Eighteenth-Century British Patriotisms," *Historical Journal* 39.2, 1996). Being British was commonly understood throughout the British Empire as enjoying the "English liberties" enshrined in the constitution and protected by the Hanoverian dynasty. Bernard Bailyn, Jack Greene, Pauline Maier, Eliga Gould, and a number of other historians have pointed out that the Thirteen Colonies initially resisted attempts at centralization by Britain in the name of these liberties. Being British also meant taking part in a shared transatlantic culture, as Ned Landsman has shown in *From Colonials to Provincials: American Thought and Culture, 1680–1760* (1997), as well as Brendan McConville in *The King's Three Faces: The Rise and Fall of Royal America, 1688–1776* (2012).

My work explores the notions of Britishness that the Scots and the colonists forged in the context of the imperial crisis, from the enactment of the Stamp Act in 1765 to the Treaty of Paris in 1783. It contends that two distinct, even competing, conceptions of Britishness were shaped by the Scots and the Americans through processes of identification with England and differentiation with one another. The American Revolution was undoubtedly the catalyst for the emergence of an American identity. Yet before rejecting Britishness, the American Patriots first built up a hybrid identity combining Britishness with Americanness; until the mid-1770s they claimed that they could remain part of the empire while benefiting from the large amount of autonomy that their colonial assemblies had acquired since the late seventeenth century. They asserted their Britishness through differentiation with the French, as all Britons then did, as well as with the Scots. In 1967 Bernard Bailyn briefly mentioned in *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* that a version of the conspiracy theory that pervaded the colonies involved former Prime Minister Lord Bute, a Scot accused of secretly manipulating George III and the government against America (pp. 147–48). The question of what Scotland embodied for American revolutionaries has not drawn much attention since then, possibly because Scotland was hardly ever mentioned in American revolutionary literature. It was, however, discussed in the colonial press. Newspapers throughout the Thirteen Colonies, particularly in Virginia, disseminated an image of Scotland as inherently Jacobite and supportive of tyranny and Roman Catholicism. They reveal a different political culture from that of the pamphlets and display a discourse based on disinformation, fantasy, and fear that originated in the English Scottophobic Grub Street rhetoric of John Wilkes and Charles Churchill. The belief in a "Scottish plot" against America waged by Bute, Scottish ministers, and the Scottish nation was in turn appropriated by Americans such as Rev. Ezra Stiles, whose diary entry for 23 July 1777 states: "Let us boldly say, for History will say it, that the whole of this War is so far chargeable to the Scotch Councils, & to the Scotch as a Nation (for they have nationally come into it) as that had it not been for them, this Quarrel had never happened. Or at least they have gloried in the Honor of exciting & conduct[ing] these Measures avowedly by their Earl of Bute behind the Curtain." Scotland was not just considered an enemy to the American Patriots' cause. It was also the antithesis of the Britishness that the Americans identified with through binary oppositions such as Hanover/Stuart, liberty/tyranny, and Protestantism/Catholicism.

Conversely, the Scots considered themselves the opposite of the American rebels and predominantly opposed the American Revolution. The perceptions of the American Revolution in Scottish public opinion were explored by Dalphy Fagerstrom in 1954 ("Scottish Opinion and the American Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 11.2) and D. B. Swinfen in 1977 ("The American Revolution in the Scottish Press," in *Scotland, Europe, and the American Revolution*, ed. Owen Dudley Edwards and George Shepperson). My approach is based on a more extensive study of the Scottish pamphlet literature in order to investigate the various reasons why the Scots stood against the Americans. At least sixty-six works on America were published either by a Scot or anonymously in Scotland between 1768 and 1784, with a peak of forty-two between 1776 and 1779. Thirty-six authors produced one, two, sometimes three pamphlets, sermons, or books discussing the conflict with the colonies. A number of them took part in the Scottish Enlightenment, including prominent figures such as Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson and less familiar ones such as William Barron. About half these authors published on a variety of other topics, including religion, history, husbandry, poetry, economic improvement, and literature. They were educated professionals who worked as teachers, lawyers, or clergymen. With the exception of a few officers of the Crown and the loyalists George Chalmers and John McAlpine, none had ever been to America. Some, like George Johnstone, Alexander Wedderburn, and Lord Mansfield, were pursuing careers as politicians, judges, or civil servants in London. Ministers

in the Church of Scotland account for almost half these authors, dominated by Moderate Party clergymen such as Alexander Carlyle, George Campbell, Adam Ferguson, Alexander Gerard, and Thomas Somerville. A majority of these Scottish authors argued that the Americans were wrong in declaring themselves independent. They believed them to be manipulated by a faction of ungrateful American politicians apt to endanger the empire and the wellbeing of all its inhabitants for the sake of their personal ambitions. Some expected Britain to bring the rebels back to their senses by force, others believed that the colonists could be convinced by sound reasoning. The Johnstone brothers, who both sat in Parliament in the 1770s, first appeared as "friends of America" when they advocated the right of the colonists to tax themselves and condemned the Coercive Acts of 1774. George, known as Governor Johnstone, reversed his opinion after the creation of the United States and its alliance with Britain's rival, France. In some of the most thoughtful and articulate pamphlets on the topic, his brother Sir William Pulteney recounted the growing tensions between Britain and its colonies and proposed a peace negotiation in 1779 based on the granting of fiscal and legislative autonomy to the colonies, assuming independence could still be reversed. John Erskine and William Thom in the Popular Party disapproved of the war but did not support the Declaration of Independence. All told, only two Scots openly endorsed American resistance to Britain's policy throughout the Revolution. George Dempster, politician and agricultural improver, expressed his staunch belief that the American Patriots were in the right, even after they seceded from the empire. James Murray, a Presbyterian minister at Newcastle upon Tyne, kept defending the American Patriots in sermons and in *An Impartial History of the Present War in America* (1778).

The Scots did not actually engage in a direct debate with the American pamphleteers, whom they hardly ever quoted or mentioned. Rather, they tried to refute Richard Price's *Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty* (1776) and other British pamphlets. Thus, they addressed the American controversy as Britons speaking to other Britons, in an attempt to convince them that the American rebellion was unconstitutional and that the empire had to be preserved. The American controversy provided Scottish elites with an opportunity to display their British patriotism. They professed their commitment to the constitution and the principle of parliamentary sovereignty as well as their Hanoverian loyalty. The Americans were accused of being far worse rebels than the Scottish Jacobites in 1745 because they threatened not only the dynasty but also the constitution and "English liberties." The natural rights that the Declaration of Independence cited were considered "an inalienable right to talk nonsense," according to the comments inserted in the text of the Declaration in the *Scots Magazine* of August 1776. The colonists' grievances and claims were seen as a ploy that could not disguise the real motive of Congress: a quest for power. The American republic that pretended to ensure the liberties of its citizens challenged the belief in the perfection of the British constitution which, most Scots believed, remained the only real source of liberty. The Scottish approach to the issue of the American Revolution combined a commitment to Britishness with a desire to promote the interests of the Scottish nation. Sir John Dalrymple and Alexander Carlyle called for the right to establish a Scots militia and to expand recruitment of Highlanders in the army. Robert Alves, Charles Nisbet, and John Stevenson glorified the part played by the Scots, especially the Highlanders, in the patriotic war against the rebels. British patriotism mixed with Scottish patriotism, as in Stevenson's description of the Highlanders in his *Letters in Answer to Dr. Price's Two Pamphlets on Civil Liberty* (1778): "they fought, they bled, and they conquered as Britons" (p. 149).

As Emma Macleod has shown in *British Visions of America, 1775–1820* (2013), American independence met with dismay and disbelief in Britain. Consequently, most of the Scots who published their reaction to the American Revolution from 1776 onward discussed matters that had been settled before 1776 in the eyes of the American Patriots. To the American claim for "no taxation without representation," the Scots answered that not only could the colonists be rightfully taxed by Parliament but also that they were not entitled to reject its authority since they were represented virtually. The empire was described as a community in which each part had to contribute to the defense of the whole through taxation in order to maintain its dominance. Scottish pamphleteers articulated the vision of a centralized empire, united by a unique fiscal system and transatlantic commerce. Adam Smith even suggested in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) that the colonists should be given the right to elect their own representatives in Parliament, an idea that did not generate much enthusiasm in Great Britain, much less in America. Even though they were not in favor of an imperial Parliament, those who discussed the imperial crisis generally assumed that the empire should somehow be reorganized on the model of the Union.

The concept of representation exemplifies the discrepancy between Scottish and American visions of empire and constitution. The colonists believed they were not represented in the Westminster Parliament because their understanding of representation was based on their political experience within the colonies. Their assemblies were regarded by the American Whigs as the only bodies that represented them. These political bodies had grown into the main institutions in colonial America by enlarging their prerogatives at the expense of governors and councils. Not only were they geographically close, whereas the Westminster Parliament was more than three thousand miles away, but they defended the interests of their constituents. Bernard Bailyn has argued that the American concept of representation drew on the English medieval notion of representation seen as a form of attorneyship, in which the

electors delegated power to the elected. The representatives in the colonial assemblies were accountable to their voters, whose interests they defended, sometimes even receiving instructions from them (*Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, p. 164). It was a general rule that candidates had to live in the county, parish, or precinct where they were running for an election. In Virginia, they had at least to possess land in the county as it was the case for George Washington in 1758 when he was elected to the Virginia House of Burgesses in Frederick County even though he lived in the neighboring county of Fairfax (see Richard R. Beeman, *The Varieties of Political Experience in Eighteenth-Century America*, 2004, p. 39). An average of 75 percent of the white adult male population having access to vote, the colonial assemblies had a direct connection with a large part of the community, even though many voters did not care to exert their right. Representation was also conceived on the local scale in eighteenth-century America because the colonists identified first and foremost with their colony. From the failure of Benjamin Franklin's Albany Plan in 1754, the building of a collective American identity and the unification of all colonies was a long, arduous process. It is the conflict with Britain that actually stimulated the creation of the Stamp Act Congress in New York in 1765 and the Continental Congress from 1774. In the American vision of empire, sovereignty was shared, and each colony acted as a state within a confederation under the sole authority of the Crown. There was the historical precedent of Scotland and England between 1603 and 1707, Benjamin Franklin argued in 1768 in a letter to his son William and in the press (*The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, vol. 15, ed. William B. Willcox, 1972, pp. 74–78; A Briton, "Arguments Pro and Con: I," *London Chronicle*, 18–20 October 1768; *Boston Evening-Post*, 11 April 1774, p. 1). Why should America be ruled by the Westminster Parliament, asked John Adams, when Scotland was not at the time of the union of the crowns: "So the Scots held their lands of him who was then king of England, his heirs and successors, and were bound to allegiance to him, his heirs and successors, but it did not follow from thence that the Scots were subject to the English parliament" (Novanglus, "XII. To the Inhabitants of the Colony of Massachusetts-Bay, 17 April 1775," *Novanglus, and Massachusettensis, or, Political Essays: Published in the Years 1774 and 1775, on the Principal Points of Controversy, between Great Britain and Her Colonies*, 1819, pp. 133–39).

Contrary to the Americans, most eighteenth-century Scots regarded the incorporating union as an improvement compared to the time when they had their own Parliament**.** They conceptualized a notion of representation on the scale of Britain which was not based on the electoral process. In Britain the voting population was much more limited than in America, even more so in Scotland where there were fewer than three thousand electors for a population of one million people. The unequal distribution of the franchise between men and between burghs and counties was not considered an issue, for it was understood that MPs were not accountable to their electors since, once elected, they became "representatives of the state at large; not only their own constituents, but every individual member of the community" (*Free Thoughts on the American Contest*, 1776, p. 22). They defended the interests of the whole nation when voting on laws and taxes that everyone was subjected to, including themselves. Representatives were in any case increasingly less connected to the constituency that elected them in eighteenth-century Britain since many did not live there; some 60 Scots even sat for an English or a Welsh constituency between 1760 and 1790, 130 between 1790 and 1820. The Scots thus felt as much under the protection of Parliament against oppression and unfair taxation as any part of England or Wales, even though they elected only 45 MPs out of 558 in the House of Commons. They were committed to centralization, believing the empire needed a single head to keep all its parts together, and their attitude toward authority was the opposite of American distrust of central power (see Jack P. Greene, *Peripheries and Center: Constitutional Development in the Extended Polities of the British Empire and the United States, 1678–1788*, 1986; Ned C. Landsman, "British Union and American Revolution: Imperial Authority and the Multinational State," in *The American Revolution Reborn*, ed. Patrick Spero and Michael Zuckerman, 2016; Paul Tonks, "Rethinking the Eighteenth Century Province and Periphery: A Historiographical Reflection on Scotland, Scottish Thought, and the Government of the British Atlantic Empire," *Korean Journal of British Studies*, no. 22, Dec. 2009).

Scottish elites believed their interests were better protected in the Westminster Parliament, which provided a stronger counterweight to the Crown's prerogative than they had enjoyed in their pre-Union unicameral Parliament or in local institutions such as town councils. They adopted the notion that virtual representation included the colonists, as George Grenville's government maintained. James Macpherson, who was pensioned by the government, argued in *The Rights of Great Britain Asserted against the Claims of America: Being an Answer To the Declaration of the General Congress* (1776) that, like the Americans, most British subjects did not vote, and he concluded: "the truth is, Representation never accompanied Taxation in any State" (p. 4). In his *Letters in Answer to Dr. Price's Two Pamphlets on Civil Liberty*, John Stevenson added that the members of the House of Commons "represent actually and virtually, not only all the inhabitants of this island, but also every individual throughout the colonies" (p. 24). Liberty was not seen as contingent upon the franchise by most Scottish pamphleteers, who contended that Britons were free because they had a Parliament that checked the Crown's power, no matter how it was elected.

Harry T. Dickinson observed in *Liberty and Property: Political Ideology in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (1977) that a movement for electoral reform swept through England from the 1770s, partly under the influence of American revolutionary ideas (pp. 217–18). Since they considered the British system of representation as nearly perfect, the Scots who wrote about the American controversy did not support that movement, with the exception of James Burgh, a member of the radical society of London. Burgh's 1500-page work *Political Disquisitions* (1774–75) called for reform that would correct the many flaws and inequalities in the electoral system and reduce the influence of the aristocracy, for example by putting an end to government intrusion in elections and establishing a more equitable electoral franchise at all levels of society. He believed that most people who paid indirect taxes on malt, soap, and other necessities were not represented in Parliament since they could not vote. These radical views were hardly supported in Scotland. The burgh reform movement had connections with the Society for Constitutional Information and Chistopher Wyvill's Yorkshire Association, but it followed a different path. Its appeal for an enlargement of the ruling elite in Scottish burghs stemmed not from a hope to reform the constitution but from a wish to modernize local institutions, which were seen as archaic compared to those in England.

The Scottish reception of the American Revolution was generally unsympathetic, as the Americans correctly perceived, but it was not rooted in Jacobitism, as the Americans believed. On the contrary, the Scots rejected Whig American thought because it questioned the British conception of liberty and empire that they endorsed. The American notions of natural rights, direct representation, and shared sovereignty within the empire induced the Scots to assert their commitment to the principle of parliamentary sovereignty over the empire, the belief in the perfection of the constitution, and loyalty to the Hanoverian dynasty, which were the fundamentals of the emerging British identity. The imperial crisis arguably weakened the empire but was also a catalyst for Britishness, which was built not merely in opposition to a French "Other" but also in opposition to an American one.

This article is based on Florence Petroff's doctoral thesis, "Le Miroir atlantique. L'Ecosse et l'Amérique dans la crise impériale: regards croisés et identités hybrides au sein du monde britannique (1765–1783)"/"Scotland and America in the Imperial Crisis: Mutual Perceptions and Hybrid Identities within the Anglo-American World (1765–1783)," for which she was awarded a PhD in history from the University of Paris 8 in 2020. She is planning to publish her thesis in French and a few articles in English. Florence's research interests focus on cultural studies, especially the circulation of political thought, opinions, and representations within the British Atlantic world. She would welcome any comments or be happy to engage in a discussion of those topics (florence.petroff@gmail.com).