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## Review of J.H. Elliott, *Scots & Catalans: Union and Disunion*

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**Elliott, J.H. *Scots & Catalans: Union and Disunion*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018. Xii + 339 pp.**

Over a seven-decade career writing political, biographical, and national histories rich in detail, J.H. Elliott has earned a reputation for painstaking research, dispassionate assessments, and admirable prose. Now he wants to know why two European peoples, the Scots and the Catalans, have attempted (again and again) to challenge their subordination to England and Castilian Spain. He seeks an answer in a comparison of their histories. He puts up a good fight against some confounding methodological difficulties but, in the end, a straightforward answer to the multigenerational rabble-rousing of his subjects eludes him.

The author sees plenty of similarities in the historical trajectories of Scotland and Catalonia over roughly 500 years: medieval monarchies shaped the territorial limits and institutional features of each region, then dynastic accidents brought each into the unions that became Great Britain and Spain. The earliest manifestations of these unions were composites in which monarchs protected the legal and cultural distinctiveness of each of their kingdoms or principalities. As monarchies became empires and then nation-states, advisers and lieutenants gained advantage for the political centers, making Scotland and Catalonia peripheral adjuncts. Scots and Catalans rebelled against these conditions in the 1640s but lost. In the early eighteenth century, authoritarian governments, threatened by international conflicts, tightened their hold and increased restrictions. The dispatch of Philip V's *Nueva Planta* decrees in 1716 revoked Catalonia's privileges and imposed new legal, institutional, and military controls. When repression arrived in Scotland at the end of the Jacobite Rising in 1745, Scots in the Highlands, already marginalized, were further reduced to a Gaelic-speaking minority. Both Scotland and Catalonia industrialized late in the eighteenth century. Both felt the reverberating effects of the French and American revolutions and suffered the social upheavals that came with the rise of Liberalism and other ideological currents. In the period of nineteenth-century Romanticism, historians, writers, and folklorists elaborated and reified the myths upon which they could assert claims to a national consciousness. Into the twentieth century, some Scots and Catalans found justification in their invented national identities to assert cultural distinctiveness and to radicalize claims for political separation. The evolution of sophisticated political parties and civil society institutions into the twenty-first century gave impetus to emboldened secessionist demands.

That these similarities are meant to give the book its basic structure is evident in the table of contents, which shows Elliott shoehorning his similarity-seeking agenda into a tight-fit chronology: 1. Dynastic Union, 1469-1625; 2.

Rebellion and Its Aftermath, 1625-1707/1716; 3. Incorporating Unions, 1707-1789; 4. Nations and States, 1789-1860; 5. The Call for Home Rule, 1860-1975; 6. Breaking Away? 1975-2017. The construction is presented as unproblematic, but readers should be forgiven for seeing the chronology as a textbook rendering and the themes as superficial. We can rightly wonder whether a story that begins for Catalonia in 1410 or 1469 can be so neatly fit to a story that begins for the Scots in 1603. And why start the stories there anyway? Elliott's points of departure signal preconceptions and prejudices that shape the narrative uncomfortably. The early pages oversimplify basic cultural distinctions. I am not Catalan, but I can appreciate that many Catalan readers of the book will argue with good conscience that any story about Catalonia that does not begin deeper in the medieval period will get basic premises wrong. Similarly, the story of the Scots insufficiently identifies the cultural elements – religious difference being key among them – that separated the Scots from the English at the moment of union. Later, as when discussing the period of rebellions after initial union, the author is not keen to emphasize the contingencies that make each situation distinct.

Elliott is engaged in exploring how the paths traveled by Scots and Catalans differ as well as converge, but how he presents these differences confirms the arbitrary, even illusory, nature of the perceived similarities. To take one example, Elliott notes that industrialization came to both locales through the manufacture of textiles, but the differences obliterate the value of the parallelism. Scotland's output made it a cog in the wheel of Great Britain's robust and diversified industrial economy, with the result that Scottish industry made Scotland more British. Catalonia's textile industry made it the economic powerhouse of an otherwise backward-looking Spanish economy dominated by a retrograde agriculture. That Madrid preyed upon the Catalan economy gave Catalans one of many reasons to harden their resistance. The author approaches some differences with timidity, obfuscating the weight they deserve. He hardly notices the fact that Catalonia had to defend itself from two hungry neighbors since at least the thirteenth century (France only gets bit-player status here). Elsewhere he posits controversial claims with such ease as to make them seem incontrovertible: that Catalonia was never a state; that the value Catalans give to their language as a cultural indicator is a Romantic invention (Gaelic, he says, was never of much consequence to the Scots either); that Catalan successionists are fanatics, a minority who impose themselves with the pretense of a majority upon a population that vacillates between disoriented or hapless. Readers may agree with the author, or they may question his motives.

To assert that historical context can tell us something about recent successionist moves requires a theory about the discursive relationship between past, present, and future. In his book of autobiographical reflections on the historical profession, *History in the Making* (Princeton: Yale University Press,

2012), Elliott tells us that theory gets in the way of his pragmatism. That is a smoke screen, since careful readers can intuit not only that he holds theoretical predilections but that they are ill-fitted to his task. One is that governance and the decisions of contending elites are of greater consequence, of a higher order, than sloppy change from below. While Great Britain and Spain need no explaining (no matter that the loss of Empire and the Brexit fiasco throw shade on Great Britain's exceptional ego, and no matter that many who know the history of Spain consider it a repeat-offender failed state), Scotland and Catalonia remain "lesser polities" of questionable relevance. Second, he is dismissive of manifestations of culture, of the construction of identity, of the productive capacity of myth and memory, and of the possibility that a state can inflict long-lasting trauma on its own people. A third guiding position, one that subsumes the first two, has it that time is the most powerful agent of change. This is tricky. Elliott can be adept at describing the seriousness of momentary conflicts even while relentlessly piling evidence upon evidence to the end that change always seems to brush the past under its rug. Leaders and those who struggle against them may try to steer the world this way or that, but they inevitably get set adrift, rocked to and fro by exigencies that they cannot anticipate and that they never fully comprehend. The problem here is that fatalism cannot answer the question Elliott asks. Some successionist movements have very deep roots. In seeking to learn why it is that their emotional batteries get recharged time and again, the answer has to go beyond identifying dynastic foibles or fleeting successes or failures in diplomacy. It has to take account of the psychology, sociology, and anthropology of humanity's use of the past to change the present.

Near the end of the book, Elliott asserts "Spain after 1978 was an infinitely more benign country than the Spain of General Franco" (270). Such relativism is undoubtedly true for those who ignore the damage done by the past to the present. It also forgets that events in the present can reawaken ancestral spirits and reopen old wounds.

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**Vargas, Michael A. *Constructing Catalan Identity: Memory, Imagination, and the Medieval*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. Pp. xii, 197.**

While a nation is a social construction, no nation can be simply constructed, as the failed example of Padania vividly testifies. To be built socially, a nation must contain the raw materials for its building, and a sense of a shared history is an essential component to such a project. Furthermore, there needs to be a degree of societal consensus around its constituent parts. We should not see these parts as