

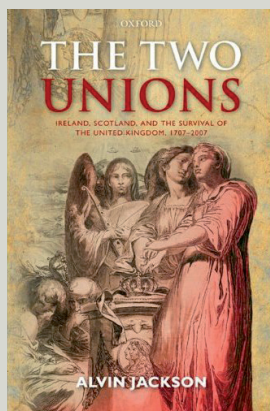


Book Reviews

The Two Unions: Ireland, Scotland, and the Survival of the United Kingdom, 1707-2007

(Alvin Jackson)

Publisher: Oxford University Press. £35 (hardback)



In the surviving remnant of Ireland's union with Great Britain (created in 1801 under legislation that has never been repealed), the strongest opponents of its constitutional position are now partners in its government. Yet ironically Northern Ireland's early amalgamation with the Republic of Ireland, so widely predicted when terrorism was at its height, has almost ceased to be the subject of serious speculation. But in Scotland the 305-year-old union hangs in the balance, awaiting the outcome of a referendum, something which no more than a few years ago would have been regarded as utterly unthinkable.

There could be no better moment to produce the first detailed scholarly history of the two unions. Its author, Alvin Jackson, spans them. A tough-minded, unsentimental Ulsterman with a string of books on Irish history to his credit, he is now a professor at Edinburgh University. With this new work he has performed an extraordinarily valuable service.

Much has been made of the grave difficulties and crises with which the two unions have been afflicted. Virtually the whole story of Ireland's union is recalled, quite incorrectly, as an unceasing struggle to break it. From the start its opponents spun it as a moral tale of resistance to cruelty and oppression; the gullible English fell for it. In fact, as Jackson makes clear,

'the union worked for a time because it was able to accommodate key sections of Irish Catholic society' and promote 'reform and advancement', establishing, for example, land courts to give tenants rights that landowners elsewhere would never have accepted.

Scotland's history under the union tends to focus unduly on periods of nationalist discontent

and electoral advance. The satisfaction provided, for example, by its role in the British Empire (it supplied India in the late eighteenth century with half its top officials and surgeons), mattered much more. Jackson is the first person to describe the strengths and achievements of the two unions over their entire lifetimes in order to explain how they have survived for so long, albeit very incompletely in Ireland.

He is also the first to provide a comprehensive account of the formidable party organisations that battled in the constituencies from the 1880s onwards to uphold the union in both countries. In Ireland its residual defence came to rest with hard-faced Ulster Unionists who refused to give an inch to nationalists and republicans until first Brian Faulkner and then David Trimble courageously sought partnership, but without wise statesmanship in London to assist and support them in the ways they needed in order to succeed. Ian Paisley then moved in unscrupulously.

In Scotland, Jackson explains, the success of unionism sprang from 'its ability to define itself in the language of nationality'. One prominent Unionist MP declared in the inter-war period that 'Scotsmen are all nationalists; we have our laws and customs and kingdom'.

A future Unionist Scottish Secretary of State went so far as to say: 'we remember and exalt ourselves about Bannockburn'. Conservatives were kept firmly south of the border. The Scottish Unionist Party remained in the ascendant until the 1960s. Then Ted Heath meddled disastrously, changing its name to Conservative and dreaming up a daft scheme of devolution in which he quickly lost interest. Margaret Thatcher insisted that Scotland needed the free market creed inspired by Adam Smith who, she imagined, had taught the Scots to be thrifty and enterprising, like her. With the poll tax, setback became rout. This is perhaps the first book where both Heath and Thatcher come out badly.

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Perfect academic detachment is preserved throughout Jackson's long book. Labour is given the credit it deserves for entrenching the union among Scotland's Catholic working class through 'those great binding agents of the United Kingdom, nationalisation and welfarism'. Their erosion is presented prominently among the factors which have weakened Labour so gravely as champions of the union. As a result devolution was bound at some point to put the union in mortal peril. 'As the Unionists of the Home Rule period predicted for Ireland', Jackson concludes, 'devolution has proved to be a starting-point for Scottish national aspirations rather than a one-off settlement'. Can the parties of the union recover their old identification with Scottish nationality with the help of this superb book? ■■■

Lord Lexden is a Conservative peer and historian



“Racing Ace, The Fights and Flights of Samuel ‘Kink’ Kinkead”

(Dr. Julian Lewis MP)

Publisher: Pen & Sword Aviation

£25 (hardback)

When my colleague and friend Julian Lewis asked me to review his book about the life and achievements of a young, heroic World War

One flying ace who went on to challenge the World Air Speed record in the 1920s, I didn’t think it would necessarily be my cup of tea.

However, having attended the book launch in the company of Admirals, RAF Commanders, generals, politicians and not so ordinary service men and women, I was intrigued to find out what kind of man ‘Kink’ Kinkead was to have engendered such admiration. I was not disappointed. Julian’s book is a sensitive portrait, backed up by meticulous research, which not only tells the human story of Kink’s life and his too early tragic death, but sets it within the political and military context of the time.

Julian’s own deep understanding of the interplay of politics and defence matters, together with his unswerving regard for the facts, gives the story veracity and power and takes it from a simple tale of courage and daring to one which illustrates and illuminates the tensions of the time.

Kink’s story takes us from his early life with his pioneer parents in South Africa, where his mother Helen was “a formidable character who kept a gun hidden in her skirts to protect her family”, to his enlistment with the Royal Naval Air Service in 1916

and his adventures over the next action packed 12 years to his untimely death at the tragically early age of 31 in search of the World Air Speed Record.

We travel the world with Kink from his early flying experience in a Bristol Scout in the Dardanelles (I now know far more about early aeroplanes than I ever thought I would!) through his amazing achievements on the Western Front where he was decorated for gallantry four times and scored at least 30 victories in the air. Then on to his ill-fated expedition to Russia in support of the White Cossacks fight against the Communists and finally to his more glamorous adventures in the Schneider Trophy race in Venice and his unsuccessful and ultimately fatal attempt on the World Speed record at Calshot.

Throughout his hectic life Kink came across always as modest and self-reliant, a man of independent thought and action who carried his achievements lightly and earned the admiration of his peers (dare I say not dissimilar to Julian Lewis himself!)

I was particularly struck by Julian’s clear explanation of the of the significance of the development of air power to Britain’s military capability in the early years of this century; from being merely an adjunct to Naval and Army services to emerging as an independent force and becoming

hugely important to our future military success. This development was not without its opponents and the political debates both in Parliament and in the Services themselves were often heated.

This has not been an easy book to write. There are few records from Kink himself and his personal life is almost unknown. I did

ask Julian if there was any “love interest” and the closest we get is the book by Marion Aten, a fellow pilot with Kink in Russia, which describes Kink as “dark, short and magnetic” and involves him in various liaisons. Despite the lack of facts I like to think of him as a true romantic.....

In the 1920s Kink pursued the quest for air supremacy for Britain. The Americans and the Italians were key rivals for the Schneider Trophy awarded to the fastest team to fly seaplanes over a highly challenging course.

Of course, racing requires funds and there’s a fascinating tale in the book of the struggle with the Treasury which finally agreed to back Kink’s British bid despite the full cost escalating from £32,000 in 1925 to £125,000 by 1927. William Wright, a prudent Scottish MP of the time asked, for full expenditure figures but was told by the Minster that “to supply further figures could not be done without a quite unjustifiable amount of clerical labour”. Sounds familiar!

After a glorious victory in 1927 when he took the Schneider Trophy, Kink was determined to break the 300mph speed barrier. His attempt would be in an N 221 Supermarine Napier S5 (more new knowledge for me!). The plane was “the embodiment of speed and mechanical beauty”, but on 12th March 1928 tragedy struck and Kink and his plane nosedived from 100 feet into the Solent where the plane broke up. Kink was dead. The disaster was bewilderingly sudden and the cause was never known. The misadventure verdict was probably the most accurate description of what had occurred. It was an adventure that went terribly wrong.

Kink’s life ended in seconds, but with Julian Lewis’ excellent book his memory will live on. 🕯

Hazel Blears is Labour MP for Salford and Eccles

