INTRODUCTION
Remembering Britain

In November 2000, the Romanian poet Corneliu Vadim Tudor came a surprisingly strong second in his country's presidential elections. The leader of the far-right Greater Romania Party, Vadim Tudor had risen to national prominence with calls for the ethnic cleansing of Hungarians and gypsies. When questioned by a British journalist about his ultra-nationalist policies, the poet retorted: "Yes, I am a nationalist. Jonathan Swift was a nationalist. William Shakespeare was a nationalist. There is nothing wrong with being a nationalist. It means to love your country."[1] This response succinctly raises several of the questions central to this book. What does it mean to be a nationalist? Was Shakespeare a nationalist? Is there something about nationalism as a doctrine that makes it particularly attractive to poets? And does the phrase "Tudor nationalism" have any meaning, outside of Romania?

As Corneliu Vadim Tudor went on to explain, "what is wrong is to be an extremist, a chauvinist, a xenophobe." While it is difficult to see how all of these terms do not also apply to the Romanian poet, the distinction being drawn is important. Not all nationalists, in all times and places, have been xenophobes, nor are all xenophobes necessarily nationalists. The latter point is particularly pertinent to our understanding of sixteenth-century England, where the evidence of strong ethnic loyalties and the hatred of "strangers" is incontrovertible. From the anti-alien riots of Ill May Day (1517) to the boisterous chauvinism of William Haughton's *Englishmen for My Money* (1598), there is no question that Tudor England was a thoroughly and unapologetically xenophobic society. Yet to acknowledge this is quite different from accepting that England in this era was a nation or that

[1] Nick Thorpe, "Romanians Gamble with their Future," BBC News: *From Our Own Correspondent*, Sunday December 3, 2000; http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/world/from_our_own_correspondent/newsid_1052000/1052551.stm. Following his initial strong showing, Vadim Tudor was soundly beaten in a run-off election on December 10, 2000.

its inhabitants tended to be English nationalists. Indeed, the development of national consciousness arguably requires individuals to rise above the very same xenophobic impulses to which Tudor subjects were so notoriously prone.

One of the distinctive features of national communities, even the most apparently exclusive or xenophobic, is their boundless inclusiveness when it comes to two sorts of "strangers": the dead, and the unborn. As Benedict Anderson has put it, while "nation-states are widely conceded to be 'new' and 'historical,' the nations to which they give political expression always loom out of an immemorial past, and . . . glide into a limitless future."[2] Coming to national consciousness is not simply a matter of accepting that the people over the hill, whom one has never met, are part of the same community – the people under the hill must be acknowledged too. For many nationalists, the affective and political claims of the dead easily outweigh those of the living. W. B. Yeats was hardly alone in his tendency to embrace the dead and unborn with an ardor he withheld from those presently alive:

> Scorn the sort now growing up
> All out of shape from toe to top . . .
> Sing the lords and ladies gay
> That were beaten into the clay
> Through seven heroic centuries;
> Cast your mind on other days
> That we in coming days may be
> Still the indomitable Irishry.[3]

As a way of living in and through history, nationalism involves a special understanding of the relationship between the present and the past, and a peculiarly intimate communion with the national dead. For the nation to live in the imagination of its members, they must come to recognize that those who lived in "other days," and whose customs, politics, and even language may at first glance appear dauntingly alien, were all along members of the same community – that "they" were in fact "us." This book is a study of why and how English and Welsh writers of the Tudor era were capable of taking this remarkable imaginative leap. The leap was a particularly extraordinary one for the English, I shall argue, for the ancients

[2] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edition (London: Verso, 1991), pp. 11–12.
[3] W. B. Yeats, "Under Ben Bulben," in *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (London: Macmillan, 1983), p. 327.

with whom they were required to imagine community were not their own ancestors. They were not even English.

The Tudor era was long associated by literary historians with the "discovery of England" – the process by which the English people became proudly conscious of their national language, geography, history, and destiny. A host of recent critical interventions, by Richard Helgerson, Andrew Hadfield, Claire McEachern, David Baker, Jodi Mikalachki, and Willy Maley among others, have challenged this comfortable narrative in a variety of ways.[4] They have demonstrated conclusively that England, like all nations, was not there to be "discovered," but had rather to be invented or constructed – even "written." Moreover, Englishness is not a self-generated but rather a relational identity, a matter of complex and often bitter negotiation among the nations of the Atlantic archipelago (England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales). These arguments have won the day to the extent of largely ceasing to be controversial, at least in broad terms, and within academic circles. At the same time, however, one central assumption of the old "Discovery of England" narrative has persisted all but unchallenged. Scholars still tend to assume that the nation constructed, invented, or written by the English in the sixteenth century was, indeed, England.[5] By contrast, I intend to argue that national consciousness in Tudor England was largely "British" rather than narrowly "English" in its content and character.

Most studies of nationalism in early modern and modern Britain take it for granted that a sense of being Welsh, Scottish, or English is historically prior to and more fundamental than an awareness of being British. Linda Colley's remarkably influential book, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837*,

[4] See Richard Helgerson, *Forms of Nationhood: The Elizabethan Writing of England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Andrew Hadfield, *Literature, Politics and National Identity: Reformation to Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), and *Shakespeare, Spenser, and the Matter of Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003); Claire McEachern, *The Poetics of English Nationhood, 1590–1612* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); David J. Baker, *Between Nations: Shakespeare, Spenser, Marvell, and the Question of Britain* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997); Jodi Mikalachki, *The Legacy of Boadicea: Gender and Nation in Early Modern England* (London: Routledge, 1998); *British Identities and English Renaissance Literature*, ed. David Baker and Willy Maley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Willy Maley, *Nation, State and Empire in English Renaissance Literature: Shakespeare to Milton* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). John Kerrigan's forthcoming study of British themes and problems in the literature of the seventeenth century will mark an important contribution to this field.

[5] David J. Baker, in *Between Nations*, comes closest to challenging this assumption. However, he still tends to see Britishness in its various guises as confronting, complicating, or undermining a pre-existing English identity. The difference between Baker's position and my own may be to some extent a matter of emphasis.

has merely strengthened the traditional perception that only after the union of Scotland and England in 1707 did the peoples of these kingdoms (and of Wales) begin to regard themselves as Britons. In contemporary debates over the future of the United Kingdom, the relative belatedness of Britishness is a point on which all sides seem prepared to agree. To its defenders, Britishness presents a more advanced and "civic" stage of nationalism than that to which, say, Scottishness can aspire; demands for the devolution of sovereignty to Britain's constituent nations can thus be branded as atavistic, a dangerous descent into tribalism. For its opponents, on the other hand, Britishness is no more than the wool that England pulled over the eyes of Scotland and Wales in 1707; devolution and (potentially) independence for these nations can thus be heralded as the restoration of older and more authentic identities.

Those seeking to demonstrate that Scotland, Wales, and England were authentic nations before the idea of Britain came into being generally look to the late medieval and early modern periods. Scottishness is summed up in the Declaration of Arbroath (fourteenth century), Welshness in the revolt of Owain Glyndwr (fifteenth century), and Englishness – curiously tardy – in the triumph of the Reformation, the defeat of the Armada, and the history plays of William Shakespeare (sixteenth century). A number of historians are justly skeptical about the relevance of the former examples to modern ideas of Scottish and Welsh nationhood; for the moment, I will limit myself to considering the case of England. There is no doubt that the Reformation and subsequent conflicts with Catholic powers encouraged the development of national consciousness in England, at least among a vocal minority, and that we find this consciousness expressed in Shakespeare's plays. The question is whether this national consciousness was in fact *English*.

Let us begin by considering this question in relation to the most well-known celebration of "England" found in Elizabethan literature. "This England," so memorably extolled by Shakespeare's John of Gaunt in *Richard II*, turns out, rather remarkably, to be an island: "this scept'red isle . . . This precious stone set in the silver sea" (2.1.40, 46).[6] This topographical slippage is of course testimony to the notorious and still-witnessed tendency of the

[6] All references to the play are from *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997). On Gaunt's notorious slip, see Kate Chedgzoy, "This Pleasant and Sceptered Isle: Insular Fantasies of National Identity in Anne Dowriche's *The French Historie* and William Shakespeare's *Richard II*," in *Archipelagic Identities: Literature and Identity in the Early Modern Atlantic Archipelago*, ed. Philip Schwyzer and Simon Mealor (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004).

English to forget the existence of their northern and western neighbors – but the long history of English arrogance should not prevent us from recognizing how much that arrogance may depend on ascribing to England qualities that are not in fact English. Insularity – *British* insularity – is not merely one agreeable attribute of John of Gaunt's England, it is its defining feature, referred to repeatedly from the beginning to the end of the panegyric. Grasping this, we are in a position to see how little of his speech in fact applies to the historical English nation. If the isle itself is to be considered "scept'red," a "royal throne of kings," the reference must be to the pre-Anglo-Saxon era, when Britain was indeed thought to have been ruled by a single monarch. If "England" has proved a "fortress . . . Against the envy of less happier lands" (2.1.43, 49), this can hardly apply to the defensive achievements of the English, who had barely consolidated their rule over one corner of Britain before succumbing to the invading Danes and Normans in rapid succession – for examples of foreign invaders effectively repelled we must turn to the eras of Cassivellaunus and King Arthur. Similarly, if England was ever "wont to conquer others," the reference is more probably to Arthur's fabled conquests in Europe and beyond than to the futile efforts of later English kings to defend their inherited territories in France. Finally, who are the "happy breed" who call this island theirs? Gaunt is not, in all probability, thinking of the racial stock of the Anglo-Saxons, who were held in remarkably low esteem in the Elizabethan era.

As this analysis of Gaunt's speech indicates, "England" in the Tudor era was a name to conjure with – but what it conjured was very often Britain. England itself, the state bounded by the Wye and Tweed with its roots in the old kingdom of Wessex, was woefully inadequate to the nationalism of the English. The tendency of the English to lay claim to the historical and geographical attributes of Britain had been witnessed for centuries, but this tendency was greatly intensified – indeed, it became an imperative – in the Tudor era, particularly in the wake of the Reformation. The very nature of the traumatic break entailed by the Reformation, cutting England off from most of the continent, encouraged the English to regard themselves as inhabiting a world apart – as *penitus toto divisos orbe*, in Virgil's well-known phrase. That phrase, of course, applied to the entire island of Britain, and it was in *insularity* that the English discerned the key to their unique and sacred national destiny.[7] Nor was simple geographical logic the only factor

[7] See Jeffrey Knapp, *An Empire Nowhere: England, America, and Literature from Utopia to The Tempest* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

in determining the cast of English national consciousness in the sixteenth century. Equally important, as I shall demonstrate in chapter 1, were the presence on the throne of a dynasty thought to be descended from the ancient (pre-Anglo-Saxon and pre-Roman) rulers of Britain, and the need, following the Reformation, to assert the existence of an ancient British Empire and British Church, uncorrupted by and older than their Roman competitors.[8]

Later English nationalism, as it developed from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries, would celebrate a trio of specifically English virtues: the English language, racial descent from the Anglo-Saxons, and parliamentary and legal traditions and privileges. By contrast, in the Tudor era all of these were objects of significant anxiety, if not of outright contempt. Of the three virtues which Tudor writers cherished most highly in their nation – insularity, antiquity, imperiality – not one was properly English.[9] For the sense of national belonging that found expression in Tudor England, there is no term readily available but *Britishness*. Of course, it was a version of Britishness that served English interests – but that, as Scottish and Welsh historians are fond of pointing out, is what the idea of Britain has almost always done, from the twelfth century onwards.

British nationalism, the nationalism of the English, had much in common with Welsh national consciousness in this period. Indeed, as I shall argue in several chapters, British nationalism took most of its facts, many of its tropes, and even much of its tone from Welsh sources. Both versions of nationalism were heavily dependent on an account of British antiquity derived from Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (c. 1136). Both looked to the Trojan Brutus as the nation's founding father, praised the same conquerors and peacemakers, lamented the Anglo-Saxon conquest, and interpreted the rise of the Tudors as the long-prophesied restoration of British rule. Yet the Welsh rarely if ever extended the category of Britishness to include the English, or saw themselves as participating with them in a national identity. Their methods of establishing a

[8] The importance of the idea of British empire for Tudor political thought has recently been underlined by David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[9] The same point might be made about the common law, which was only beginning to emerge as a focus of patriotic enthusiasm in the Tudor era. Sixteenth-century legal theorists generally traced English institutions back to an ancient British "time immemorial," emphasizing the role of the pre-Christian law-giver Dunwallo Molmutius. See John E. Curran, Jr., *Roman Invasions: The British History, Protestant Anti-Romanism, and the Historical Imagination in England, 1530–1660* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2002), pp. 129–36; Colin Kidd, *British Identities Before Nationalism: Ethnicity and Nationhood in the Atlantic World, 1600–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 83–84.

relation between the present and the ancient past were quite different, and, at least apparently, more straightforward. They were, as the English anxiously recognized, the descendants of those ancient people, still speaking the same language, practicing the same customs, and inhabiting the same land. Even for the Welsh, as I shall argue in chapter 3, the means for establishing a link with the ancient past were not as simple as might be supposed. But for the English, with no self-evident connection to the people of pre-Anglo-Saxon Britain, the task was a good deal more difficult.

All historically-based forms of nationalism rely to some extent on tropes – from Founding Fathers to Unknown Soldiers – to describe and ratify the connection between the living and the dead. In Tudor England, the need to forge a link between the present and an apparently alien (that is, non-English) past required the development of an unusually sophisticated figurative vocabulary. What might be termed the colonization of British antiquity was achieved by means of linguistic technology. Chapters 1, 2, and 4 explore some of the modes – genealogical, nostalgic, spectral – by which English readers and playgoers were induced to experience a sense of communion with the ancient Britons (and, as a crucial by-product, with one another). Chapter 5 surveys the deployment of these modes, forged in the crucible of British nationalism, in Shakespeare's "English" nationalist masterpiece, *Henry V*. The final chapter takes note of the fate of these figures in the early years of the seventeenth century, focusing on Shakespeare's *King Lear*.

The fact that nationalist discourse comes stuffed with the raw materials of literary creation explains why the most taciturn general or wooden politician is capable of waxing suddenly eloquent when speaking about the nation. It may also explain why nationalist causes seem in so many ages and places to have appealed especially to poets. (Here one might think of Hungary's Sándor Petõfi, Cuba's José Martí, Ireland's Patrick Pearse, and, of course, Corneliu Vadim Tudor.) In sixteenth-century England, where nationalism was unusually reliant upon figurative language, this general rule applied with special force. While the commitment of Tudor rulers and policy-makers to British nationalism was uneven and opportunistic, reaching a peak under Protector Somerset's regime (1548–51) and declining thereafter, the commitment of the poets was unflagging and genuine, increasing steadily from the mid-point of the century to its end.[10] In the

[10] On the English government's far from consistent approach to the question of Britain in the sixteenth century, see Hiram Morgan, "British Policies Before the British State," in *The British Problem, c. 1534–1707: State Formation in the Atlantic Archipelago*, ed. Brendan Bradshaw and John Morrill (London: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 66–88.

Elizabethan era, the poets drawn to the nation's flame included the likes of William Shakespeare, Edmund Spenser, Samuel Daniel, and Michael Drayton, among others. One could, of course, reverse the equation and suggest that it was because of the involvement of writers such as these that Tudor nationalism was so richly figurative and literary. But this would ignore the fact that, as I shall demonstrate, all of the central tropes had already been developed in prior generations by writers of far less literary ambition and ability.

One other reason has traditionally been advanced to explain the involvement of these writers, especially Shakespeare, in nationalist discourse – namely that in the decade after the defeat of the Armada England was swept by a wave of fervent patriotism, which made plays like *Henry V* guaranteed crowd-pleasers. However, the basic premise of this argument is almost certainly mistaken. As Eric Hobsbawm has observed, although "it would be pedantic to refuse this label [patriotism] to Shakespeare's propagandist plays about English history . . . we are not entitled to assume that the groundlings read into them what we do."[11] In fact, the evidence that the late Elizabethan era witnessed a groundswell of nationalist sentiment is fairly meager, once we discount those same poems and plays which, it is asserted, were responding to the public mood. An argument for nationalist groundlings, in other words, cannot easily escape tautology.

For a number of years, the study of nationalism has witnessed a stand-off between those who hold that nations and nationalism are a product of the second half of the eighteenth century, and others who hold that nations and nationalists have existed much longer than that, if not forever.[12] At times the debate can seem merely semantic, hinging on whether various pre-modern cultural formations should be described as nations, or rather as ethnic, linguistic, or proto-national groups. A key question, however, is that of mass participation. Central to the modernist position is the view that nations as we know them only exist when it becomes possible as well as desirable for a large proportion of the population and a wide range of social

[11] Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, second edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 75.

[12] Leading "modernists" include Benedict Anderson (*Imagined Communities*), Eric Hobsbawm (*Nations and Nationalism since 1780*), and Ernest Gellner (*Nations and Nationalism* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983]). The opposing camp is often associated with Anthony D. Smith, though he has recently sought to stake out a third position, that of the "ethno-symbolists" (*Myths and Memories of the Nation* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999]). Of course, not all studies of nationalism fit into one of these two categories. Liah Greenfeld, for instance, discovers the roots of all modern nationalisms in sixteenth-century England; see *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

classes to experience and act on nationalist sentiments. It is beyond dispute that the conditions for such mass participation did not pertain either in Europe or the New World prior to the era of the American and French Revolutions.

In the sixteenth century, there were many people of all ranks and stations willing to kill or die for their religion, for their traditional lord, for customary rights, or for pay – few if any were willing to make similar sacrifices for an imagined transhistorical community, be it nominated England, Wales, or Britain. Sentiments that could be termed "nationalist" seem to have been largely confined to a small, economically and politically dominant sector of society. One (modernist) scholar has termed this the era of "psychological formation," when national consciousness of a recognizably modern cast emerged among the leading classes of the most economically advanced societies (notably, England and the Netherlands).[13] Some two to three centuries separate "psychological formation" from "social diffusion," when this kind of consciousness became available to the mass of the population. To put it crudely, sixteenth-century nationalists talked the talk, but only after 1750 would whole nations walk the walk. What we discern in some early modern texts is not the nation *per se* so much as the nation *in potentia*. Strictly speaking, then, "Tudor nationalism" has only ever existed in Romania.

Recognition of this fact has not prevented me from using terms such as "Tudor nationalism" and "British nationalism" freely throughout this book. I use them in part as a kind of shorthand (for "emergent-national-consciousness-seeking-to-propagate-itself-more-widely"), and in part because, as Hobsbawm acknowledges, it would be "pedantic" to do otherwise. And I use them above all in recognition of the fact that some of the literary works I discuss – notably Shakespeare's plays – have been regarded by later generations as among the most profound expressions of the national ideal in the history of English literature. There is matter in a play like *Henry V* that has spoken to audiences in 1803 and 1945 in ways that it could not possibly have done to the original audience in 1599.[14] While it would be easy to dismiss such later responses as anachronistic misreadings, Shakespeare's power to stir so deeply the national sentiments of people living centuries after his death deserves to be reckoned with. If audiences living in very different times are able to believe that they belong to the same

[13] Neil Davidson, *The Origins of Scottish Nationhood* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), p. 28.
[14] On the stage history of *Henry V*, see Emma Smith, *King Henry V* (Shakespeare in Production) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

nation as Shakespeare, this, I shall argue, is because Shakespeare understands the nation primarily as a means of communicating across vast gulfs of time.

British nationalism captured the sixteenth-century imagination not only because it served the needs of the Tudor state and church after the Reformation, and not only because it was rich in the stuff of literary craftsmanship, but because it answered to a very deep and probably timeless desire: the desire to believe that the past can be recaptured, that what is forever lost may yet be found, that the dead may in some sense live again. This is a yearning found in all historical epochs, and doubtless in all cultures; yet it is also a desire definitive of the Renaissance. We tend to think of the Renaissance in terms of a longing to recapture the glories of Greek and Roman antiquity. Yet those English and Welsh writers of the Tudor era who aimed at the restoration of British antiquity were, as I shall argue in chapter 2, self-consciously following in the footsteps of Petrarch. The animating spirit of British nationalism was the quintessential mood of the Renaissance, the sense of nostalgia. To put this slightly differently, one mode by which Tudor writers gave expression to their culture's increased susceptibility to nostalgia was British nationalism.

If the spirit was that of the Renaissance, the body it animated was a medieval corpus of beliefs about the past. No version of British nationalism could entirely escape dependence on Geoffrey of Monmouth, the twelfth-century chronicler and fabulist who conjured almost two millennia of ancient British history out of disjointed scraps of Welsh tradition and liberal doses of his own imagination. The fact that faith in Geoffrey's account was finally beginning to wane in the sixteenth century (though neither as swiftly nor as steadily as is sometimes supposed) might lead us to perceive champions of ancient Britain like John Leland, John Bale, and Edmund Spenser as intellectual holdovers from the medieval era.[15] Yet though they relied on the same sources and often retold the same stories, the aims and methods of these Tudor writers were fundamentally different from their medieval predecessors.

The middle ages are often associated with a lack of appreciation of historical difference – of the pastness of the past.[16] Yet medieval writers

[15] On the sixteenth-century debate over Geoffrey's veracity, see Curran, *Roman Invasions;* T. D. Kendrick, *British Antiquity* (London: Methuen, 1950); F. J. Levy, *Tudor Historical Thought* (San Marino, 1967); May McKisack, *Medieval History in the Tudor Age* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971); James Carley, "Polydore Vergil and John Leland on King Arthur: The Battle of the Books," *Interpretations* 15 (1984), 86–100.

[16] But see Monika Otter, "'New Werke': *St. Erkenwald*, St. Albans, and the Medieval Sense of the Past," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 24 (1994), 387–414.