Britishness and Otherness: An Argument

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> There is no more effective way of bonding together the dis-
> parate sections of restless peoples than to unite them against
> outsiders. [E. J. HOBSBAWM, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*
> (Cambridge, 1990), p. 91]

> Britain is an invented nation, not so much older than the
> United States. [PETER SCOTT, *Knowledge and Nation* (Edin-
> burgh, 1990), p. 168]

The morning of Saturday, September 14, 1793, was bitterly cold,
and George Macartney, Viscount Macartney of Dervock in the county
of Antrim, had been up since four o'clock, making final preparations
for his audience with the emperor of China at his summer palace at
Jehol, just north of the Great Wall. He stood waiting in the large,
silken tent for over an hour before Ch'ien-lung eventually arrived,
"seated in an open palanquin, carried by sixteen bearers, attended by
numbers of officers bearing flags, standards, and umbrellas."[1] To the
fury of the watching Chinese courtiers who had wanted him to execute
the full kowtow (three separate kneelings and nine knockings of the
head on the floor), Macartney went down on one knee only and pre-
sented the emperor with a letter from George III in a gold casket
covered with diamonds. He followed this with other gifts—pottery, the
best that Josiah Wedgwood's factory in Staffordshire could produce, a
diving bell patented by the Anglo-Scottish engineer John Smeaton,
sword blades from Birmingham, an orrery, a telescope, and some
clocks. The emperor smiled his approval and offered rich presents and

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[1] J. L. Cranmer-Byng, ed., *An Embassy to China: Being the Journal Kept by Lord
Macartney during his Embassy to the Emperor Ch'ien-lung, 1793–1794* (London, 1962),
p. 122.

a lavish banquet in return. Thus passed the climax of the first-ever British embassy to China.

The mission was the brainchild of the Scottish home secretary, Henry Dundas, and had been two years in the organizing. Macartney, a Scots Irishman from Ulster with years of diplomatic experience behind him in Russia, India, and the West Indies, had insisted on a salary of £10,000 per annum plus promotion in the peerage before agreeing to undertake it. His suite of more than ninety men had also taken a great deal of time and trouble to assemble. Its physician, Dr. Hugh Gillan, and its scientist, James Dinwiddie, were both Scots with degrees from Edinburgh University. The ambassador's deputy, Sir George Leonard Staunton, was a Protestant Irishman from County Galway. Erasmus Gower, the naval commander in charge of the ship that bore them to Macao, HMS *Lion,* was a Welshman from Pembrokeshire, while by far the most talented of the two artists accompanying the mission was a Kentish man, William Alexander, a native of Maidstone.[2] As it turned out, the hundreds of delicate watercolors that he would bring back with him of Chinese scenery, costumes, buildings, and people would constitute the mission's most substantial achievement. For in diplomatic terms, and in commercial terms, its failure was stark.

Even before he stood tense with cold, fatigue, and nerves before the eighty-three year old emperor, Macartney had come to realize that the Chinese viewed his mission in a way quite alien to its purpose. His instructions were to persuade them to accept a permanent British representative on their shores, to obtain more trading posts for the East India Company on China's coast, and to impress the emperor with the quality of British manufactured goods so that in the future he would allow them to be imported in bulk. In the eyes of the Chinese court, however, Macartney was the puny representative of a barbarian land come to do tribute at the center of the civilized world. "We have never valued ingenious articles, nor do we have the slightest need of your country's manufactures," declared the imperial edict delivered to the ambassador when he left Peking: "You, O King [George III], ought, looking upwards, to carry out our wishes, and for ever obey our edict, so that we may both enjoy the blessings of peace. . . . Do not say that you have not been forewarned."[3] Macartney reacted to this rebuff philosophically enough, writing in his journal that "nothing

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[2] Ibid., pp. 307–19; J. L. Cranmer-Byng, "China, 1792–94," in *Macartney of Lisanoure, 1737–1806: Essays in Biography,* ed. Peter Roebuck (Belfast, 1983), pp. 216–43.
[3] Cranmer-Byng, *An Embassy to China,* pp. 337–41.

could be more fallacious than to judge of China by any European standard'' and predicting—correctly—that this vast, ancient, and introverted society would crumble were it ever to be confronted with the guns of the Royal Navy.[4] His companions were less patient. As his lackey, Aeneas Anderson, reported: ''We had also our feelings as Britons, and felt the insult, as it appeared to us, which was offered to the crown and dignity of the first nation in the world.''[5] Widely different in country of origin and background, the men of Macartney's mission found themselves united by anger and by something more. In the presence of an alien and contemptuous culture, they felt all of a sudden intensely British, brought together, almost despite themselves, by confrontation with the Other.

I

Historians and anthropologists at work on Continental Europe and the Third World have long recognized that national identity, ''like ethnic or communal identity, is contingent and relational.'' In Peter Sahlins's words, national identity is defined ''by the social or territorial boundaries drawn to distinguish the collective self and its implicit negation, the other,'' rather than being dependent on objective criteria such as language or race or cultural uniformity.[6] Quite simply, we usually decide who we are by reference to who and what we are not. One might have expected that historians of Britain would have been particularly sensitive to this point. After all, Great Britain has always been an extraordinarily warlike state, and was for a long time both aggressively and successfully imperialistic. Protracted and often violent contact with alien peoples has been its lot since its creation as a united kingdom in 1707 right down to the 1940s, though to a much more intermittent degree thereafter. Why is it, then, that so little attention has been devoted to exploring the ways in which Britons defined themselves against a real or imaginary Other, against the outside?

One reason is that the identity of Britain only began to be seriously investigated (as distinct from being taken for granted) after the Second World War, a time when peace and imperial retreat fostered a highly introverted view of the British past. With their subject reduced to a

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    [4] Roebuck, pp. 239–40.
    [5] Aeneas Anderson, *A Narrative of the British Embassy to China* (London, 1795), p. 143.
    [6] Peter Sahlins, *Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain* (Berkeley, 1989), pp. 270–71.

normally peaceful, increasingly disgruntled, and essentially second-ranking state on the peripheries of Europe, historians of Britain found it easier to understand its past in terms of internal social, political, religious, and cultural divisions, rather than approaching it as a one-time great power influencing and being influenced by every continent in the world. Moreover, in recent years, most of those in pursuit of a truly "British" past have been in thrall to a series of remarkable articles written by J. G. A. Pocock. In the *Journal of Modern History* in 1975, and in the *American Historical Review* for 1982, Pocock argued that British history could only be understood as "the *interaction* of several peoples and several histories."[7] By this, it is important to note, he meant not only the relations that existed over time among England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland but also the broader connections between these four countries and North America and the rest of Britain's "white" empire, including Pocock's own native New Zealand. Predictably, though, it has been his insistence on the need for study of the four component parts of the United Kingdom—and not his geographically more wide-ranging manifesto—that has generated the greatest interest among British historians.[8]

Some of the results of this new scholarly fashion have been entirely benevolent. Our collective consciousness has been raised, and we are now much less likely than we were even ten years ago to describe exclusively *English* events and trends as though they were necessarily synonymous with *British* developments. We have come to understand with more precision than before that Great Britain is a composite structure forged, as France and Spain were forged, out of different cultures and kingdoms.[9] And by examining how these entities

[7] J. G. A. Pocock, "The Limits and Divisions of British History: In Search of the Unknown Subject," *American Historical Review* 87 (1982): 313, and see his "British History: A Plea for a New Subject," *Journal of Modern History* 4 (1975): 601–24.

[8] From a still rapidly expanding list, one could cite surveys such as R. R. Davies, *Domination and Conquest: The Experience of Ireland, Scotland and Wales, 1100–1300* (Cambridge, 1990); and Hugh F. Kearney, *The British Isles: A History of Four Nations* (Cambridge, 1989); biographies such as Maurice Lee, *Great Britain's Solomon: James VI and I in His Three Kingdoms* (Urbana, Ill., 1990); and Ronald Hutton, *Charles the Second, King of England, Scotland and Ireland* (Oxford, 1989); and a recent textbook: Thomas William Heyck and Stanford E. Lehmberg, *The People of the British Isles: A New History*, 3 vols. (Belmont, Calif. 1992). See also the references in J. C. D. Clark, "English History's Forgotten Context: Scotland, Ireland, Wales," *Historical Journal* 32 (1989): 211–28. It is worth noting that, with some few exceptions, historians of modern Britain have thus far found the Four Nations framework far less attractive and useful than have their medieval and early modern colleagues.

[9] British historians were slow to apply the insights on state formation supplied by historians of Continental Europe: see, e.g., J. H. Elliott's *Imperial Spain, 1469–1716* (London, 1963), and his *The Revolt of the Catalans* (London, 1963).

effected each other in the past, we have been able to approach familiar historical events in a different and revealing light. Sir John Seeley remarked as long ago as 1895 that the interaction between Scotland, Ireland, and England was so extensive in the 1640s that he wondered whether the civil war "had really its origins in the necessity of revising their mutual relations." But it is only in the past few years that this insight has been pursued to the full.[10]

These are substantial gains. But while acknowledging them as such, we also need to be aware of the problems and limitations inherent in this approach to the British past. To begin with, some of its practitioners are undoubtedly swayed by current political preoccupations, and this can lead to a certain amount of special pleading. Especially since the 1960s, both the Welsh and the Scottish nationalist movements have increased in size and self-consciousness (as simultaneously has support for an independent Basque country and Catalonia in Spain and for separate Breton and Occitanian nations in France). In addition, one of the consequences of Margaret Thatcher's long premiership, which saw a savage reduction in Tory electoral support in Scotland, and a less dramatic but still significant fall in Tory support in Wales, has been the reemergence of a right-wing Little Englandism.[11] (The Labour party, for reasons that will become clearer later in this essay, remains emphatically British in its electoral base and ideology.) Put crudely, the current political situation has encouraged some English scholars to view the Welsh and the Scots as the Other in a more deliberate fashion than before, and vice versa. If we add to this the fact that Protestant Britons have traditionally viewed the predominantly Catholic Irish as the Other, and have been so viewed in return, it is easy to see why the appeal of a Four Nations view of the United Kingdom can seem so overwhelming *quite independent of its scholarly value*. Such an approach can reduce Britishness to the interaction of four organic and invariably distinct nations (or three if Ireland is left out of the story). As such, it can sit comfortably not only with Welsh, Scottish, and Irish nationalism but also with a newly assertive English nationalism.

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[10] See Conrad Russell, *The Causes of the English Civil War* (Oxford, 1990), and his *The Fall of the British Monarchies, 1637–1642* (Oxford, 1991). Seeley was quoted by Raphael Samuel in "In Search of Britain," *New Statesman and Society* 25 (August 1989): 23.

[11] For these trends, see John Osmund, *The Divided Kingdom* (London, 1988); Tom Nairn, *The Break-up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-nationalism* (London, 1981). As Robert Blake comments, there is a sense in which the Conservative party has always been the party of *English* nationalism: see his *The Conservative Party from Peel to Churchill* (London, 1970), p. 273.

The breakup of Britain, or at the very least the emergence of a federal Britain existing as part of a federal Europe, may well be desirable goals for the 1990s. I am not concerned here with vindicating unionism or to argue for its continuation in the future. But I would argue that the Four Nations approach, if pushed too hard or too exclusively, is an incomplete and anachronistic way to view the British past and, also, a potentially parochial one.

It conceals, if we are not careful, the fact that the four parts of the United Kingdom have been connected in markedly different ways and with sharply varying degrees of success. Most conspicuously, Ireland, as a whole, was only part of the Union between 1800 and 1920. It has always been divided from the British mainland by the sea and since the sixteenth century has been severed from it even more brutally by its strictly limited response to the Protestant Reformation. There is considerable evidence that at grass-roots level the Welsh, the Scottish, and the English saw (and often still see) the Irish as alien in a way that they did not regard each other as alien.[12] None of this means that we should ignore Ireland's many and important political, cultural, and economic links with Britain. But we should recognize that, mainly for religious reasons, the bulk of its population was never swept into a British identity to the degree that proved possible among the Welsh, the Scots, and the English. We also need to recognize that, until the late nineteenth century, at least, the majority of people in all of these countries were never simply and invariably possessed by an overwhelming sense of their own distinctive identity as Englishmen, as Scotsmen, as Welshmen, or even as Irishmen. As in the rest of Europe, intense local and regional loyalties were always there to complicate and compromise.

Even in the early 1800s, for example, and despite the enormous impact of Sir Walter Scott's heroic evocation of the lochs and glens of the North, some Lowland Scots still automatically referred to their Highland neighbors as savages or as aborigines.[13] They regarded them, as they had traditionally done, as impoverished and violent, as members of a different and inferior race, rather than as fellow Scots. Conversely, whereas the word "sassenach" is now one of the kinder epithets used by all Scots to refer to the English, before 1800 the Gaelic *sasunnach* (meaning a Saxon) was commonly employed by Highland

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[12] I am aware that—as with all statements about the relationship between Britain and Ireland—this one is controversial.

[13] For a full discussion of the points in this paragraph, see my *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (New Haven, Conn., and London, 1992).

Scots to refer to Lowlanders in general as well as to the English. Quite
logically in ethnic terms, Highlanders could view both Lowland Scots
and the English as foreigners. By the same token, the inhabitants of
northern England had (and still have) far more in common with their
Lowland Scottish neighbors than with the inhabitants of southern En-
gland. They read the same books, ate the same kind of food cooked
in similar ways, frequently intermarried, and shared similar literacy
levels. Much the same could be said of men and women living in
Herefordshire and Shropshire with regard to their Welsh neighbors.
Here, again, people living close to the border, whether on the Welsh
or on the English side, could have more in common with each other
than with the rest of their respective countrymen. As Hugh Kearney
has demonstrated, with a scrupulous honesty that threatens at times
to undermine his own arguments, imposing a strict three- or four-
nation model onto these intricate and myriad regional alignments is
difficult and distorting.[14] In practice, men and women often had dou-
ble, triple, or even quadruple loyalties, mentally locating themselves,
according to the circumstances, in a village, in a particular landscape,
in a region, and in one or even two countries. It was quite possible for
an individual to see himself as being, at one and the same time, a
citizen of Edinburgh, a Lowlander, a Scot, and a Briton.

The invention of a British national identity after 1700 did not oblit-
erate these other, older loyalties. True, both before and after that date,
London was always ready to employ military force, parliamentary leg-
islation and various kinds of indoctrination to limit the autonomy of a
few, particularly dangerous regions—the "pacification" of the Scot-
tish Highlands after 1746 would be an obvious example.[15] But Brit-
ishness was never just imposed from the center, nor can it be under-
stood solely or even mainly as the result of an English cultural or
economic colonization of the so-called Celtic fringe.[16] The extent of
such anglicization has, to begin with, often been exaggerated. Scotland

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[14] Kearney, pp. 1–9 and passim.

[15] See Byron Frank Jewell "The Legislation relating to Scotland after the Forty-
five" (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina, 1975); Annette M. Smith, *Jacobite
Estates of the Forty-five* (Edinburgh, 1982); V. E. Durkacz, *The Decline of the Celtic
Languages: A Study of Linguistic and Cultural Conflict in Scotland, Wales and Ireland
from the Reformation to the Twentieth Century* (Edinburgh, 1983).

[16] Pace Michael Hechter, *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National
Development* (Berkeley, 1975). The unwisdom of treating either England on the one
hand, or Scotland, Wales, and Ireland on the other, as though they were racially or
culturally homogeneous is well set out in Kearney, passim. As far as England is con-
cerned, Daniel Defoe made the same point very powerfully in *The True-Born Englishman*
(London, 1701).

always preserved its own religious, educational, and legal structures and its own sophisticated network of printing presses and cultural centers, while even in the 1880s, some 350 years after the Act of Union between Wales and England, three-quarters of all Welshmen still spoke their own language out of choice.[17] More broadly, though, we need to stop thinking in terms of Britishness as the result of an integration and homogenization of disparate cultures.[18] Of course, a degree of integration did occur, mainly by way of the advance of communications, the proliferation of print, the operation of free trade throughout the island, and a high level of geographical mobility. But what most enabled Great Britain to emerge as an artificial nation, and to be superimposed onto older alignments and loyalties, was a series of massive wars between 1689 and 1815 that allowed its diverse inhabitants to focus on what they had in common, rather than on what divided them, and that forged an overseas empire from which all parts of Britain could secure real as well as psychic profits.

It is this vital and external dimension of British development that is most likely to be obscured by too narrow a concentration on the Four Nations model. The interaction of Wales, Scotland, Ireland, and England is an important and fascinating theme and is a particularly pertinent one at the end of the twentieth century. But in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Britishness was forged in a much wider context. Britons defined themselves in terms of their common Protestantism as contrasted with the Catholicism of Continental Europe. They defined themselves against France throughout a succession of major wars with that power. And they defined themselves against the global empire won by way of these wars. They defined themselves, in short, not just through an internal and domestic dialogue but in conscious opposition to the Other beyond their shores.

II

The absolute centrality of Protestantism to the British experience in the 1700s and long after is so obvious that it has often been passed

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[17] Kenneth O. Morgan, *Rebirth of a Nation: Wales, 1880–1980* (Oxford, 1981), p. 20. Two recent collections of essays that capture very well Scotland's considerable autonomy after 1707 as well as the degree to which it exhibited trends in common with its Southern neighbor are R. A. Houston and I. D. Whyte, eds., *Scottish Society, 1500–1800* (Cambridge, 1989); and Roger A. Mason, ed., *Scotland and England, 1286–1815* (Edinburgh, 1987).

[18] For reasons that are well set out in Sahlins (n. 6 above), passim; and E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 1–45.

over. Historians, always reluctant to be seen to be addressing the
obvious, have preferred to concentrate on the more subtle divisions
that existed within the Protestant community itself, on the tensions
between Anglicans and nonconformists in England and Wales, be-
tween Presbyterians and Episcopalians in Scotland, and between the
older forms of Dissent and newer versions such as Methodism. These
internal rivalries were abundant and serious. But they should not ob-
scure what remained the towering feature in the religious landscape,
the gulf between Protestant and Catholic.

Even after the beginning of large-scale Irish immigration, the
Catholic community on the British mainland was a small one, and its
members were usually able to socialize with their Protestant neighbors,
own land, earn a living, and even attend mass openly.[19] Yet in terms
of prejudice, none of this mattered very much. Irrespective of their
real strength and of how they were treated as individuals, Catholics as
a category remained in popular mythology an omnipresent menace.
Every November 5 until 1859, worshipers at virtually all Protestant
places of worship in England and Wales would be reminded that it had
been a Catholic who had tried to blow up James I and Parliament back
in 1605.[20] In England, Wales, and Scotland, almanacs, sermons, and
popular histories made the point, year after year, that it had been a
French Catholic Queen, Henrietta Maria, together with her interfering
priests, who had led Charles I astray and the whole island into war;
that the would-be tyrant James II had been Catholic, just as those
responsible for the Saint Bartholomew's massacre in 1572, or the Irish
"massacres" of 1641, or the Great Fire of London in 1666 had been
Catholic also. "While Britain continues to be a nation," wrote a Scot-
tish pamphleteer at the end of the eighteenth century, "she ought
never to forget."[21]

This mythic interpretation of history, a characteristic of all nation
building, was emphatically *British*, not just English in its scope. In

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[19] For England, see John Bossy, *The English Catholic Community, 1570–1850* (Lon-
don, 1975), an excellent survey that fails, however, to come to grips with the extent of
Anti-Catholicism in this society.

[20] David Cressy, *Bonfires and Bells: National Memory and the Protestant Calendar
in Elizabethan and Stuart England* (London, 1989). Orthodox Presbyterian practice did
not permit the Church of Scotland to keep calendrical feasts or fasts that were not
demonstrably scriptural in their origin. It was able to participate in the special days of
worship ordered by London on occasions of national thanksgiving, however, and seems
to have done so enthusiastically alongside the Welsh and English churches. The forth-
coming doctoral dissertation of my research student, James Caudle, will illumine the
Britishwide impact of this state calendar of worship.

[21] *Scotland's Opposition to the Popish Bill: A Collection of all the Declarations and
Resolutions* (Edinburgh, 1780), pp. 337–38.

Wales, as G. H. Jenkins and others have described, Welsh language ballads and almanacs were "shot through with the most vigorous anti-Roman animus."[22] And this kind of intolerance only deepened in the nineteenth century when Protestant nonconformity swept through the country. The first occasion when Welshmen (and women) petitioned Parliament in huge numbers was over Roman Catholic emancipation in 1829, and they were overwhelmingly hostile to the measure. The normally quiet and heavily agricultural county of Anglesey alone sent in over fifteen anti-Catholic petitions that year, many of the signatories coming from Baptist and Methodist congregations. In Scotland, because of the substantial Catholic presence in the Highlands and the Ulster connection, active intolerance was if anything even more pronounced. When London attempted to relax the laws against Catholics in 1778, the outcry in England led to the Gordon Riots two years later, still the most destructive, lethal, and prolonged urban riots ever to have occurred in British history. But it should be remembered that the self-styled leader of the protest, Lord George Gordon, was a Scot and that, whereas in England the new legislation was in the end enforced, in Scotland resistance was so widespread that it had to be withdrawn. As in Wales, this intolerance persisted far into the nineteenth century. After 1829, the law allowed suitably qualified Roman Catholics to become Members of Parliament. Yet no Scottish constituency proved willing to elect a Catholic representative until the 1890s.[23]

The continuing power of the notion that Catholics were the hereditary enemy needs to be stressed because it is sometimes supposed that it receded after 1700 in the face of growing rationalism and literacy. Among the more well educated and those who were comfortably prosperous and better, this was certainly true.[24] Among the majority, however, the chief significance of the growth of print and literacy in this period may well have been that the Protestant Reformation was popularized as never before. Take the case of John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* (London, 1563). The large amount of excellent scholarship devoted to its theological and popular impact in the late sixteenth and seventeenth

[22] Geraint H. Jenkins, *Literature, Religion and Society in Wales, 1660–1730* (Cardiff, 1978), p. 47.
[23] In their eagerness to chronicle their country's resplendent Enlightenment, Scottish historians have neglected the very different and often singularly unenlightened ideas of the mass of Scotland's population in the 1700s and after. But see Robert Kent Donovan, *No Popery and Radicalism: Opposition to Roman Catholic Relief in Scotland, 1778–1782* (New York, 1987).
[24] See Colin Haydon, "Anti-Catholicism in Eighteenth-Century England, c.1714–c.1780" (Ph.D. diss., Oxford University, 1985).

centuries has obscured the fact that during this early period it remained a large and very expensive text accessible to the ordinary man and woman only as a chained book in some of the cathedrals and more important churches.[25] This changed dramatically in the course of the eighteenth century. In 1732, a printer in Smithfield, London—close by to where so many of the martyrs had perished under Mary Tudor— produced a new edition of Foxe's work suitably adjusted for a very different and much wider reading public: "The purchase of so voluminous a work cannot be reached by everyone's purse at once; and therefore this expedient was resolved on, of publishing a certain number of sheets weekly, by subscription, that the common people might be also enabled, by degrees to procure it."[26] His edition appeared in thirty-one installments, and this publishing device proved so successful that subsequent editions took it even further. New editions in 1761 and 1776 were each issued in sixty cheap installments; while further editions in 1784 and 1795 were sold by "all . . . booksellers and newsmen" in eighty even cheaper installments. *The Book of Martyrs* was thus repackaged so that, together with the Bible, John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (which appeared in countless English and Scottish, as well as in five Welsh language editions throughout the 1700s), and a handful of almanacs, it came to be one of the few books that one might plausibly expect to find even in a working-class household.[27]

By way of such texts and in response to sermons, ballads, and folklore, Britons were encouraged to look through the Catholic glass darkly so as to see themselves more clearly and more complacently. Catholics, they chose to believe, were superstitious and persecuting, inclined to be arbitrary when powerful, starving, illiterate, and cringing when not. Catholicism, declared a society of journeymen in Edinburgh in 1780, meant "The denying to the common people the free use of the holy scriptures."[28] Catholics, wrote an English private soldier stationed in Spain in the early nineteenth century, "do not read the Bible: the priests have entire control over the masses. . . . Oh, Britons! let us prize our privileges."[29] The most common slang adjective for

[25] William Haller's dated but still valuable *The Elect Nation: The Meaning and Relevance of Foxe's "Book of Martyrs"* (New York, 1963) should be read alongside Katherine R. Firth, *The Apocalyptic Tradition in Reformation Britain, 1530–1645* (Oxford, 1975).

[26] John Foxe, *The Book of Martyrs: Containing an Account of the Sufferings and Death of the Protestants in the Reign of Queen Mary the First* (London, 1732), preface.

[27] I discuss these points in greater detail in *Britons* (n. 13 above).

[28] *Scotland's Opposition to the Popish Bill*, p. 191.

[29] John Teague and Dorothea Teague, *"Where Duty Calls Me": The Experiences of William Green of Lutterworth in the Napoleonic Wars* (West Wickham, 1975), p. 47.

Catholics was "outlandish," and this was meant literally. Catholics were beyond the boundaries, always on the outside even if they were British-born: they did not and could not belong.[30]

Because these sentiments are repellent, historians sometimes dismiss them as atavistic survivals of an earlier age, as embarrassing and peripheral aspects of plebeian culture, perhaps, but as otherwise unimportant because so obviously irrational. In fact, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britons reminded themselves of their embattled Protestantism in what seems a wearyingly repetitive fashion precisely because they had good cause to feel uncertain about its security and their own. On the Continent, the Counter-Reformation remained in progress much longer than is sometimes recognized. France attempted to expel its Protestant population in 1685, and many of these Huguenot refugees settled in Britain, living reminders to their new countrymen of the enduring threat of Catholic persecution. In Spain, the Inquisition continued to take action against Protestants throughout the eighteenth century. While in some of the German states, and in parts of the Austrian empire, such as Hungary, pressure on Protestant communities was actually fiercer in the early 1700s than it had been before.[31] These and other examples of militant Catholicism were extensively reported in British newspapers and constantly referred to in sermons. But they would not have made the impact that they did had there not also been danger much closer to home.[32]

In 1708, 1715, and again in 1745, expeditionary forces in support of the Stuart claimants to the throne landed in Scotland with the intention of marching south to capture London and thereby the entire island. There were other Jacobite invasion scares in 1717, 1719, 1721–22, 1743–44, and even 1759 that never came to anything but were still unsettling. A successful Stuart restoration would have meant the replacement of a Protestant monarchy with a devoutly Roman Catholic dynasty. Moreover, since the Stuarts could never hope to get back without substantial French or Spanish military and financial aid, it seemed probable that their restoration would be accompanied by a foreign army of occupation, and not just a foreign army but a Catholic army. The prospect of all this, though it never came to pass in fact, made the sufferings of other European Protestants seem frighteningly

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[30] Haydon, p. 55.
[31] See William J. Callahan and David Higgs, eds., *Church and Society in Catholic Europe of the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1979), passim.
[32] Jeremy Black, "The Catholic Threat and the British Press in the 1720s and 1730s," *Journal of Religious History* 12 (1983): 364–81.

relevant. "The miseries of which we have been witness in the dis-
tressed condition of the poor French refugees; the exiles of the princi-
pality of Orange; the Palatines heretofore; and now lately the half-
starved Saltzburgers, driven from their native country in the depth of
winter," all these horrors, argued a dissenting minister in 1735, were
a poignant reminder of Britain's own blessings and a warning of how
easily they could be snuffed out.[33]

Even after Jacobitism had dwindled into nostalgia, there remained
the challenge posed by France. Because we know now that Great
Britain and its allies won the battle of Waterloo, it is easy to assume
that its protracted duel with France—which involved no fewer than
seven different wars between 1689 and 1815 as well as many other
minor skirmishes—was somehow always destined for ultimate suc-
cess. But those living at the time did not and could not view it in
this light. Right until the end of the nineteenth century, in fact, most
politicians, military experts, and popular pundits continued to see
France as Britain's most dangerous and obvious enemy, and for good
reason.[34] France had a larger population and a much bigger land mass
than Great Britain. It was its greatest imperial rival. It possessed a
more powerful army, which had repeatedly showed itself able to con-
quer large tracts of Europe. And it was a Catholic state. This last point
was the crucial one in shaping responses throughout Britain as a whole.
Gerald Newman has supplied us with a highly skillful dissection of the
secular lineaments of *English* Francophobia, but it seems clear that
for obvious historical reasons Scots were far less likely to view France
as the natural enemy *merely because it was France*.[35] Because France
was also Catholic, however, the majority of Scots, like the Welsh, like
the English, and like some of the Protestant Irish, were able to feel an
emotional stake in the consequences of this protracted cross-Channel
feud.

The fear and the actuality of recurrent war with France fostered
a more united Britain in other ways than by reinforcing its sense of
itself as a beleaguered bastion of Protestantism. John Brewer has
shown how this second Hundred Years War strengthened the machin-
ery of the British state, necessitating the creation of an efficient and

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[33] Samuel Chandler, *Plain Reasons for being a Protestant* (London, 1735), pp.
63–64. The most balanced survey of the Jacobite threat after 1688 is Bruce Lenman,
The Jacobite Risings in Britain, 1689–1746 (London, 1980).

[34] See Hugh Cunningham, *The Volunteer Force* (London, 1975); Kenneth Bourne,
The Foreign Policy of Victorian England (London, 1970).

[35] Gerald Newman, *The Rise of English Nationalism: A Cultural History, 1740–1830*
(London, 1987).

nationwide fiscal bureaucracy and inexorably inflating the armed forces.[36] During the War of Spanish Succession (1702–13), Britain's total military strength averaged out at some 135,600 men. By the time of the War of American Independence, this had risen to some 200,000 men. And by 1815, one economist calculated that, if the militia and the East India Company's army were to be included in the total, over one million men—perhaps one in five of the United Kingdom's adult male population—were in uniform.[37] The effect of these rising levels of recruitment on the ideas of the men involved has hardly begun to be researched, in large part because military history, like imperial history, has been a casualty of postwar Britain's decline into introversion. But clearly these men must have been exposed to some state propaganda during their term of service. They had to take an oath, they had to listen to sermons from army or naval chaplains, and many of them were given pep talks by their officers. For most of them, too, military service involved a physical removal from home village and familiar landscapes and exposure to action abroad or on the open sea. Some of them, at least, must have acquired from this experience a heightened sense of solidarity with their own tribe, a sharpened awareness of "us" as against "them."[38]

Certainly, the testimonials of army and navy officers, often completely taken aback to discover that plebeians could also be patriots, suggest that this was so. "A trifling anecdote of one of my men," a naval captain wrote after the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805:

> A shot took off the arm of Thomas Main at his gun on the forecastle. His messmates kindly offered to assist him in going to the surgeon, but he bluntly told them "I thank you, stay where you are, you will do more good there". He then went down by himself to the cockpit. The surgeon (who respected him as a good man) willingly would have attended to him in preference to some others . . . but this the seaman would not admit of, saying "Avast! not until it comes to my turn, if you please". The surgeon soon after amputated the shattered part of the arm near the shoulder, during which with great composure, smiling and with a steady clear voice, he sang the whole of "Rule Britannia."[39]

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[36] John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State, 1688–1783* (London, 1989).

[37] C. A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World, 1780–1830* (London, 1989), p. 3.

[38] I discuss these points in more detail in *Britons* (n. 13 above).

[39] Quoted in Warren R. Dawson, *The Nelson Collection at Lloyd's* (London, 1932), pp. 450–51.

How typical or atypical this man was (who died for his stoicism) remains at present unclear, though enough of this kind of evidence survives to show that the traditional image of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century soldiers and seamen as the scum of the earth, mindless brutes governed only by drink and the lash, should be banished from responsible historical writing.[40] And the emotional and ideological effect of war was not confined to the professionals. Every major French war brought with it some threat of invasion: the prospect—carefully played on by loyalist propaganda—of a professional army landing in Britain to the accompaniment of mass killings, plunder, rape, and insecurity. The danger of invasion from abroad was particularly acute in the years between 1743 and 1746, between 1778 and 1780, and between 1797 and 1805, as it would be again during the Second World War. But folk memories of these threats persisted even after wars had ended, making the specter of the Other something about which ordinary men and women could feel profoundly apprehensive. The poet John Clare, son of a poor laborer from Northamptonshire, noted how his fellow villagers were gripped by invasion fears in 1803, in part because they retained a strong oral tradition of earlier violent incursions. They had gathered "at their doors in the evening to talk over the rebellion of '45 when the rebels reached Derby and even listened at intervals to fancy they heard the French 'rebels' at Northampton knocking it down with their cannon."[41]

III

As it turned out, none of the many real and imaginary invasion scares ever resulted in a successful landing by foreign troops. Instead, every major war in which Britain participated after 1700, with the exceptions of the American War, the Crimean War, and the Second World War, led to a consolidation and more commonly a marked increase of its overseas empire. Already, by 1820, Britain claimed dominion over some 26 percent of the world's population. A century later, and far more insecurely, it exercised some kind of authority over close to a quarter of the world's land surface. How Britons at home responded to this mammoth empire, as distinct from the mechanics of

[40] This is beginning to happen. See, e.g., N. A. M. Rodger, *The Wooden World: An Anatomy of the Georgian Navy* (London, 1986); G. A. Steppler, "The Common Soldier in the Reign of George III, 1760–1793" (D.Phil. diss., Oxford University, 1984).
[41] J. W. Tibble and Anne Tibble, eds., *The Prose of John Clare* (London, 1951), p. 47.

its acquisition and rule, is still very unclear. Recent research by Kathleen Wilson suggests that an awareness of empire, spread by the newspaper press, novels, and plays, had penetrated far beyond the ruling elite and those directly engaged in colonial trade even before 1775.[42] But I suspect that the psychic effect of empire became far deeper and more complex after the loss of the American colonies.

The English especially, and quite legitimately, had been able to view the thirteen colonies as a cultural, political, and religious extension of themselves.[43] But after 1783, the heart of the imperial structure lay in the East, not the West. From now on, the majority of Britain's colonial population would be attached to religions other than Christianity, would not speak English as their first language, would not be white-skinned, and would live in climates and among flora and fauna that could easily be perceived as strange and exotic. Moreover, this second British empire, as it is still somewhat erroneously called, was indeed British and not overwhelmingly English, as the American colonies had been. From the late eighteenth century to its dissolution after 1945, the Scots, the Scots-Irish, and the Anglo-Irish, in particular, played a part in its conquest, in its exploration, and above all in its government, quite disproportionate to their total numbers back home.[44] The consequences of this imperial episode in terms of the forging of a British identity were extensive, though as yet they have hardly begun to be explored.

As Edward Said has remarked of the European empires in general: "The Orient . . . helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience."[45] Possession of such a vast and obviously alien empire encouraged the British to see themselves as a distinct, special, and—often—superior people. They could contrast their law, their standard of living, their treatment of women, their political stability, and, above all, their collective power against societies that they only imperfectly understood but usually perceived as far less developed. Whatever their own individual ethnic backgrounds, Britons could join together vis-à-vis the empire and act out the flattering parts of heroic conqueror, humane judge, and civilizing

[42] Personal communication, Professor Kathleen Wilson, State University of New York at Stony Brook, 1989.

[43] See David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (Oxford, 1989).

[44] See Bayly, passim; Alex M. Cain, *The Cornchest for Scotland: Scots in India* (Edinburgh, 1986); E. Ingram, ed., *Two Views of British India: The Private Correspondence of Mr. Dundas and Lord Wellesley, 1798–1801* (Bath, 1970).

[45] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1978), pp. 1–2.

agent. This was manifestly true of those Britons (they were over-whelmingly male) who lived and worked or fought in the colonies involved. Arthur Balfour, an Anglo-Scot whose family had made its fortune in India, described to the Commons in 1910 how the average British administrator in Egypt was surrounded by "tens of thousands of persons belonging to a *different* creed, a *different* race, a *different* discipline, *different* conditions of life."[46] But this sense of the eastern and African empire as embodying an essential quality of difference against which Britishness could emerge with far greater clarity was not confined to those who had direct experience of colonial life. It was disseminated far more widely by way of the theater, ballads, journal-ism, the music hall, children's books, art of all kinds, and, of course, by novels. One has only to remember how West Indians, Indians, and Africans feature as the mysterious, or threatening, or ambiguous, or unsettlingly seductive Other in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (Lon-don, 1847), or in Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* (London, 1868), or in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (London, 1924), or in the less reputable but massively popular works of Rider Haggard or John Buchan.[47]

I am not, for one moment, suggesting that their shared imperial obsession, and shared access to imperial booty, invariably concealed from Britons their own internal divisions—the cultural splits among Englishness, Irishness, Scottishness, and Welshness, the gaps in expe-rience and sympathy among different regions, social classes, and reli-gious groupings and between the sexes. But empire did serve as a powerful distraction and cause in common. Whatever their own differ-ences, Britons could feel united in dominion over, and in distinction from, the millions of colonial subjects beyond their own boundaries. It was no coincidence at all that the period of British imperial takeoff and success also witnessed the forging of an authentically British gov-erning elite. Rich, landed, and talented males from Wales, Scotland, England, and to a lesser extent Ireland became welded after the 1770s into a single ruling class that intermarried, shared the same outlook,

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[46] Ibid., pp. 33–34.

[47] This is a rich vein of inquiry that historians, as distinct from students of English literature, have barely begun to mine. But see Samuel R. Taube, "British Fiction and the British Empire, 1830–1880" (Ph.D. diss., State University of New York at Stony Brook, 1979); Sara Suleri, *The Rhetoric of English India* (Chicago, 1992); J. S. Bratton, *Acts of Supremacy: The British Empire and the Stage, 1790–1930* (Manchester, 1991); John M. MacKenzie, ed., *Imperialism and Popular Culture* (Manchester, 1986); J. A. Mangan, ed.,*"Benefits Bestowed": Education and British Imperialism* (Manchester, 1988). For a typical piece of imperialism for the young, see Alfred H. Miles, *Fifty-two Stories of the British Empire* (London, 1897).

and took to itself the business of governing, fighting for, and profiting from greater Britain. This point was made most tellingly perhaps in an essay published during the First World War called *The Oppressed English:*

> Today a Scot is leading the British army in France [Field Marshall Douglas Haig], another is commanding the British grand fleet at sea [Admiral David Beatty], while a third directs the Imperial General Staff at home [Sir William Robertson]. The Lord Chancellor is a Scot [Viscount Finlay]; so are the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Foreign Secretary [Bonar Law and Arthur Balfour]. The Prime Minister is a Welshman [David Lloyd George], and the First Lord of the Admiralty is an Irishman [Lord Carson]. Yet no one has ever brought in a bill to give home rule to England.[48]

The essay was a spoof, but its prosopography was entirely accurate. This same war also saw the enlistment of 13.8 percent of the Welsh population, 13.3 percent of the English population, 13.02 percent of the Scottish population, and a significantly lower 3.8 percent of the Irish population.[49] These patterns of military and civil participation illustrate once again how closely Britishness was connected with the availability of (on this occasion, a hostile) Other. They also confirm that to interpret the emergence of this artificial nation primarily in terms of an English core subduing and exploiting a "Celtic" periphery is inadequate. Between 1914 and 1918, the Welsh and the Scots—though not the Irish— seem to have volunteered with much the same degree of enthusiasm, and for much the same kind of reasons, as did the English. What W. J. Reader rather hopefully calls "obsolete patriotism" knew few boundaries within the British mainland, though it did falter markedly across the Irish Sea.[50] At the same time, and as the author of *The Oppressed English* pointed out, Welsh, Scottish, and some Irish members of the ruling elite proved as eager as, and sometimes more eager than, their English counterparts to direct the war both at the Front and behind it. Confronted with the same enemy, and sharing the same cult of empire, different Britons proved willing—rightly or wrongly— to act in unison.

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[48] John Hay Beith, *The Oppressed English* (New York, 1917), p. 30.
[49] John Osmund, "Wales in the 1980s," in *Nations without a State: Ethnic Minorities in Western Europe*, ed. Charles R. Forster (New York, 1980), p. 44.
[50] W. J. Reader, *At Duty's Call: A Study in Obsolete Patriotism* (Manchester, 1988).

IV

If we look at Great Britain in this way, as an invented nation that was not founded on the suppression of older loyalties so much as superimposed on them, and that was heavily dependent for its raison d'être on a broadly Protestant culture, on the threat and tonic of recurrent war, especially war with France, and on the triumphs, profits, and Otherness represented by a massive overseas empire, a great deal becomes clear. First, this interpretation helps us to understand why— on the British and not just on the Irish side—Ireland was always difficult to accommodate within the framework of the United Kingdom, always the poor relation. Its population was more Roman Catholic than Protestant. It was the ideal jumping-off point for a French invasion, and both its Protestant and its Catholic dissidents traditionally looked to France for aid.[51] And although Irishmen were always an important component of the British armed forces, and individual Scots-Irishmen like Macartney and Anglo-Irishmen like the Wellesley clan played leading imperial roles as diplomatists, generals and proconsuls, Ireland's relationship with the empire was always a deeply ambiguous one. How could it not be, when London so persistently treated the country, in a way that it never treated Scotland and Wales, as a colony rather than as an integral part of a truly united kingdom? Ireland was in many respects the laboratory of the British empire. Much of the legal and land reform that the British sought to implement in India, for example, was based on experiments first implemented in Ireland.[52]

Second, if we view the success of Britishness as being closely dependent on the proximity, real or imagined, of the Other, we can perhaps obtain a fresh understanding of the drift toward American independence before 1776. Historians have always known that the British conquest of Canada in 1759, by destroying the French military presence there, allowed the American colonists subsequently to become more strident in their resistance to British authority. But might it not also have been the case that once Canada was no longer an outpost of Catholic France, once it was no longer available to act as the Other as far as Protestant Americans were concerned, they were set free to see the British crown and its agents as the Other? Instead

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[51] See, e.g., Marianne Elliott, *Partners in Revolution: The United Irishmen and France* (New Haven, Conn., 1982).

[52] See Scott B. Cook, "The Example of Ireland: Political and Administrative Aspects of the Imperial Relationship with British India, 1855–1922" (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers—The State University, 1987).

of the Americans viewing themselves and the British as "us" opposed to the French Catholic "them," the thirteen colonies became "us," while the mother country was demoted to "them."

Finally, understanding Britishness in this way helps to explain its late twentieth-century difficulties. Virtually every major European state is currently witnessing a revival of ethnic tensions and/or a resurgence of small nations that once acquiesced in being a component part of a greater whole, so it would be clearly inappropriate to interpret calls for a breakup of Britain solely in terms of its own peculiar development. But its peculiarities do play a part. Part of its fragmentation is clearly owing to the fact that Protestantism is now only a residual influence on its culture, as is Christianity itself. As the recent furor over Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* (London, 1988) bears witness, there are now more Moslems in Britain than there are Methodists. Only perhaps the continuing Britishness of the Labour party, with its nonconformist roots and its continuing strength in Scotland and Wales as well as in England, allows us to see how much a common Protestantism contributed to an artificial British nation in the past.

But most obviously, of course, the era of successful war making and empire building is over. It had ended indeed even before the First World War, but the realization only began to sink in with the 1960s. Shorn of its imperial extensions, Britain, as J. G. A. Pocock writes, has ceased to be able to control Europe or to avoid it.[53] It has to become part of it and, so, is unable anymore to define itself comfortably against it, though the difficulties that British politicians and voters of all partisan persuasions have in coming to terms with the dictates of the European Economic Community indicate how rooted the perception of Europe as the (predominantly Catholic) Other still is. In these circumstances, the reemergence of Welsh, Scottish, and English nationalism can be seen, not just as the natural outcome of cultural diversity, but as a response to a broader loss of national—in the sense of British—identity. The Other in the shape of Catholicism, or a militant France or Germany, or an exotic empire is no longer available, and the natural result has been a renewed sensitivity to internal differences.

In that it tends to look resolutely inward rather than outward, the Four Nations model of British development must be seen in part as one more aspect of these current political developments. As the Welsh historian Gwyn Williams declared back in 1979: "The British nation and the British state are clearly entering a process of dissolution, into Europe or the mid-Atlantic or a post-imperial fog. Britain has begun

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[53] Pocock, "The Limits and Divisions of British History" (n. 7 above), p. 333.

its long march out of history."[54] For its inhabitants, this may well be no bad thing. But for historians to reconstruct British development in the past without paying close attention to the effect of the outside world, both as Britons experienced it and as they imagined it, would be a grievous mistake—not just a march out of history, but a retreat into blinkered parochialism.

[54] Quoted in Osmund, p. 44.