Introduction

The famous ‘Ditchley’ portrait of Elizabeth I (see Figure 1.1 in plate section), painted by Marcus Gheeraerts in 1592, has long been seen as marking a new departure in English national consciousness. For Roy Strong, the painting was the culmination of a growing interest in depicting the monarch next to a cartographic representation of her realm, set in the sea. Here, with the map of Oxfordshire at her feet, the map fringed like a rug by the south English coast, Elizabeth seemed to merge with the very island itself. Strong’s comment captures the painting’s achievement: ‘in the “Ditchley” portrait Queen, crown and island become one. Elizabeth is England, woman and kingdom are interchangeable.’¹

In the last twenty years, critics of English literature have talked more and more about the cultural production of space, about the artifice of cartographic representation. They note that the map spread under Elizabeth’s dainty shoes derives from Christopher Saxton’s officially commissioned atlas of the counties of England and Wales (1579). A revolution in geography, they say, was now enabling the English to imagine their nation through detailed cartographic representation, here captured in a painting. But there is a problem. England is not an island.

It seems so tedious, so pedantic to point this out. England-as-island is just a convention, isn’t it? Without disparaging Scotland, it seems reasonable to assume that there was no need to register the northern nation’s presence in what we might call the ‘sceptred isle’ conceit. So we are told that early modern writers referred to ‘England’ and ‘Britain’ indifferently, that there was an ‘easy slippage’ between effective synonyms for the nation and its historic past. In any case, we all know that James VI and I succeeded Elizabeth in 1603, fulfilling the indivisibility of monarch, island and nation that Gheeraerts here foreshadows so wonderfully.

But this account will not wash. Gheeraerts’s painting antedates James’s accession by ten years. It was painted when a Scottish succession was by no means certain, and when Scotland was a foreign and sovereign, albeit inferior, nation. Yet the painting deters the gazer from imagining any land border. Indeed, the gazer might note by contrast the artfulness with which Gheeraerts has suggested the island of Britain’s traditional triangular shape in the taper from Elizabeth’s broad farthingale, through her be-ruffed neck and shoulders, to the narrow point of her head. Furthermore, we also know that the accession of James did not, in 1603, fulfil the promise of a single island nation. The English Parliament rejected union with Scotland, insisting on the separation of the two nations, each with its own allegiance to the king. In short, no easy slippage or adumbration of a future union with Scotland can explain Gheeraerts’s frankly imperial vision here. There is nothing natural, empirical or ‘unionist’ about the insular fantasy into which the artist has brilliantly transformed the conceit of England as monarch and map.

This book, England’s Insular Imagining, makes visible the poetic techniques by which Elizabethan poets, painters, lawyers, historiographers and cartographers created the strange conceptual space in which the idea of England-as-island could cohabit comfortably with the rejection, in 1603, of the Anglo-Scots union that would have secured a single island nation in reality. The vanishing of Scotland as a named nation from the great poetry and political writing of Elizabeth’s reign is not an indication of that kingdom’s actual insignificance in sixteenth-century English consciousness, but the effect, as I will show, of myriad acts of imagination which signal quite the opposite. The conscious project of English insular imagining was to make Scotland as nation inconceivable; to produce, by various means, a sense in which England stretched from shore to shore without diluting its identity by conquest or union with another nation, another sovereign people.

It is difficult, of course, to claim that indifference is an artistic effect and not an underlying sentiment. But there is good evidence that members of the sixteenth-century English governing class were far from indifferent to Scotland. They knew what the possession of Scotland would mean for England’s geopolitical prospects in terms of coastline security and future empire. One piece of undeniable evidence for this is the attempt to conquer Scotland which England undertook between 1542 and 1550. The war was brutal, destructive and immensely costly for both nations: English

1 Susan Doran and Paulina Kewes, eds., Doubtful and Dangerous: The Question of Succession in Late Elizabethan England (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014).
Invasions killed more than ten thousand Scots, destroyed numerous abbeys, towns and villages and ruined the Scottish economy, while the cost of maintaining an English pale of fortresses emptied England’s coffers and cost their Protector his life. Yet English literary criticism completely ignores this war. Indeed, such is the legacy of English insular imagining (which produces England as always merely defending the homeland) that modern literary critics and historians repeatedly reverse the war’s facts. They write of ‘defence of the Scottish border’ as the motive for England’s economically ruinous militarisation in the 1540s and of England’s being ‘threatened with . . . agitation from the Scots in the North’, or of ‘1545 . . . when the Scots were once again threatening England’s northern border’. These statements are astonishing reversals of the reality. In 1545 an English royal army marched, at Henry VIII’s command, across the border and burnt Leith, Edinburgh and all the border towns, torching inhabitants as they slept. Given the British public’s appetite for all things Tudor, one has to ask why this Tudor war of conquest remains so occluded.

The substitution of English insular imagining for the facts of the 1540s war does not just distort the literary criticism of ‘early modern England’. It has shaped the terms of contemporary debates on devolution and union in the contemporary post-Brexit moment. In a recent piece in the New Statesman, Tom Holland sketches a history of England and Scotland as ‘the two rival kingdoms of Albion’ which were ‘in many ways the mirror image of one another’, with mythologies that were ‘strikingly similar’. What his account ignores is the goal that each of these nations, from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century, used its mythologies to pursue. English monarchs appropriated Geoffrey of Monmouth’s legends of an island founded by the Trojan Brutus, the so-called ‘matter of Britain’, with its irresistible image of a sea-bounded insular unity, to pursue an imperial aim: they aimed for the conquest of Scotland and acquisition of an insular Anglo-British empire. The Scots, by contrast, developed fantastic legends of kings dating back to 330 BC in order to resist being conquered, to claim their own sovereignty over their part of the island and themselves. This is not, then, a rivalry in which the kingdoms ‘mirror’ one another, but in which the pretensions of one drive the reactions of the other. That Holland’s account can seem even remotely plausible is a demonstration of the effectiveness of the Elizabethan rewriting of Galfridian legend that England’s Insular Imagining seeks to trace.

1 See below, Chapter 1.
After the failure of the attempt to conquer Scotland in the 1540s, England’s poets, antiquarians and lawyers transmuted the Galfridian legends which justified Anglo-imperial British empire into new forms: allegorical epic, chorography, Oedipal tragedy and political theology. They thus produced a trompe l’œil vision of England and Wales as the essence of Britain, with Scotland as an unnecessary supplement. In this vision, England’s nationalism is fused with the idea of its peaceful inheritance of ancient Britishness, so it can be perceived as capacious and tolerant, while the very idea of Scotland’s nationalism becomes inevitably excessive and partisan. At the same time, a Scottish desire for British union is perceived, in 1603, not as amicable but as predatory, while an English rejection of union is perceived as rightly respectful of local custom and the rights of the English ‘constitution’.

England’s Insular Imagining is concerned, as the title suggests, with imagination’s power to body forth the forms of things unknown. Though it begins, in chapters 1 and 2, with war writing – the writing that justified the 1540s attempt to conquer Scotland – its chapters thereafter centre on major imaginative achievements of early modern English and Scottish literature and political thought: Edmund Spenser’s The Faerie Queene, George Buchanan’s A Dialogue on the Law of Kingship among the Scots, the poetry of Sir Richard Maitland, Edmund Plowden’s theory of ‘the King’s Two Bodies’, Shakespeare’s English history plays, William Camden’s Britannia, Jonson’s The Masque of Blackness, Shakespeare’s King Lear and Macbeth. The book shows that is through the dazzling achievements of the English literary imagination that we have come to accept as fact the unlikely idea that it was because Scotland was of no geopolitical value to England, because England was indifferent to Scotland’s existence, that English politicians, historians and poets found it so easy to forget about Scotland’s existence and think of England as the whole island of Britain.

And in case that sounds as though I am reducing the very greatest works of English literature to ideology, let me paraphrase the art historian, T. J. Clark, as he considers what distinguishes the brilliant, fantastical and unsettling ‘Terrestrial Paradise’ (c.1505–15) of Hieronymus Bosch from a painting on the same subject by Bosch’s contemporary, Dieric Bouts. In noting the many similarities that suggest shared prototypes or even Bosch’s citation of Bouts, Clark feels obliged to labour the obvious conclusion: the paintings are incomparable. While Bouts’s work is a worthy exemplar of its cultural and artistic moment, Bosch’s feels both strange and modern: alive with strange juxtapositions, suffused with irony, compassion and wit. He has felt obliged to labour this point, Clark says, because ‘a majority of art
Introduction

Historians are so anxious to see no difference between the one *Paradise* and the other. Art historians are bound to want to place Bosch in a ‘cultural’ frame which ‘inevitably shifts the attention away from the imagination, which has no history, to ideology, which has’. Ideology, he goes on, is ‘the name we have for allowed, repeated legitimate imaginings – ways of picturing things that do not destabilise the world as it is, or don’t do so too much’. Yet Clark does not conclude from this that because the art historians’ cultural and ideological framing of Bosch is inadequate, Bosch’s work has therefore nothing to do with ideology or history. On the contrary, Clark says, ‘ideology needs the imagination – including, occasionally, the kind of extremity of imagining we find in Bosch – to renew itself’. In other words, extremity of imagining, imagining of the kind we find in Bosch, but also Spenser, Shakespeare and even (in different ways) Jonson, can change the allowed, repeated imaginings that structure the world. As well as perpetually surprising us with vivid and sometimes disturbing experiences, these artists of imaginative extremity produce new ways of picturing things that become the reality for their own and later times, a set of images that future readers don’t find destabilising, because their worlds (our worlds) have long been shaped by them. And great works achieve these two things simultaneously: they both ground a future reality and continually unsettle and renew the perceptions of future generations.

The usual objections to reading Shakespeare’s imagined spaces – the ancient Britain of *King Lear*, say – in relation to what they might or might not seem to say about ways of picturing England and Scotland is to say that such ideological or topical readings are reductive. On reading *King Lear* in relation to James’s accession and Anglo-Scotts union, John Kerrigan has said that it would be ‘fatuous’ to claim that *Lear* ‘could be reduced to topicality’ (my italics). From Clark’s comments, however, we can see that this might be to frame the question the wrong way round. The question is not how some apparently sudden, merely empirical, merely topical ‘event’ (such as the accession to the English throne of a Scottish king) impinged on Shakespeare’s imagination. The question is, rather, how Shakespeare’s *Lear* brilliantly reimagines the ancient mythic materials of Anglo-imperialism that were everywhere in the literature of his upbringing. For the story of King Leir’s ‘division of the kingdom’ derives from Geoffrey of

---

Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain* (c.1137) with its legends of Brutus, Leir, Gorboduc, Kymbeline and the great King Arthur. These Galfridian materials had, since the thirteenth century and especially since Edward I’s invasions of Scotland (1296–1306), been continually deployed to justify the argument that English kings were overlords of Scotland and therefore had a right to invade it. Indeed, England’s invasion of Scotland under Henry VIII and Edward VI in the 1540s was explicitly justified by recourse to Geoffrey’s legends, albeit in somewhat updated form, and both the legends and the war they justified filled the history books Shakespeare read. Sixteenth-century debates about the veracity of legends of King Arthur were thus not a mere ‘battle of the books’, as English critics have thought, but were urgently geopolitical, deeply implicated in England’s Anglo-imperial claims.

Scholars of medieval English literature know all this very well. They know that, at the end of the thirteenth and through the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries, Scottish historians responded to this Anglo-imperial history with their own national story of origin in what R. James Goldstein has called a ‘war of historiography’. The question that needs to be asked, therefore, is: what happened to this ‘war of historiography’ over Scottish nationhood in the second half of the sixteenth century, the reign of Elizabeth I? It certainly had devastating material consequences in the 1540s, when conviction that Scotland was not a sovereign nation drove England’s diplomacy and made its conduct of the war especially brutal. But it seems to fade from popular English consciousness between 1560 and 1603, although Elizabeth’s leading statesmen and lawyers, as this book shows, explicitly subscribe to Galfridian claims of English overlordship of Scotland.

So what happened? As this book argues, the English belief that Scotland was not a sovereign but merely a vassal nation does not simply disappear in Elizabeth’s reign. What happened, rather, accords with T. J. Clark’s argument about ideology and the imagination. The medieval way of picturing Anglo-Scots relations as those of overlordship and vassalage gradually metamorphosed, with the help of the brilliant, disorderly, classicising creativity of English poets, lawyers, cartographers and antiquaries, into new epic, tragic and chorographic ways of imagining England’s sovereign insularity: depicted in Marinell’s ‘Rich strond’ in Spenser’s Faery land, or in Shakespeare’s Henry V crossing of the channel to France, or as the

---

strangely unlocalised Britain divided by Shakespeare’s Lear, or as the way in which, in Camden’s *Britannia*, Picts suddenly become ethnic Britons, while Scots shrivel into mongrel interlopers. Thus, through all these powerful and sometimes extreme acts of imagination – which can themselves be untethered to history – Galfridian-derived stories of English overlordship morph into a new set of repeated mental visualisations of England’s insularity, an insularity in which Scotland ceases to be named and occupies no conceivable space. *Lear*, a tragedy which specifies no geographical location at all except Dover (its imagined cliff epitomising, as John Kerrigan elsewhere says, the extreme verge of both life and land) not only can but should be read as an instance of the ‘extremity of imagining’ in which the ideology of Anglo-imperial insularity renews itself and becomes an irresistible image of human truth. Such a reading is not reductive nor merely topical, but engages with the whole question of how tragedy imagines the relations of space, habitation and origin.

*Insular Imagining* is divided into chapters which identify and discuss Elizabethan England’s great literary achievements as transformations of Galfridian British history. In doing so, these chapters offer original readings of major literary texts and produce new interpretations of key innovations in historiography, chorography and political thought, such as Plowden’s doctrine of ‘the King’s Two Bodies’, Camden’s *Britannia* and Holinshed’s *Chronicles*. The chapters range from exploring Faery land’s offshore interests to contemplating the transatlantic race-making implications of turning tattooed Picts into painted Britons. Together, they reveal the myriad ways in which significant works of early modern English literature reshaped the materials of Galfridian British history so as to secure the imaginative identification of England as the whole island of Britain and thereby with British empire. Modern literary criticism’s sense of the supreme unimportance of Scotland to the Tudors is itself testimony to the success of a rich creative effort to reduce this foreign kingdom to imaginative non-nationhood just as its ruling dynasty looked set to assume rule over England. This book is devoted to revealing with what complex, thoughtful and brilliant art that effort was undertaken and at what it costs us now to persist in the fiction of England’s insularity, mistaking an artistic achievement for the natural ‘way things were back then’.

---

CHAPTER I

Writing the Forgotten War I: Henry’s War, 1542–1547

I. Why It Matters to Remember the War

For almost a decade, from 1542 to 1550, England invaded, occupied and attempted to conquer Scotland. The attempt was finally unsuccessful, but invasive war was always legally and morally dubious, and these campaigns were designed to devastate: they were explicitly punitive, deliberately brutal. The report of the earl of Hertford (later Protector Somerset) to the English privy council on his 1545 border campaign itemises every one of the 287 Scottish monasteries, castles, market towns and villages ‘brent, rased and cast downe’ by his forces in that campaign; in 1544 the citizens of Dunbar, men, women and children, were suffocated and burnt as they slept. At the Battle of Pinkie in 1547 between six and ten thousand Scots soldiers were slaughtered rather than (as would be usual) some being captured and made prisoners of war. The economist S. G. Lythe long ago noted the devastation of Scotland’s means of food production in the wake of Hertford’s 1544 and 1545 campaigns, along with the plundering of Tayside and Fife during the occupations of Broughty Craig and Inchcolm in 1547–8. From Dundee in November 1548, Sir John Brende wrote that there was like to be ‘little doing’ for the English forces that winter in Tayside and Fife, because ‘The country is so wasted there is nothing to destroy. But as well as despoiling the means of material sustenance, soldiers attacked the country’s spiritual infrastructure, smashing up the ‘ydols’ of traditional worship and ‘stripp[ing] the Church of much of what

4 Brende to Sir John Mason, Nov. 29, 1548, CSP Scot., I.337.
had made its piety live'.5 The ‘dissolution of the monasteries’ is, to most of us, an episode in the well-known narrative of the formation of English exceptionalism. It has stirred richly expressed feelings about the ambiguous legacy of Henry VIII’s Protestant Reformation, from William Empson’s famous comments on Shakespeare’s ‘bare ruined choirs’ to Eamon Duffy’s evocatively titled The Stripping of the Altars.6 The choirs of Scotland’s magnificent abbeys and churches, by contrast, were stripped bare and brought to ruin by looting, killing and cannon-fire inflicted by English forces in 1544 and 1545. Even in Alec Ryrie’s fine, witty analysis, this ‘military iconoclasm’ remains hard to assimilate to a meaningful narrative of Scottish Reformation.7

Yet this nine years’ war was almost no less devastating for the English. By the summer of 1549, William Paget was writing to Protector Somerset, begging him to abandon his attempt to conquer Scotland: ‘we are exhausted and worn to the bones with these eight yeres warres both of men money and all other thinges’, he wrote.8 In the same year, according to Sir Thomas Smith’s Discourse of the Commonweal of This Realm of England, artificers and merchants were observing that England’s cities, heretofore wealthy, had ‘fallen into great desolation and poverty’, that ‘not only the good townes are sore decayed . . . but also in the country . . . there is a such a general dearth of all things’.9 Exiled from court in the summer of 1549 precisely for having criticised Somerset’s handling of the economy, Smith wrote the Discourse as his response: a brilliant analysis of the catastrophic effects of wartime currency debasement. ‘For the furniture of his wars’, wrote Smith, the king was continuing to import ‘armor of all kind, artillery, anchors, cables, pitch, tar, iron, steel, handguns, gunpowder’, squeezing his subjects to pay for it, though ‘there is no treasure left within the realm’.10 In political terms, the war’s effects were, if possible, even
worse. Franco-Scottish victory in 1550 brought about the very situation that the war had been fought to prevent: Mary Stewart’s marriage to Henri II’s son, the Dauphin François, gave the French Crown a claim to the English throne, greatly exacerbating England’s political isolation and vulnerability at the accession of the Protestant Elizabeth in 1558.11 Just after the English defeat, in 1550, the English ambassador to France, Sir John Mason, had to watch uncomfortably as Franco-Scots victory was celebrated in King Henri II’s triumphal entry into Rouen. First, images of the Scottish burghs freed from English occupation were paraded — ‘Voilà Dondy, Edimpton, Portugray’ (‘Behold, Dundee, Haddington, Broughty Craig’) – and later on, as part of a magnificent spectacle on the river Seine, Neptune appeared, offering Henri fair winds to conduct his navy up the Thames, to conquer Albion and to become Henry IX of England.12

Ultimately, and more importantly, the harsh lessons of the failed 1540s war to conquer Scotland actually shaped the success of Elizabethan England, economically, geopolitically and constitutionally. Sir Thomas Smith and William Cecil, Lord Burghley, chief among the innovative thinkers and political advisors of Elizabeth’s reign, both began their political careers as strategists and propagandists for Somerset’s war in Scotland.13 They never abandoned their belief in the desirability of the war’s goal, which was the neutralising of Scotland’s potential as an ally to England’s enemies by the creation of an Anglo-dominated ‘Great Britain’. However, they also fully absorbed and creatively transformed the harsh lesson of the war’s failure as the means to achieve that goal. Joan Thirsk has shown how Smith’s analysis of the war’s economic effects laid the ground for the astonishingly successful development of a consumer society in Elizabethan England, through the encouragement of economic projects.14 Jane Dawson likewise demonstrated how central to William Cecil’s vision remained the need to achieve English control over the unification, political and religious, of the British Isles, thus securing the