The Making of English National Identity

Why is English national identity so enigmatic and so elusive? Why, unlike the Scots, Welsh, Irish and most of continental Europe, do the English find it so difficult to say who they are? *The Making of English National Identity* is a fascinating exploration of Englishness and what it means to be English. Drawing on historical, sociological and literary theory, Krishan Kumar examines the rise of English nationalism and issues of race and ethnicity from earliest times to the present day. He argues that the long history of the English as an imperial people has, as with other imperial people like the Russians and the Austrians, developed a sense of missionary nationalism which in the interests of unity and empire has necessitated the repression of ordinary expressions of nationalism. Professor Kumar's lively and provocative approach challenges the reader to reconsider their pre-conceptions about national identity and who the English really are.

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To Katya and Kyrill

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Preface

This book could have been entitled alternatively 'the enigma of English national identity'. For it attempts to answer such questions as: why does 'English nationalism' sound so strange to English ears? Why is it – more than in most other cases – so elusive, so difficult to pin down? When – if at all – did it emerge? What is the relation of English national identity to the national identities of those other peoples – the Welsh, Scots and Irish – who share with the English the two islands off the northwestern coast of Europe? Can we separate English from British national identity and, if so, how?

That these questions need to be asked suggests the peculiarity of the English case. It is not so much that English national identity cannot be distinguished by its 'content' – its self-conceived differences, flattering to the national pride, from other nations. This by itself is not unusual. What we call content is in most cases the product of the process by which nations are formed, rather than some qualities intrinsic or special to the nation in question. It is common enough for nations, as for individuals, to develop a sense of themselves by a process of opposition and exclusion. What they are – French, German – is defined by what they are not – German, French. The 'content' of national identity is more often than not a counter-image of what is seen as distinctive in the culture of the other nation or nations.

This pattern is, as Linda Colley especially has argued, probably true for the making of British national identity. British national identity was forged through a series of powerful contrasts with Britain's continental neighbours, particularly but not only France. But the English case shows almost the opposite phenomenon. Not exclusion and opposition, but inclusion and expansion, not inwardness but outwardness, mark the English way of conceiving themselves. The English saw themselves in the mirror of the larger enterprises in which they were engaged for most of their history. They found their identity as constructors of Great Britain, creators of the British Empire, pioneers of the world's first industrial civilization.

No doubt an element of contrast does enter into the story, here as with other nations. The English could see themselves as different from the 'Celts' whom

they colonized and in some cases conquered, just as, in even larger measure, they could distinguish themselves from the non-European peoples that made up the Empire. But what is more striking – or so at least this book argues – is the extent of English inhibition in the matter of national self-assertiveness. English rulers and writers, and the political culture they created, saw it as impolitic to beat the nationalist drum, in the face of rule over different peoples and different lands. Hence we do not, in English political writing, find tub-thumping statements of English nationalism. For much of the time, in the society at large, there are virtually no expressions of English nationalism (a different matter from English xenophobia, which is venerable and much remarked on by visitors). There is no native tradition of reflection on English national identity (though many foreigners have felt free to have their say on the English national character).

This native reticence was not modesty; indeed the opposite. The English took pride, as did the Romans of old, in their role as empire-builders. They saw themselves as engaged in the development and diffusion of civilizational projects of world-historic importance. This gave them a nationalism and a national identity of sorts – the type I have called in this book 'missionary' or 'imperial' nationalism and national identity. But it differed from classic nationalism in shifting the emphasis from the creators to their creations. The English did not so much celebrate themselves as identify with the projects – the 'mission' – they were, as it were providentially, called upon to carry out in the world. This did not lessen the extent of self-importance; but it gave it a characteristically different form from that expressed in classic nationalism. Like many other imperial nations such as the Russians, the Austrians and the Ottomans, the English could not see themselves as just another nation in a world of nations.

The problems arise when these projects no longer exist. What happens when empire ends? When industrial supremacy and global power disappear? When the longest-lasting and most significant creation, Great Britain itself, threatens to dissolve and disintegrate? These are the questions facing the English today, made more urgent by the move towards European unity and the calls for a radical pluralization and diversification of English society. Not surprisingly they have been accompanied by an intense debate about English national identity and the future of the English nation. For the first time ever, perhaps, the English have been forced to consider themselves as a nation, as a people with a particular history, character and destiny.

This book is intended as a contribution to that debate. It does so by taking the long look, contemplating the *longue durée*. I have indeed been forced to go back further than I originally intended. The reason for this is a number of important claims, by historians and sociologists, to have discovered English national

consciousness flourishing as far back as the eight century – or, if not then, the fourteenth century, or the sixteenth, or the seventeenth, or the eighteenth. Since my own argument is that it is not until the late nineteenth century, at the earliest, that we find a clear concern with questions of 'Englishness' and English national identity – let alone any strong expressions of English nationalism – I have felt the need to confront and as far as possible counter the claims of these scholars.

The form of the book is therefore to a good extent a series of alternating presentations whereby I first discuss and debate these claims, and then present my own account of how I see English identity in the relevant periods. Thus chapter 3 takes on the argument of Patrick Wormald, Adrian Hastings and others that an English national identity was formulated as early as the eight century, the time of Bede, and that by the fourteenth century a fully developed English national consciousness had come into being. Against this I argue, in chapter 4, that the key to English – more properly, Anglo-Norman – identity in these centuries is the construction of 'the first English empire' through the subjugation of the Welsh, the Irish and – though ultimately unsuccessful for the time being – the Scots. This, I contend, the making of the 'inner empire' of Great Britain, sets the pattern and the context in which the English will see themselves, as an imperial rather than a merely national people, in the succeeding centuries.

Chapter 5 confronts another challenging thesis, that of the sociologist Liah Greenfeld, that not only did the English know nationalism in the sixteenth century – though not before – but that they were the pioneers, the inventors of European nationalism. I attempt a detailed refutation of this, especially concerning the role of Protestantism as the basis of a putative English nationalism. In chapter 6 I similarly argue against the view of Hans Kohn that English nationalism came into being in the seventeenth century, during the English Civil War, and in chapter 7, I take issue with Gerald Newman's contention that an English nationalism, formed mainly in opposition to the French, developed vigorously in the second half of the eighteenth century. Against both of these I follow and extend Linda Colley in proposing that the really decisive development of these centuries – especially after the union with Scotland in 1707 – was the rise of an overarching British identity within which Scottish, Welsh and Irish identities nested. English identity, however, remained relatively undeveloped, the English contenting themselves with masterminding the whole enterprise. The same was even truer in relation to the vast overseas empire that England began to create in these centuries – one in which, once again, the other peoples of the British Isles were invited to find a place and an identity.

Chapter 7 advances the view that, despite the continuation of a strong sense of Britishness expressed through an increasingly unified Britain and a common involvement in the British Empire, there was towards the end of the nineteenth

century a 'moment of Englishness'. This was, I argue, largely a cultural movement, responding partly to a sense of the possible decline of empire, partly also to the strong expressions of ethnic and cultural nationalism in other parts of the British Isles and on the European continent. If this was English nationalism – for the first time ever – it took cultural, not political, form.

Chapter 8 considers the current position of both Englishness and Britishness. It accepts that Britishness is in decline, and that traditional notions of Englishness face challenges not simply from a revived 'Celtic' nationalism but also from large-scale immigration and the increasing integration of Europe. It argues that while this has thrown up certain expressions of English nationalism, especially on the Right, the English remain fatally handicapped by the whole history that I have traced – a history, that is, of a studied disavowal of nationalism and a reluctance to reflect on their character as a nation. It is this that makes current efforts to define English national identity so difficult – even as the need for such an endeavour becomes ever more urgent.

Throughout the book, I make reference to certain concepts of nationhood, such as 'ethnic' and 'civic'. I also draw upon my own idea of 'missionary' or 'imperial' nationalism. Accordingly, chapter 2 lays out these concepts, as an introduction to the subsequent discussion of English and British identity. In addition, chapter 1 opens with an account of the central 'English-British' confusion, as a prelude to the whole inquiry into English national identity. It includes a glossary of relevant terms, and concludes with new ways of conceiving the English-British relationship, especially in the rise of the new 'British History' and British Studies.

This chapter thus gives a foretaste of the book as a whole, which follows the spirit of these approaches in considering English identity in the widest possible context. English national identity, more even than in the case of other nations, cannot be seen in isolation. It cannot be understood from the inside out but more from the outside in. To unravel the enigma of Englishness, we must explore the long-drawn-out engagement of the English with a variety of peoples stretching from near neighbours to those thousands of miles across the globe.

It remains to thank the many people and the several institutions that have given aid, advice, support and encouragement. I began work on this book in Canterbury, Kent and finished it in Charlottesville, Virginia. At the University of Kent I was lucky to have around me historians such as Alf Smyth, Peter Roberts and Hugh Cunningham, who were an invaluable source of suggestions and helpful advice. Other Kent colleagues, Mary Evans, Chris Hann, Jan Pahl and Frank Parkin, also gave encouragement and provided me with much material to reflect upon. At the University of Virginia I have benefited from participation in the British Studies Group convened by Richard Drayton,

and including historians and literary scholars such as Stephen Arata, Alison Booth, Robert Ingram, Alison Milbank, Herbert Tucker and Jennifer Wicke. The University of Virginia also has the splendid Alderman Library, whose well-stocked shelves supplied me with practically everything I ever needed, and whose irreplaceable and perhaps unique LEO section probably did more than anything else to ease the labour of research. To its expert and always efficient staff I owe a great debt. I need also to thank the University of Virginia for awarding me a Sesquicentennial Associateship for the Fall 2001 semester, during which I was able to complete the writing of this book.

Talks to various groups at various universities did much to help me shape my thoughts. I thank the British Studies Group – especially James Cronin and Fred Leventhal – at the Center for European Studies, Harvard University; the Sociology Department – especially David McCrone, Tom Nairn and Lindsay Paterson – of the University of Edinburgh; the Humanities Consortium seminar, organized by Rogers Brubaker and Vincent Pecora, at the University of California at Los Angeles; Anne Nielsen, Yngve Lithman and the students of the Sociology Department at the University of Bergen, where I was a visiting professor for three happy years.

Rogers Brubaker, David McCrone and Tom Nairn deserve more than passing thanks for their constant encouragement and for the wonderful example of their own work. The same can be said of Tariq Modood, who was also responsible for my holding a Benjamin Meaker Visiting Professorship at the University of Bristol in June 2001. This gave me an invaluable opportunity to try out the main ideas of this book in a series of talks to the Sociology Department. For the warmth of their welcome and the constructiveness of their response I am very grateful to all the members of the department, especially Steve Fenton, Steve May, Ruth Levitas, Greg McLennan and Tariq himself.

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A special word about Raphael Samuel. His untimely death meant that I had no chance to show him any of this work. Nevertheless, as one who was an early mentor and whose work continued to be a lifelong inspiration, he is of all people the one into whose hands I should have liked most to place this book. Its subject is one that was central to all his writing, as is magnificently clear in his posthumously published *Island Stories*.

I should like finally to thank Jeffrey Alexander, co-editor of the Cambridge series in which this volume appears, both for his receptiveness to the idea of this book and for his support throughout; and Sarah Caro, my editor at the Press, for whose enthusiastic encouragement and critical skills – especially in the reduction of an unwieldy manuscript – I am immensely grateful. Thanks are also due, for skilful copy-editing, to Sheila Kane, and to Hilary Cooper for preparing the index.