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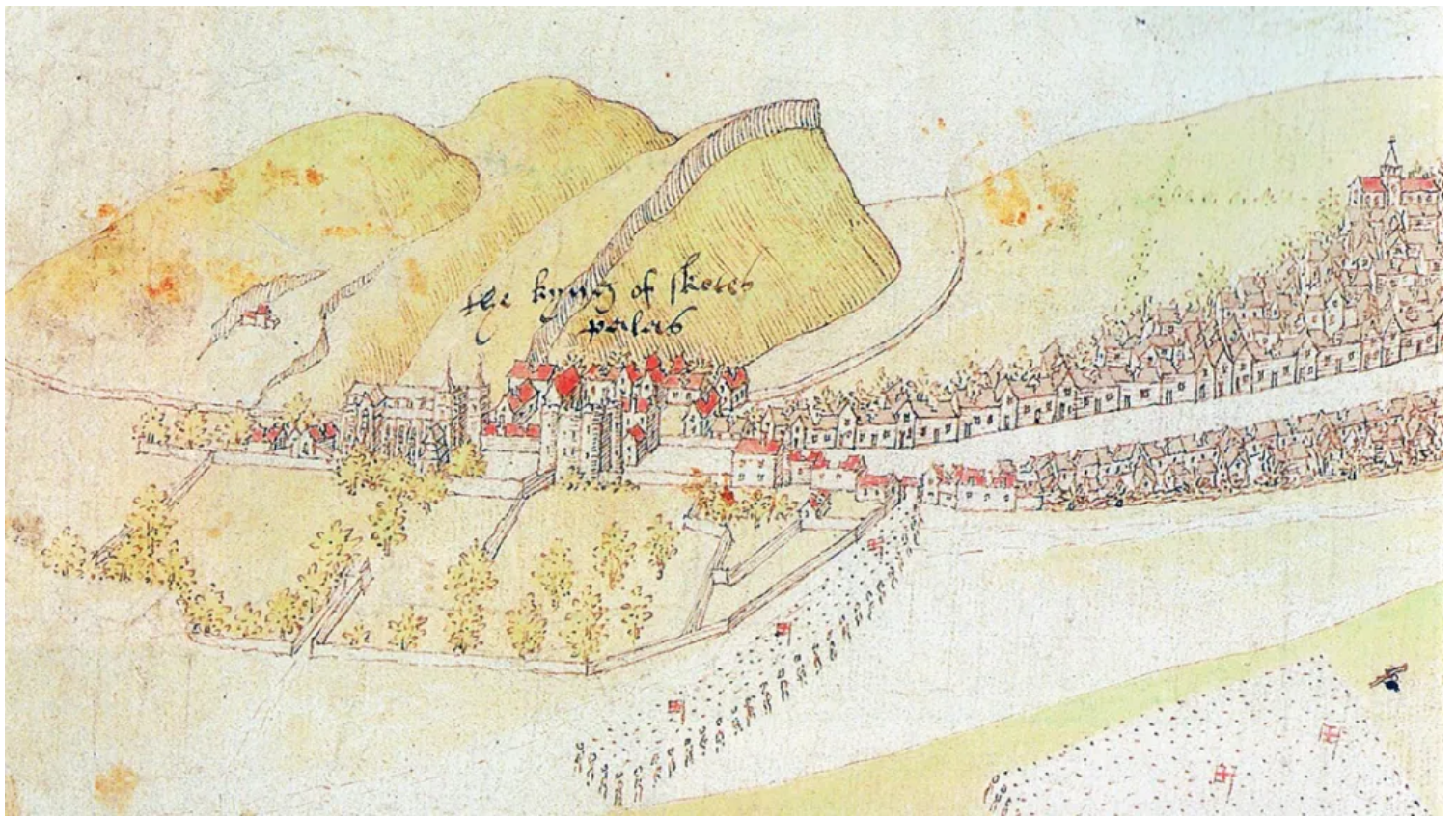
Early modern history | *Book Review*

### Tudor grand strategy

English designs on union with Scotland

By **Willy Maley**





The "Hertford sketch" of Edinburgh by Richard Lee, c.1544 | © The Picture Art Collection/Alamy

#### IN THIS REVIEW

##### ENGLAND'S INSULAR IMAGINING

The Elizabethan erasure of Scotland  
320pp. Cambridge University Press. £30 (US \$39.99).

Lorna Hutson

In his history of Henry VII, Francis Bacon recalls a discussion of the proposed marriage of the king's daughter Margaret to James IV of Scotland. Invited to speak freely, some counsellors cautioned that were God to take the king's two sons, a Scottish succession would follow. Henry's reply, that "*Scotland would be but an Accession to England, and not England to Scotland, for that the Greater would draw the lesse*", silenced those concerns. In the event, God took only one of Henry's sons, but the king's speech, as Bacon knew, and as Lorna Hutson demonstrates in this brilliant study, proved prophetic. The greater drew the lesser.

"Then with Scotland first begin", Westmoreland advises the king in Shakespeare's *Henry V*, but few critics of the period began thus. In *England's Insular Imagining* Hutson shows how English rulers and writers sought to downplay Scotland's political significance precisely because of its strategic importance for the Tudor state's imperial ambitions. Vital to this strategy was Geoffrey of Monmouth's medieval *History of the Kings of Britain*, with its mythologizing of Arthur, which was used "to uphold the claim that Scotland, as a kingdom, had anciently been feudally subject to the king of England". Hutson maps out the ways in which this Galfridian history was harnessed by poets and politicians in pursuit of "an insular Anglo-British empire".

Hutson is right to pinpoint the preoccupation with Arthurian legend as “urgently geopolitical”. The first half of the sixteenth century witnessed the deaths of three princes named Arthur, a Tudor and two Stuarts, their titles - Prince of Wales, Duke of Rothesay, Duke of Albany - resonant of their archipelagic origins. The “legends” of these Arthurs may have owed more to Malory than to Monmouth, but the mere fact that Elizabeth I had an Uncle Arthur, and James VI an uncle and a great-uncle of that name, renders the “Arthurian moment” all the more compelling. In the case of Henry VII’s son, fears of a Scottish succession were allayed when Arthur’s younger brother Henry married his widow, Katherine of Aragon, an insurance policy against a Franco-Scottish alliance. France and Spain figured prominently in England’s desire to make sure its coast was clear, its border locked.

*England’s Insular Imagining* opens with the legal justifications and military accounts of the Anglo-Scottish wars of the 1540s in two formidable chapters that exemplify its scholarship. These chapters do two things. They debunk the myth of English indifference to Scotland and indicate the lengths to which the Tudor state was prepared to go to establish an insularity that presupposed the obliteration of Scotland as a separate nation. Hutson’s analysis of the “Rough Wooing” (1542-50), a label that has diminished the importance of this brutal invasion, establishes Scotland as a crucible of conflict that laid the foundations for future English hegemony. She then unpicks with forensic skill the intrigue around the Marian Civil War (1567-73), a succession crisis in which England played a mischievous mediating role.

This dramatic opening gambit leads in to astute readings of Spenser, Shakespeare and Jonson, but it is no mere scene-setting. Hard-wired into Hutson’s treatment of Shakespeare’s history plays, of *King Lear* and *Macbeth*, and of Jonson’s *The Masque of Blackness*, is the patient and elaborate framing of these works as part of a complex set of debates around Scottish sovereignty. A chapter on “Race-Making in the Invention of Britain” offers a fascinating meditation on race and erasure through the “linguistic ethnography” of William Camden’s *Britannia* (1586) that fed Jonson’s fantasy of British whiteness. Reading *King Lear* alongside a sequence of earlier British plays, including *Gorboduc* and *The Misfortunes of Arthur*, Hutson gives a compelling account of how English arguments for union shifted in light of the Scottish succession.

On occasion her readings are less convincing. Speaking of Book IV of *The Faerie Queene*, for example, she notes the absence of Scottish rivers, “the Forth, Clyde and Tay”, viewing this omission as “Spenser’s powerful and effective artistic choice, an erasure of local habitation and name”. But the Clyde and Forth are alluded to in Book II, when the Antonine wall, misattributed to Constantine II, is invoked: “From sea to sea he heapt a mightie mound, / Which from *Alcluid* to *Panwelt* did that border bound”. Hutson remarks that “*The Faerie Queene* makes Scotland unimaginable”, but the allegation of the country’s elision from Spenser’s epic poem would surprise James VI, who famously took offence at the depiction of his mother, Mary, Queen of Scots, in Book V.

Hutson’s most impressive contribution is her engagement with Scottish writers such as Hector Boece, David Lyndsay, William Lamb, George Buchanan and Richard and Thomas Maitland, and the persuasive case she makes for the literary weight of these often-overlooked sources as she patiently dismantles a whole anglocentric critical tradition. She also excels in her narrative condensation of official documents, as well as manuscript material. Henry VIII’s declaration of English sovereignty over Scotland (1542) is read as

assiduously as Spenser's poetry or Shakespeare's drama, with equally impressive results. Hutson forces us to rethink the impact of Scotland: "Holinshed's *Chronicles* were not only deeply indebted to historiography of the 1540s wars: they were the war's product". This is a novel way of thinking about a work that proved a vital resource for poets and playwrights in the 1580s and 1590s. *England's Insular Imagining* is a timely reminder of the value of slow reading and painstaking research. The significance of this intellectually demanding book can be measured by its huge relevance for the later period. By excavating the imperial ambitions of the Tudor state Hutson unearths the core issue of English hegemony that would drive the crises of the seventeenth century.

Her exit line perhaps underplays the nature of her achievement: "This book has been about the Elizabethan erasure of the idea of Scotland as a sovereign historic kingdom". In a way the book's subtitle belies its subtlety. This is about much more than an "Elizabethan erasure"; it is an effacement with deep roots in early Tudor and medieval imperial strategies. And there's the rub. For it could be said that the Elizabethan emphasis runs counter to the central thesis. It feels more like marketing shorthand than an accurate description of the book's scope.

*England's Insular Imagining* closes with *Macbeth*, a challenge for the contention that Scotland was erased, not least because its eponymous usurper seeks to erase his country's invaders - "What rhubarb, cyme, or what purgative drug, / Would scour these English hence?" *Macbeth* is an inveterate eraser, asking the doctor attending his wife to "Raze out the written troubles of the brain". Hutson meets this challenge head on and confirms her thesis through a dynamic reinterpretation of the so-called "Scottish play", pointing to a larger razing that occurred in Shakespeare's disjointed time. The written troubles of the brain are here restored to memory.

This book will incite arguments, breed scholarship, beget articles and enrich our understanding of a period we thought we knew well. Its discussion of sixteenth-century uses of law, legend and literature to claim sovereignty over a nascent English-dominated British imperial state by snuffing out any claims to independence held by Scotland (and Ireland and Wales) - and all this with the purpose of expelling European influence - reminds us of where we are today. Lorna Hutson has not just laid the groundwork for the next generation of critics; she has set the bar high for future interdisciplinary work in this field.

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