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An Incorporating Union? British Politicians and Ireland 1800–1830

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Abstract

The Act of Union between Britain and Ireland which came into force on 1 January 1800 was the outcome of immediate military necessity and the result of decades of spasmodic thought by politicians on both sides of the Irish Sea concerning the relationship between the two islands. But while the overall

intention was undoubtedly an integrative one, a failure to understand the nature of Irish politics and society together with the pressing imperatives of war with France generated a casual and shallow attitude towards administrative detail and undermined those master plans of – to use the fashionable word of the time – ‘incorporation’ which seem intermittently to have gripped the governing minds of the time. By – without it seems much thought – leaving the administration of Ireland in the hands of a viceroy and his chief secretary London politicians ensured that a species of Dublin government survived to preside over a very individual political entity in many respects divorced from the mainstream of British political life. Far from becoming integrated (in any but the financial sense) Ireland seems, during the first decades after the union, to have been allowed – indeed at times even encouraged – to float further and further out into the Atlantic and further and further away from the contemporary glories of British norms, British values, and British self-congratulation.

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