Britishness or Englishness? The historical problem of national identity in Britain*

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ABSTRACT. The dominant ‘modernisation’ perspective on the nature of nations and national identities characterises these phenomena as purely modern artefacts which function as sociological cement for complex industrial societies. In opposition, Anthony D. Smith has elaborated an ‘ethno-symbolist’ framework which posits the possibility of pre-modern antecedents to modern national identities. According to Smith, modern states which have been able to establish their official cultures on the ethnicity of a demographically dominant and cohesive ethnic core are likely to be more stable than states that are divided by the rival histories and traditions of competing ethno-national communities. This paper evaluates Smith’s ethno-symbolist thesis by applying his work on the relationship between states and ethnic cores to the historical example of Britain. What is Britishness? Is it just a transnational state patriotism, or is it a secondary form of national identity constructed largely in English terms?

Before proceeding, I would like to offer three disclaimers. First, I do not propose to offer a comprehensive survey of historical and contemporary accounts of the differences between Englishness and Britishness. Nor do I wish to propose that I have discovered a way of getting around the unconscious conflation of Britain and England on the part of the English—a habit that understandably irritates the Scots, the Welsh and the Irish. Second, while I recognise that Irish political and cultural life has shaped British government policy in important ways, for the purposes of this article, ‘Britain’ refers only to the mainland of England, Scotland and Wales.¹ Third, it is, of course, outside the scope of this article to canvass in detail all of the merits of an ethno-symbolist interpretation of nations and nationalism as against the ‘primordialist’ and modernisation frameworks. Instead, this article endeavours to throw some light on the connections between the British state and its dominant English core by applying Anthony D. Smith’s ethno-symbolist thesis on the relationship between...

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modern states and ethnic core populations to the historical example of Britain. I think that Britain presents a particularly interesting case for analysis, for it is a modern political entity grounded in the pre-modern institutions of the constitution and the monarchy. What is Britishness? Is it just a transnational state patriotism, or is it a secondary form of national identity constructed largely in English terms? In other words, is Britishness a political and territorial identity or does it operate on civic and ethnic levels at the same time?

Interpretations of Britishness from a ‘modernisation’ perspective on nations and nationalism argue that it is the former. In opposition to earlier essentialist and primordialist characterisations of the nation as a human constant, ‘modernists’ argue that the nation is an historically recent artefact arising out of specific modern conditions. From this point of view, Britishness is a ‘political tradition’ that has been selectively generated by state elites in order to counteract the divisive tendencies of modernity and its concomitants: capitalism, industrialisation, impersonal centralised bureaucracies and so forth.

Examples of a modernisation perspective applied to the question of Britishness include Michael Hechter’s *Internal Colonialism* (1975), Tom Nairn’s *The Break-up of Britain* (1981) and *The Enchanted Glass* (1994), and more recently Linda Colley’s *Britons* (1996). It is my contention that the neo-Marxist analyses of Britishness offered by Hechter and Nairn tend to overlook the dynamism of ethnicity and culture in shaping actors’ perceptions and life experiences. In locating the ‘ethnic revival’ of the late twentieth century in the mechanics of ‘uneven development’ (of capitalism, of industrialism), they offer interpretations which stress only the reactive properties of ethnicity and the functionality of culture. These assumptions also inform Colley’s justly celebrated account of British patriotism as a post-1707 ‘invention’. However, in Colley’s case, it is open to question whether Britishness can really be characterised as purely the product of deliberate (ideological) invention and conscious exploitation.

Smith’s work represents a third approach challenging both primordialist and modernisation frameworks. While conceding that nations have certain distinctively modern features – a mass educational culture, an integrated economy and common legal rights and duties for all members – Smith argues that modern nations also require *pre-modern* ethnic foundations in order to mobilise and integrate diverse cultural and social elements (Smith 1988: 11). The unifying myths (of putative origins and descent), symbols and memories of pre-modern ethnic communities (which he calls *ethnies*) not only provide these foundations, but, more importantly, they shape actors’ perceptions of the antiquity and destiny of their communities (Smith 1986a: 129–52; 1991: 43–70). From this perspective, then, nations are ‘ethno-symbolic’ communities shaped by shared myths of origins and a sense of common history and territory (Smith 1986a). This suggests that Britishness operates on both a political and a cultural level at the same time.
At this point it must be stated that Smith deploys the concept ‘ethnicity’ not in the more common sense of the shifting ‘border markers’ that Fredrik Barth (1969) has discussed, nor even in a racial/biological sense. Rather, he uses this concept to refer to the sense of common historic culture and way of life amongst a given ethno-national community.

Because nations embody ethnic as well as civic components, Smith argues that they tend to form around pre-existing ‘ethnic cores’. The myths, symbols and cultural practices of these ethnic cores provide both nations and states with a history and a destiny, ‘for it is very often on the basis of such a core that states coalesce to form nations’ (Smith 1991: 39). And even though most nation-states today are polyethnic, many have been formed in the first place around a dominant *ethnie*, which annexed or attracted other ethnic groups into the state to which it gave a name and a cultural charter (Smith 1991: 39). Here, however, it is important to note that Smith is not positing a simple one-to-one correspondence between ethnic cores and nations. Rather, in saying that modern nation-states are largely built on the framework of pre-existing ethnic cultures, Smith is merely drawing attention to the historical fact that ‘the first nations [England, France, and Spain] which acted as models for many others, were built up by state élites on these ethnic foundations’ (Smith 1988: 12).

The case for the ‘ethnic origins of nations’ is a complex one. For present purposes, the crucial point of Smith’s argument is that in a world dominated by the problem of ‘national congruence’, states which have been able to build their official cultures on the ethnicity of a demographically dominant and cohesive ethnic core are likely to be more stable than states that are divided by the rival histories and traditions of competing ethno-national communities. In other words, states that cannot be associated with the pedigree and fortunes of a dominant ethnic community are open to potential challenges from alternative ethnic solidarities.

Smith himself looks towards developments in the British Isles for an example of the indispensability of an ethnic core in state- and nation-formation. He claims that by the fifteenth century one can speak of a relatively culturally homogeneous ‘aristocratic’ English *ethnie*, whose myths of origin and descent formed the core of the English kingdom. During the Tudor period, these myths of ethnic descent were primarily supplied by Geoffrey of Monmouth’s late-twelfth-century chronicle of the ‘Ancient Kings of Britain’. By the mid-seventeenth century, these legends of an island inhabited by an ancient race of independent ‘Britons’ were supplemented by an Anglo-Saxon mythology which traced the origins of the English back to the Germanic tribes and their ancient liberties and ‘free’ institutions. As the English dynastic state became more centralised and bureaucratic, it attempted to incorporate the middle classes and outlying ethnic groups through military, fiscal and administrative processes (Smith 1986b: 245–47; 1991: 38–9, 55–7). Still, although these processes of ‘bureaucratic incorporation’ typically involved accommodations between
the dominant and peripheral ethnic cultures, it was the myths and culture of the dominant aristocratic core that set its mark on the state (Smith 1991: 55). In other words, the English have given the state its cultural heritage and political traditions, even where it has taken on elements from Wales and Scotland.

This account of nation-formation draws attention to at least three interesting points. First, by combining a wider focus upon the ways in which pre-modern ethnicity has influenced the formation of modern nations (and states), with an attention to the civic components that emerge in more recent periods of history, Smith provides an account of the rise of nations that is not mortgaged to the idea of a fundamental ‘transition’ from ‘pre-modernity’ to ‘modernity’. Perhaps more importantly, this dualistic conceptualisation of the nation suggests that national identities – in this case ‘Britishness’ – will combine both political and ethno-cultural elements. Second, the state played a large role in transforming the aristocratic English ethnie into a nation in this argument. Contrary to modernisation analyses, Smith argues that this is not solely or even primarily due to the deliberate ‘nation-building’ measures of state elites influenced by the doctrine of nationalism. Rather, this occurred only because of the availability of a core historic culture which the state could extend and deepen, to create over the next few centuries the relatively novel concept of the ‘mass citizen nation’ (Smith 1986b: 243 n30, 262–3; 1989: 352–3; 1991: 61). In any case, the first nations in part antedated the rise of nationalism. The English nation, therefore, emerged largely as an ‘unintended consequence’ of processes of bureaucratic incorporation by an aristocratic ethnie, ‘whose ruling classes could by no stretch of the imagination be called “nationalist”’ (Smith 1991: 100). Finally, this interpretation makes a positive correlation between the presence of cohesive and demographically dominant ethnic core communities and the cohesion of modern states. Given that the majority of contemporary states have multiethnic populations this is an important observation. It suggests that states without a stable ethnic foundation will be more susceptible to the destabilising effects of ethnic conflict arising from the tension between the claims of the ‘ethnic nation’ and the demands of the ‘state nation’. This is an interesting thesis that raises several questions, not least of which is the precise nature of the relationships between the British state and its dominant English core.

**English ethnicity**

What would we expect to find if we stripped Britishness back to its central values and institutions? If Smith is correct, we should expect to discover predominantly English historical myths, values and institutions at the core of Britishness. But, if this is indeed the case, how do the other ethnic populations within the state relate to Britishness? Does Britishness have
continued resonance for the Scots and the Welsh? Above all, is there a distinctive Englishness distinguishable from Britishness?

It is possible to address such questions of Britishness on two levels; namely, at the level of the state’s key integrating institutions and at the level of ethnic loyalties and identifications. But, before engaging with some of the evidence, it might not be amiss to venture some prefatory observations about the importance of notions of ethnicity for Englishness. Here there is a big problem – scholars have tended to skirt around this issue. If we were to believe the analyses of Hechter, Nairn and Colley, a topography of ethnicity in Britain would look something like a doughnut. English ethnicity is rendered invisible in these accounts: Hechter and Nairn, for instance, are more comfortable with explaining the ethnicity of the so-called ‘Celtic’ peripheries; while Colley’s account simply presents the English as the ‘core’ who equate Englishness and Britishness. In fact, Colley’s rendition of the construction of British identities during the eighteenth century represents a number of themes as ‘British’ which contemporaries may well have thought of as primarily English. The most obvious example in this regard is the Puritan depiction of England as a Protestant ‘elect nation’ blessed with superior freedoms and liberties and entrusted with a providential mission and destiny in world history as the exporter of the ‘true faith’. In doing so, Colley obscures the extent to which the development of a sense of Britishness depends on an older tradition of English patriotism and elite sense of English nationhood going back to the reign of Elizabeth I and England’s defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588.

This silence and apparent confusion on the part of scholars in relation to English ethnicity has led to characterisations of English nationalism which at best describe it as ‘weak’ and ‘indeterminate’, or, at worst, deny its existence altogether. This is remarkable; especially when, as it will be shown, the evidence seems to suggest that historically there has been a strong sense of Englishness (even though this ‘Englishness’ may have been defined in different and competing ways). What is Englishness? Is it a set of essential or inherent characteristics that belong to the English people? Or does it comprise a set of ‘cultural markers’ that are shaped (and re-shaped) in response to contact with significant ‘others’ (that is, a Barthian ‘boundary’ approach (Barth 1969: 9–38))? In short, is it a category or a relationship? A scrutiny of the content of the chief English ethnic myths that have achieved political and cultural saliency since the early modern period would suggest that Englishness is both a relationship and a category. That is, like all national identities, versions of Englishness consist at one and the same time of bundles of values, traits and stereotypes that are held to be intrinsic and unique to the English people, and which are measured against perceived external and internal significant ‘others’.

The coexistence of notions about ‘inheritance’ and ‘otherness’ in English self-identifications is perhaps most clear in the pivotal myth of the ‘Free-born Englishman’. The seventeenth-century conflicts between the king and
parliament put the rhetoric of ‘traditional’ English liberties at the heart of political discussion. Whilst spokesmen for parliament asserted ancient Anglo-Saxon traditions of independence and developed the doctrine of an ‘Ancient Constitution’ in order to defend their privileges against the encroachments of the crown, radicals developed a mythology of the free-born Englishman to claim political rights for all. This legend proclaimed that the duty of the English (English yeoman in particular), was to restore their rights allegedly lost by the imposition of the ‘Norman yoke’ in 1066 (Hill 1954: 11–66; Colls 1986: 29; Kohn 1940: 80–1; Pocock 1957, 1975: 105–6; Underdown 1996: 55–6). Variations on this theme of natural rights were widespread in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in writers from Tom Paine, William Cobbett, Richard Cobden and John Bright, to Benjamin Disraeli (Hill 1954: 42–60; Thompson 1988: 84–110). In fact, by the former date the theory of the ‘Norman yoke’ can be regarded as a ‘subversive genealogy’ with the dual function of demanding political reform by presenting the aristocracy as an ‘alien’ imposition (because descended from the Norman conquerors) upon the Anglo-Saxon middle and working classes. In short, it is an example of an ethnic myth of origin that is also class specific.

Based on an equation of Catholicism and absolutism, conservative and radical versions of a ‘golden age’ of Anglo-Saxon democracy contrasted the superior liberties enjoyed by the Protestant English to the tyrannical and weak form of liberty suffered by the French (Colley 1989: 169–87; Newman 1987: 75–7, 117–19). The foundations of this ethnocentric contrast are to be found in the earlier Protestant construction of Englishness that began to be articulated after the break with papal Rome in the Henrician Reformation. A religious mythology of ‘chosenness’ defined Englishness in opposition to the hostile Catholic states of Europe (France and Spain in particular) and provided the English with a sense of unique identity and destiny. This cosmology acquired a secular dimension after the ‘Glorious bloodless Revolution’, expanding to include parliamentary democracy as another one of England’s auspicious gifts to the world (Kohn 1940: 69–94; Greenfeld 1992: 42–66; Cressy 1994: 61–73). Eventually, this Whig reading of English history became one of the cornerstones of nineteenth-century Liberalism which presented itself as the historical incarnation of an ideal English freedom from 1688 (Colls 1986: 30–9).

These bases of English collective identity were cemented by a mortar of anti-French propaganda which propagated a series of ‘we–they’ oppositions (Colley 1996: 94–8; Newman 1987: 118–19). Gerald Newman’s study of English cultural nationalism during this period skilfully delineates the contours of this Francophobia which, he asserts, emerged forcefully in the 1740s largely in reaction to the neglect of native artistic, musical and literary talents by domestic elites (Newman 1987: 59–67). Over the next three decades, a sense of alien cultural invasion was linked with the idea of aristocratic cultural and moral betrayal, crystallising into ‘a cosmology
attacking national corruption and decay’ (1987: 59–60). Fears of the contamination and decline of national cultural identity from both external and internal enemies were taken up and reinforced by the numerous voluntary associations such as the Laudable Association of Anti-Gallicans and the Society of Arts (Colley 1989: 172–5; 1996: 95–7). The nativist, anti-cosmopolitan and anti-aristocratic charters of such associations provided a spur to the rediscovery of an idealised (Saxon) age of national greatness, an integral aspect of the effort to clarify and proclaim the unique virtues of the English national character. Hence, during the reign of George III we witness not only a revival of national authors such as Shakespeare and Milton, but also the creation of new English heroes such as Samuel Johnson and the Duke of Wellington (Newman 1987: 126).

Variations on these themes were prevalent throughout the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, by which time these accounts of ethnic chosenness, origins and political foundations were supported by numerous aesthetic, folkloric, pseudo-scholarly and scholarly researches into the Teutonic roots of the Anglo-Saxon race. These not only provided the English with heroic ancestors such as King Alfred – who was promoted during the Victorian era as an exemplar of bourgeois virtues – but also furnished historical continuities by glorifying public buildings and monuments like Westminster Abbey – the site of the coronation of Harold, the last Saxon king (Newman 1987: 119; Melman 1991: 578–81, 586). Moreover, racial notions of Saxonism received wide currency at Oxford University, especially during the 1860s – the decade when Mathew Arnold delivered his famous lectures characterising the Celtic races as lacking in the requisite capacities for good self-government, thus supplying a convenient racial/biological legitimation for English political hegemony within both the domestic and imperial spheres (Dodd 1986: 12–13).

In trying to bring English ethnicity to the fore, it is important to stress that my point is not that a single (biological) racial base for the English actually existed. Rather, I am asserting that an English ethnicity embodied in a number of customs, traditions, codes and styles has existed at least since the early modern period, and this provided the basis for the state-aided development of the British ‘nation’ during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It must also be stated that the ‘purity’ of any version of Englishness is drawn into question when we take into account earlier borrowings from the Celtic territories. In fact, English identities have from the beginning shared space with, and borrowed selectively from, an older Celtic notion of Britishness. The term ‘British’, which was associated with the early literature of the Welsh bards, figured prominently in the Arthurian legend adopted by the Tudor dynasty during the Wars of the Roses as a bridging and legitimating force. The conception of an island occupied by an ancient British race was later invoked during the Henrician Reformation as a justification for England’s break with Rome (Evans 1989: 17; Robbins 1995a: 250–1). Indeed, one of the most enduring symbols of
English identity is Shakespeare’s evocation of the ‘sceptr’d isle’. These appropriations compound the problem of a distinctly English identity. And, further, we find can striking statements about the ability and willingness of England to absorb foreigners and even take on ‘British’ components. A good example of this is Daniel Defoe’s much-cited satire on the myth of racial superiority – the *True-Born Englishman* – published in 1701, it was the most widely sold poem in English literature up to that time (Moore 1970: 348).

What do these recurring themes and motifs of English identities during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries demonstrate about Englishness? Taken together, these points suggest that historically several effective manifestations of Englishness have existed. This, of course, does not mean that it was a uniform and uncontested allegiance. As is true of all national identities, the meanings and saliency attached to Englishness are fluid and have varied considerably: it has at some times drawn upon Celtic sources, and at other times it has been conflated with Britishness (the myth of ‘our Island race’ for instance).

**Questions of Britishness**

Having established the difficulty of defining a distinctly English identity, we can now examine the relationship between English values and institutions and those of the British state.

Here one can argue that Britain’s key political structures – the crown, parliament and the unwritten constitution – are thoroughly English in character. This assertion is reasonably unproblematic in reference to Britain’s unwritten constitution. A similar point can be made in noting that the British parliament created by the Acts of Union between England and Scotland in 1707 ‘was in effect an enlarged English parliament to which the Scots sent forty-five MPs and sixteen elected peers’ (Levack 1987: 13). Britain’s parliament and constitution have English origins. But can the same be said for the British monarchy? During the period between 1603 and 1688, England and Scotland shared a monarch in the person of James I and VI and his Stuart successors until 1688. However, the crowns of England and Scotland remained distinct until they came under the same laws of succession in 1707 (Levack 1987: 52). Therefore, the British monarchy had both English and Scottish connections (not to mention later Dutch and German-Hanoverian ties). And to further complicate this picture, one must not forget the earlier Welsh connection represented by the accession of the nominally Welsh Tudor dynasty in 1485. But, since at least the nineteenth century, the main residence and symbolic centre of the monarchy has been Buckingham Palace in London.

Turning to the sphere of religion, the influence of English ecclesiastical institutions is similarly ambiguous. The point is that, on the surface,
Britain’s official state church is Anglican. Yet, when this picture is further examined, we find that there are actually two established churches within the state. The Acts of Security in 1707 established the Presbyterian church in Scotland and the Anglican church in England and Wales, and this remained the official religious composition of the state until disestablishment of the Church of England in Wales in 1914 (Levack 1987: 102, 134; Robbins 1995b: 63–4). It is also worthwhile noting here that Protestantism is central to Britain’s institutions of crown and parliament.

Did Britain’s economic and legal systems have an integrating effect for the English, Scots and the Welsh? Since the sixteenth century (and until very recently), Wales has been ruled in all religious, political, legal and economic matters as a dependency of England. The union with Scotland, on the other hand, preserved the integrity of Scottish judicial institutions, along with the bulk of Scottish private and criminal law. This has led to the remarkable coexistence of two distinct legal systems within the politically unitary state. One is based upon English common law, the other upon Roman law principles (Birch 1989: 77; Levack 1987: 13, 68–101; Seton-Watson 1977: 33). But the Anglo-Scottish union did have an integrating effect in the economic sphere – abolishing all internal customs duties and barriers between England and Scotland, and granting Scotland the right to trade freely with the English colonies (Colley 1996: 40; Levack 1987: 13, 138–68).

Overall, it seems that apart from some ambiguities in areas relating to the crown, religion and law, the British state established in the early eighteenth century was largely built upon pre-existing English institutions and governmental practices. It is more difficult, though, to assess the extent to which these institutional processes of incorporation created a unifying sense of Britishness amongst the ethnically diverse populations of the state.

On the one hand, sections of the Lowlands Scots and Welsh gentries did voluntarily assimilate to the culture of the state’s English ethnic core mainly because of what they could get in return – greater parity in the union for their respective countries and greater titles, jobs and pensions for themselves. For the Scottish ruling class, union also brought the prospect of greater political stability (Colley 1986: 111). These examples, taken together with patterns of intermarriage, point to the fact that a sense of ‘commonness’ may have existed amongst the upper strata of the population. This was aided by several other factors including the genuinely British character of industrialisation and the opportunities presented by the enterprise of empire, the experience of repeated warfare against France during the eighteenth century and the dissemination of English culture through the elite public schools that emerged in the first half of the nineteenth century (Colley 1996: 180–84; Crick 1989: 32; Samuel 1995: xvii). In fact the English network of public schools was one of the primary training grounds for producing an imperial governing class. According to Colley: ‘in the first half of the nineteenth century, sons of the peerage and the landed gentry
together made up fifty per cent of the pupils of all the major public schools’ (1996: 180). The other prime agency for the cultivation of imperial administrators and attitudes were the universities, especially Oxford and Cambridge. This was increasingly so after the introduction of a competitive system of entry for the Indian Civil Service as well as the Home Civil Service in 1855.22

On the other hand, it is doubtful whether the institutional processes of incorporation functioned in the same way for the lower strata of the population before the end of the nineteenth century and the introduction of compulsory mass education in the 1870s. The opportunities offered by empire and the colonies of settlement were largely limited to the upper and middle classes. As Robin Cohen has recently observed, ‘[e]ven the colonies of settlement were, for many working-class people, outposts that they were condemned to by poverty, unemployment, orphanhood, homelessness or a vicious judge’ (1994: 13). The existence of discriminatory legislation directed against Catholics and Nonconformists was one barrier to the perception of ‘Great Britain’ (and ‘Greater Britain’) as a common project to be invested in equally by the rich and the poor, the English, the Scottish and the Welsh alike. Yet, at the same time, many Welsh and Scottish working-class families ‘became British’ (in a sense) for prudential reasons: many perceiving the English language to be a ticket to geographical mobility and employment prospects (Colley 1986: 112). Moreover, this did not preclude the formation of a popular pride in being a subject of ‘Britain upon whose Empire the Sun never Sets’, as the jingoistic imperialism of the late nineteenth-century music hall attests.

The question of an overarching sense of Britishness is also obscured by the terminological problems associated with the word ‘Briton’. In the early eighteenth century ‘Britishness’ still had strong Welsh associations which drew upon the symbolism of the Arthurian legend (in part a result of its role in the Tudor’s legitimising programme), but, by the mid-eighteenth century, the Arthurian legacy of ‘Britishness’ had become associated with Scottishness (on account of its appropriation by the Scottish Stuart dynasty) (Kidd 1993: 205–6; Pittock 1991: 2–6). These myths – which revolved around themes of death and resurrection, exile and return – prophesied the return of a Welsh/Scottish heir of Arthur who would bring true peace to the kingdom of Britain in a reign of perpetual righteousness (Pittock 1991: 4–6). Indeed it is rather ironic to note that before the first public performance of God Save the King in 1745, different versions of the anthem had been circulating for well over half a century, mainly amongst Jacobites (Colley 1996: 46). These points suggest that, if institutional measures did create a British identity, then it was one that was dependent upon local and individual circumstances. What does this tell us about the relationship between Britishness and the ethnic identities of the English, the Scots and the Welsh?

The first point to be noted is that the institutional and cultural pluralism
of Britain suggests that state elites have never viewed Britishness in terms of an all-or-nothing concept designed to replace the ethnic loyalties of these peoples. Scotland’s religious and civil institutional structures that survived political union have certainly furnished a basis for a distinct Scottish identity. Moreover, at both national and imperial levels Britishness has always been defined more in terms of a common allegiance to the crown, rather than by any ethno-cultural homogeneity (Cohen 1994; Marshall 1995b; McCrone 1997). This, however, does not necessarily mean that consciousness of ‘being British’ is merely a political allegiance for the Scots or for the Welsh or the English. Instead, it is more the case that the ethnic populations of the British state have dual (or even multiple) political sentiments and historical memories. I argue that this can perhaps be thought about in terms of a ‘secondary British national consciousness’ which, in part, derives from shared cultural similarities (the English language is an obvious example), and means more than simply ‘complying with the dictates of a British state and assisting that state when it is in need’ (Levack 1987: 209).

This form of Britishness, constructed largely in English terms, usually receives its most forceful expression in times of external crisis, and is ‘perfectly compatible with a primary English, Scottish, or Welsh national consciousness’ (Levack 1987: 209). In other words, unlike the majority of Northern Irish Catholics, who were earlier excluded on the grounds of their religion, the majority of the Scots and Welsh find no incongruity in participating energetically in British public life and institutions (Hutchinson 1994: 152; Kearney 1991: 3). In this sense, Britishness appears to be an ‘added value’ that varies in intensity according to the prevailing circumstances. Thus, we find that at certain times Britishness also tends to have divisive consequences, most notably when there is a perception that the state is becoming ‘top-heavy’ in favour of England. Here lies the crux of the issue: the English basis of Britishness is the source of its greatest strength, as well as its greatest weakness. It ensures strong English support for the state, while simultaneously attenuating and ensuring the persistence of Scottish and Welsh national identities.

**Britishness or Englishness?**

Whilst further empirical research is required to chart the relationships between these dual loyalties, their existence and continued resonance (as indicated by the largely autonomist, rather than separatist, nature of contemporary Scottish and Welsh nationalisms) does appear to support Smith’s overall thesis. My preliminary observation is that they are the result of the long links of relation and interdependence between these territories. The shared historical experiences of war and the common mission provided by the British empire, which enabled a negotiation of the inherent English-
ness of the British state, have also been reinforced by a sense of territorial attachment to an ‘island’ homeland. 25

In the case of Britain, the presence of a relatively cohesive English ethnic core which is strongly identified with the state and its territories has contributed to state integrity. Yet this is not to say that Britishness is just Englishness writ large (despite the tendency of the English to conflate the two). As mentioned earlier, processes of bureaucratic incorporation – such as the inclusion of Scottish Highland regiments within the British army from the mid-eighteenth century – entailed a considerable measure of accommodation, cultural fusion and social intermingling. But a certain confusion on the part of the English over what is England and over the English/British distinction does appear to have contributed to the cohesion of the British state; that is, the English core has become ‘Britonised’. 26 This was not an inevitable process and the English at different times have railed against this – ‘Little England’ interpretations of the national essence in the late nineteenth century, for example, depicted the counties in the south-east of England as the repository of authentic English values which were uncorrupted by the perceived imperial cosmopolitan ethos of London and the racial degeneration and social decay of urban and industrial areas.27

There was, therefore, a collision of Englishness – defined in terms of rural localities – and Britishness – defined in imperial and urban industrial terms. A more fluid or ‘fuzzy’ relationship between Englishness and Britishness exists, in part, because the centre of economic, political and ideological power in Britain is London (and so England). This elasticity does not occur in Scotland and Wales where a sharper distinction with Britain tends to be drawn. In short, ‘Britain’ exists over and above the multinational structures of the state. Conceptualised in these terms the British national community is best conceived as ‘four nations and one’ (Kearney 1991: 4). How much longer this will continue to be so is a question (and fear) in the minds of many who await the implementation of Blair’s devolution measures in Scotland and Wales, and, in particular, the fragile peace process in Northern Ireland.

In conclusion, this line of approach suggests at least two points. The first is that modern states do not have to conform to the unitary, homogenised model of the ‘nation-state’ in order to be viable. The second is that Britishness should be approached as an allegiance that is held in addition to – rather than instead of – the often intense ethnic loyalties of the state’s inhabitants. This signals that there is not (and never has been) one single variant of Britishness. However, the relations between different varieties of Britishness and the factors that intensify or moderate these dual allegiances await further detailed and comparative study.
Notes


2 For a statement of the primordialist argument see Geertz, ed. (1963). For a sociobiological variant of this perspective see Van den Berghe (1978).


4 For other accounts of nations before the industrial age, see Armstrong (1982) and Reynolds (1984).

5 The reality (or otherwise) of antiquity is beside the point; what is important is a community’s belief that it has existed in time immemorial.

6 It is noteworthy that Smith’s formulation of ‘nation’ reconciles the two overlapping concepts of the nation that exist in the modern world: the ‘civic’ or ‘territorial’ nation of Western Europe, and the ‘ethnic’ or ‘genealogical’ nation found mainly outside the West. In bringing these together, and allowing for their different emphases, Smith presents a picture of the ‘nation’ that accords better with reality than the common attempt to oppose them.

7 For an ethnicist account of ‘nations before nationalism’ that operationalises a Barthian conception of ethnicity, see Armstrong (1982).

8 Smith, in fact, identifies two types of ethnie in the pre-modern era: ‘lateral’ or aristocratic, which develop round centralised states and tend to be socially confined to the upper strata of the population; and ‘vertical’ or demotic, which are usually subject communities whose values and institutions are sustained by an organised religion and tend to be diffused to all social strata. These basic kinds of ethnic core also furnish the main two routes by which nations have been created: ‘bureaucratic incorporation’ and ‘vernacular mobilisation’. See Smith (1986a: 129–52; 1989: 346–9; 1991: 52–4).


10 Smith proposes at least four major historical ‘routes’ to state and nation-formation: ‘the Western’ (prior to 1800), ‘the ethnic’ (1800–1914), ‘the immigrant’ (1914–45) and ‘the colonial’ (after 1945) (1986b: 241–2).

11 I use the word ‘largely’ here because elements of ‘design’ or ‘deliberation’ were present in Tudor and Stuart centralisation in opposition to papal Rome and Catholic Spain.

12 A neglect of the role of ethnic myths in Englishness is also apparent in the recent analysis of social historian Eric Evans (1995). Evans maintains that ‘neither Englishness nor Britishness is a separately identifiable phenomenon’ in the period c. 1790–1870 (1995: 243). It seems to me that Evans reaches this conclusion by essentially relegating issues of ethnicity to the margins. For instance, his discussion of one of the pivotal ethnic myths of Englishness – the free-born Englishman – is limited to a few brief sentences near the end of his essay (1995: 242). Moreover, in questioning the social penetration of Englishness and Britishness throughout this period, Evans overlooks two separate but related points. First, by restricting the definition of ‘nation’ to the mass citizen nations of the late nineteenth century, he ignores the existence of earlier elite versions of English patriotism. Second, Evans overlooks the possibility that these conceptions
of Englishness might have become ‘Britonised’ during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This is a process which Colley’s work unconsciously highlights, but which she herself neglects to mention.

13 The doctrine of the Ancient Constitution was held to be enshrined in Magna Carta and the Petition of Right as well as more generally in the ‘immemorial custom’ of common law (Pocock 1957: 34–5; Underdown 1996: 24–7).

14 Of course such myths of ‘ethnic election’ are not unique to the English. Many other communities in history – including Persians, Jews, Poles, Russians, Mexicans, the French, the Scottish and the Chinese – have also cultivated a belief that they are a ‘chosen people’. The sense of uniqueness and mission supplied by a belief in election has been identified by Smith (1992) as a crucial factor in ensuring long-term ethnic survival. Nevertheless, it is worth noting in this context that the influence of John Foxe’s memorialisation of the origins and sufferings of the Church of England in the Book of Martyrs (1563) was perhaps only second to that of the Bible in sixteenth and seventeenth-century England (Colley 1996: 27–8; Greenfeld 1992: 60–3).

15 No great feats of imagination are required to see how these ideas could be adapted to justify the primarily secular mission of empire in the nineteenth century.

16 The concerns of such associations with national trade and culture are clear in the full title of the Society of Arts: ‘The Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Commerce, and Manufactures in Great Britain’ (Colley 1996: 96).

17 The origins of this simplistic contrast between the ‘advanced’ Anglo-Saxons and the backward ‘barbarian’ Celts have recently been traced by John Gillingham to the twelfth-century historian William of Malmesbury (1995: 59–60). It would therefore seem to be the case that self-definition by opposition has been an ever-present feature of the interactions between the ethnic communities of the British Isles.

18 This over-used epithet was, of course, a very thinly disguised political claim to English suzerainty over the entire island mainland.

19 Levack claims that ‘[i]n order to bring this new institution into existence Queen Anne simply proclaimed that the current English parliament, which had assembled in 1705, was now, with the addition of the Scottish members, the parliament of Great Britain’ (1987: 13). Though it must be noted here that the assertion of constitutional and parliamentary continuity is not wholly unproblematic. See MacCormick (1998).

20 The instalment of a Protestant Germanic dynasty on the throne goes some way to explaining the resort to Anglo-Saxon histories during the eighteenth century.

21 The fact that the British state puts its monarch on its stamps in place of its name also says a great deal about the nature of the state and its self-image.

22 For the long historic association between Oxford and empire, see Symonds (1986).

23 A less well-known example would be the Anglo-British histories of the eighteenth-century Scottish whig historians discussed by Kidd (1993).

24 I am indebted to John Hutchinson for bringing this point to my attention.


26 Cohen (1994) conceptualises this confusion and ambiguity in terms of a ‘fuzzy internal frontier’.

References


