The union of the crowns was a huge event. It changed the course of English and Scottish history. It raised enormous new problems about the relationship between the two kingdoms, no longer separate and independent entities but somehow, however badly defined – from then until now – brought together under one king, now ruling from London, and, a century later, one parliament, until in the late twentieth century there was another constitutional shift. Scotland's destiny now lay with England, and it has almost come to be assumed that there was a kind of historical inevitability that this should be so, particularly when both England and Scotland became Protestant countries, just as there was a historical inevitability that Scotland would be very much the junior partner. Well, perhaps. What is striking, however, is that such an approach simply does not fit Scotland in the first years of union, the reign of James VI. It would be going much too far to say that it might almost not have happened, but it is certainly arguable that the fact that it had happened had far less impact than might have been expected.

How does a kingdom keep going without a king? That was the question which dramatically challenged the Scots in 1603, when James VI succeeded to the English throne, and departed for London, less speedily than the English would have expected, more quickly than the Scots would have wished. And as is famously known, he broke his promise to return to Scotland every three years, returning only for a few months in 1617. Like Philip II who stuck to Madrid for almost the whole of his reign, apart from his sojourn in Lisbon when he took over the Portuguese throne, so with James. From London he ruled his three kingdoms. He never went to Ireland, although as no king of England since Richard II had done so the Irish can hardly have expected anything different. Nor did he visit the Principality of Wales, although again no king of England had gone anywhere near Wales since Henry IV appeared on the Welsh border, in his case – unlike Richard – to put
down a rising, the Glyn Dowr rebellion. Scotland was very different. James's ancient kingdom, as it described itself to the king after 1603, lost its adult and successful monarch in 1603, and virtually never saw him again. From the English point of view, it was entirely natural that the Scottish monarchy should relocate itself; who would not, when offered London rather than Edinburgh?

That is a very obvious way to formulate the problem of the impact of the Union. But is it the correct one? That depends on the nature of the Scottish kingdom when James apparently deserted it for the bigger prize of the throne of England in 1603. Another way of looking at Scotland is to say that in this age of composite monarchies there was no European kingdom better equipped than Scotland to survive without the presence of an effective king. It had done so intermittently for two centuries, and can therefore be regarded as having plenty of practice. The fifteenth-century minorities beginning in 1406 had left it without an adult king for a total of thirty-eight years. The sixteenth century was even worse. By the time James emerged from his own minority, in the mid-1580s, there had been fifty-two years of minority, and to that one can add in the six wholly ineffective years of the rule of Mary Queen of Scots. Moreover, Mary's minority (1542–1561) – the period of intense religious and diplomatic upheaval – posed problems far greater than those experienced in any previous minority, arguably greater than in the minority of James, and certainly greater than those which faced Scotland with its absentee monarch after the Union of the Crowns. For these two decades witnessed the stalemate between Catholics and reformers until the sudden and rapid lurch towards Protestantism in 1559–1560. They also witnessed the first, if premature and short-lived, stirrings of the idea of Great Britain – Arthur Williamson's 'Edwardian moment'. ‘Great Britain’ would lie dormant for almost another sixty years. But there was, for the first time since the late thirteenth century, a move towards friendship with England, begun by the embattled Protestant lords in the late 1550s and necessarily developed after their success in 1560. It would be simplistic to regard this as a switch from the Auld Alliance with France to a new alliance with the 'auld inemie' England. What it did was to represent something of a shift in the balance of Scottish foreign relations, because of the triumph of the Scottish Protestants. The 'Amity' with England replaced the 'Auld Alliance' as the diplomatic theme of the moment, even if that amity never ran very deep; indeed, it is important not to overstate the shift, and assume that Scotland was now firmly tied to England, for that leaves out of the reckoning Scotland's strong and long-standing sense of being a European kingdom, which would survive the union of 1603 and underpin tensions between English and Scottish foreign interests as late as the early eighteenth century. James's own minority was far from easy, thanks to the consequences of the deposition of his mother in 1567 and the establishment of the reformed kirk, but at least the general way forward was becoming clear as it had not been in