

CHAPTER I

What Is Britain?

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All nations are fictions, but some are more believable than others.¹

I

At five in the morning on 15 July 2020 a truck arrived at Colston Avenue in Bristol carrying a life-sized statue of a female figure. A small group of people in hi-vis jackets installed the statue on a nearby plinth. The next day, a team of workers was sent by the Bristol city authorities to remove the statue, restoring the plinth to its previous, vacant condition. The woman featured in the statue that so fleetingly stood on Colston Avenue was Jen Reid. Reid had attended a protest in the previous month, during the course of which the original statue that had stood on the plinth had been torn down and taken to Bristol harbour, where it was thrown in the sea. That statue had been put in place in 1895, with the plinth bearing a plaque indicating that it was '[e]rected by citizens of Bristol as a memorial of one of the most virtuous and wise sons of their city'.² The particular son of Bristol in question was Edward Colston (1636–1721), after whom Colston Avenue is itself named. In commissioning the statue, the Victorian citizens of Bristol were celebrating Colston's extensive philanthropic legacy in the city, but the protest in which Reid took part focused on another, bleaker aspect of his life. Colston had wide-ranging business interests, with many of them centred on the Royal African Company, of which he became a member in 1680, later serving as its Deputy

¹ Darran Anderson, 'Time Moves Both Ways', in James Conor Patterson (ed.), *The New Frontier: Reflections from the Irish Border* (Dublin: New Island, 2021), p. 12.

² For full details of the Colston statue, see the Historic England listing at <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1202137>. For the Jen Reid statue, see Aindra Emelife's article in the *Guardian*, 15 July 2020, at www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/jul/15/marc-quinn-statue-colston-jen-reid-black-lives-matter-bristol.

Governor.³ The Company had been founded in 1672 and, as David Olusoga has noted, it

was responsible for transporting and enslaving more Africans than any other company in British history. More than any other institution it established Britain as a key player in the transatlantic slave trade, setting her on an upward trajectory that, by the eighteenth century, would enable her to become the dominant slave-trading power in Europe.⁴

The tearing down of the Colston statue was inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement and was a response to the history of British involvement in slavery and the vast profits that accrued from it – profits that flowed into cities such as Bristol that were heavily involved in the ‘triangular trade’ between Britain, Africa and, primarily, the Caribbean. The transatlantic element of this trade is estimated to have involved the displacement and enslavement of 6 million people, about 40 per cent of whom were transported in British ships.⁵

After Colston’s statue had been toppled, Jen Reid had climbed up onto the empty plinth and had stood there briefly, giving a ‘Black Power’ salute. An image of her standing in this pose was seen by the artist Marc Quinn, who worked with her to produce a statue that recreated the moment, and it was this sculpture that was then installed on the plinth in the early-morning hours of 15 July.⁶ Reid herself observed of her statue: ‘This sculpture is about making a stand for my mother, for my daughter, for Black people like me. It’s about Black children seeing it up there. It’s something to feel proud of, to have a sense of belonging, because we actually do belong here and we’re not going anywhere.’⁷

The history of the Colston and Reid statues raises several important questions that are central to the concerns of the current volume. Reid’s assertion of belonging is potent, and it resonates with the question of *who* exactly constitutes the British nation. In *The Clamour of Nationalism*, Sivamohan Valluvan argues that ‘while nationalism is, of course, to some degree always about belonging, it does also draw much of its purpose and

³ See Colston’s *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (ODNB)* entry: <https://doi.org/10.1093/odnb/5996>.

⁴ David Olusoga, *Black and British: A Forgotten History* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2016), p. 73.

⁵ See James Vernon, *Modern Britain 1750 to the Present* (Cambridge History of Britain, vol. IV) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 82–3.

⁶ The question of Quinn’s role in the project – as a white, male artist – was not without controversy. See, for instance, Kadish Morris’s astringent critique in ‘Marc Quinn’s Black Lives Matter Statue Is Not Solidarity’, <https://artreview.com/marc-quinn-black-lives-matter-statue-is-not-solidarity/>.

⁷ Quoted from www.stylist.co.uk/people/jen-reid-black-lives-matter-activist-statue-edward-colston-bristol-marc-quinn/408167.

sense through identifying iconic figures of non-belonging'.⁸ Those populations who were on the receiving end of the imperialist project – including a slave trade that guaranteed, to coin a phrase, 'the wealth of the nation' in Britain – were systematically subjected precisely to a policy of enforced non-belonging. The mindset of British imperialism was that distant populations neither had a claim on the metropolitan centre nor could they possibly have any shaping influence on it.

This mindset proved to be of enduring force. In 1948, with the high period of empire already coming to an end, the Westminster parliament passed a British Nationality Act that granted citizenship to those born in both the former and the then-current colonies, thus theoretically offering them the possibility of formal incorporation within the British national community. Those who availed themselves of this right quickly found, however, that that community, as already constituted, was not exactly welcoming of colonial migrants. In the same year as the British Nationality Act was passed, the *Empire Windrush* arrived in London carrying immigrants from the West Indies – an event discussed by J. Dillon Brown in Chapter 15 in this volume. Among those disembarking from the ship was the Trinidadian calypso singer Aldwyn Roberts, who performed and recorded under the stage name 'Lord Kitchener' – a resonant choice of name given the historical Lord Kitchener's iconic role in the 'Kitchener Wants You' British Army recruitment poster at the beginning of the First World War. As he disembarked from the *Windrush*, Roberts was filmed by Pathé News singing one of his own songs, 'London Is the Place for Me', which he had written during the course of the *Windrush* voyage. It included the following verse:

To live in London you are really comfortable
Because the English people are very much sociable
They take you here and they take you there
And they make you feel like a millionaire
London: that's the place for me.⁹

Before long, however, it became clear to those who arrived on the *Windrush* (and to those who followed them over the years) that, in many respects, Britain did not, in fact, want them, nor was London – or

⁸ Sivamohan Valluvan, *The Clamour of Nationalism: Race and Nation in Twenty-First-Century Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), p. 37.

⁹ A segment of the Pathé footage is included in a documentary clip available on YouTube at www.youtube.com/watch?v=7AprO_Zi3LM. The complete song is available on Spotify, and also on YouTube at www.youtube.com/watch?v=dGt21q1AjuI.

anywhere else in Britain – a particularly welcoming place for immigrants from the ex-colonies.¹⁰ Later in his career Roberts would write a very different kind of song about the experience of living in the UK, with far starker lyrics:

If you're brown, they say you can't stick around.
If you're white, well everything's all right.
If your skin is dark, no use you try:
You've got to suffer until you die.¹¹

The British-born descendants of the earliest migrants oftentimes fared little better than their elders. The Conservative politician Enoch Powell once insisted that '[t]he West Indian or Asian does not, by being born in England become an Englishman', and while Powell is often seen historically as an ideological outlier, nevertheless it is commonly the case that conceptions of British national identity are framed – as in Powell's formulation – in ways that are specifically intended to be exclusionary.¹² Thus, for instance, in more recent times, the former British prime minister John Major offered a vision of Britain as a 'country of long shadows on county [cricket] grounds, warm beer, invincible green suburbs, dog lovers and pools fillers'.¹³ Major's speech was reported in the *Independent* newspaper at the time under the headline 'What a Load of Tosh', but what is striking about it – beyond how unspeakably dreary Major makes Britain sound – is how narrow his vision of the nation is. There is no room here for any cultures that might exist beyond the numbingly ordered, sedate white suburbs.

¹⁰ Over time, the provisions of the 1948 British Nationality Act would be significantly altered by successive pieces of new legislation, which increasingly eroded the settlement rights of citizens of Britain's former colonies. The 'Windrush generation' continues, of course, to suffer significant disadvantage at the hands of the British state – see, for instance, www.bbc.com/news/uk-57271540 and www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/jul/07/at-least-five-who-applied-for-windrush-compensation-die-before-receiving-it.

¹¹ The song – 'If You're Brown' – is available on Spotify, and on YouTube at www.youtube.com/watch?v=opRinj15Byw. Roberts himself did, in fact, have a reasonably successful career in England before returning to Trinidad later in life. For details, see Philip Carter's *ODNB* entry: <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/73811>.

¹² Quoted in Olusoga, p. 513. It is, in fact, questionable whether it is accurate to see Powell as an 'outlier' – Olusoga notes that a Gallup poll conducted in April 1968 indicated that 74 per cent of those questioned expressed support for the sentiments articulated in Powell's infamous 'rivers of blood' speech (p. 513). On Powell's career more generally, see Paul Corthorn, *Enoch Powell: Politics and Ideas in Modern Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

¹³ See www.independent.co.uk/voices/leading-article-what-a-load-of-tosh-1457335.html. 'Pools' here refers to a prize competition based on predicting sets of scores for professional football (soccer) games. At one time extremely popular, general interest in the pools declined with the introduction of the British National Lottery in 1994, though the competition still survives in a residual form.

We gain a sense from Major's speech – with its faux-arcadian focus – of the fact that race is not the only vector of 'non-belonging' when it comes to how the nation is conceived. In this regard, we might register a link from the Jen Reid statue in Bristol to an earlier London project of Marc Quinn's in which he placed a sculpture of a naked and pregnant Alison Lapper on the vacant 'fourth plinth' in Trafalgar Square. This plinth had originally been intended to carry a statue of William IV but had sat unused for more than a century and a half after the funds raised for the statue itself proved insufficient. Quinn became the first in a series of contemporary artists invited to provide a piece for temporary exhibition at the site. Lapper, the subject of Quinn's statue, is herself an artist. She has phocomelia, as a result of which she was born without arms and with foreshortened legs. For a statue of a pregnant woman artist with a disability to be placed in such an iconic location – a location dominated by the crudely symbolic assertion of male-gendered militaristic national potency embodied in Nelson's Column – is a strikingly bold attempt to situate at the heart of the metropolis a figure whose intersectionality makes her emblematic of multiple communities traditionally excluded from conceptions of the nation and its symbolic representation – communities the Irish writer Rosaleen McDonagh has brilliantly gathered under the embracing term 'the unsettled'. McDonagh is a member of the Traveller community and thus is, in a narrow sense, not aligned with the 'settled' community; she also has cerebral palsy and thus, for her, as she writes, 'the word "intersectionality" [is] something other than an abstract academic term'.¹⁴ In its various incarnations over the centuries, the British nation has rarely afforded a central place to women, or to those with disabilities, to members of the Traveller community, or indeed to the working classes or those who do not conform to heteronormative understandings of sexual and gender identity. For centuries, the official discourse of the nation has tended to place these groups at the margins, where, in many instances, they serve, together with the colonised, the enslaved, migrants and refugees, as emblems precisely of what the nation is *not*: it is not Black, foreign, female, disabled, impoverished or – as Brian Lewis makes clear in Chapter 18 – Queer. Projects such as the Reid and Lapper statues set out to challenge and correct this narrative.

These statues, then, and their locational contexts raise important questions about culture and its relation to conceptions of national identity. Culture can serve to create, sanction and endorse an officially approved

¹⁴ Rosaleen McDonagh, *Unsettled* (Dublin: Skein, 2021), p. 25.

understanding of the nation, as in the case of the Colston and Nelson statues, or it can serve to challenge and reimagine that understanding. This dual aspect of the relationship between culture and the nation can be brought further into focus by considering contrasting, related works by two British authors. Firstly, we might take the instance of James Thomson (1700–1748). Thomson was one of the most popular British writers from the middle decades of the eighteenth century into the early decades of the nineteenth century. His extended poem *Seasons* was, for instance, reprinted more than 400 times between the first appearance of its complete text in 1730 and the closing decades of the nineteenth century.¹⁵ In the year immediately before the full text of the *Seasons* appeared Thomson published the poem *Britannia*, in which he exhorted the British navy to ‘rise! . . . And as you ride sublimely round the World’

Make every Vessel stoop, make every State
At once their Welfare and their Duty know.
This is your Glory; this your Wisdom; this
The native Power for which you were design’d
By *Fate*, when *Fate* design’d the firmest State,
That e’er was seated on the subject Sea.¹⁶

Thomson reprised these bullish, patriotic sentiments at a later point in his career when he wrote the lyrics to a rather better-known text: ‘Rule Britannia’, which has, of course, for centuries served as a prime totemic anthem of British nationalism, supremacy and exceptionalism.¹⁷

In those places where ‘Rule Britannia’ is sung with the greatest flag-waving fervour – the BBC’s annual ‘Last Night of the Proms’ event at the Royal Albert Hall, for instance – it is often coupled with ‘Jerusalem’, a song with lyrics by another British poet: William Blake. Those who participate in such events often think of Blake’s text as occupying precisely the same patriotic ground as Thomson’s national panegyric, except that, by contrast with Thomson’s focus on Britain, Blake is more narrowly concerned specifically with his native England (Thomson, by contrast, was Scottish). Where Shakespeare’s John of Gaunt in *Richard II* famously imagines England as ‘This other Eden, demi-paradise’ (II.i.42), Blake’s

¹⁵ See his *ODNB* entry: <https://doi.org/10.1093/refodnb/27306>.

¹⁶ [James Thomson], *Britannia A Poem* (London: T. Warner, 1729), p. 11.

¹⁷ David Armitage, in *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), has described Thomson as ‘the aggressively Anglicising son of a Scottish Whig mother and a Lowland Presbyterian minister father’ (p. 173), but Gerard Carruthers offers a rather more nuanced view of his relationship with British nationalism in *Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), pp. 84–5.

text advances further still, asking whether it may be possible that ‘the holy Lamb of God’ might himself actually have been seen ‘On England’s pleasant pastures’ and whether ‘the Countenance Divine’ might ‘Shine forth upon our clouded hills’.¹⁸ England is thus not, as in Gaunt’s speech, an *equivalent* to the Garden of Eden; rather, it is potentially *itself* sacred ground – habitation of the divinity – thus making the English themselves God’s own chosen people.

What those waving their Union flags at the Albert Hall and elsewhere typically tend to miss, however, is the complexity of Blake’s vision in ‘Jerusalem’. What he offers is, in fact, not a celebration of what England is, but rather of what it might be. Far from registering England’s present glories, Blake instead imagines what the nation could be if his compatriots could be persuaded to ‘buil[d] Jerusalem / In England’s green & pleasant Land’. But this will only happen through struggle: a struggle that requires ‘mental fight’, involving the deployment of metaphorical armaments – a ‘Bow of burning gold’, ‘Arrows of desire’, a ‘Chariot of fire’. These weapons are, we might say, significantly different in kind from the very real warships that Thomson calls on, in *Britannia*, to ‘Make every Vessel stoop’ in the face of British naval supremacy. By contrast with the exalted *potential* England of the future, the England of Blake’s own present time is actually a land represented in the poem synecdochally by ‘dark Satanic Mills’ – emblematic of the dehumanising industrialisation that was beginning to take hold during Blake’s own lifetime as the earliest phase of the Industrial Revolution got underway. It is, for Blake, partly the struggle against the forces of materialist exploitation that may potentially produce an England worthy of considering itself a new Jerusalem. The flag-waving version of the poem so often performed at public events in Britain thus represents a strong misreading of Blake’s text. Taking Thomson and Blake together, then, we can say that where Thomson’s text serves to confirm immediate orthodoxy, Blake’s, by contrast, places that orthodoxy under interrogation and calls for a refashioning of the nation in a better form.

II

When political, social and cultural forces place the manner in which the nation is conceived under interrogation it is often the case that a backlash follows from those invested in an orthodox reading of the national

¹⁸ William Blake, *Complete Writings with Variant Readings*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 480–1. All subsequent quotes are from p. 481.

narrative. Thus, for instance, when the Colston statue was torn down and thrown in Bristol harbour, Priti Patel, the British Home Secretary, condemned the incident as ‘utterly disgraceful’.¹⁹ Patel’s Conservative colleague, the MP Simon Clarke, took up the matter in a rather less heated manner on Twitter, cautioning that ‘[r]e-writing parts of . . . history, or seeking to erase them because they are painful . . . does not bring enlightenment’ and insisting that ‘[o]ur history is complex, as is inevitably the case for any nation state of at least 1,200 years’.²⁰ It is unlikely that anyone would disagree very much with Clarke’s assertion that ‘history is complex’. His invocation of the conjunction ‘nation state’ is rather more problematic, given that the two elements of the term sit in an intricate relation to one another and have their own distinctive histories. More problematic still is Clarke’s assertion that the ‘nation state’ of Britain (or perhaps he intends simply England) is ‘at least 1,200 years’ old. It is rather difficult to grasp quite what Clarke wished to signal with this figure, which does not really take us back to any particular major formative moment in the history of the island of Britain. We might say that Clarke drops us in a rather arbitrary spot, chronologically; we look around, find the Romans long gone, the Angles and Saxons with a few centuries under their belts and the Normans far off on the distant horizon.²¹ To borrow from Samuel Beckett: ‘Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes.’²² In fairness to Clarke, however, we can also say that the issue of when the nation – whether that be any particular nation or ‘the nation’, more abstractly, as a concept – comes into formation is a topic that has actually exercised political scientists and historians a great deal in recent decades. The issue was specifically brought into focus by Walker Connor in 1990, in his much-cited article ‘When Is a Nation?’.²³ The primary focus of this present section will be the question of when and how the British nation comes into being – and the ways in which conceptions of national identity and nationhood have shifted and evolved over a protracted period of time in Britain.

For some theorists, the nation as a political structure and nationalism as an ideologically driven praxis are products of a modernity prompted by the

¹⁹ See www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-bristol-52962356.

²⁰ <https://twitter.com/SimonClarkeMP/status/1270326461422088194?s=20>.

²¹ It is possible that Clarke may have had Bede’s *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (731) in mind as a foundational moment for the English nation, though, of course, Bede’s text did not in any sense at all initiate a ‘nation state’.

²² Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), p. 41.

²³ Walker Connor, ‘When Is a Nation?’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 13(1) (1990), 92–103.

social and political effects of the Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century. For these scholars, nations and nationalisms emerge belatedly in historical terms. Thus, for Ernest Gellner, nationalism is ‘the consequence of a new form of social organization’ in the high industrial era, and ‘it is nationalism which engenders nations, and not the other way round’.²⁴ This hard-modernist view has, however, been questioned by a number of other theorists, who argue that forms of national identity and of nationhood have existed over an extended period – albeit that these forms may have been significantly reconfigured and repurposed in the modern era. In a sense, uncoupling the two terms conjoined in Clarke’s tweet – ‘nation’ and ‘state’ – may point towards a useful way forward here, particularly in a British context, as it can help us to frame a distinction between structures of identity on the one hand and structures of governance and political control on the other.

Anthony D. Smith’s work is helpful in clarifying these distinctions. For Smith, ‘the modern era is no *tabula rasa*’, but rather national identity in the modern period is built upon pre-existing structures of group identity. Smith offers a useful image in helping to conceptualise this process of construction:

we may liken the nation to a kind of palimpsest, on whose parchment many different texts and messages from various epochs have been collated and written down, and which go on being written down to our own day and into the foreseeable future. The difference here is that older layers of writing are not wholly erased.²⁵

For Smith, the earliest layers of the palimpsest relate not to the nation, in the modern sense, but to what he styles the *ethnie*, which he defines as ‘a named human population with myths of common ancestry, shared historical memories, common elements of culture and a measure of solidarity’.²⁶ When Helen Fulton begins Chapter 2 of this volume with the question ‘When did Britain begin?’ the answer she offers is essentially framed in terms that resonate with Smith’s analysis, in that she explores the question of when, exactly, a mythology of common British ancestry starts to emerge, and she investigates how that narrative is constructed – and to what ends.

²⁴ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006; originally published 1983), pp. 46, 54.

²⁵ Anthony D. Smith, ‘The Genealogy of Nations: An Ethno-symbolic Approach’, in Atsuko Ichijo and Gordana Uzelac (eds), *When Is the Nation? Towards and Understanding of Theories of Nationalism* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 109.

²⁶ Smith, ‘Genealogy’, p. 99.

Krishan Kumar, in *The Making of English National Identity*, registers that one place where Englishness finds its roots, textually, is in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (731), which, as Kumar notes, 'first spoke of "the English" (*gens Anglorum*) as a single people'.²⁷ The concept, specifically, of Britishness is, by contrast, a later development. Though a *Historia Brittonum* (contentiously attributed to the eighth-century Welsh scholar Nennius) was in circulation from early in the ninth century, it was not until Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (completed by 1139) that a closely elaborated understanding specifically of Britishness first appeared. It is noteworthy that Geoffrey himself remains a rather shadowy figure, whose family lineage may actually ultimately have been Breton, forming part of 'the French-speaking élites [who had] settled on the Welsh border since 1066'.²⁸ Connected within French, Welsh and English familial and social networks, Geoffrey's own 'Britishness' is thus, we might say, complexly fashioned, illustrating, in itself, just how contingent notions of ethnic identity can be.

It was Geoffrey who provided the first extended attempt to offer the 'myths of common ancestry, shared historical memories, common elements of culture and a measure of solidarity' that Smith registers as the formative elements of an *ethnie*. Geoffrey elaborates an origin story found in nascent form in the *Historia Brittonum*, in which Brutus, a descendant of Aeneas, the hero of Virgil's *Aeneid*, ventures from Italy to an island off the coast of Europe, founding a new civilisation there and giving his name both to the island itself (Britain) and to its people (the Britons). The link back to the *Aeneid* is of particular importance here, since Virgil's poem was in part itself conceived as providing a narrative of origins. Like his descendant Brutus, Aeneas, a displaced Trojan, ventures abroad to found a new civilisation – Rome – which is ultimately destined to rise to prominence as a great power. The *Aeneid* is also, in its turn, articulated with another central mythological text, Homer's *Iliad*, which tells of the fall of Troy. Geoffrey was thus fashioning a deep mythological lineage for the British *ethnie* and offering that *ethnie* a sense of destiny, as the descendants of a civilisational line extending back through Rome to Troy.

Geoffrey did not, however, rely simply on classical mythology for his sense of British lineage. He also elaborated on and helped to popularise a native mythology in the form of the stories included in the legends

²⁷ Krishan Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 41.

²⁸ J. C. Crick, *ODNB* entry on Geoffrey: <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/10530>.

associated with King Arthur and his court, including the claim that the intractable Scots were subdued by Arthur, thus restoring the integrity of Britain as an island territory.²⁹ Arthurian legends were treated as factual history in Geoffrey's account, and they provided the Britons with a rich mythology located on native soil and would serve as a core element of British self-imagining for centuries to come, running like a continuous thread through the literary and cultural tradition: from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, through to Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, to Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, T. H. White's *The Once and Future King* and on to film versions of the story, such as John Boorman's *Excalibur*, and taking in, along the way, parodies such as *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. Geoffrey thus facilitated the British *ethnie's* self-definition in historical and mythological terms and also gave impetus to a cultural resource that would be repeatedly invoked and re-worked – even to the point of mockery – over time.

In the origin stories found in Geoffrey, the ultimate descendants of Brutus were the Welsh – the Britons who had been driven westward by the invading Romans. The centrality of Wales to the conception of the greater nation persisted in various ways in British self-imagining. Edward I (1239–1307) extended effective English control over Wales during the course of his reign, and his son, the future Edward II (1284–1327), was born at Caernarfon Castle in Gwynedd. The symbolic force of Edward II's being born in Wales led to the establishment of the tradition (continued to this day) whereby the heir apparent to the English/British throne is formally designated as the Prince of Wales. Though not all of Edward II's successors were Welsh by birth, Henry VII was, having been born at Pembroke Castle in 1457. Henry's Welsh birth was convenient in the context of what amounted to a break in the monarchical line, when Henry displaced the reigning monarch, Richard III, as king: in the context of this usurpation, the 'Welshness' of the Tudor dynasty founded by Henry VII could be traded on as a token of true British authenticity and legitimacy. As both Helen Fulton and Neil Rhodes note, Henry named his first-born son 'Arthur' in a gesture towards the dynasty's Welsh/British lineage.

Where Geoffrey helped to lay the foundations of a narrative of coherent identity for the British *ethnie*, the Tudors can be said to have instituted programmatic structures of governance and control, layering, as Anthony D. Smith might have it, a political and constitutional narrative onto the

²⁹ See Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), pp. 218–9.

cultural text inscribed on the national palimpsest. Or perhaps we might restate this by returning to Simon Clarke's binary and registering that the Tudors began the process of fashioning a state that might roughly coincide with the cultural and ethnic nation. From Henry VII's reign forward, the Tudor dynasty sought to extend its dominance more fully throughout its domains, subduing over-mighty subjects and seeking to bring neighbouring polities under its control. Wales was more fully brought within the ambit of the Tudor state through what were, in effect, acts of union in 1536 and 1543. As Krishan Kumar has noted, this legislation, 'by merging the Principality and the Marches of Wales, and by comprehensive extension of English law and administration in the region, effectively created a new constitutional as well as cultural entity'.³⁰ Turning to Scotland, we might note that, at the mid-point of the sixteenth century, what Walter Scott would – with a notable degree of understatement – term the 'Rough Wooing' combined military action against the Scots with an attempt to impose a match between the royal children Mary Stuart (later Mary Queen of Scots) and the future Edward VI of England. Though the attempt failed, it indicated an English desire to unite the entire island of Britain under a single monarchy. In the same period, concerted attempts were made fully to re-establish control in Ireland, which, as Jim Smyth notes in his chapter, had come under Cambro-Norman/English dominance in the late twelfth century. By the Tudor period, the area of English rule had effectively shrunk to Dublin and its immediate environs (the 'Pale'). During the reign of Henry VIII, under the auspices of a policy dubbed 'surrender and regrant', the Irish were effectively encouraged to re-imagine themselves as English. As part of this programme, native Irish aristocrats were to forswear their traditional Irish titles and ceremonially surrender their lands to the English monarch. In exchange they would receive English-style titles and have their lands returned to them as subjects of the monarch. The surrendering lords were also expected to adopt English dress styles, the English language and English law codes. This policy of the whole-scale re-engineering of national identity met with little long-term success and, by the close of the Tudor period, the English authorities had firmly committed themselves to a policy of colonisation as the best way of bringing the neighbouring island under control.

At precisely the time when successive Tudor monarchs were seeking to extend their area of control to the fullest extent possible across the two neighbouring islands, the conditions for the emergence of a more modern

³⁰ Kumar, *Making*, p. 138.

form of national imagining were also coalescing both in Britain itself and across Europe more generally. In his seminal study *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* Benedict Anderson identified a series of signal developments that contributed to the emergence of more clearly defined forms of national identity in many European territories in the early modern period.³¹ Central to Anderson's thesis is the fracturing effect of the Reformation on a pan-European Christendom and also, most crucially, the symbiotic relationship that was forged between the proponents of the Reformation and the publishing trade. Anderson notes that the new technology of printing facilitated the ready dissemination of Reformist ideas, with publishers in turn benefitting commercially from the demand for works of religious controversy. With many strands of the Reformist movement pressing the importance of a direct engagement with scripture, the printing of biblical and other religious texts in the vernacular became increasingly common in Protestant territories, bolstering a sense of the existence of particularist national language communities.

The question of exactly what form the vernacular should take when it was brought to print was, however, initially a vexed one in many areas. In 1490, for instance, William Caxton – the first English printer – complained that

our langage now vsed varyeth ferre from that. whiche was vsed and spoken whan I was borne / For we englysshe men / ben borne vnder the domynacyon of the mone. whiche is neuer stedfaste / but euer wauerynge / wexyng one season / and waneth & dyscreaseth another season / And that comyn englysshe that is spoken in one shyre varyeth from a nother.³²

In fact, however, the effect of the work of Caxton and those who followed him in the publishing trade in Britain led in itself, over time, to a gradual stabilisation and standardisation of English specifically as a print language, in the process shifting English away from being a language constantly, as Caxton observed, waxing and waning under the domination of the moon. In this manner, over the course of the early modern period, something like a 'comyn englysshe' was forged, shared at least by the national literate community. As Peter Burke has noted, 'a standard language, first for writing and later for speaking, helped to unify the area in which it was

³¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

³² *Here Fynnysheth the Boke Yf Enydos . . .* (STC 24796) (London: Caxton, 1490), n.p.

used'.³³ Colin Kidd has further argued that, in a larger geographical context, print culture also helped to reduce the differences between English and Scots (viewed as two distinct languages with a common root) since Scottish 'printers – and authors ambitious of a wider circulation for their works – began to iron out Scots diction and phraseology into a language more closely approximating to English'.³⁴ Thus, if attempts to erase the actual border between Scotland and the Tudor state ended in failure, we can say that the impress of the linguistic border was certainly lightened somewhat in the period.

These developments, collectively, facilitated the emergence of a distinctive national literature over the course of the (long) sixteenth century. As Anderson registers, religious publishing in the vernacular helped to create a more general market for secular vernacular texts, including literary works, and, at the same time, the gradual coalescence, through printing, of a more standard form of English laid the groundwork for a re-conceptualisation of the language as a worthy vehicle for literary composition at a national level. Edward Wilson-Lee and Neil Rhodes, in their Chapters 6 and 7, respectively, track the developments and debates through which a distinctive national literature was brought into being in England at this time. As both contributors indicate, Edmund Spenser might usefully be taken as an emblematic figure here. Spenser sought, in *The Faerie Queene*, to create his country's first truly national epic poem – something that could stand beside the work of Virgil and Homer. In drawing partly on the Arthurian narratives in creating his text, Spenser can be said to have given his epic a Britannic rather than simply a narrowly English cast, and he also brought his own early modern conception of national cultural identity into alignment with that of mediaeval precursors such as Geoffrey of Monmouth.³⁵ Spenser's declared aim in *The Faerie Queene* was 'to fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline', but we might, in fact, reframe this in political-cultural terms as a desire specifically to fashion *Britons*.³⁶ In a much later period, Massimo d'Azeglio is famously said to have observed, in the context of the unification of Italy: 'We have made

³³ Peter Burke, 'Nationalisms and Vernaculars, 1500–1800', in John Breuilly (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 29.

³⁴ Colin Kidd, *Union and Unionisms: Political Thought in Scotland, 1500–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 51.

³⁵ Ironically, in an age when the English language was, as we have seen, increasingly being modernised and standardised, Spenser, in order to forge a link between his own text and the past textual tradition, affected a form of archaism in his writing, causing Ben Jonson to observe sharply of him that he 'writ no language'.

³⁶ Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (London: William Ponsobnie, 1590), p. 591.

Italy, now we must make Italians.³⁷ We might see a similar process at play in Spenser's work: the Tudors had helped to create a political unit compounded of England and Wales, with Ireland being drawn into its orbit by virtue of colonial force (a venture in which Spenser himself enthusiastically participated), and with Scotland being thought of as a territory ripe for assimilation – whether by consent or coercion. Spenser helped to provide a mythologically rooted sense of cultural identity to those who belonged to this emerging political formation.

Spenser was a servant of the state in a multiple sense, in that he was a colonial functionary in Ireland and a primary objective of his major work was to forge a national narrative in celebration of the reigning monarch, Elizabeth I – herself partly figured in the character of Gloriana, the Faerie Queene. Like Spenser, Shakespeare was also a servant of the state: after 1603, when James I assumed patronage of Shakespeare's theatre company, the playwright was, quite literally, a 'King's Man'. But Shakespeare's relationship to the business of fashioning a national narrative was, we might say, rather more complex than Spenser's. Again and again he returned in his work to the question of how the nation is constituted. A notable instance is *Henry V* (c. 1599), a play that resonates in various ways with contemporary Tudor concerns. The Welsh note is sounded repeatedly throughout the play, through the inclusion of a Welsh character, Fluellen, but also through the insistence on the Welshness of Henry himself, born, like Henry VII, in Wales (at Monmouth Castle in Henry V's case). Speaking of the national symbol of Wales, Fluellen says to Henry 'I do believe your majesty takes no scorn to wear the leek upon St Tavy's [i.e. St David's] day', to which Henry replies 'I wear it for a memorable honour, / For I am Welsh, you know, good countryman' (IV. vii.91–4).³⁸ Henry is presented as a heroic figure, capable of unifying his realm and leading his army successfully in a campaign against the French, and the French themselves serve in the play as a convenient cypher against which Henry's compatriots can define themselves: the French are vain, arrogant, self-regarding, effeminate and over-confident, providing a foil to set off the virtues of Henry's own national community as valorous, pragmatic, manly and plain-spoken. But the play is also – in a characteristic Shakespearean fashion – shot through with contradictions and tensions that serve consistently to undermine any clear narrative of

³⁷ Quoted in Valluvan, *Clamour*, p. 13.

³⁸ Quotations from *Henry V* are taken from Andrew Gurr's New Cambridge Shakespeare edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

ideological orthodoxy. Thus, for instance, Henry's exalted, heroic speeches are invariably followed by demotic deflations. His great call to military valour – 'Once more unto the breach' (III.i.1) – is, for example, answered, less than fifty lines later in the text, by the searchingly honest mundanity of the Boy's 'Would I were in an ale-house in London' (III.ii.10). The play's national community is fundamentally fractured, and the high note of heroism can only be struck by systematically eliminating the lower-caste characters from inclusion in the national imaginary. In *2 Henry IV*, the youthful Henry, then Prince Hal, consorts with a miscellaneous crew of endearing Eastcheap rogues, but these figures are banished one by one from the world of the successor play: Falstaff dies offstage from the toes up; Bardolph is hanged; news comes from London that Doll Tearsheet is dead; and Pistol cuts a forlorn solitary figure at the last, as the play draws to its end. In *Henry V*, then, Shakespeare, we might say, sounds the high patriotic strains later to be heard in 'Rule Britannia' – and, indeed, the play's St Crispin's Day speech, with its resonant invocation of 'We few, we happy few, we band of brothers' (IV.iii.60), would become part of the canon of nationalist discourse.³⁹ Yet, at the same time, the play also registers the costs and consequences of such simplistic visions of the nation. The play offers both panegyric and interrogation in equal measure, leading one critic to compare it to a perceptual illusion that flickers between two different images.⁴⁰

In Shakespeare's play the nation can be said to exist in a state of tension. Nowhere in the text is this more apparent than in the 'four captains' scene, where Shakespeare offers an image of soldiers from the four distinct ethnic units in the island group, held together – but only barely – by their participation in the coalition of Henry's army. In historical terms, the scene is curiously anticipatory, since the play was most likely written in 1599, four years before James VI of Scotland ascended the throne in London as James I, thereby finally bringing Scotland within the ambit of the greater national state that the Tudors had been attempting to fashion over the course of the previous century. The 'union of the crowns' effected in James's person can be said to have offered, constitutionally, the first

³⁹ For example, in an extended account of the Brexit campaign, the journalist Sam Knight notes that, when victory for 'Leave' was confirmed, Daniel Hannan, one of the primary activists, 'stood on a desk in the office and delivered the St Crispin's Day speech from *Henry V* – "We few, we happy few, we band of brothers" – substituting the names of people who had worked on the campaign': Sam Knight, 'The Man Who Brought You Brexit', *Guardian*, 20 September 2016, www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/sep/29/daniel-hannan-the-man-who-brought-you-brexit.

⁴⁰ See Norman Rabkin, 'Rabbits, Ducks, and Henry V', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 283 (1977), 279–96.

version of what we now conceive of as a British 'United Kingdom'. In relation to Ireland, James embraced the colonialist policies of his Tudor predecessors, introducing Scottish (and English) settlers into Ulster, the area of the island most resistant to external rule. David Armitage has noted that Ulster 'provided James with a testing-ground for the creation of Britons', with the expectation being that the transplanted Scots and English might embrace an archipelagic identity and might also help to inculcate such an identity among the recalcitrant native Irish as well.⁴¹ James's principal law officer in Ireland, John Davies, expressed the hope at the time that the Irish would 'in tongue & heart becom *English*; so as there will bee no difference or distinction, but the Irish Sea betwixt vs' (Davies was, we might note, neither the first person nor the last to elide the difference between 'England/English' on the one hand and 'Britain/British' on the other).⁴² Commenting on projects of national imagining, Etienne Balibar has observed that 'the fundamental problem' in such projects 'is . . . to produce the people. More exactly it is to make the people *produce itself*.'⁴³ But the native Irish were, inevitably, unlikely ever to imagine themselves as loyal Britons when faced with the onslaught of a dispossessing colonial project, and, indeed, the Ulster plantation – and the greater colonial community in Ireland – would come under sustained pressure during a significant (though, in the long term, unsuccessful) uprising against colonial rule in 1641.

From the later decades of the sixteenth century the Irish had, in any case, an additional way of separating their own national identity from that of the emerging compound British state, in that, as a collective community, they rejected the Reformation, committing themselves instead to Roman orthodoxy. This religious divide served as a point of distinction between settlers and natives in Ireland. On the one hand, it facilitated a colonialist doctrine predicated on the inferiority of the 'backward-looking', unreformed Irish, but, on the other, it also served as a motive force for an enduring Irish sense of a national identity different from that of the colonial minority. Looking beyond this Irish distinctiveness, we might note that Linda Colley, in her classic study of British identity, has argued that Protestantism was itself one of the significant factors that increasingly

⁴¹ Armitage, *The Ideological Origins*, p. 58.

⁴² John Davies, *Discoverie of the True Causes why Ireland was Neuer Entirely Subdued . . .* (London: John Jaggard, 1612), sig. Mm2v. On the confusions and elisions of England/Britain, see also Helen Fulton's Chapter 2 in this volume.

⁴³ Etienne Balibar, 'The Nation Form: History and Ideology', *Review (Fernand Braudel Centre)*, 13(3) (1990), 329–62, p. 346.

came to provide a kind of identitarian 'glue' that served as a point of commonality for the greater British community. (As Gerard Carruthers points out in Chapter 3 of this volume, however, differences among the various *forms* of Protestantism in Britain presented their own problems). While Britain was not, Colley observes, 'a confessional state in any narrow sense . . . its laws proclaimed it to be a pluralist yet aggressively Protestant polity'.⁴⁴ Certainly, an extended series of events – the revolution of 1688 (discussed in relation to Milton by David Loewenstein in Chapter 8 of this volume), when the Catholic James II was displaced in favour of the Protestant ruling couple William III and Mary II; the Act of Settlement of 1701, which barred anyone Catholic (or anyone married to a Catholic) from inheriting or holding the crown; the imposition of a set of anti-Catholic 'penal laws' in Ireland from the early decades of the eighteenth century onward; and the crushing of uprisings in support of the descendants of James II in 1715 and at the Battle of Culloden in 1746 – all helped collectively to reinforce a sense of Britain as a state whose central unifying point of identity was its Protestantism. It was a form of identity that oftentimes drew strength from the fact that the British state was felt to be under threat from Catholic territories in continental Europe and from those allied with them (including, of course, the native Irish). As Colley notes, this sense of Protestant identity was reinforced partly through the medium of popular literary texts, many of which appealed specifically to a pan-British readership. Prime among these texts was John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*:

Published first in London between 1678 and 1684, it had reached its fifty-seventh edition there by 1789. Every self-respecting Scottish press issued its own editions as well, and there were Welsh-language editions in 1688, 1699, 1713, 1722, 1744, 1770 and 1790. Here, then, was [a] canonical text that was authentically British in its impact, and that appealed particularly to the subordinate classes. For Christian's and Christiana's companions on their perilous journey are in the main ordinary folk. Those who seek to prevent them from reaching the Heavenly City include – it is explicitly stated – Catholics.⁴⁵

Scotland's particular place in the composite British state was further cemented in 1707 with the Anglo-Scottish Act of Union. James Vernon has noted that, to secure the votes for the Scottish parliament to dissolve

⁴⁴ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837* (London: Pimlico, 2003; originally published Yale University Press, 1992), p. 19.

⁴⁵ Colley, *Britons*, p. 28.

itself and amalgamate with its Westminster counterpart, ‘£20,000 was sent north of the border and peerages and promotions liberally dispensed to supporters of Union’.⁴⁶ Likewise, T. M. Devine has observed that ‘the successful negotiations were carried out by a tiny patrician elite and resulted in a marriage of convenience passed through the Scottish Parliament in the teeth of both internal opposition and considerable external, popular hostility’.⁴⁷ Late in the eighteenth century, Robert Burns would complain, in ‘Such a Parcel of Rogues in a Nation’, that ‘We’re bought and sold for English gold.’⁴⁸ But, in fact, in many respects the benefits of union to Scotland can be said to have been considerable. Fifty years after the passing of the Act of Union, David Hume noted – if perhaps a little melancholically – the degree to which, in the wake of union, Scottish influence had been extended in cultural terms (including in the impact of Scottish Enlightenment thinkers, such as Hume himself):

Is it not strange that, at a time when we have lost our Princes, our Parliaments, our independent Government, even the Presence of our chief Nobility . . . is it not strange, I say, that, in these Circumstances, we shou’d really be the People most distinguished for Literature in Europe?⁴⁹

Beyond the cultural advantages that Hume perceived as coming to Scotland from union, there were also very distinct financial and commercial advantages, as Scotland established for itself a central role in the expanding British imperial project. Devine has noted that, for the eighteenth and much of the nineteenth centuries, ‘Scottish educators, physicians, soldiers, administrators, missionaries, engineers, scientists and merchants relentlessly penetrated every corner of the empire and beyond so that when the statistical record for virtually any area of professional employment is examined, Scots are seen to be over-represented.’⁵⁰ Imperial wealth also flowed back into Scottish centres of trade and manufacturing – increasingly so during the period of high industrialisation. Thus, as Alex Niven has observed, ‘powered by the twin engines of

⁴⁶ Vernon, *Modern Britain*, p. 8.

⁴⁷ T. M. Devine, ‘Three Hundred Years of the Anglo-Scottish Union’, in T. M. Devine (ed.), *Scotland and the Union, 1707–2007* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), p. 3.

⁴⁸ Andrew Noble and Patrick Scott Hogg (eds), *The Canongate Burns*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2003), p. 394.

⁴⁹ Quoted in Tom Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain* (London: Verso, 1981; first published 1977), p. 139.

⁵⁰ T. M. Devine, ‘The Break-up of Britain? Scotland and the End of Empire’, *Transactions of the RHS*, 16 (2006), 163–80, p. 169.

capitalism and imperialism, the UK was bound firmly together from the 1707 Acts of Union to the early 20th century'.⁵¹

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, as Scotland (or, at least, the middling to higher segments of Scottish society) accrued benefits from participation in the imperial project, the novelist Walter Scott offered highly popular nostalgic visions of a Scottish and broader British past. Scott was writing during a period when, elsewhere in Europe, traditional myths and legends were being recruited – particularly by those influenced by the thinking of figures such as Johann Gottfried Herder and the broader Romanticist movement – to foster a sense of distinct, separatist national identities among ethnic groups subject to domination by larger conglomerate polities. As Pascale Casanova has registered, the impulse of cultural thinkers such as Herder was 'to embrace a popular definition of literature and to collect specimens of the popular cultural practice of their countries in order to convert them into national capital'.⁵² In a British context, by contrast, Scott's narratives of the legendary past can be said to have aimed rather squarely at a form of nostalgic evocativeness. As Tom Nairn has noted in his seminal study *The Break-Up of Britain*: 'for Scott, the purpose of his unmatched evocation of a national past is never to revive it: that is, never to resuscitate it as part of political or social mobilization in the present On the contrary: his essential point is always that the past really is gone, beyond recall.'⁵³ Nairn's conclusion, specifically in relation to the reception of the work in Scotland itself, is that Scott 'showed [the Scots] both sentimentally and politically, how *not* to be nationalists during an age of political nationalism'.⁵⁴ The strategy may be thought of as having been broadly effective, with Scotland settling, for an extended period, into a broad, pragmatic acceptance of what Colin Kidd has nicely styled (adapting from Michael Billig) 'banal unionism', with the union becoming simply 'part of the wallpaper of Scottish political life'.⁵⁵ With a nod to the work of Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, Devine has characterised Scott as 'a brilliant pioneer in the invention of tradition'.⁵⁶ In this, we can

⁵¹ Alex Niven, 'Why the Covid Crisis Will Hasten the Break-Up of Britain', *New Statesman*, 19 August 2020, www.newstatesman.com/world/uk/2020/08/why-covid-crisis-will-hasten-break-britain.

⁵² Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 306.

⁵³ Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain*, p. 115. ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

⁵⁵ Kidd, *Union and Unionisms*, p. 24. See also Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage, 1995).

⁵⁶ Devine, 'Three Hundred', p. 10. See Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

see him as being something like a descendant of Geoffrey of Monmouth, providing a narrative of coherent identity for the British – a narrative that summons an imagined sense of past tradition in order to affirm present orthodoxy.

In the period during which Scott was writing, the notion of an extended tradition specifically of British literature was also beginning to come together. As William St Clair has argued, in *The Reading Nation and the Romantic Period*, the emergence of a canon of British literary texts in this period was closely tied in with developments in copyright law, which placed ever tighter restrictions on the reprinting of newer literary texts, meaning that reprint publishers came to rely increasingly on a standard and closely defined set of older works.⁵⁷ The forging of a national literary canon was further facilitated over the course of the nineteenth century by developments in education with the gradual extension of a state-sponsored primary and secondary school system (and, beyond this, the incorporation of English literature into the university curriculum). Late in the century, Matthew Arnold, writing in his capacity as a schools inspector, noted with pleasure: 'I find that of the specific subjects English literature . . . continues to be by far the most popular. I rejoice to find it so; there is no fact coming under my observation in the working of our elementary schools which gives me so much satisfaction.'⁵⁸ Arnold had, of course, in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), argued for the central role of literature in maintaining national coherence in an era when the common culture provided by religion was increasingly coming under threat, with the advancement of scientific knowledge and the spread of utilitarian doctrines.⁵⁹

For some, however, access to the national canon through education – and, beyond this, to a place in the national community that such access implied – was hard won and barely secured. Women's access to education (and, of course, to other aspects of full citizenship) was, in general, highly constrained, but the situation was particularly difficult for working-class women. Those who did manage to gain an education – oftentimes by cobbling together a miscellaneous set of opportunities of different

⁵⁷ See William St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁵⁸ Matthew Arnold, *Reports on Elementary Schools, 1852–1882*, ed. Francis Sandford (London: Macmillan, 1899), p. 225 (report for 1880).

⁵⁹ Gellner has also noted, rather sharply, the nature of the relationship between modern economics, religion and culture: 'a growth-bound economy dependent on cognitive innovation cannot seriously link its cultural machinery (which it needs unconditionally) to some doctrinal faith which rapidly becomes obsolete, and often ridiculous' (*Nations and Nationalism*, p. 135).

kinds – sometimes went on to write eloquently of their struggles. Mary Smith (1822–1889), for instance, met with considerable discouragement from her own mother, who ‘looked upon reading, even when I was a little child, as a species of idleness; very well for Sundays or evenings, when baby was asleep and I was not wanted for anything else’.⁶⁰ She managed, however, to become a prodigious reader, ultimately working as a school-teacher and founding a women’s suffrage society in Carlisle. Offered the opportunity of marriage, she turned it down on the grounds that she did not want to compromise her intellectual freedom and independence. Responding to the intermediary who had broached the marriage, she observed: “No, it’s no use. I cannot do that.” I could see all my intellectual castles falling with a crash, to rise no more. And, moreover, I had formed the opinion, that to marry for earthly advantage, without one’s affections being intertwined, was a foul blot which nothing could justify.’ Of her intended partner, she observed: ‘He’s not intellectual. What is marriage without happiness! The bare idea of it is dreadful to contemplate.’⁶¹

The high literary canon which readers such as Mary Smith sought out was also often deployed in this period in the service of the British imperial project. In writing a ‘Minute’ on education in India in 1835, Thomas Babington Macaulay argued vigorously that such education should be carried out through the medium of English, asserting that English ‘stands pre-eminent even among the languages of the West’, abounding ‘with works of the imagination not inferior to the noblest which Greece has bequeathed to us’. He further declares, rather extravagantly, that ‘the literature now extant in that language is of greater value than all the literature which three hundred years ago was extant in all the languages of the world together’.⁶² The objective of exposing the natives of India to a programme of such literature should be, in Macaulay’s view ‘to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern, – a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect’. In essence, the objective was to re-engineer Indian identity, re-fashioning it in accordance with British ideals – but without any expectation that Indians thus re-shaped could have any claim on actually joining the British national community; their role was to

⁶⁰ Mary Smith, *The Autobiography of Mary Smith, Schoolmistress and Nonconformist. A Fragment of a Life* (London: Bemrose & Sons, 1892), p. 26.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

⁶² www.columbia.edu/itc/mealc/pritchett/oogenerallinks/macaulay/txt_minute_education_1835.html.

be intermediaries – ‘mimic men’, as Homi Bhabha styles it – facilitating relations between the colonisers and the lower orders of the colonised.⁶³

While Macaulay wished to create Indian colonial intermediaries schooled, literally, in the cultural markers of British identity, the nineteenth century also witnessed further attempts to incorporate the Irish more fully into the British state. An uprising in 1798 – inspired by the republican doctrines of the French Revolution – had prompted the passing of an Irish Act of Union, which came into effect in 1801. Unlike the Scottish instance, however, formal union brought no very tangible benefits to the majority population in Ireland (the bulk of the penal law restrictions remained in force through the opening decades of the nineteenth century, for instance). Beyond the constitutional reconfiguration, a government-sponsored educational system sought to re-shape Irish identity in rather more subtle ways. In the *Second Book of Lessons for the Use of Schools*, for instance, pupils were told that ‘[t]he country you children live in is Ireland On the east of Ireland, is England, where the queen lives; many people who live in Ireland were born in England, and we speak the same language, and are called one nation.’⁶⁴ In the *Fourth Book of Lessons* students learned that ‘[t]he *British Empire* consists of the United Kingdom of Britain and Ireland, with extensive colonies in America, the East and West Indies, and Africa’.⁶⁵ Here Ireland, rather than being presented as being itself *subjected* to the British colonial project, is characterised instead as *co-possessor*, with Great Britain, of colonies overseas.⁶⁶

Like earlier attempts to inculcate a sense of British identity among the majority population in Ireland, these Victorian-era efforts also met with very limited success. In considering the work of Walter Scott, we noted that the impact of his work in Scotland ran counter to developments elsewhere in Europe, whereby the retrieval and dissemination of mythological and legendary material spurred the evolution of nationalist impulses among minority communities within larger-scale polities. By contrast with Scotland, Ireland did follow the pattern established in continental Europe. The cultural nationalist tide which swept through Europe in the 1840s

⁶³ See Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 87.

⁶⁴ *Second Book of Lessons for the Use of Schools* (Dublin: Published by Direction of the Commissioners of National Education in Ireland, 1847), p. 135.

⁶⁵ *Fourth Book of Lessons, for the Use of the Irish National Schools* (London: Printed by William Clowes, 1834), p. 84.

⁶⁶ For a more extensive treatment of this topic, see ch. 2 of the present writer’s *Ireland, Reading and Cultural Nationalism, 1790–1930: Bringing the Nation to Book* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

certainly reached Irish shores. The ‘Young Ireland’ group was founded in 1842, establishing its own newspaper – tellingly titled *The Nation* – in October of that year and sponsoring the publication of several volumes of patriotic ballad poetry. In 1848, during the ‘Springtime of Revolutions’ elsewhere in Europe, Ireland had its own uprising, albeit a bathetically small-scale affair that was immediately suppressed by the authorities, with the Young Ireland leaders being transported to Tasmania (at the time ‘Van Dieman’s Land’) as a result. But the nationalist movement continued to gather pace through the second half of the century and on into the twentieth century, with culture and politics being closely intertwined within the movement. W. B. Yeats can be seen as an emblematic figure here. Where his very earliest poetry was marked by the influence of writers such as Edmund Spenser, a growing friendship with the veteran nationalist leader John O’Leary led Yeats to the discovery of Irish mythology and legend and to a decisive turn to Irish subject matter and to a campaigning nationalism.

Among the explicitly nationalist works produced by Yeats early in his career was the short play *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, co-written with Augusta Gregory. In the brief drama an Old Woman calls at a country cottage soliciting help ‘putting the strangers out of [her] house’. She is, of course, a figure for Ireland, transformed, at the end of the play, into ‘a young girl [with] the walk of a queen’ by the sacrifice of the young men who lay down their lives in her cause.⁶⁷ The play proved highly popular, being widely performed by amateur theatre groups. Later in life, Yeats would ask, in ‘The Man and the Echo’ (in the process erasing Gregory’s role in the composition of the play): ‘Did that play of mine send out / Certain men the English shot?’⁶⁸ The certain men in question were those who – tiring of protracted attempts to secure devolutionary ‘Home Rule’ for Ireland – launched a separatist uprising in 1916. Though the rising itself was unsuccessful, it ultimately had the effect of inspiring a guerrilla campaign that saw the greater part of Ireland break away from the United Kingdom in 1922. This was, in essence, the first time since the Tudor period that the British state had contracted.

⁶⁷ Augusta Gregory and W. B. Yeats, *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* in *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats: Plays* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 90, 93.

⁶⁸ *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1989), p. 345. In a later period, Paul Muldoon would, with characteristically playful wit, respond in ‘7, Middagh Street’: ‘If Yeats had saved his pencil-lead / would certain men have stayed in bed?’ – *Poems 1968–1998* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p. 178.

The rump United Kingdom sought to maintain its own coherence in various ways in the decades that followed, though it was riven by its own internal divisions. One crucial rift was mapped out with extraordinary precision and clarity by Virginia Woolf in *Three Guineas* in 1938. Universal male suffrage had been introduced in 1918, with voting rights also being extended to women over thirty years of age. Full universal suffrage was finally introduced in 1928. However, as Woolf makes clear, the conceding of the right to vote, though significant, was a relatively small advance in the face of the extent to which women were still generally excluded from access to the mechanisms of power and influence within society and the state. She memorably visualises this systemic discrimination as being emblematised in a procession: ‘There it is then, before our eyes, the procession of the sons of educated men, ascending those pulpits, mounting those steps, passing in and out of those doors, preaching, teaching, administering justice, practising medicine, making money.’⁶⁹ The effect of this, Woolf noted, was to make the average woman feel excluded from the nation:

‘Our country,’ she will say, ‘throughout the greater part of its history has treated me as a slave; it has denied me education or any share in its possessions . . . in fact, as a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country.’⁷⁰

The male hegemony that Woolf registers here persisted, of course, for many decades after *Three Guineas* was written – indeed, in some crucial respects it has never truly been brought to an end.

Woolf’s comments were written in the context of the build up to the Second World War – indeed, her text was produced in response to being asked to support the anti-war movement. When the war came, however, it partly had the effect of lending the national community (including those women who went to work in the war industries and in other roles) something of a sense of purpose and identity in adversity. Certainly the British film industry at the time offered idealised versions of a national society united across regional and class divisions (see Gill Plain’s Chapter 14 in this volume). As many commentators have noted, in the aftermath of the war, the evolution of the welfare state – and the nationalisation initiatives that ran in parallel with it – had the effect both of bolstering the connections between the individual territories within the

⁶⁹ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own and Three Guineas*, ed. and Intro. by Michèle Barrett (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), p. 194.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 234.

United Kingdom and also of prompting a re-conceptualisation of the relationship between the citizen and the state.⁷¹ This became increasingly important as the British imperial territories gained their independence over time and Britain found itself retrenching more and more on home ground. Thus, Michael Keating has observed that ‘the welfare state both tapped into and reinforced a strong common social citizenship. Reflecting the shared *ethos*, the term “national” was used freely to describe UK-wide institutions, including the health service and state-owned industries.’⁷² Devine has noted, specifically in relation to Scotland, that, ‘as one of the poorer parts of the United Kingdom [it] was likely to gain more than other regions from the introduction of an interventionist social and economic policy’. ‘State support from cradle to grave’, Devine concludes, ‘became the new anchor of the Union state.’⁷³ Beyond these developments, Krishan Kumar has also noted the importance, in this period, of the trade union movement and the Labour Party in offering an integrative sense of greater British unity.⁷⁴

The welfare state and the various national institutions, industries and organisations that sat side by side with it can be said, in this period, to have effected a centripetal force, holding in check the potential centrifugal effect of individual nationalisms within Britain. This is not to say that there were not those who argued strongly from oppositional nationalist perspectives. Hugh MacDiarmid (pen name of Christopher Murray Grieve) might serve as a useful example here. Rejecting what he perceived as Anglicised language and literary forms, MacDiarmid pressed for the restoration of Lallans (‘Lowlands’), an archaising form of Scots, arguably analogous in point and effect to the synthetic form of English deployed by Spenser for national ends in *The Faerie Queene*. But, beyond his own poetic experiments, MacDiarmid’s programme achieved little real traction in the greater literary field. Likewise, in the realm of politics, nationalism remained, in essence, something of a minority sport – at least for much of the middle period of the twentieth century. Keating has noted, for instance, that, even in the 1980s, support for independence in Wales ran to only about 8 per cent.⁷⁵ The exception, as always, was Ireland, where the six north-east-most counties of the island had been retained as a semi-autonomous unit

⁷¹ For an engaging – if somewhat rose-tinted – reflection on these developments, see Ken Loach’s documentary *The Spirit of ‘45* (2013).

⁷² Michael Keating, *State and Nation in the United Kingdom: The Fractured Union* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), p. 35.

⁷³ Devine, ‘Break-Up’, p. 180. ⁷⁴ Kumar, *Making*, p. 236.

⁷⁵ Keating, *State and Nation*, p. 182.

within the United Kingdom. From the end of the 1960s onwards a civil rights movement within the (then) minority Catholic community, inspired by the work of Martin Luther King and by student protests in Paris and elsewhere, was violently suppressed by the local authorities, fuelling the rejuvenation of a separatist nationalism in the territory. The effects of this separatist campaign – and the reaction against it – would result in a period of profound instability in the region. The conflict was partially resolved by the Good Friday settlement of 1998, but even that agreement has failed to bring an end to questions about the territory's constitutional status – both within the greater British conglomeration and within the island of Ireland itself (see Chapter 21 of this volume).

One effect of the conflict in Northern Ireland was that it prompted an extraordinary flowering of literary work in Ireland. In the period of the immediate irruption of conflict, it was predominantly male writers, such as Seamus Heaney, Brian Friel and Ciaran Carson, who received the greatest public recognition for their work, with, for instance, Heaney being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995. In more recent times, a brilliant group of women writers from Northern Ireland – including Anna Burns, Lucy Caldwell, Jan Carson, Wendy Erskine, Louise Kennedy, Gail McConnell, Kerri ní Dochartaigh and many others – have turned again to the conflict, tracing its history and the manner in which it continues to impact on the present. Of particular interest here is the work of writers such as ní Dochartaigh, whose background spans the primary divide in Northern Ireland, as her mother was from a Catholic family and her father came from a Protestant background. This split identity effectively meant that ní Dochartaigh's family ultimately fitted into neither community – their house in a Protestant estate was firebombed, and they were subsequently obliged to leave a Catholic estate when their Protestant family connections came to light. This enforced liminal state prompted a serious meditation on ní Dochartaigh's part on the question of what, exactly, constitutes identity when accepted polarities do not wholly apply.⁷⁶

Returning to consider the greater cross-British historical narrative, we can say that the coming to power of the Thatcher government in 1979 led to a significant re-shaping of how the nation was constituted. The post-war settlement was immediately put under pressure, as the new administration

⁷⁶ See Kerri ní Dochartaigh, *Thin Places* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2021). Gail McConnell's *The Sun Is Open* (London: Penned in the Margins, 2021), which offers a complex meditation on the nationalist murder of her father, deputy governor of a jail for political prisoners in Northern Ireland, opens up a wholly new space in Irish writing.

engaged in a large-scale programme of privatisation of publicly owned companies, while also undermining some of the key elements of the welfare state – in the process, as Keating has noted, emptying ‘the concept of social citizenship of much of its meaning’.⁷⁷ These developments were compounded by a substantial contraction in manufacturing – which shrunk by 25 per cent in the first two years of the Thatcher administration – and by a significant rise in unemployment (from 1.3 million in 1979 to in excess of 3 million in 1983).⁷⁸ Where the post-war settlement had served to sustain – on the island of Britain at least – a reasonably broad consensus that the benefits of union were more attractive than any nationalist alternative, from the beginning of the Thatcher era onwards the tide gradually began to turn, and nationalist parties started to gain strength and momentum. By 1997, support for a significant re-configuration of the constitutional arrangements that had held for more than four centuries in the case of Wales and for almost three centuries in the case of Scotland was strong enough that referendums proposing the setting up of devolved administrations in both territories achieved positive results – albeit with a much higher level of support in Scotland (74 per cent for, 26 per cent against) than in Wales (50.3 per cent for, 49.7 per cent against).

The 300th anniversary of the Scottish Act of Union passed with little enough fanfare in 2007, and Neal Ascherson has nicely observed that, at the time, celebrating it ‘would have been like lighting a bonfire on a melting ice-floe’.⁷⁹ Though a referendum on full Scottish independence was defeated in 2014, support for the Scottish National Party rose in the wake of the vote, bolstering the party’s sense that if a further referendum could be engineered it might be winnable, particularly following Scotland’s decisive remain vote in the Brexit referendum. In 2021, another anniversary arrived: the centenary of the founding of the Northern Irish parliament at Stormont. The setting up of Stormont had cemented the north’s place as a semi-autonomous territory within the United Kingdom, securing it against the independence settlement applied in the rest of the island. There was an attempt to organise a commemoration of the centenary in Northern Ireland that, as the historian Eamon Phoenix has put it, would have celebrated the ‘golden thread running through British affairs, the Union of Britain, Northern Ireland and Scotland’, but, outside Unionist

⁷⁷ Keating, *State and Nation*, p. 195.

⁷⁸ For these statistics, see Ben Jackson and Robert Saunders, *Making Thatcher's Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 5–6.

⁷⁹ Neal Ascherson, ‘Future of an Unloved Union’, in Devine (ed.), *Scotland and the Union*, p. 228.

political circles in Northern Ireland, the initiative met with little real enthusiasm.⁸⁰ Northern Irish politicians had, in fact, more serious issues to deal with during the course of the centenary year, as the significant fallout from Brexit continued to rumble on in the territory. As Etain Tannam indicates in Chapter 19 of this volume, Brexit has added accelerant to the centrifugal forces that have been growing within the greater British conglomerate for some decades now, bringing us perhaps closer than we have ever been to the final sundering of an entity that has been cumulatively fashioned – culturally and politically – over a period of many centuries.

III

Almost exactly a year after Jen Reid took part in the Black Lives Matter protest at the site of the Colston statue in Bristol, another demonstration – of sorts – occurred some few hundred miles away, in London. On 18 June 2021, a group of Scottish football fans, fresh from watching their team gain a creditable 0–0 draw against England at Wembley Stadium, gathered around a statue of William Shakespeare in Leicester Square. Beers held aloft, pointing at the statue, they repeatedly chanted (to the tune of ‘Guantanamo’): ‘Shite Robbie Burns, / You’re just a shite Robbie Burns, / Shite Robbie Bu-urns, / You’re just a shite Robbie Bu-urns’.⁸¹ The incident was good natured – unlike Colston, Shakespeare was not dragged from his plinth to be thrown in the nearest body of water. The episode was not, exactly, a case of Marx’s dictum of history repeating itself, first as tragedy, then as farce – more a matter, perhaps, of cultural history spinning back on itself in a whimsically demotic fashion, oppositional nationalism confronting establishment orthodoxy through the medium of cheerily drunken pantomime comedy. No stranger to the whimsically demotic himself, Shakespeare might actually have cracked a wry smile at the episode.

The Shakespeare statue that the Scotland fans gathered around is, in fact, not an original but a copy, sculpted by Giovanni Fontana. The original on which it is based was created by the Flemish immigrant sculptor Peter Scheemakers, and it was erected in Poets’ Corner in

⁸⁰ Freya McClements, “‘My Passport’s Green’: Why Was Seamus Heaney Used in Northern Ireland Branding?”, *Irish Times*, 21 December 2020, www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/my-passport-s-green-why-was-seamus-heaney-used-in-northern-ireland-branding-1.4440679.

⁸¹ For a brief video clip of the incident, see https://twitter.com/fc_1869/status/1406352706344738818. My thanks to Sonya Gildea for bringing the clip to my attention.

Westminster Abbey in 1741. In the Abbey, the statue sits side by side with an impressively large monument to James Thomson – writer, as we have registered, of the lyrics to ‘Rule Britannia’. The Scottish fans in Leicester Square might have been tickled to know that, on the same wall in Westminster Abbey, is a bust of none other than Robert Burns, perched loftily above the English playwright. The Leicester Square copy of the Scheemakers statue has, in itself, an interesting history. It was commissioned by the financier Albert Grant, who had purchased Leicester Fields in 1874, at which point it was a ‘neglected area . . . occupied by dead cats and other refuse and surmounted by a broken statue of George I’.⁸² Grant proceeded to turn the area into a public square and garden – complete with Fontana’s statue of Shakespeare. But there is actually rather more to this story of public-spirited benefaction than meets the eye. The term ‘financier’ when applied to Grant hides rather a multitude. One account of his life describes him more accurately as a ‘fraudster’, noting that ‘most of the shares he promoted gave only minimal returns, and his investors suffered massive losses’.⁸³ Grant himself made money from these investment funds, but it was at times a precarious enough business, trying to keep one step ahead of the pyramid schemes as they collapsed. Ultimately, late in life, Grant was declared bankrupt.

If Albert Grant was not really a financier, he was not, in fact, really Albert Grant either. He had actually been born Abraham Zacharia Gottheimer, the son of a Jewish family from central Europe. Nor was Grant himself an English native. He was actually Irish by birth, his father having for a time run a shop on Fleet Street in Dublin, before moving the family to London. Joyce’s Leopold Bloom – another son of a middle-European Jewish emigrant father – embraced his Irishness, famously declaring, in response to the Citizen’s querulous ‘What is your nation if I may ask[?]’ in the ‘Cyclops’ episode of *Ulysses*, ‘Ireland . . . I was born here. Ireland.’⁸⁴ Instead of opting for an Irish identity, however, Gottheimer fashioned a fictitious creation, becoming a self-made *Briton*. Perhaps it was his own personal history, then, that helped him understand – very clearly – that the construction of identity is a complex business and requires the assemblage of many disparate components. And he grasped the importance specifically of culture to the process of

⁸² Quoted from Thomas Secombe’s *ODNB* entry for Grant (revised by Michael Reed): <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/11241>.

⁸³ Quoted from David Murphy’s *Dictionary of Irish Biography* entry: <https://doi.org/10.3318/dib.003572.vi>.

⁸⁴ James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 330.

fashioning identity. In turning Leicester Fields into Leicester Square he could, in including a statue in the plans for the public space, simply have restored the derelict statue of George I that already existed there. Had he considered the matter, re-establishing a statue of the European prince Georg Ludwig – who spoke virtually no English and who seemed much more at home in his native Hanover – might well have appealed to Grant/Gottheimer, as he might have recognised in George/Georg something of a kindred spirit. But, in fact, he opted instead for a statue of the British national poet, doubtless recognising the particular value attaching to symbols imbued specifically with cultural capital. In another gesture of cultural patronage, Grant also donated a painting by Edwin Landseer to the National Portrait Gallery in London.⁸⁵ Landseer was best known as a painter of animals – particularly dogs – and he also designed the lion sculptures that sit at the base of Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square. The painting that Grant gave the National Portrait Gallery was not, however, of an animal but of a writer – none other than Walter Scott. The painting dated from a visit Landseer paid to Scott in 1824 when, as Scott himself wrote to a friend, the painter had 'drawn every dog in the House but myself [and] is now at work upon me'.⁸⁶ Scott, as we have seen, knew a little something about re-fashioning the past for present ends, and Grant, like Scott, may be said also to have had a rather intuitive sense of what cultural notes to hit in creating identity. He would, we might feel, have understood perfectly well what Geoffrey of Monmouth – himself a man of composite identity – was attempting to do when, more than seven centuries earlier, he set about not, as in Grant's case, fashioning an *individual* Briton, but rather fashioning a whole nation of Britons.

⁸⁵ See the National Portrait Gallery's catalogue entry at www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portraitExtended/mw05671/Sir-Walter-Scott-1st-Bt.

⁸⁶ Quoted in Judith Bronkhurst and Richard Ormond's *ODNB* entry on Landseer: <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/15984>.