



Education Leaflet 4

THE ACT OF UNION



The Act of Union between Great Britain and Ireland came into effect on the 1 January, 1801. By this Act, Ireland joined with the rest of the British Isles to form The United Kingdom of England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland.

History

Between 1295 and 1800 the kingdom of Ireland had its own separate Parliament. In 1798, at the height of the rebellion of that year, the British cabinet decided that this Parliament should be extinguished, and that Ireland should send representatives to a United Parliament at Westminster. The idea of a Union, however, was far older than this, and had, in fact, briefly been implemented by Cromwell. In the early 18th century it was once again mooted, due to the legislative Union between England and Scotland in 1707. At this stage, Union with Britain would almost certainly have been acceptable to Ireland but, during the last third of the 18th century, Irish people acquired a new sense of self-consciousness and national pride. Union was no longer acceptable and the Irish Parliament disassociated itself with the British Parliament. Union was no longer a popular ideology.

From Britain's point of view, the new constitutional settlement of 1782, by which the Irish Parliament had secured its independence of British control, left the connection between the two kingdoms dangerously vague and imprecise. In 1785 Britain made an attempt to make the connection tighter and better defined, but the attempt failed amid much bitterness on both sides of the Irish sea. When, in 1788, King George III went mad, it became necessary to appoint a Regent to rule the two kingdoms while his insanity lasted. Both the British and the Irish Parliaments named the Prince of Wales as Regent, but the Irish Parliament made the appointment on different terms from the British. Although the King quickly recovered, the episode served to increase the desire of British politicians to draw the two kingdoms more closely together, if necessary by a Union.

The defect of the Irish Parliament in British eyes was not that its loyalty to Britain was suspect. It was, on the contrary, almost extravagantly loyal. The problem was, first of all, that it was corrupt even by the standards of the contemporary British Parliament, and secondly, that it

was strongly and bitterly opposed to all concessions to the Irish Roman Catholics, even though they composed the overwhelming majority of the population of Ireland. While some concessions had been made to the Irish Catholics in 1792 and 1793, these were reluctant concessions, extorted from the Irish Parliament by heavy pressure from the British cabinet. Then came the '98 Rebellion, that showed how deep the rift between Irish Protestants and Irish Catholics ran. Britain, engaged in a bitter struggle with Revolutionary France, could no longer allow the disaffection of the Irish Catholics to provide an opportunity for France to invade Ireland. Yet the Irish Parliament, and the class it represented, had shown itself to be in favour of violently repressive measures that only served to increase that disaffection. In the view of the British cabinet there was a much better chance that the Protestant and the Catholic sections of Ireland would become one if the Irish Parliament was wiped out and the representation of Ireland transferred to Westminster.

In these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that, when Union was first debated by the Irish House of Commons on the 22 January 1799, the government found itself with a majority of only one, and two days later was defeated outright by five votes. Even such a small opposition majority in the normally subservient Irish Parliament spoke volumes for the opposition to the measure at this stage. Between the early summer of 1799 and the beginning of 1800, when Parliament was in recess, the Irish government, in close conjunction with the British cabinet, busied itself in making the terms of the Union more palatable to the various interests that stood to lose by the extinction of the Irish Parliament. In this they were greatly assisted by the fact that many of its members had been so frightened by the events of the '98 Rebellion that they automatically turned to Britain as their only protection against forfeiture and massacre, and were prepared to swallow anything the British government thought was for their good. Once it became clear that the British government would keep introducing a bill of Union into the Irish Parliament until eventually it was passed, people like these automatically swung over to support the measure. From the beginning of the 1800 session, therefore, the Irish government had a comfortable majority for the Union - a majority that increased as the session wore on. The Act of Union passed on 1 August 1800, and the Union became effective on 1 January 1801.

Sources

PRONI is rich in manuscript material on the Union. Of particular interest are the following archives:

An entirely new Change of Amusements, with several new Performers.

At the ROYAL CIRCUS,
Near College-Green.

FOR THE BENEFIT OF
The Great Mrs. Britain.

On MONDAY, FEBRUARY 3d,
Will be performed a grand Serio-Comic PASTICCHIO,
CALLED, THE
RAPE of IERNE;
OR,
Fidelity Betrayed.

TARQUINUS BRUTUS, Mr. Bull, (from the
Booth Theatre)
FILIPUS PALINUS, Mr. Rappell,
DOUBTFACE, Mr. Jones,
FIRST KAPTAN, Mr. Robinson,
SECOND RUFFIAN, Mr. Graydon,
BENGLADO, Mr. Conventina

KNOWING NED, Mr. Cobden,
TRIMMER, Mr. Spence, (from the City)
BRONZE, Mr. Bole,
PELLEAS, Mr. Conventina,
ALIBON, Mr. Brown, and
IERNE, Mr. Brown

AFTER THE PASTICCHIO,
Grand Trials of Strength, with Mr. Rappell's new Trampoline Troup
of Fugal Performers, Melin, THE DEVIL KNOWS WHO, from the
Provincial Theatres, THE DEVIL KNOWS WHERE.

Immediately after which, a farcical Exhibition of the celebrated
Dr. Touch's astonishing Experiments with the Metallic Traitors.

SECOND COURSE.

A grand Display of Lofty Tumbling,
Followed by a grand Sweepstakes Race for Coronets, Ribbons, and Rouleaus,
By Mr. BEYCASTLE's trained Squad of JACK ASSES,
To be rode by English Riders, and which, among other Parts, will see *Whifled, over a
Troop, and flip to my Case at the Wheel of Command, in a most farcical Manner.*

After the Race, a new Interlude, called,
The SCRAMBLE;
OR,
Every One for Himself.

With an occasional Prologue, written by Commodore PACKWOOD, called,
"Blood and Quack! Hur! Hur! Hur! Hur among Thieves!"

TICKLE PALM, Mr. Rappell,
PANDER, Mr. Spence,
SINEUR, Mr. Conventina,
MACHAVEL, Mr. Cobden,
TERGIVERSE, Mr. Brown

INDIATE, Mr. Conventina,
SHITTEL, Mr. Jones,
HEADTHRESHIN, (with a Song) Mr. Rappell,
MR. HOPLEY, by Mrs. Bull, (being her self
Appearance in that Character.)

After which, a Politico-Dramatic 'JEU D'ESPRIT, called,
High Bidding;
OR,
HONOURS FOR RAPS.

In which will be displayed a perspective View of the HOSORIC FOUNTAIN, with a
Transmutation of Panders and Pleasers into Piers.

In the Course of the Performance will be introduced Mr. Conventina's favourite Concerto on the
UNION PIPES,
Mr. Vandrick's admired Solo on the
HURDY GURDY;
The GRINDERS,
A very popular Quintetto, by Mr. Rappell, Mr. Brown, Mr. Phoskit, Mr. Gracius, (being
his second Appearance,) and Mr. Conventina, (being his 3rd Appearance these two Years.)

A very favourite Song,
"By your Leave, Larry Grogan,"
By Mr. Jones,
AND THE HEAVENLY AIR OF
WHILL-IL-LHU, by Signora Grana Weal,
From the GREEN ISLAND THEATRE.

To conclude with a grand Display of the new
Political Steam-Engine;
OR,
Civilising Machine,
For Britanizing the wild Irish.

After which, there will be
A harsh Concert of Woeful and Detrimental Music,
TICKETS to be had of Mr. Conventina's Office, at the round Gate's Shop, in the Fishers, near College-Green,
"Vive la Bagatelle."
[5, College-Green.]

D3030 – Castlereagh Papers comprise c.7,500 documents relating to the career of Robert Stewart Viscount Castlereagh. Lord Castlereagh held the post of Chief Secretary for Ireland from 1798 to 1801 and was thus largely responsible for the passage of the Union legislation through the Irish Parliament.

The two major events of the time, the 1798 Rebellion and the passing of the Act of Union dominate the papers relating to Castlereagh's Chief Secretaryship. The former include letters and reports about the military campaign, about the trial of rebels, about information received from government informers and agents abroad, and about the landing and movements of the French invasion force and the steps taken to resist it.

The papers which relate to the Union include material on the defeat of the measure on its first introduction in the Irish House of Commons in 1799, on Irish trade, on the linen, cotton and distilling industries, parliamentary representation, the representative peerage, the strength of the leading borough proprietors, and the negotiations with the more influential opponents of the measure to persuade them to change their minds.

The correspondence of the period also covers the issue of Catholic Emancipation.

Castlereagh's correspondents during his term as Chief Secretary include: William Pitt, the British Prime Minister; the Duke of Portland, Home Secretary; Lords Camden and Cornwallis, successive Lords Lieutenant of Ireland; Lord Clare, Lord Chancellor of Ireland; John Foster, Speaker of the Irish House of Commons; Edward Cooke, Under Secretary; John Thomas Troy, Roman Catholic Archbishop of Dublin; and Rev. Robert Black, a representative of the Presbyterian Synod of Ulster.

D1606 – Gosford Papers comprise c.40,000 documents in total. However, within this large estate collection is a significant cache of correspondence of Viscount Gosford relating to the late 1790s and the passage of the Act of Union and its aftermath. Lord Gosford supported Union but did not succeed in persuading his son and heir, then one of

the MPs for Co. Armagh, to follow his example. His letters include references to disturbances in Co. Armagh in 1796 between the 'Orange Boys' and 'the lower order of the Catholics', and give a graphic account of a parade of 1,500 Orangemen at Markethill, Co. Armagh. The correspondents include: 1st Marquess Cornwallis, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland.

See D1606/1/1/199, 203, 205-6, 208, 220, 215, 225-6, 228, 229.



D642 – Hill of Brook Hall, Co. Londonderry Papers comprise c.3000 documents. The correspondence of Sir George Hill, Bt., MP for the City of Londonderry (1795-1801; 1802-1830) contains many letters relating to the Irish Act of Union. Hill held the lucrative sinecure of Clerk of the Irish Parliament from 1798-1801 and received a pension of £2,265 in compensation for its abolition. The collection includes: letters from Lord Castlereagh, Irish Chief Secretary, Edward Cooke, under-secretary at Dublin Castle, and Alexander Knox, private secretary to Lord Castlereagh on the topics of the 1798 rebellion, the Union and Catholic Emancipation.

D207 – Foster/Massereene Papers comprise 4,700 documents. They mainly relate to John Foster, Speaker of the Irish House of Commons from 1785 to 1800. Although Foster was the leading opponent to the Union, only a small number of documents, c.50 relate directly to the Union.

D591 – Drennan Papers comprise c.1,400 letters. It is a unique collection containing the letters exchanged between William Drennan, a doctor in Newry and Dublin, and his sister, Martha McTier in Belfast, discussing every aspect of their lives. Drennan campaigned for political reform and Catholic Emancipation. He was a founder of the United Irishmen. Martha shared his political convictions and their letters provide a first-hand account of the events that led up to the 1798 rebellion and, its aftermath, especially the Act of Union.

Drennan wrote two pamphlets opposing the Act of Union and his letters detail the growth of Belfast, and the decline of post-union Dublin. The correspondence provides a vivid picture of the Union period.

See also:

Colclough family of Tintern Abbey (T3048/C)

John Foster (D207)

D572/13/55

Pelham papers (T755)

The Marquess of Downshire (D654)

Volumes of speeches and debates in the Irish House of Commons can be found under T3326. Petitions opposing the introduction of the Act of Union are referenced D207/10, and a Belfast petition on the same lines in T533/6.

Printed material on the Union is also abundant. The best narrative account of events, particularly of events inside the Irish Parliament, is that given by Lecky in his *History of Ireland in the Eighteenth Century*. The classic study, *The Passing of the Irish Act of Union* by G.C. Bolton (Oxford, 1966), has shown the necessity for modifying some of Lecky's conclusions. The most recent scholarly publication is Patrick M. Geoghegan's *The Irish Act of Union*. Useful adjuncts to these works are the published editions of the papers of several politicians who played a leading part in the Union crisis. Of these, probably the most important is the papers of Lord Castlereagh, published in eight volumes in 1849 under the title, *Memoirs and Correspondence of Viscount Castlereagh*. Lord Castlereagh's Union papers are also drawn on extensively by H. Montgomery Hyde in *The Rise of Castlereagh* (London, 1933).

Newspaper sources can be found under D2451/2 and T2344/1-2.

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