

REVIEW: BRITISH IDENTITIES

Victor Kiernan

David J Baker and Willy Maley (eds), **British Identities and English Renaissance Literature**, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, 314pp, hb £40, ISBN 0521 78200 7.

A book put together by seventeen scholars, British and American, is likely to have a somewhat zigzag pattern. Their inspiration, as Baker and Maley explain, in an introduction entitled 'An uncertain union', is drawn from J. G. A. Pocock's study of interacting elements in the population of the British Isles, or 'British Archipelago', since the mid-17th century. We are being introduced to a 'New History', a 'dialogue between centres and margins.' Some readers, it may be expected, while welcoming this plan, would expect more emphasis on England's role as the hammer, destructive of very much in the lives of its neighbours, who have had to provide the anvil. But the introduction makes it clear at least that the outcome is far from having been a single nation. This plurality is accompanied by an emphasis on relations between history and literature, although there is little attempt to explore the place of oral expression or writing in Welsh or Irish or Gaelic. Social history too has been drawn on only very sparingly.

Fifteen chapters are arranged in seven sections. In the first, Philip Schwyzer contrasts antiquated 'British history' – chiefly Geoffrey of Monmouth's Latin **History of the Kings of Britain**, which held the field from 12th to 17th century – and the 'new British history' now commencing. In between 12th and 17th centuries there was much fumbling and stumbling, 'gaping holes' for instance for Tudor patriots to fall into. Late medieval Welsh visionaries

Emeritus Professor V. G. Kiernan is a descendant of Ulster farmers with Scottish names, and of an Irish family settled in Lancashire. He studied at Trinity College, Cambridge, and after some years in India taught at Edinburgh University. He has written on imperial and international affairs, and on English literature.

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looked forward to a redeeming hero, though they seldom called him 'Arthur', the name in fashion later; yet the first Tudor monarch, Henry VII, christened his first son Arthur. On the whole, what we chiefly learn about the Celtic regions is the astonishing ignorance about them of the English and their learned men. Solid ground is touched when we come to the administrative and legal union of England and Wales by Henry VIII in 1536. This, as pointed out, benefited 'the needs, aspirations and sensibilities of emergent Welsh gentry.' But were these gentry really Welsh, or English? They were at least heavily anglicised.

Andrew Murphy (chap. 2) finds the strongest opponent to 'new British history' in Nicholas Canny, a writer with wide influence. Murphy points also to a miscellaneous group of 'revisionists', historians inclined to whitewash English treatment of Ireland – the Irish peasantry in particular – and to shift the blame for Irish sufferings on to simple administrative errors of an English-style bureaucracy.

English and Scots of the Reformation period, Christopher Highley observes, were captivated by the idea of a whole Protestant Britain, on guard against a Catholic Europe. Catholic exiles, for their part, were a scattered flock, not an organisable community. Robert Persons the Jesuit lamented their multiple discords and factions. National or ethnic bonds had more power than religions to draw men together. English and Welsh in Rome quarrelled; Persons jibbed at the thought of a Scottish successor to Elizabeth; Guy Fawkes and other conspirators were very anti-Scottish. Scotland was known to be harder on papists than England, besides rejecting episcopacy.

R. A. McCabe grapples with Holinshed's **Irish Chronicles** (1577, 1587) and the schism between the 'Old' – pre-Reformation – English settlers and the 'New English' pouring in to supplant them. John Hooker, visiting Ireland from 1567, strengthened the newcomers' claims by writing Irish history 'from the viewpoint of Dublin Castle'. The invaders had to convince themselves that their demands on Ireland were entirely justifiable. The native inhabitants, it seems, had no right to be in Ireland.

Matthew Greenfield's chap. 5 discovers a 'metatheatrical Britain' where a historical play like Shakespeare's **Henry IV** might conceal a tissue of double meanings and sly political hints. A few smart individuals, well primed beforehand, might manage to enjoy it. Patricia Parker follows with **Henry V**, as a 'series of *sotto voce* commentaries' on the ostensible hero. These

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emanate chiefly from Fluellen and his awkward English pronunciation. When hailing Henry as another Alexander, for instance, he unwittingly calls him 'the Pig', instead of 'Big', or Great. This sort of humour can be taken as belonging to the same malapropisms as Dogberry's; and **Much Ado** was written about the same time (c.1599). No one suspects Dogberry of being a clandestine conspirator. It is very possible no doubt that Shakespeare admired Henry rather less than he had to appear to, and was indulging in a little quiet deflating, undetectable by the censor.

Mary Wilson brings us to chap. 7, and **Cymbeline** (1610), whose jumble of miscellaneous peoples seem to have intrigued Shakespeare. He made use of Holinshed, but only loosely. Mary Wilson puts forward a hypothesis of the plot being an amalgam of English and Scottish history, such as early Jacobean writers of masques often made use of. Camden the antiquary's work **Britannia** (1586) is credited with giving the Roman conquest a new look, as a civilising of British savagery (much as the English now viewed the conquest of barbarous Ireland, it might be added.) Posthumus, the hero, is taken to represent a Scotland on the verge of joining England.

Philippa Berry and Jayne Archer are concerned with Jacobean masques looking to political themes such as 'the inherent instability of states'. In chap. 9, Christopher Ivic shows us – with splendid illustrations, in which the book abounds – the first atlas of the entire British Isles: the **Theatre** of John Speed, 1611. James I saw the utility of cartography; he took the title, partly absurd, of 'King of Great Britain, France, and Ireland', thus bringing England and Scotland as close together as he could. As the writer says, uneasy memories of past relations still lingered, and stood in the way.

Andrew Hadfield is concerned with ideas of 'a British union'. Wales and Ireland were labelled in Speed's maps as 'British kingdoms'; Camden and others were trying to trace the identities of the various peoples that had taken part. Raleigh's agent Thomas Harriot was extending the range of enquiry to North America, and reported its inhabitants to be docile and helpful, worthy of the missionary efforts soon under way. Linda Gregerson in chap. 11 sums them up as much less savage than the 'Picts', supposed to have rampaged through most of Scotland.

The final chapters bring us nearer to a morganatic marriage between History and Literature. John Kerrigan narrates very interestingly the crowded career of a Baron Broghill who ended as Earl of Orrery, comfortably seated in

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Munster but feeling equally Irish and English. He won fame as a politician and as a writer of comedies, serious plays – a highly successful one in 1664 on Henry V – and a treatise on the art of war. Murray Pittock gives us a useful survey of ‘Jacobite literature’, from Walter Scott down; he may be right in believing it to have had more importance, of a subterranean kind, than has generally been allowed. Jane Ohlmeyer speculates about how smoothly the ‘New History’ will be able to adapt itself to the literary record.

Derek Hirst’s impressive closing chapter is at some points critical of his predecessors. He considers Kerrigan to have said too little about the interdisciplinary theme, and regards Ossory as too ‘emphatically anglocentric.’ Likewise, Hirst remarks on Spenser’s linking of the Gaelic peoples with the Scythians of antiquity, traditionally the *ne plus ultra* of barbarism. He sets Caliban’s claim to be the rightful owner of his island side by side with that of the O’Neill clan of Ulster.

England has not been the only ambitious European country with a retinue of subsidiaries. France laid hands on several borderlands, one of them Celtic, though it failed to win possession of Italy. Castile, with its central place in Spain, took over most of the Basque regions, leaving them a degree of autonomy; the eastern provinces, headed by Aragon and watching over the western Mediterranean, remained independent until the union of crowns with Castile in 1479. Germany, represented by Austria, gathered up Slav territories, and Hungary. Denmark was for a while suzerain over all Scandinavia. Sweden, and then Russia, laid hands on Finland and part of the coastline facing it, in order to safeguard their access to the Baltic Sea. ‘Baltic Barons’, or German feudal lords, came to share command of the Russian army with Russia’s own nobility.

It would be of interest to compare the fortunes of these various conglomerations. It may not be too rash to say that of all the subsidiaries, those grabbed by England – Lowland Scotland excepted – fared worst. Imperialism was part of life within as well as outside Europe.

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