

1

English or British? The question of English national identity

I am a citizen of a country with no agreed colloquial name.
 Bernard Crick (1991aa: 90)

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

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

A natural confusion

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

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

2 The Making of English National Identity

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

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

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

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

(Fowler 1983: 157)

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

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-77188-7 - The Making of English National Identity

Krishan Kumar

Excerpt

[More information](#)

English or British? 3

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

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

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

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

Britain and the British

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

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

(Taylor 1965: v)

4 The Making of English National Identity

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

6 The Making of English National Identity

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

England and the English

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

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

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

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-77188-7 - The Making of English National Identity

Krishan Kumar

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 The Making of English National Identity

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

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

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

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

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

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-77188-7 - The Making of English National Identity

Krishan Kumar

Excerpt

[More information](#)

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

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

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

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-77188-7 - The Making of English National Identity

Krishan Kumar

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 The Making of English National Identity

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

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

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

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