The Making of English National Identity

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English or British? The question of English national identity

I am a citizen of a country with no agreed colloquial name.

<div align="right">Bernard Crick (1991aa: 90)</div>

As long as the various peoples lumped together under the heading "English" accept this, let us use it. When they start to object we call them Irish or even Scotch. It really does not matter. Everyone knows what we mean whether we call our subject English history or British history. It is a fuss over names, not over things.   A. J. P. Taylor (1975: 622)

It can be said of the English in Britain, as wags say of the Catholics in Heaven, that they think they are the only ones here.   Conrad Russell (1993: 3)

A natural confusion

'English, I mean British' – this familiar locution alerts us immediately to one of the enduring perplexities of English national identity. How to separate 'English' from 'British'? The reverse problem is nowhere as acute. Non-English members of the United Kingdom rarely say 'British' when they mean 'English', or 'English' when they mean 'British'. On the contrary, they are usually only too jarringly aware of what is peculiarly English, and are highly sensitive to the lordly English habit of subsuming British under English. For them it is a constant reminder of what they perceive to be – rightly, of course, – England's hegemony over the rest of the British Isles.

One has to say immediately though that the problem is not one solely of or for the English. Scottish friends confess, with some embarrassment, that they too sometimes say 'English' when they mean 'British'. Foreigners do it all the time, even though 'Brits', 'Britishers', as well as the more conventional 'British', are readily, if not gracefully, to hand. All this testifies to the imperial reach of the English, both at home and abroad. The confusions of others compound

the confusion in the minds of the English, and reinforce them in their bad habits.

But in general it is probably right to say that the elision of English into British is especially problematic for the English, particularly when it comes to conceiving of their national identity. It tells of the difficulty that most English people have of distinguishing themselves, in a collective way, from the other inhabitants of the British Isles. They are of course perfectly well aware that there are Welsh, Scots and Irish, even that there are Manxmen and Jersey Islanders. They make jokes about them, imitate their accents, and call upon them for special effects, as when they lend colour to poverty by portraying it in a Glasgow slum, or amuse themselves by intoning passages from Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood* in a ferocious Welsh accent. But these are particular exceptions to the general rule, which is to see all the major events and achievements of national life as English. Other ethnic groups are brought on in minor or supporting roles.

Though when it is brought to their attention the English are properly uneasy and even apologetic about this practice, they can also on occasion offer a robust defence. Fowler's celebrated view, in his *Modern English Usage*, is likely to strike a chord in the heart of every native Englishman (if not all Englishwomen). It is natural, says Fowler, to speak of the *British* Commonwealth or the *British* navy or *British* trade, and to boast that *Britons* never never shall be slaves.

But it must be remembered that no Englishman . . . calls himself a Briton without a sneaking sense of the ludicrous, or hears himself referred to as a Britisher without squirming. How should an Englishman utter the words *Great Britain* with the glow of emotion that goes for him with *England*? His sovereign may be Her *Britannic* Majesty to outsiders, but to him is Queen of *England*; he talks the *English* language; he has been taught *English* history as one continuous tale from Alfred to his own day; he has heard of the word of an *Englishman* and aspires to be an *English* gentleman; and he knows that *England* expects every man to do his duty . . . In the word *England*, not in *Britain* all these things are implicit. It is unreasonable to ask forty millions of people to refrain from the use of the only names that are in tune with patriotic emotion, or to make them stop and think whether they mean their country in a narrower or wider sense each time they name it.   (Fowler 1983: 157)

This defence, from the heart as it were, certainly tells us something important about Englishness, and its relation to Britishness.[1] But it describes, rather than explains. Why, given the objective situation of a multinational state, did 'Britain' and 'Britishness' not gain the ascendancy? Why does 'patriotic emotion' attach itself so fervently to 'England' and not to 'Britain'? If 'Britain' sounds – as it does – colourless and boring, why is that so and why on the contrary is 'England' so glowingly sonorous (and not, let it be said, just to the English)? And if neither 'Britain' nor 'England' seems to suit, what else? The mystery is

deepened, not diminished, by the accurate observation that *none* of the available names for the United Kingdom will do, for various reasons. We live, says Tom Nairn, in a State

> with a variety of titles having different functions and nuances – the U.K. (or "Yookay", as Raymond Williams relabelled it), Great Britain (imperial robes), Britain (boring lounge-suit), England (poetic but troublesome), the British Isles (too geographical), "This Country" (all-purpose within the Family), or "This Small Country of Ours" (defensively-Shakespearian).   (Nairn 1994: 93)

As a remedy Nairn proposes, with calculated malice, 'Ukania', a deliberate echo of the 'Kakania' of Robert Musil's famous end-of-empire novel, *The Man Without Qualities* (1930). This was Musil's notoriously satirical (and scatological) coinage for the Habsburg Empire, a baggy, unwieldy domain that also suffered from a plethora of names, and for much the same historical reasons (Austria, Austria-Hungary, 'the Empire', etc.).[2]

We shall return to Austria, and to other imperial and post-imperial nations such as Russia. They have much to tell us, by way of comparison, of the problem of national identity faced by the imperial English. But first we must try to do the best we can with the vexed question of nomenclature. This is of course more than simply about names. It reveals a history and a culture resonant with ambiguities and conflicts. It is a language of power and prejudice as much as it is a reflection of constitutional proprieties.

Britain and the British

In the 'Preface' to his volume in *The Oxford History of England*, A. J. P. Taylor wrote, in his characteristically combative tone:

> When the Oxford History of England was launched a generation ago, "England" was still an all-embracing word. It meant indiscriminately England and Wales; Great Britain; the United Kingdom; and even the British Empire. Foreigners used it as the name of a Great Power and indeed continue to do so. Bonar Law, a Scotch Canadian, was not ashamed to describe himself as "Prime Minister of England", as Disraeli, a Jew by birth, had done before him . . . Now terms have become more rigorous. The use of "England" except for a geographic area brings protests, especially from the Scotch. They seek to impose "Britain" – the name of a Roman province which perished in the fifth century and which included none of Scotland nor, indeed, all of England. I never use this incorrect term . . . "Great Britain" is correct and has been since 1707. It is not, however, synonymous with the United Kingdom, as the Scotch, forgetting the Irish (or, since 1922, the Northern Irish), seem to think. Again the United Kingdom does not cover the Commonwealth, the colonial empire, or India. Whatever word we use lands us in a tangle.
>   (Taylor 1965: v)

A tangle indeed. Taylor himself, writing the history of 'England' since the First World War, was forced again and again to speak of 'the British' and even to use the despised term 'Britain' ('sometimes slipped past me by sub-editors'). Nor could 'English affairs' for long be kept separate from those, say, of Ireland; while in the account of the Second World War Australians, Canadians, Indians, New Zealanders, South Africans and a host of other members of the British Empire and Dominions crowd the narrative, as when we are told that 'over half the Canadians involved were killed or taken prisoners' in the bungled raid on Dieppe in 1942 (Taylor 1965: 557). How indeed write of 'the Battle of *Britain*' without giving up on 'England' pure and simple? How narrate a central strand of national political life without referring to the *British* Labour Party, whose strongholds were in Wales and Scotland; or discuss a central component of the national culture without reference to the *British* Broadcasting Corporation, headed in its formative years by a Scot? (The abbreviation BBC conveniently helps the English, and many foreigners, to ignore this). As soon as one begins to think seriously about the subject the self-imposed restriction of dealing only with 'English' history dissolves in hopeless contradiction.

Taylor's insouciance is unlikely to be copied in these 'politically correct' days, though actual practice, especially among popular writers, is far less affected. More representative of current scholarly thinking on the subject is a work such as Hugh Kearney's *The British Isles: A History of Four Nations* (1995) or, somewhat differently, Norman Davies's *The Isles: A History* (1999). A similar shift in consciousness is reflected in the decision to replace the old *Pelican History of England* by the *Penguin History of Britain*. Introducing the series, its general editor David Cannadine remarked that it will look 'more critically and more closely at the whole concept of nationhood and national identity', and that it will be 'a three-dimensional history of Great Britain, not a Watfordesque history of Little England' (1995a: 2; see also 1993; 1995b: 16).[3] At a time when a former British prime minister, John Major, could still startle non-English inhabitants of the United Kingdom by declaring that 'this British nation has a monarchy founded by the Kings of Wessex over eleven hundred years ago' (*The Times*, 24 May 1994), such a revision was clearly overdue.[4]

The 'four nations' approach to Britain, and to England, has it own problems, as we shall see. But it is a necessary start to correcting the Anglocentric accounts that have been the staple of standard histories and school textbooks – and not just in England – for over a century. It forces us to consider just what are the meanings of the terms 'English', 'British' and so on which we use so casually and promiscuously. No one can ask of native English speakers that they 'tidy up' their language, that they speak with scholarly precision. That would be absurd – Fowler is right about that. The everyday usages reflect real experiences and real perceptions. They are the result of a real history. But it certainly behoves

students of nationhood and national identity to examine carefully what those unselfconsciously used terms connote, what attitudes and assumptions lie buried in them, what historical myths they enshrine or promote.

Britain seems to be the most ancient of the relevant terms.[5] It was first recorded by the Greeks of the fourth century BC as the name of the Celts who lived in western Europe's largest off-shore island. The Romans turned the Greek *Pretanoi* into the Latin *Britanni*, for whose home they then coined the feminine name *Britannia*. The Celts themselves appear to have made no clear distinction between the people and the place. The meaning of the original word evidently referred to the Celtic practice of painting the body.

When the Angles and Saxons invaded the islands in the fifth century AD they did not associate themselves with Britannia or its inhabitants. They called the piece of the island they settled 'Engla-land' and ignored the rest. 'Britain' nevertheless persisted during the Old English period, in various forms (Bretayne, Breteyn, Breoton, etc. – it took its present spelling in the thirteenth century), but thereafter 'was used only as a historical term until about the time of Henry VIII and Edward VI [early sixteenth century], when it came again into practical politics in connexion with the efforts to unite England and Scotland' (*OED*). Despite the union of the crowns in 1603 – James I proclaimed himself 'King of *Great Britain*' – efforts to promote 'Britain' as an overarching identity appear to have had limited success until the Act of Union with Scotland in 1707, which established the united kingdom of Great Britain.

From that time 'Britain' came into common use as a shorthand for 'Great Britain'. It figured widely in official and semi-official encomia to the kingdom, as in William Somerville's 'Hail, happy Britain! Highly favoured isle, and Heaven's peculiar care!' (1735), and, in its most celebrated form, in the panegyric composed in 1740 by the anglicized Scottish poet James Thomson: 'When Britain first, at heaven's command, / Arose from out the azure main . . .' It was Thomson too who in the same work gave *Britannia* and *Britons* wide currency.

> This was the charter of the land,
> And guardian angels sung this strain:
> 'Rule Britannia, rule the waves;
> Britons never will be slaves.'
> (Thomson and Mallet, *Alfred*, 1740)

'Britons' and 'Britannia' (the Roman female figure with a shield revived by Charles II in 1665 when he put her on a coin in an attempt to reconcile Scots and English) had a success denied to the official efforts in the eighteenth century to replace the old emotive names 'England' and 'Scotland' with 'South Britain' and 'North Britain' within the framework of an overall 'Great Britain' (the later

attempt to turn an uncooperative Ireland into 'West Britain' was even less successful). The failure in this respect did not however, as we shall see, prevent the emergence of a strong sense of British identity in this period.

Something of the same lacklustre quality as afflicts 'Britain' has carried over into *British*. 'To identify with "British" ', says Bernard Crick, 'is not the same as identifying with the warmth and width of English, Scottish, Welsh or Irish. "British" is a limited utilitarian allegiance simply to those political and legal institutions which still hold this multi-national state together' (*The Independent* 22 May 1993). The majority of English, Welsh and Scots do not think of themselves as 'British'; only a majority of Ulster Protestants do so (see, e.g., Rose 1982: 15). Foreigners use 'British' freely; the British to refer to their trade with other nations, their economy, their armed forces, their legal nationality, the inhabitants of the pre- and non-Anglo-Saxon cultures of the island called Britain, and a few other things besides (see Fowler, above; and cf. Crick 1991a: 97; 1995:173–4). But they rarely use it in relation to themselves in their social, cultural or personal life.

This coldness towards the term 'British' is nowadays highly problematic. With the revival of nationalist movements in Scotland, Wales and Northern Island, and the influx of many hundreds of thousands of immigrants who do not think of themselves as English, Scottish, etc., never can the appellation 'British' appear more necessary, at least if the political and social unity of the United Kingdom is to be preserved. Yet it is those very forces that are making the task difficult.

Britons, Britisher and Brit continue to find some favour, especially with foreign journalists. The *British Isles* similarly does service as a catch-all term to include not just the countries of the United Kingdom but also the Republic of Ireland, the Channel Isles and the Isle of Man. Some scholars, seeking to avoid the political and ethnic connotations of 'the British Isles', have proposed 'the Atlantic archipelago' or even 'the East Atlantic archipelago' (see, e.g., Pocock 1975a: 606; 1995: 292n; Tompson, 1986). Not surprisingly this does not seem to have caught on with the general public, though it has found increasing favour with scholars promoting the new 'British History' (see below).

This is probably the right place to introduce the *United Kingdom*. Although a united kingdom came into being with the parliamentary union of England and Scotland in 1707, the new state (which included the principality of Wales) did not formally adopt the title until the union with Ireland in 1801, which brought into being the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland (after the formation of the Irish Free State in 1921, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland).

There are some English-speaking groups – contemporary Indians among them – who do refer to 'Yookay' as a country, in the way we might speak of

England, Britain etc. But for the vast majority of the British people the United Kingdom is a term reserved for passports, visa applications and other official purposes. The old British passports referred to one as a citizen of 'the United Kingdom and Colonies'. But few saw or sought a national identity in these official terms. It is noticeable, though, that with current talk of 'the break-up of Britain' and threats to the integrity of the United Kingdom, there has been a rise in references to the United Kingdom in public utterances – for instance, by politicians in radio interviews.

England and the English

For over a thousand years *England* has been the largest and most powerful state in the British Isles. It was always and to an increasing extent the most populous part. In 1801 England contributed just over half of the population of the United Kingdom; today the English make up more than four-fifths (N. Davies 1999: 1153).

It is not surprising that England became, and remains for many people at home and abroad, a synecdochical expression not just for the island of Britain but for the whole archipelago. Macaulay called his great work *The History of England* (1848–61) but it included extensive coverage of Ireland and Scotland, as did W. E. H. Lecky's *History of England in the Eighteenth Century* (1878–90). The French historian Elie Halévy, in his *History of the English People* (1913), similarly and with the same unselfconsciousness included Irish and Scottish history. Walter Bagehot's famous work on the government of Britain is called *The English Constitution* (1867). The OED's report of 1891 on the established usage of the time perhaps underplayed its inflationary tendency: '*England*: the southern part of the island of Great Britain, usually with the exception of Wales. Sometimes loosely used for: Great Britain. Often: The English (or British) nation or state.' In later years the practice has if anything grown, rather than diminished, despite the irritation it causes the non-English inhabitants of the British Isles. Not just in everyday conversation but in journalistic use and in scholarly writing the confusion of 'England' with 'Britain' and 'Britain' with 'England' is so common and pervasive that quotation is largely superfluous (for examples see Kearney 1995: 2; N. Davies 1999: xxvii–xxxix).[6]

'England' is a highly emotive word. When intoned by, say, an Olivier (as in *Henry V*) or a Gielgud (as in *Richard II*), it can produce spine-tingling effects. It has served, in a way never attained by 'Britain' or any of the British derivatives, to focus ideas and ideals. It has been the subject of innumerable eulogies and apostrophes by poets and playwrights. From Shakespeare to Rupert Brooke it has been lauded as the font of freedom and the standard of civilization, a place

of virtue as well as of beauty. 'Let not England', urged John Milton in 1643 in pleading for a more liberal attitude to divorce, 'forget her precedence of teaching nations how to live.' Nelson fell at Trafalgar, according to J. Braham's patriotic poem of 1812, for 'England, home and beauty' – a phrase much loved and oft repeated in the nineteenth century. Shakespeare as always supplied the best lines. Despite its familiarity, the following deathbed tribute by John of Gaunt, from *Richard II*, needs to be quoted because of its innumerable echoes in succeeding centuries:

> This royal throne of kings, this sceptred isle,
> This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
> This other Eden, demi-paradise,
> This fortress built by nature for herself
> Against infection and the hand of war,
> This happy breed of men, this little world,
> This precious stone set in a silver sea,
> Which serves it in the office of a wall
> Or as a moat defensive to a house,
> Against the envy of less happier lands;
> This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England.
>   (*Richard II*, Act 2, Scene 1)

This is truly unbeatable, and could be unpacked at length for what it has contributed to the self-image of the English. Pausing only to note though the usual conflation of 'England' and 'Britain' ('this sceptred isle', 'England, bound in with the triumphant sea', etc.), we might pass on to the nineteenth century and an appreciation by Alfred Lord Tennyson almost as well known and almost as good:

> It is the land that freemen till,
> That sober-suited Freedom chose,
> The land, where, girt with friends or foes
> A man may speak the thing he will;
> A land of settled government,
> A land of just and old renown,
> Where Freedom slowly broadens down
> From precedent to precedent.
>   ('You ask me, why, tho' ill at ease',
>   1842)

There were, as we shall see, many challenges to this self-congratulatory account. But perhaps the most pertinent question was raised by Rudyard Kipling: 'And what do they know of England who only England know?' (*The English Flag*, 1891).

English and *the English* follow England closely in the comprehensiveness of their embrace. As an ethnic adjective, it is often used for 'British', especially by the English who unlike the Welsh, Scots and Irish, have traditionally identified themselves with the Union Jack, the composite flag of the United Kingdom, rather than what is technically their flag, the Cross of St George: thereby symbolically claiming possession of the whole kingdom.[7]

This tendency to inflate the English to take in other groups began very early. When the word 'English' first occurred in Old English, it had already lost its etymological sense, 'of or about the Angles', and was used as a collective expression for all the Teutonic peoples – Angles, Saxons and Jutes – who had settled in Britain in the fifth century. 'With the incorporation of the Celtic and Scandinavian elements of the population into the "English" people, the adjective came in the 11th century to be applied to all natives of "England", whatever their ancestry' (*OED*). For a generation or two after the Norman Conquest state documents distinguished between 'French' and 'English' – i.e., the descendants of the pre-Conquest English – but in practice the distinction soon lost its meaning. So 'English' began its imperialistic career from the very beginning; taking in 'Britain' and the 'British Empire' was a continuation, apparently, of a very old tradition.

The ethnic English, as the core nation of the British Isles and the dominant group of what became the leading industrial and imperial power in the world, have been anatomized ceaselessly by native and other writers. A genre of writing that can be said to have started with Edward Lytton Bulwer's *England and the English* (1833) was powerfully reinforced by the vivid reflections of visitors, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson's *English Traits* (1856), Hippolyte Taine's *Notes on England* (1860–70) and Henry James's *English Hours* (1905). Emerson's and James's accounts continued the tradition of 'travel literature', a favourite form in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in which the writer journeyed through the kingdom and reported on the condition and ways of the inhabitants. Alexis de Tocqueville thus recorded his impressions of his visits in the 1830s in the writings which have been published as *Journeys to England and Ireland* (1958); later distinguished examples of the genre include J. B. Priestley's *English Journey* (1934), A. V. Morton's *In Search of England* (1937) and George Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937). The English have also been the subject of the usual crop of humorous or satirical portraits, many of them not surprisingly by foreigners, such as G. J. Renier's *The English, Are They Human*? (1931), George Mikes's *How to Be an Alien* (1946) and Ranjee Shahini's *The Amazing English* (1948). The Scots, in the form of A. G. Macdonell's comic novel, *England, Their England* (1933), cast an affectionate and not too baleful eye on their idiosyncratic neighbour. But it was the native English themselves who produced the best example of the genre: W. C. Sellar and R. J. Yeatman's

wickedly revealing *1066 And All That* (1930) – the best book ever written on the English and their history, or what they take to be their history. With the renewed debates on English identity in the 1990s, the genre revived after a generation or so of disfavour. But, in the more anxious climate of the times, the model now was not so much the satirical type as the more considered national portrait of the kind typified by George Orwell's *The Lion and the Unicorn* (1941): Jeremy Paxman's *The English: A Portrait of a People* (1999) is a good recent example.

It is in and from this kind of writing that attempts are conventionally made to sum up the English 'national character'. With all their pitfalls they are invaluable in helping us understand 'Englishness' and English national identity. My account begins from a different direction but I shall have plenty of occasion to refer to these offerings. To ignore them would be to miss a rich harvest.

'English' as an adjective and noun for a language – *the English language* – has an interestingly parallel history to English as an ethnic description. It exhibits the same striking elasticity. Starting as a group of dialects originally spoken in what is now Denmark and north-eastern Germany, it became after the Anglo-Saxon invasions of Britain the general name for the tongue – 'Englisc' – used from Kent to Edinburgh. 'Englisc' referred, in other words, to the language spoken not just by the inhabitants of the kingdom of England but also by those of the south-eastern part of the kingdom of Scotland. 'Over the centuries a linguistic polarization took place, with the King's English in the south and the King's Inglis (or Scottis) in the north, the two forms so distinct as to be virtually different languages' (McArthur 1985 (3): 29; see also James 1998: 306). English's further conquest took place with its expansion, following that of the English people, into Wales and Ireland. English was now used in four countries, three of which were bilingual between an ever-strengthening English and an ever-retreating Celtic.

From about the fifteenth century onwards, the King's English of the English court, centred on London, was increasingly recognized as 'standard' English, though enormous variation existed in spelling and pronunciation. But with British expansion overseas, starting in the seventeenth century, the English language developed a variety of forms, a number of which gradually emerged as new standard forms (American English, Australian English, Caribbean English, South Asian English, etc.). 'British English', as a language and a literature, has had to compete with these other *Englishes* in the world at large. Even in its home territory, British English, traditionally identified with the speech patterns of the upper and upper-middle classes of south-east England, has in recent years found itself challenged by new or revived varieties, as in Mancunian, Glaswegian and 'Estuary' English, and the English spoken by new immigrant groups such as West Indians and South Asians. With British English embracing all these groups,

many of which do not identify themselves as English, English as a badge of a specifically English national identity becomes increasingly problematic.

To turn finally to the group of words formed by the combination term *Anglo-*, as in Anglo-Indian, Anglo-Saxon, etc. They exhibit all the ambiguity and, occasionally, arrogance, involved in the parent terms 'England' and 'English'. At the simplest level, 'Anglo-' is the combining form for 'England' and 'English', whether the people or the language. Thus 'Anglo-Welsh' relations are simply relations between the English and the Welsh. But, following the pattern of 'England' and 'English', 'Anglo-Finnish' relations could be relations either between England and Finland or between Great Britain (or the United Kingdom) and Finland. Similarly with Anglo-American, Anglo-Russian, etc. The offence that the imperial use of 'England' and 'English' causes the Welsh, Scots and Irish is compounded by this multiple meaning of Anglo.

There are further complications. 'Anglo-Irish', for instance, can mean relations between Ireland and England or between Ireland and Britain, as in 'Anglo-Irish talks'. But it can also refer to the group of English settlers in Ireland in past centuries, the group that formed the ruling gentry class and established the English ascendancy in Ireland. For native Irish therefore 'Anglo-Irish' is an emotive term with powerful historical overtones. 'Anglo-Indian' is similarly complex, referring both to relations between India and England (or Britain), and to the sensitively placed Eurasian community in India descended from British fathers and Indian mothers. To add to the richness of the term, Anglo-Indian also refers to those English or British people who spent most of their working lives in India during the British Raj – an 'Anglo-Indian colonel', for example.

Most multifaceted of all is 'Anglo-Saxon'. The *OED* records a complex history, involving multiple confusions, which led to the term being used by 1600 to cover everything 'English' before the Norman Conquest: language, life, people. Secondly, and by an equally expansive route, it has come to be applied to the entire 'culture, spirit, heritage, ethnic type and set of attitudes' (McArthur 1985 (1): 14) associated with the English (or the British) whether at home or abroad. There is an obvious overlap between the two main uses, in the sense that the Anglo-Saxon heritage or Anglo-Saxon attitudes are supposed to be somehow representative of the original pristine culture of the English, especially as that existed before the Norman Conquest, hence *Anglo-Saxonisms*, to refer to plain, pithy, quintessentially English speaking, thinking and doing. Anglo-Saxonism has historically also played an important political role, in the frequent harking back to the supposedly popular democratic assemblies of the Teutonic settlers of Britain, and as the basis therefore for a political ideology of Anglo-Saxonism that frequently had racial overtones. But the larger meaning of Anglo-Saxon or *Anglosaxondom* has equally obviously travelled a long way from its historical

base. It has come to occupy a significant place in the political culture of all societies that have a large number of people of English or British descent, and where English is the principal language – the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa. In this guise it is engaged with debates about dominant ethnicities and multiculturalism, and embroiled in the politics of language and of identity.

British studies: in search of the national identity

In a small volume on the national character published in 1941, George Orwell confessed to some difficulty of nomenclature. 'We call our islands by no less than six different names, England, Britain, Great Britain, the British Isles, the United Kingdom and, in very exalted moments, Albion.' He admitted that 'the so-called races of Britain feel themselves to be very different from one another', and that even the differences between the north and south of England were significant. He consoled himself with the observation that 'somehow these differences fade away the moment that any two Britons are confronted by a European', and still more so, presumably, when an Indian or a Chinaman heaves into view. Armed with the conviction that there was a unified national character, Orwell moved easily between England ('England is the most class-ridden country under the sun', etc.) and Britain ('British democracy is less of a fraud than it sometimes appears', etc.) to conclude with the famous observation that 'England [*sic*] resembles a family ... a family with the wrong members in control' (Orwell 1970a: 83, 88).

Few scholars today would approach the subject – if they dare approach it at all – with such blithe confidence. Their self-consciousness about the diversity of 'our islands', together with their sensitivity to nationalist feeling within them, render them modest in the extreme, if not actually speechless in the face of such terminological and cultural complexity. But some at least have bravely attempted to grasp the nettle of national identity. Prominent among these have been the historians, for whom perhaps the question is of more urgent practical importance than it is to scholars in other disciplines. In writing the history of 'these islands', what does one call them? What kind of framework does one adopt? To what extent is one dealing with a unitary story – the story of an 'island race', say – and to what extent with separate histories, the histories of 'four nations'?

In 1975 the New Zealand-born historian J. G. A. Pocock, in response partly to what he saw as a growing assertion of English nationalism – he instanced A. J. P. Taylor's volume in the *Oxford History of England* – put in a plea for 'British history'. Noting the lack of a better term that might satisfy the Irish, he meant by British history, he said, 'the plural history of a group of cultures

situated along an Anglo-Celtic frontier and marked by an increasing English political and cultural domination' (1975: 605). Though speaking of a 'revival' of British history, Pocock was perfectly well aware that very little along these lines had ever actually been done. For examples he had to turn to the twelfth-century Welsh chronicler Geoffrey of Monmouth's largely fabulous *History of the Kings of Britain* (*c*. 1136), and William Camden's sixteenth-century *Britannia* (1586), a highly informative survey of the British Isles which nevertheless reads mainly like a guide-book.

In advocating a properly *British* history, Pocock aimed his fire at two main targets. The first was the approach of the John Bull school of English historiography, in which British history was merely English history writ large. ('The history of Britain was merely the history of England as and when it took place elsewhere': Cannadine 1995b: 16). The rejection of this conventionally Anglo-centric view also entailed the rejection of its left-wing variant, the 'internal colonialism' approach. Here England was seen as the core imperial nation which had 'colonized' its peripheral regions, 'the Celtic fringe' (see, e.g., Hechter 1999). The largely benign view of England's 'civilizing' and 'modernizing' role was replaced by a more critical account which emphasized dependence, inequality and exploitation in the relations between core and periphery; but it did nothing to shake the impression that British history had been a one-way flow, with England as the fount and origin of all developments.

Pocock by contrast wished to point to the mutual and reciprocal relations between the different parts of the British Isles, such that they have not only created 'the conditions of their several existences but have also interacted so as to modify the conditions of one another's existence'.

[British history], which does not yet exist and must be created, cannot be written as the memory of a single state or nation or as the process by which one came into existence. It must be a plural history, tracing the processes by which a diversity of societies, nationalities, and political structures came into being and situating in the history of each and in the history of their interactions the processes that have led them to whatever forms of association or unity exist in the present or have existed in the past. This calls for a multi-contextual history . . .   (Pocock 1982: 317, 320)

The admitted difficulty of this undertaking was underscored by a bold extension, implicit in this formulation. British history must not simply be an account of the interaction of the peoples and cultures of the British Isles or 'the Atlantic archipelago'. The British (including the Irish) had also taken themselves and their cultures overseas. They had crossed the Atlantic to colonize the lands that later became the republics of the United States and Canada. They had crossed the world to found societies in its southern half, in Australia and New Zealand. However different they became, these societies were in the first instance British.

They added yet new dimensions to what had conventionally been presented as 'English history'(Pocock 1982: 317; see also Pocock 1992).

No more than in the case of Wales, Scotland and Ireland could these American or oceanic 'British' societies be regarded simply as 'fragments' or 'scions' of the 'parent society', England or – in this case – Britain. This approach, associated particularly with Louis Hartz and his followers (Hartz 1964), was the second target of Pocock's assault. The Hartzian view saw American or Australian society as offshoots of the older British stem; they were related to it as 'fragments' to a monolith, from which they had 'broken off'. Such a conception, argued Pocock, mistakes the nature and development of both 'fragment' and 'monolith'. Both 'fragment' and 'parent society' had to be seen as formed by a dynamic interaction, by an evolving process of 'cultural conflict and creation' (Pocock 1975a: 620). If Britain in some sense came first, its extensions overseas reacted back upon it, modifying it in profound ways just as its continued presence in their lives shaped their evolution.

Recast in the general form of 'British history', much of English and British history could be seen in a new light. Instead of being the story of the evolution and expansion of one nation, it might be possible to see it as the history of 'three kingdoms' (English, Scottish and Irish) or 'four nations' (English, Welsh, Scottish, Irish), all interacting with one another in complex ways. Certain crucial historical episodes, familiar in one aspect, could take on a new appearance. The 'English Civil War' of the mid-seventeenth century now becomes the 'war of the three kingdoms', since 'without rebellion in Scotland, the English Parliament would not have been summoned; without rebellion in Ireland it would not have demanded the king's surrender of the power of the sword' (Pocock 1992: 372; see also 1975a: 602; 1982: 325). Moreover, one might wish also to speak now not just of one but three 'British Civil Wars' convulsing the peoples of the British Isles together with their overseas possessions: that of 1642–46 ('the English Civil War'), that of 1776–83 ('the American War of Independence'), and that of 1911–22 ('the Irish Rebellion') (Pocock 1975a: 606). Using somewhat different terminology, some of these episodes could also be recast as the 'three British Revolutions' of 1641, 1688 and 1776 (Pocock 1980) – or more, according to taste and the task in hand, since the category 'British Revolution' might encompass not just the Irish Revolution of 1911–22 but also a good many of the twentieth-century 'wars of independence' of former British possessions in Asia and Africa.

Whether as a result of Pocock's urging or, more probably, because a number of scholars had already been moving in that direction, there have in recent years been some remarkable changes in the historiography of Britain and its overseas empire.[8] Some have tried their hand at entirely new general histories, notable examples being Richard Tompson's *The Atlantic Archipelago:*

A Political History of the British Isles (1986), Hugh Kearney's *The British Isles: A History of Four Nations* (1995), Jeremy Black's *A History of the British Isles* (1996) and Norman Davies's *The Isles* (1999). Others have re-examined key episodes of British and imperial history, such as the seventeenth-century revolutions (see, e.g., Russell 1987), and the interactions between Britain and its overseas colonies in the 'first British Empire' (e.g., Calder 1981; Bailyn and Morgan 1991b; Canny 1998; Marshall 1998). There has been a magnificent reinterpretation of British nationalism in the eighteenth century in Linda Colley's *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837* (1994); for the same period Gerald Newman essayed something similar for English nationalism in a pioneering work, *The Rise of English Nationalism* (1987). An ambitious and wide-ranging study of British imperialism sought to locate its springs in the culture of 'gentlemanly capitalism' operating at the heart of the British economy, in the financial sector of the City of London (Cain and Hopkins 1993). Students of cultural history have looked at the way the British Empire affected the mentality not just of its subject populations but of the imperial nation itself, the British people (e.g., Mackenzie 1986; Young 1995; Schwarz 1996a). What stands out in all these studies is the impossibility of considering 'England' or even 'Britain' as independent or intelligible units of study. Both are fragments of a larger whole whose boundaries extend to the very limits of the globe.

The historians did not make all the running, though it is fair to say that it is their rethinking of British history that has most made it possible to approach the question of English and British identity in a satisfactory way. Other disciplines have weighed in. In 1975 the American sociologist Michael Hechter published *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development, 1536–1966*; a brave and impressive study, especially considering that Hechter at the time had not set foot in the British Isles. Political science also made sterling contributions. In 1976 Richard Rose (revising a paper of 1970) published an essay, 'The United Kingdom as a Multi-National State' (Rose 1976), which became the basis and rallying point for a wide-ranging programme of work largely under his direction (see Rose 1982; Rose and McAllister 1982; Madgwick and Rose 1982; Bulpitt 1983). Political scientists were also the mainstay of Bernard Crick's stimulating collection, *National Identities: The Constitution of the United Kingdom* (Crick 1991b). Also distinctly political, but strictly unclassifiable in disciplinary terms, were two brilliant contributions from the left-wing thinker and Scottish nationalist Tom Nairn: *The Break-Up of Britain* (1981) and *The Enchanted Glass: Britain and its Monarchy* (1994). Multidisciplinarity was also the hallmark of three major volumes published under the auspices of History Workshop: *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity* (Samuel 1989a).

Introducing the *Patriotism* volumes, Raphael Samuel noted a critical shift in the thinking of the contributors as their work proceeded. It is as good an indication as any of the new consciousness and the changed approach to the subject.

A late but important element in the shaping of these volumes was the substitution of "British" for "English" in the subtitle. We had started with the second. For History Workshop, as for others, it had all kinds of pleasant connotations. It evoked a people rather than a state, Blake's *Jerusalem* rather than Westminster, Whitehall, or Balmoral. Because of its association with the language, it was umbilically tied to English literature. Because of its subliminal association with the countryside – the "real" England – it conjured up images of rusticity, chronicles of ancient sunlight. "English" is smaller and gentler than "British", and it has the charm, for the historian, of the antiquated and the out of date. "British" was an altogether more uncomfortable term to work with, hard rather than soft and belonging to specific historical epochs rather than the timelessness of "tradition". It is a political identity which derives its legitimacy from the expansion of the nation-state. Its associations are diplomatic and military rather than literary, imperial rather than – or as well as – domestic. Compared with "English" it is formal, abstract and remote. But it allows for a more pluralistic understanding of the nation, one which sees it as a citizenry rather than a folk. It does not presuppose a common culture and it is therefore more hospitable both to newcomers and outsiders . . .   (1989b: xii–xiii)

'Hard rather than soft', 'citizenry rather than a folk', 'hospitable both to new-comers and outsiders'; these expressions strike the note of the new realism, a new sobriety in the face of unprecedented problems both at home and abroad. Gone are the cosy assumptions of 'Englishness', with its sleepy villages and ancestral piles. They have gone because the empire has gone, and so has British economic power. They have gone because the English are not even safe in their homelands, challenged as they are by the rise of Celtic nationalism and by the claims of 'multiculturalism' within English society. And then there is the promise, or threat, of 'Europe'. In whichever direction they look, the English find themselves called upon to reflect upon their identity, and to re-think their position in the world. The protective walls that shielded them from these questions are all coming down.

One consequence of this is that we must, initially at least, lay aside the traditional approaches to English national identity. These have tended to consider the character of 'Englishness' from within, from inside the national culture. They have scrutinized the past and the present for the evidence they offer of 'English traits', of distinctive elements of 'the English character' or 'the English people'. Of such a kind are the famous works of cultural analysis, such as Priestley's *English Journey* and Orwell's *The English People*. Invaluable as they are, they cannot be our starting point. They take for granted the very thing that needs investigation: the wider world within which 'England' and 'Englishness' find

their meaning. English national identity cannot be found from within the consciousness of the English themselves.[9] We have to work from the outside in.

It is within the new terrain of 'British studies' that we are most likely to find our most promising leads. But before we come to this, there is a prior task. To speak of English nationalism, or of English national identity, is to use the language of a flourishing branch of social and political theory, that part concerned with the nature and development of nationalism. In recent years there has been an outpouring of new works in the field. It would seem sensible to ask what contribution the new thinking can make to the understanding of our specific subject, English nationalism. Is English nationalism a recognizable variety of nationalism in general? What theory or theories might be appropriate to it?