The British Isles

A History of Four Nations

Second edition

HUGH KEARNEY
For my wife, Kate
In this Ocean there happen to be two very large islands which are called Britannic, Albion and Ierna, bigger than any we have mentioned.

Aristotle, *De Mundo* c.iv
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Preface to the first edition

In the course of writing this book I came to owe a great deal to various friends and colleagues. In particular I wish to thank Rees Davies of University College, Aberystwyth, David Dumville of Cambridge University and Harry Dickinson of the University of Edinburgh for the time they gave to reading various portions of the typescript. I am especially grateful to the Master and Fellows of Peterhouse, Cambridge, and to the Governing Body of the University of Wales, who awarded me visiting fellowships in 1985. My stay in Aberystwyth was made particularly enjoyable thanks to the hospitality of Rees Davies, Gareth Williams, John Davidson, Martin Fitzpatrick and their wives. I wish also to express my gratitude to the University of Pittsburgh for granting me leave of absence during the Fall Term, 1985. At various times, I benefited from the encouragement of Janelle Greenberg of the University of Pittsburgh, John Pocock of Johns Hopkins University, Joseph Lee of University College, Cork, James Shiel of the University of Sussex and Lord Dacre of Glanton, erstwhile Master of Peterhouse. Brian Wormald, my friend and old supervisor at Peterhouse (1942–3), gave me many hours of his time forty years later. James Shiel provided the epigraph. Like many others I have incurred a debt to Linda Randall, Hazel Dunn and Maureen Ashby. Mr William Davies of Cambridge University Press has displayed patience and sympathy beyond the call of duty. My deepest debt, however, is to Kate, my wife for over thirty years, who encouraged me to persevere in an enterprise which underwent several strange metamorphoses.

Bury St Edmunds

Hugh Kearney

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Preface to the second edition

On St George’s Day 1993 John Major, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, addressed a group of the Conservative party as follows:

Fifty years from now Britain will still be the country of long shadows on county [cricket] grounds, warm beer, invincible green suburbs, dog lovers and pools fillers and – as George Orwell said – ‘old maids bicycling to Holy Communion through the morning mist’ – and – if we get our way Shakespeare still read in school. Britain will survive unamendable in all essentials. (quoted Richard Weight, *Patriots: National Identity in Britain 1940–2000*, London, 2002, p. 666)

This passage illustrates vividly the type of Anglo-centricity which I criticise in *The British Isles*. John Major refers to Britain, an island which encompasses Wales and Scotland, but the ‘Britain’ which he evokes is very much an idealised version of southern England. There is no hint here of the industrialised cities of northern England, South Wales and south-west Scotland with their commitment to football grounds set in grimly urban surroundings. Nor is there any hint of the way in which new ethnic groups are changing the ‘essentials’ of Britain, especially in the capital, London. Missing also from Major’s nostalgic musing is any sense that the most determinedly British element of the United Kingdom is to be found in Northern Ireland, where in some Unionist areas pavements are painted red, white and blue.

The Southern England of John Major’s vision undoubtedly exists. It is, however, merely part of a wider United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, whose history until recently also included that of ‘the British Isles’ as a whole. The various histories of Australia, Canada and New Zealand all reflect the impact of a wider ‘British Isles’ history in which English, Welsh, Irish and Scots ethnicities have interacted with one another. The history of the United States is also linked with that of ‘the British Isles’ from which Scots, Irish and Ulster Scots as well as Anglo-Saxons emigrated. Finally, immigration from the wider British empire of India, Pakistan, Africa and the Caribbean is now changing what Major calls the ‘essentials’ of Britain. ‘The old maids bicycling to Holy
Communion through the morning mist’ are very much an embattled species. Indeed, in modern Britain, there are as many worshippers attending the mosque as those the parish church.

What is becoming clearer is an awareness that the United Kingdom is not a nation state with a unique past (a ‘sonderweg’) but a multi-ethnic conglomerate whose shifting patterns of historical development resemble those of states such as Spain or the Habsburg Monarchy. The English scholar Gerald Brenan wrote a classic work entitled *The Spanish Labyrinth* (1940) which analysed the interaction of the various ‘nations’ of what we call ‘Spain’. It is this, in my view, which should be our model for histories of the United Kingdom rather than a comforting but now simple-minded recourse to ‘the Englishman and his History’. To say this, of course, is to take part in a debate which has a long history. (It may be followed in Hugh MacDougall’s brilliant short book *Racial Myth in English History: Trojans, Teutons and Anglo-Saxons* (1982.)

The title of this book is ‘The British Isles’, not ‘Britain’, in order to emphasise the multi-ethnic character of our intertwined histories. Almost inevitably many within the Irish Republic find it objectionable, much as Basques or Catalans resent the use of the term ‘Spain’. As Seamus Heaney put it when he objected to being included in an anthology of British Poetry:

Don’t be surprised
If I demur, for, be advised
My passport’s green.
No glass of ours was ever raised
To toast the Queen.

*(Open Letter, Field day Pamphlet no.2 1983)*

But what is the alternative to ‘The British Isles?’ Attempts to encourage the use of such terms as ‘The Atlantic Archipelago’ and ‘The Isles’ have met with criticism because of their vagueness. Perhaps one solution is to use ‘the British Isles’ in inverted commas (‘quotes’ in American usage). All this is not to say that a ‘British Isles’ approach is the only way of dealing with their complex interrelated history. It is misleading, for example, to ignore the different ways in which the four nations have been involved in Europe. Irish missionaries in particular played a key role during the so-called Dark Ages. After the Norman Conquest, England and, later, Scotland were closely involved in France. During the Reformation and Counter-Reformation period, England, Ireland and Scotland were all linked with Europe in various ways, although the experience of Ireland was very different from that of the other two nations. At a later period,
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the impact of the French Revolution was much greater in Ireland than elsewhere in the archipelago. Thus a ‘British Isles’ approach should not be taken as ruling out a European emphasis as the basis of alternative interpretations. At the time of writing, for example, it looks as if the Republic of Ireland is moving towards a more European future than that of a United Kingdom which is still coping with the challenges of its post-imperial past.

In preparing this new edition, I should like to record my thanks for their help to John Morrison, Proinsias O Drisceoil, Rees Davies and Gareth Williams as well as to Michael Watson, Isabelle Dambricourt and Carrie Cheek of Cambridge University Press, and to my keen-eyed copy-editor, Sue Dickinson. As before my wife, Kate, made an indispensable contribution.

Bardwell, 2005

HUGH KEARNEY
MAP: the British Isles