British consciousness and identity

The making of Britain, 1533–1707

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York NY 10011–4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

http://www.cambridge.org

First published 1998, 2000
First paperback edition 2002

Typeface Plantin 10/12 pt.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 521 43383 5 hardback
ISBN 0 521 89361 5 paperback

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Introduction

Brendan Bradshaw and Peter Roberts

British history as a 'new subject' may be said to have been launched by John Pocock in a series of path-breaking studies charting the conceptual contours that define its unique territory which appeared over the two decades from 1974.[1] So far as concerns the chronological span to which the present volume is devoted, the early modern period, the subject was 'brought down to earth', to adopt the phrase of Rees Davies, the distinguished practitioner of the genre for an earlier period, in the mid nineteen nineties. In the last few years a series of studies has appeared in print firmly grounded in documentary sources which explore the possibility of a political history of the Atlantic Archipelago as a coherent entity, not just as the sum of its national constituents, much less as a history of England with occasional glances towards the Celtic fringes as they intruded themselves into domestic politics.[2] The agenda which emerged from these pioneering explorations largely relates to the implications of political developments on the two islands over the period for an emergent British state. One item they address is the extent to which the constitutional unions between England and Scotland in 1707, and between the United Kingdom thus constituted and Ireland in 1800, were pre-conditioned by moves towards greater integration between the relevant polities in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. More particularly they discuss the significance that is to be attached in a British context to the state-building in which successive English monarchs engaged in this period, notably the incorporation of Wales within the English kingdom under Henry VIII in the 1530s, the conquest of

[1] J. G. A. Pocock, 'British history: a plea for a new subject', *Journal of Modern History*, 4 (1975); Pocock, 'The limits and divisions of British history', *American Historical Review*, 87 (1982); Pocock, 'Conclusion: contingency, identity, sovereignty', in A. Grant and K. J. Stringer (eds.), *Uniting the Kingdom? The making of British history* (London and New York, 1995).

[2] Among the most important of these are the following collections of essays: Ronald G. Asch (ed.), *Three Nations – a common history?* (Bochum, 1993); Steven G. Ellis and Sarah Barber (eds.), *Conquest and Union* (London, 1995); Brendan Bradshaw and John Morrill (eds.), *The British Problem, c. 1534–1707* (London, 1996).

Ireland under Elizabeth, the various attempts of the Tudors to reassert suzerainty over the Scottish monarch, the abortive attempt of James VI and I to translate the union of crowns in 1603 into a union of the kingdoms, and the short-lived Cromwellian archipelagic republic. Then, changing the focus from the centre to the constituent territories of the multiple kingdom, these studies raise a further series of issues. What insights are to be gained on historical developments in Ireland, Scotland and Wales by attending to their status as national entities within a state-system centrally governed by a sedentary English monarch? More particularly, how did the increasing assertiveness of government from the centre over the period impinge on internal political developments? That last question presents itself most arrestingly perhaps in the context of what historians, alerted to its British context, have come to call the War of the Three Kingdoms in the 1640s. However, the most historically and complex question remains the contrariety of Ireland. In contrast to Wales, and to Scotland after a spate of 'teething problems' in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Ireland alone has persisted, from the outset of the Tudor period of imperial state-building, in constituting a seriously destablising element within the multinational polity governed by the crown of England.

The collection of essays assembled here continues the exploration of such issues. Its special claim as a contribution to the new subject rests on the historical categories in which they are investigated. The effect, we modestly suggest, is to add valuably to the scope of the discussion and to the agenda to which British historians of the new ilk address themselves. The special concern of the volume, then, is with the intellectual, cultural, linguistic and ideological dimensions of British history in this period. These are brought to bear in discussions that focus on that essential concomitant of territorial integration in the successful formation of a nation-state: a matching sense among the communities comprehended within the new state-system of a shared political identity. In a word, a main object of enquiry of the studies that follow is that elusive and altogether too much taken for granted phenomenon, 'Britishness'.

When, where and in what circumstances is such a sentiment discernible among the people of the two islands at this period? Did it pre-exist the embarkation of the Tudors on a policy of territorial consolidation? Did it therefore constitute a dynamic of the process for the formation of the British multinational state or was it generated in the process? What was the content of this notoriously unanalysed sentiment? Did the content vary in accordance with the predilections of the national communities that responded to it? How was it moulded by the unionist

ideologues who manipulated it to win support for the various projects for the formation of an integrated archipelagic British state? Was it adequate as a political concept and in its historical resonances to fulfil the ideological demands made upon it by the constitutional union of which it became the rhetorical referent?

Much of the discussion that follows is preoccupied with such considerations. However, many of the contributors rightly devote themselves to investigating *in tandem* or even exclusively an associated question relating to the political mentality that conditioned the response of the communities of the two islands to the project for an integrated archipelagic state over the two centuries. That is the much-controverted one of the existence or otherwise of a sense of national identity, specifically as such, within the various territorial entities that formed the patrimony of the English crown. For to raise the question of a British sensibility as a feature of the mind-set of the relevant communities is to beg the question of whether an English, Irish, Scottish and Welsh sensibility had taken hold at this period in any case. The relevance of that consideration to the preoccupations of the British historian need hardly be emphasised. For instance, one of the issues to which a good deal of space is devoted in the studies that follow is whether and, if so to what effect, the communities of the regional dominions resisted cultural anglicisation over these centuries given their increasing exposure to an English, imperial and metropolitan public culture; given further the insidious attraction to the elites of the regions within the new state-system of the ambience and the patronage benefits of court and metropolis. In that regard a British paradox of no little long-term historical significance is explored in these pages: the vigorous survival of a distinctive national cultural ethos, both 'high' and 'popular', within the communities of Scotland and Wales despite the failure of national sentiment to express itself, as it did with apparent ineluctability in the case of Ireland, in political agitation for secession from the union or indeed for a form of devolved self-government. The resolution of the paradox as it emerges here lies at least in part precisely in the vagueness of the notion of Britishness referred to earlier. Its genius as an ideological concept is found in its capaciousness: its capacity to seem to buttress the self-esteem of each of the constituent nationalities of the British conglomerate – apart significantly from that of the Irish – while at the same time subsuming these identities under a more comprehensive category of nationality.

Such then is the conceptual frame and the agenda which the essays that follow adopt under the rubric of the new British history. The chronological range of the volume also requires a word of explanation.

No doubt the *terminus a quo* reflects the influence of the late Sir Geoffrey Elton, an influence which the two editors as research students of his would by no means wish to repudiate. His major interpretative contribution as a Tudor historian was the thesis, powerfully argued for throughout his distinguished career, of a Tudor 'revolution' in church and state conducted under the auspices of Henry VIII's chief minister and a group of radically minded Erastian reformers in the 1530s. These, he maintained, availed of the opportunity of the crisis precipitated by Henry VIII's unavailing quest for a papal annulment of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon, to launch a programme of reform by statute, which moulded the English crown's medieval patrimony into a more integrated and centralised unit, governed under the absolute sovereignty of the 'king in parliament' in accordance with the Renaissance imperial principle 'rex est imperator in regno suo'.[3] Whatever the present status of Sir Geoffrey's thesis – certain features of his original formula concerning the bureaucratisation of the central administration undoubtedly require modification[4] – it cannot be doubted that the 1530s mark a point of discontinuity in the crown's approach to the government of the English localities and to the constituents of its multinational medieval patrimony. In the former case the late medieval system of delegating responsibility and thereby royal authority to a local magnate was effectively terminated by means of the statute 'for liberties and franchises' and the extension of the shire system virtually uniformly throughout the realm.[5] At the same time a series of statutes incorporated Wales within the English realm and clinched the union by the shiring of the country on the English model.[6] The imperial programme for Ireland did not entail a constitutional union of the Lordship with the English kingdom in the Welsh manner. Nevertheless the form of government now set in place involved a hardly less radical break with the medieval past. The system of so-called 'aristocratic home-rule', in effect the devolution of crown government to the colonial political elite, and in particular to its most powerful magnate dynasty, the Kildare Fitzgeralds, was abandoned. Henceforth the central administration in Dublin was

[3] The classic statement of the thesis is contained in G. R. Elton, *England under the Tudors* (London, rev. edn. 1974), ch. 7. It is more fully elaborated, developed and modified in the light of later research in Elton, *Reform and Reformation* (London, 1977), chs. 7, 9.

[4] See especially D. Starkey and C. Coleman (eds.), *Revolution Reassessed* (London, 1986). The consolidation of the realm in the 1530s is one aspect of the Elton thesis which is not addressed in this critique. The essays are generally well balanced and probing apart from Starkey's overheated and overstated introductory essay.

[5] Elton, *Reform and Reformation*, 201–2.

[6] Glanmor Williams, *Recovery, Reorientation and Reformation: Wales c. 1415–1642* (Oxford and Cardiff, 1987), ch. 11. P. R. Roberts, 'The act of union in Welsh history', *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion* (1974), 49–72.

headed by an English administrator, often an experienced military commander. Increasingly the key administrative posts went to New English officials, not to the old colonists according to the disposition of the Fitzgerald lord deputy. Meanwhile provision was made for the protection of the colonial territory from marauding Irish borderers by the establishment of a garrison force as a substitute for the entourage of the colonial satrap.[7] Here is found the origins of the system by which Ireland was to be governed down to the establishment of the Free State in the 1920s. More immediately the effect of the programme of reform was to destabilise Anglo-Irish relations and to embroil the crown in a process of increased militarisation in governing Ireland that terminated in the conquest of the 1590s. One further significant alteration of the medieval system in relation to Ireland needs finally to be noted. This was the elevation of the status of the Lordship to that of a sovereign kingdom in consequence of the statute of 1542 ostensibly designed simply to affirm the English ruler's sovereign authority throughout the island.[8] Succeeding generations of Irish patriots were to argue steadfastly from this point forward that Ireland in virtue of its sovereign status was not subordinate to English institutions of government, most especially to English law and to the English parliament, but only to its king whose sovereignty in Ireland resided in the Irish parliament, and in the laws there enacted or consented to. Finally it is relevant to the significance of the later reign of Henry VIII as an historic turning point in British history properly so-called, to bear in mind that the 'rough-wooing' of Scotland embarked on in 1542 was accompanied by a propaganda campaign in which the English king's claim to suzerainty over his Scottish counterpart as the senior British monarch, first entered by Edward I, was revived, and in consequence a British 'rhetoric' was reintroduced into English political discourse.[9]

As to the *terminus ad quem*, the turn of the seventeenth century may be taken to mark also a turning point in British history as decisive as that of the later reign of Henry VIII. The process of state-building that got under way in the 1530s now reached a certain completion. Wales was firmly and unproblematically committed to political union; yet its survival as a geographical and cultural entity, contrary to the imperialistic design announced in the so-called statute of union of 1536, was also assured. The Welsh had ingeniously resisted total anglicisation.

[7] Elton, *Reform and Reformation*, 206–11; Brendan Bradshaw, *The Irish Constitutional Revolution of the Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1970), chs. 4–6.

[8] Bradshaw, *Irish Constitutional Revolution*, chs. 7–9.

[9] Roger A. Mason, 'Scotching the brut: politics, history and national myth in sixteenth-century Britain', in *Scotland and England, 1286–1815*, ed. Roger A. Mason (Edinburgh, 1987), 60–84.

They retained a strong sense of a Welsh national identity which found expression in the protestant faith, in antiquarian scholarship and in various forms of high and popular culture. Traditional accounts of the early-modern history of the polity of 'England and Wales' which was created in 1536 have done scant justice to the complexity of the relationship. By means of the acts for the union of the kingdoms of England and Scotland passed by the respective parliaments of both kingdoms in 1707, the union of the crowns effected by the accession of James VI of Scotland to the English throne was brought to the consummation so ardently desired by that monarch, though perhaps not quite in the form he had envisaged. The island of Britain, historically so called, now for the first time comprised a single constitutional entity, governed from the capital of the sedentary British monarchy in London. The last of the dynastic wars for the British throne had yet to be fought in 1745 but the union of the three national territories within a single British state was never again to be seriously challenged. Meanwhile Ireland had emerged as *the* British Problem, the main problem that was to destabilise the state internally in the course of the modern period. The contours of the Irish problem had by now also become evident. In the aftermath of the Treaty of Limerick in 1691 which concluded the 'War of the Two Kings' – James II and William III – many of the remaining Catholic landowners availed of the opportunity to seek their fortunes in the service of the Catholic monarchs of Europe. The opportunity was thus offered to the New English, Scottish and Cromwellian planters to undermine both the guarantees of security of tenure extended to Catholics under the treaty and that of toleration for the private practice of the Catholic religion. The protestant Ascendancy had begun. It would seem that, in practice, Ireland had been reduced, uniquely within the amalgam of territories that comprised the United British Kingdom, to the status of a colony. Its traditional Catholic elite had been dispossessed, their lands now being occupied by protestant planters. Henceforth Catholics who formed the majority of the island's population were to be systematically discriminated against by means of the penal laws, a code not dissimilar to that from which the legislation of 1536–43 had released the Welsh.[10] The Catholics in Ireland were thus subjected to a form of 'social apartheid' more selective than that which affected their co-religionists in other parts of the British state.[11] Government relied upon substantial assis-

[10] The Lancastrian penal laws against the Welsh, which became a dead letter in 1536, were not formally repealed until 1624, while parliament had rescinded hostile English laws against the Scots in 1607. Stats. 4 & 5 James I, c. 1; 21 James I, cc. 10, 28 section 11: *Statutes of the Realm* (London, 1819), vol. iv, pp. 1134–7, 1219, 1239.

[11] J. G. Simms, 'The establishment of protestant ascendancy, 1691–1714', in T. W. Moody and W. E. Vaughan (eds.), *A New History of Ireland* (Oxford, 1986), iv, 1–30 at

tance from an occupying garrison force.[12] The issues that were to render Ireland an unassimilable element within the British state and to fuel Irish nationalism into the twentieth century were now in place: land, religion and the garrison.

The curtain had come down upon the early modern phase of British history. The stage was set on which the history of modern Britain would be enacted.

16–21; David Dickson, *New Foundations: Ireland 1660–1800* (Dublin, 1987), 40–52; Thomas Bartlett, *The Fall and Rise of the Irish Nation: The Catholic Question, 1690–1830* (Dublin, 1992), chs. 2, 3, 4.

[12] Thomas Bartlett and Keith Jeffery (eds.), *A Military History of Ireland* (Cambridge, 1996), chs. 6 (Ellis), 10 (Guy), 11 (Connolly), 12 (Bartlett), 16 (Crossman), 17 (Fitzpatrick).