Comment: *Queensberry House*

Queensberry House, begun in 1681 and complete by 1686, is still there, at the Holyrood end of Edinburgh's Canongate. Raised by a storey in 1808 when it was sold to the Board of Ordnance, the first Duke of Queensberry's 'great mansion' is now understandably too barracks-like an edifice to catch the sightseer's eye. In 1832 it became a People's Refuge and has latterly been a nursing home. While the surrounding buildings are being razed to the ground, Queensberry House alone will survive to be incorporated in the exotic glass-walled scheme, modelled on upturned boats, designed by the Catalan architect Enric Miralles, which will eventually house the newly elected Scottish parliament in Edinburgh.

Rather ironically, really. It was the Edinburgh home of James Douglas, second Duke of Queensberry—'the Union Duke'—who was mainly instrumental, by his management skills, in securing a majority in the Scottish parliament in 1707 for incorporating union with the English parliament.

Even rather macabrely. The day the final vote was taken the Duke's household went up the hill to join the crowd, waiting to hear the result, in Parliament Close. A young boy was left in the kitchen, watching a spit, on his own in the house but for the Earl of Drumlanrig, the Duke's insane son and heir. Normally confined and guarded, he broke out of his cell, killed the boy, spitted and roasted the body, and was found eating the flesh when tne Duke and the others returned. 'This horrid act of his child was, according to the common sort of people, the judgment of God upon him for his wicked concern in the Union'—so Robert Chambers says, in his *Traditions of Edinburgh* , adding, however, from the British imperial perspective of 1825, that the Union of Parliaments was actually 'the greatest blessing, as it happened, that ever was conferred upon Scotland by any statesman'.

The Duke died in 1711, aged forty nine, rewarded by Queen Anne with a second (English) dukedom and a handsome pension. The 'cannibalistic idiot', as people called him, was moved to his mother's family in Yorkshire where he died a few years later at the age of seventeen. In 1707, when he roasted the scullion boy, he was barely ten years old: a detail that Chambers does not record and which makes one wonder whether the grisly story may not have grown in the telling.

The vote was 110 in favour and 67 against, after lengthy debate. There were about four thousand electors at the time, in a population of about one million. Had there been a referendum, as contemporary sources show, it would have been overwhelmingly defeated. Indeed, troops were drafted into Edinburgh to support the town guard, such were the fears of civil unrest. Other parts of the country were even more disaffected, little

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enough as most people knew of what was going on. Among the educated and informed classes, however, many Church of Scotland ministers called on their congregations to petition for a federal union, rather than the incorporating one on which the English insisted. After all, it was only fifteen years since Episcopalians had finally been driven out of the Church of Scotland, as part of the deal to have the Dutch Calvinist William of Orange and his wife Mary installed on the throne instead of her Catholic father. Fears that the union would result in attempts by a predominantly English and therefore Anglican parliament to restore episcopacy were allayed only by the passing of the Act of Security, providing for continuance of the Church of Scotland under its Presbyterian government.

The union in 1707 of the Scottish and English parliaments is one of the most documented instances of how a major constitutional change is achievable, against the will of the vast majority of the people, by what at the time was called 'management'. Even within the tiny minority who took the decision, as the extensive contemporary archives record, a great deal of arm-twisting and something very like bribery were required. Even then, if the fourth Duke of Hamilton, also named James Douglas, had proved a more effective leader of the anti-Unionists, the result might easily have been federal rather than incorporating union, in whatever form the lawyers would have worked out. At a crucial moment, when the anti-Unionists were about to state their case, he called off on the plea of toothache, though no doubt in reality intimidated by veiled threats of a treason charge deriving from his anti-Hanoverian sentiments. He had to be frog-marched into Parliament House by his colleagues but then refused to play his part. On one theory, of course, the union of the parliaments was the next natural step in the march of historical progress: that is what schoolchildren in Scotland have been taught for a century. It went through the London parliament very easily, since it secured the northern frontier against independent Scottish political and military action—or seemed to do so. As it happened, it would not be until 1746, at Culloden, that the British government, with the support of most of the gentry, merchants, lawyers and Presbyterian ministers in Scotland, finally achieved the purpose of the Union. On the face of it, however, if a few dozen men,and particularly the ducal cousins of Queensberry and of Hamilton, had been somewhat different characters, with somewhat different interests and imagined prospects, there would have been a rather different outcome. Now that the people's representatives, on a considerably wider franchise, have voted to bring a measure of self-government back to Scotland, Queensberry House will, in due course, focus a new stage in Scottish and British history, however oblivious of its colourful past its new occupiers are likely to be.

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