CHAPTER ONE

# The nation and nationalism

## I

Nation, ethnicity, nationalism and religion are four distinct and determinative elements within European and world history. Not one of these can be safely marginalised by either the historian or the politician concerned to understand the shaping of modern society. These four are, moreover, so intimately linked that it is impossible, I would maintain, to write the history of any of them at all adequately without at least a fair amount of discussion of the other three. That is a central contention of this book and it stands in some disagreement with much modern writing both about nationalism and about religion. The aim of this first chapter is sixfold: to set out my own position, to provide a review of recent literature, to establish the sense of an emerging schism in this field between what we may call, for simplicity's sake, modernists and revisionists, to explore the history of the word 'nation' and to lead on from there, through an analysis of the relationship between language and society, to a larger discussion of the nature of both the nation and nationalism.

When I chose this subject I thought that in developing my theme I would be able to begin by largely adopting the viewpoint of recent studies of nationalism and go on from there to insert within it the somewhat neglected dimension of religion. In particular, I naturally intended to take as a starting point Eric Hobsbawm's Wiles Lectures of 1985 on *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*[1] as probably the most influential explicitly historical discussion of nationalism in recent years. However I quickly realised that my own understanding of nationalism differed too profoundly from that of Hobsbawm to make this possible in the way I had hoped. Moreover the very parameters

he laid down for the subject effectively ruled out two-thirds of what I wanted to discuss. Far from moving forward from Hobsbawm, I realised that the only course open to me was to attempt to deconstruct his central thesis in favour of a very different one, and this I have endeavoured to do. In consequence, the central topic of this book has become the history of nations and nationalism in themselves. Most modern theorists of nationalism appear somewhat weak on hard history and that is why, in speaking as an historian, it is Hobsbawm that I find myself facing above all. Nevertheless, as he drew quite considerably on several other hardly less influential recent works such as John Breuilly's *Nationalism and the State*, Ernest Gellner's *Nations and Nationalism* and Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, all of which first appeared just as he was preparing his lectures,[2] I have found it sensible to link the four, while recognising their differences where necessary. Together they represent what has come to be known as the 'modernist' view, the principal current orthodoxy in nationalist studies, but one increasingly challenged by medievalists and others. Thus Keith Stringer recently suggested not only that 'medievalists and modernists have more to learn from each other than has often been thought', particularly in regard to 'the thorny problem of nationalism', but that this may constitute no less than a 'current crisis of historiography'.[3] My discussion of the relationship of religion to nationalism has then had to be done within the course of a larger historical reconstruction, and in the consciousness of speaking across the frontline of an historiographical schism. This is, I have come to be convinced, the best way to approach it, because, while the role of religion has been far from single-faceted in its relationship to ethnicity and the construction of nations, it has been integral to this wider history, perhaps even determinative. The history of religion can never be best understood within a box of its own and that is evidently particularly true in a field such as this where religion, politics and culture so obviously interact. Nevertheless this has meant that I have devoted less space than anticipated to speak specifically about religion.

Let me begin by briefly setting out my central theses, themes to which we will return from one angle or another again and again.

1. For the development of nationhood from one or more ethnicities, by far the most important and widely present factor is that

of an extensively used vernacular literature. A long struggle against an external threat may also have a significant effect as, in some circumstances, does state formation, though the latter may well have no national effect whatever elsewhere. A nation may precede or follow a state of its own but it is certainly assisted by it to a greater self-consciousness. Most such developments are stimulated by the ideal of a nation-state and of the world as a society of nations originally 'imagined', if you like the word, through the mirror of the Bible, Europe's primary textbook, but turned into a formal political philosophy no earlier than the nineteenth century and then next to canonised by President Woodrow Wilson and the Versailles peace settlement of 1920.

2. An ethnicity is a group of people with a shared cultural identity and spoken language. It constitutes the major distinguishing element in all pre-national societies, but may survive as a strong subdivision with a loyalty of its own within established nations.
3. A nation is a far more self-conscious community than an ethnicity.[4] Formed from one or more ethnicities, and normally identified by a literature of its own, it possesses or claims the right to political identity and autonomy as a people, together with the control of specific territory, comparable to that of biblical Israel and of other independent entities in a world thought of as one of nation-states.
4. A nation-state is a state which identifies itself in terms of one specific nation whose people are not seen simply as 'subjects' of the sovereign but as a horizontally bonded society to whom the state in a sense belongs. There is thus an identity of character between state and people. In some way the state's sovereignty is inherent within the people, expressive of its historic identity. In it, ideally, there is a basic equivalence between the borders and character of the political unit upon the one hand and a self-conscious cultural community on the other. In most cases this is a dream as much as a reality. Most nation-states in fact include groups of people who do not belong to its core culture or feel themselves to be part of a nation so defined. Nevertheless almost all modern states act on the bland assumption that they are nation-states.
5. 'Nationalism' means two things: a theory and a practice. As a political theory – that each 'nation' should have its own 'state' –

it derives from the nineteenth century. However, that general principle motivates few nationalists. In practice nationalism is strong only in particularist terms, deriving from the belief that one's own ethnic or national tradition is especially valuable and needs to be defended at almost any cost through creation or extension of its own nation-state. If nationalism became theoretically central to western political thinking in the nineteenth century, it existed as a powerful reality in some places long before that. As something which can empower large numbers of ordinary people, nationalism is a movement which seeks to provide a state for a given 'nation' or further to advance the supposed interests of its own 'nation-state' regardless of other considerations. It arises chiefly where and when a particular ethnicity or nation feels itself threatened in regard to its own proper character, extent or importance, either by external attack or by the state system of which it has hitherto formed part; but nationalism can also be stoked up to fuel the expansionist imperialism of a powerful nation-state, though this is still likely to be done under the guise of an imagined threat or grievance.

6. Religion is an integral element of many cultures, most ethnicities and some states. The Bible provided, for the Christian world at least, the original model of the nation. Without it and its Christian interpretation and implementation, it is arguable that nations and nationalism, as we know them, could never have existed. Moreover, religion has produced the dominant character of some state-shaped nations and of some nationalisms. Biblical Christianity both undergirds the cultural and political world out of which the phenomena of nationhood and nationalism as a whole developed and in a number of important cases provided a crucial ingredient for the particular history of both nations and nationalisms.

I will be suggesting that England presents the prototype of both a nation and a nation-state in the fullest sense, that its national development, while not wholly uncomparable with that of other Atlantic coastal societies, does precede every other – both in the date at which it can fairly be detected and in the roundness that it achieved centuries before the eighteenth. It most clearly manifests, in the pre-Enlightenment era, almost every appropriate 'national'

characteristic. Indeed it does more than 'manifest' the nature of a nation, it establishes it. In the words of a very recent writer, Liah Greenfeld, 'The birth of the English nation was not the birth of a nation, it was the birth of the nations, the birth of nationalism.'[5] Moreover, its importance for us lies too both in its relationship with religion and in the precise impact of English nationalism on its neighbours and colonies. Much of this, I will be claiming, was detectable already in Saxon times by the end of the tenth century. Despite the, often exaggerated, counter-action of the Norman Conquest, an English nation-state survived 1066, grew fairly steadily in the strength of its national consciousness through the later twelfth and thirteenth centuries, but emerged still more vociferously with its vernacular literary renaissance and the pressures of the Hundred Years War by the end of the fourteenth. Nevertheless the greatest intensity of its nationalist experience together with its overseas impact must undoubtedly be located in and after the late sixteenth century.

I will argue that there appears to be no comparable case in Europe and that it was this English model, wholly preceding the late eighteenth century, in which this sort of process is held by modernist theory to find its roots, which was then re-employed, remarkably little changed, in America and elsewhere. I will not suggest that English nationalism preceded an English nationhood. On the contrary. However English nationalism of a sort was present already in the fourteenth century in the long wars with France and still more in the sixteenth and seventeenth. Indeed, without the impact of English nationalism, the history of England's neighbours seems virtually unintelligible.

These claims have, of course, to be justified by the evidence. If true, they require a considerable rewrite of the standard modernist history of nationalism. To many people they will seem surprising claims. Perhaps as I am myself so very much an Englishman, they may even seem an expression less of historical enquiry than of English nationalism itself. Yet if there is such a thing as English nationalism it is surely right that an Englishman should explore it, especially as it is undoubtedly a category that many English people have denied to exist. Foreigners have nationalism, which is a bad thing; we English have patriotism, which is a good thing! I do not agree. English nationalism, partially transformed from the eighteenth

century into British nationalism, has been a very powerful, and frequently damaging, historical force. Yet historians have made a habit of ignoring it. Thus it is strange that an historian so searching in other fields as Hobsbawm can simply remark in passing that 'the development of nations and nationalism within old-established states, such as Britain and France, has not been studied very intensively . . . The existence of this gap is illustrated by the neglect, in Britain, of any problems connected with English nationalism.'[6] That may be the most remarkable understatement of any Wiles lecture. It is odd that historians of nationalism have managed for long so easily to avert their eyes from what in hard reality, I believe, has been the prototype for the whole story.

It would surely be surprising if England was not in at the start of a process which has been so central to the political development of the modern world, surprising because England did so clearly provide the lead in regard to most other aspects of that development, such as the establishment of a strongly centralised state, the growth of parliamentary government, elective and representative, the early decline of villeinage, the limitation of royal power, the emergence of a powerful capital city, the formation of political parties, the ending of slavery, the emergence of industrial society and of an effective press. Britain has also led the way in the writing of political theory from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, from Hobbes and Locke, through Burke, Hume and Adam Smith, to Bentham, Mill, Bagehot and Bosanquet. Benedict Anderson's astonishing claim that the English nation was only emerging at the heart of its empire in the later years of the nineteenth century[7] not only goes in the teeth of the evidence but is totally implausible. Only if national identity and nationalism were really marginal phenomena within the modernisation of the world over the last three centuries would it be easily imaginable that they did not affect the country, which had throughout provided the lead for modernisation, until the very eve of its decline. In fact they are central and indispensable elements within that movement and it would be hard to imagine the development of the modern world without them.

This does not mean that the nation-state is the only political form available for the modern world. Far from it. The nation-state does not inherently belong to modernity and if Britain, for long the prototype of modernity, pioneered the nation-state, it also pioneered

the non-national world empire. While France's empire was conceived, if unrealistically, as an extension of its nation-state, Britain's was not. That does not make it less modern. Indeed it may be the political reality of Britain's global empire which looks in another fifty years' time more like the real prototype for the political structuring of modernity. The nation-state has always been itself to a very large extent an unrealised myth; it only too manifestly does not fit the complex reality of human society very helpfully in many places; its values have often been overplayed in the past hundred years, its dangers, until recently, foolishly belittled. Nationalism has been enormously damaging to peace, tolerance and common sense; and the model of a nation-state, which could seldom fit social reality without grave injustice to numerous minorities, may well be wisely superseded by arrangements which stress both smaller and larger units of power and administration. While nationalism's territorial form seems vastly preferable to its more ethnic or linguistic form, its ideal has relied far too heavily on simplistic concepts of the indivisibility of sovereignty – concepts which have in our time been in practice increasingly superseded by the working of the UNO, international law and the European Community. For many people the structures of a pre-nationalist Habsburg Empire, or an extra-nationalist British Empire, or a post-nationalist European Community look basically more sane than those of the nation-state. Nevertheless it has to be recognised that the Habsburg or British Empires were only tolerable, for most of their parts, because of relative underdevelopment. Once the dominance of Latin as the one language of civilisation in the West fell before the literary advance of French, English, German and Spanish, it came to seem inevitable that any kind of Holy Roman Empire model, whose legacy survived in the Habsburg Empire, would need to be replaced by one of 'national' states reflecting the more advanced and stable of ethnic/linguistic identities. One of the functions of this book will be to explore wherein lay that inevitability but it is quietly symbolic of what made the Habsburg Empire possible for so long that Latin was still used as an official language in Hungary in the nineteenth century. Moreover, as English becomes increasingly a new world language so do new universalist, supra-national, states edge themselves into existence.

What needs explaining may be less why England, followed by

Spain, France, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden and Portugal, moved steadily towards the creation of nation-states, than why Germany and Italy, caught more deeply in medieval structure, imperial, commercial and ecclesiastical, failed for so long to do the same. To this crucially important question we will return. For the moment it is sufficient to recognise that the attractiveness and apparent power of the nation-state, manifest above all in England and then in Britain by the eighteenth century, guaranteed that sooner or later its pursuit would be taken up across the rest of Europe. The heady shock waves of the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars, followed by a huge increase in printing in many languages, ensured that central, southern and eastern Europe in the nineteenth century, and much of the rest of the world in the twentieth, would endeavour to imitate the political model provided by the apparently most advanced and successful countries of the world.

At this point it is appropriate to set out as clearly as possible the principal lines of disagreement with the 'modernist' view of nations and nationalism as represented by Hobsbawm, Gellner, Breuilly and Anderson. I may repeat, before I do this, that I am not alone in disagreeing. On the one hand one senses a renewed conviction among medieval historians that these are categories fully appropriate for the understanding of pre-sixteenth, let alone much pre-late eighteenth century, history.[8] On the other hand is the school of nationalist studies of a more sociological kind, led by Anthony Smith and John Hutchinson who, however much they acknowledge the inspiration of the masters of 'modernism', appear decidedly unconvinced by its central theses. Smith's most important work, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*,[9] represents the strongest critique of modernism hitherto presented though it still accepts far too many modernist presuppositions. Equally encouraging, so far as I am concerned, is Liah Greenfeld's 1992 *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity*, already quoted, with its explicit recognition that England was 'the first nation in the world, and the only one, with the possible exception of Holland, for about two hundred years'.[10]

Greenfeld's work is a truly major, and originally constructed, contribution to a subject now being heavily overloaded with often repetitious studies. Nevertheless her thesis remains, in my opinion, seriously misleading on several counts. First, it is still in principle

within the enterprise of the modernists. Nationalism remains the 'road to modernity', a road which still opens in the late eighteenth century apart from the one privileged exception of England. I am not convinced by the great divide between the pre-modern and the modern and I certainly do not think that nationalism is, as such, a door, let alone the main door, from the former to the latter. It can often be a road in quite the opposite direction, but the recognisable nationalism of, say, early fourteenth-century Scotland cannot usefully be described as either modernising or anti-modernising. Understanding nations and nationalism will only be advanced when any inseparable bonding of them to the modernisation of society is abandoned.

Secondly, she still does not get England right. For Greenfeld, 'the emergence of national sentiment in England' is to be located in 'the first third of the sixteenth century'.[11] I find this decidedly unlikely. For one thing there is really no obvious reason why it should emerge at that point, prior to the Reformation and in a period of peace. For another she, like all other modernists, totally avoids consideration of the medieval evidence. For that very distinguished American medievalist, Joseph R. Strayer, 'England was clearly a nation-state in the fifteenth century.'[12] Yet it would be highly implausible to claim that it was the fifteenth century when this came to be. What happened to English nationalism in the sixteenth century can only be understood, I am convinced, if the pre-Reformation history of the English nation is fully recognised. If Greenfeld is right to claim that England was 'the first nation in the world', it requires demonstration in medieval terms.

The key issue at the heart of our schism lies in the date of commencement. For the modernists, following in this Elie Kedourie's highly influential *Nationalism* of 1960,[13] nationalism is a very modern phenomenon about which you cannot reasonably speak before the late eighteenth century; nationalism, moreover, precedes the nation. 'It is nationalism which engenders nations', declared Gellner.[14] Again, 'Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist.'[15] Hobsbawm agrees. 'Nations do not make states and nationalisms, but the other way round.'[16] 'The nation', he adds, is 'a very recent newcomer in human history . . . it belongs exclusively to a particular, and historically recent, period. It is a social entity only in so

far as it relates to a certain kind of modern territorial state, the "nation-state" and it is pointless to discuss nation and nationality except in so far as both relate to it.'[17] 'The basic characteristic of the modern nation and everything connected with it is its modernity.'[18] That is why, of course, Hobsbawm puts 'since 1780' into his title. For him it is 'pointless' to discuss the subject in pre-1780 terms. 'Nations', Gellner agrees, 'can be defined only in terms of the age of nationalism.'[19] For Breuilly too nation-states appear in principle inadmissible before the nineteenth century, anything prior to that being dismissed with remarkably little investigation, as 'prelude' only in a period when anything 'nationalist' is considered by him to be necessarily in opposition to the state.[20] Anderson wholly agrees and his conclusion, faced with the national reality of the American War of Independence, is that it must all have begun there: 'The large cluster of new political entities that sprang up in the western hemisphere between 1778 and 1838, all of which self-consciously defined themselves as nations . . . were historically the first such states to emerge on the world stage, and therefore inevitably provided the first real model of what such states should "look like".'[21] The French Revolution quickly followed in the American wake and in consequence this new entity, the nation, Anderson continues, was 'a complex composite of French and American elements'[22] which became 'available for pirating' by the second decade of the nineteenth century. All our authors follow Kedourie in insisting on this late eighteenth-century date for the start of the whole process (even though Gellner does at one point, self-contradictorily, admit that England somehow became a nation in a much earlier age). On why or where it all began they are not so united. Anderson claims that it was really all a great American invention – 'Nationalism emerged first in the New World not the Old . . . it is an astonishing sign of the depth of Eurocentrism that so many European scholars persist, in the face of all the evidence, in regarding nationalism as a European invention.'[23] For Kedourie, it was Kant and the Enlightenment that must accept responsibility; for others, the political, military and intellectual impact of the French Revolution was the precipitating factor. For Gellner and Hobsbawm it appears to be more an inevitable consequence of capitalism and industrialisation. The problem with that is twofold. First, much of the nationalist explosion in central and eastern Europe has not been in areas noted for