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## CURRENT BOOKS

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### ... *But Will There Always Be a Britain?*

**BRITONS:** Forging the Nation 1707–1837. By Linda Colley. Yale. 375 pp. \$35

Few questions have proved so puzzling as the question of what makes a nation. Still fewer ideas have proved so psychologically satisfying, and yet so lethal, as nationality. To call it an idea may even be something of a misnomer, since most of its force derives from the popular belief that it is a naturally occurring fact, like carbon or nitrogen. National self-determination—the proposition that ethnic identity should be expressed and guaranteed through political sovereignty—has enjoyed a wider sway than any other modern political doctrine. But what is a “self” here? Ethnic differences all too obviously lead people to kill each other, but if representatives of various ethnicities are asked to spell out what makes them distinct—for instance, to help would-be peacemakers to draw up the baselines for a political settlement in Northern Ireland, Palestine, or the south Slav successor states—they find it impossible. A people’s “way of life” seems, literally, to be inexpressibly precious.

Once upon a time (and most national histories are indeed fairy tales), there was—in theory, at least—a simple explanation of nationality. A nation was a nation because it had a common culture, articulated through its language. Language was the most obvious sign of nationhood because it indicated a shared experience, but there could be other indicators as well, such as religion or even an artificially imposed political unity. This was where things started to get complicated. The ideal type hardly ever meshed with reality on the ground. German unification in the 19th century established the modern rule that the only legitimate political unit is the culturally homogeneous “nation state.” Yet even Germany’s “ideal case” involved the dragooning of other ethnic groups and fell far short of the pure nationalist dream of inner unity (*Volksgemeinschaft*).

The British case was more ambiguous still. Everybody knew, as Daniel Defoe put it, that “from a Mixture of all kinds began/ That Het’rogeneous Thing, *An Englishman*.” Yet the mystical force was with Defoe and his contemporaries, too. A 19th-century British schoolbook could say quite unproblematically of the American colonists that “they had English feeling and spoke the English language.” What this meant everybody knew. Everyone also knew that *British* was a term of artifice, a plausible civic fiction for England’s control of a multinational state incorporating Scots, Welsh, and—with considerably more controversy—Irish. Or at least everyone suspected it was, and was therefore reluctant to subject the term



to rigorous scrutiny. English nationalism has been one of the last major cases to attract historical attention. In suggesting that not only an English nationality but also a comprehensive British nationality, emerged before Victorian times, Linda Colley of Yale University set herself a task more difficult than it may appear—a task with substantial relevance to other multi-ethnic “nations” such as Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. To her credit, she has produced a substantive study of how legitimacy is negotiated.

Colley's technique is as much visual as verbal. She has a persuasive way of locating in visual messages and symbols the roles both played in nation-building. Her view embraces such celebrated images as Benjamin West's *Death of General Wolfe at Quebec* (1770) and less familiar (and even more complicated) interplays of imagery and visual symbols. She describes the sudden passion of elite males at the turn of the century for tight-fitting uniforms, and she has an eye for other sartorial and behavioral details, such as Jonas Hanway's famous umbrella. The patriotic pamphleteer Hanway (1712–86) was the first man to carry one regularly—a more English trait would be hard to find—but why did he? Not, as we may think, only because of the fear of chills that terrorized society in his century but because he “desperately needed to impress and be taken seriously” by keeping his clothes in good shape.

This takes us to one of the central lines of Colley's argument, the contention that nation-building was an enterprise of the middle class on the make. The outline of this view, in soft-Marxist form, is familiar enough—it is hard to imagine that nationalism would have begun to draw breath if it had been inimical to the middle class—but Colley enlarges it to show how the British state engaged the energies and loyalties of former outsiders, the Scots and even women. Her most vivid theme is the monarchy's rise as the central symbol of the new national identity. Of course, monarchs had always been central, but no previous kings had pulled off (or even tried to

pull off) the Hanoverian trick of becoming simultaneously grand and commonplace. When George III went mad after 1810, and his draconian medical treatment became the nation's daily news, the royal family stumbled on the peculiar modern power of soap opera to represent a way of life. (Their discovery would be exploited by Trollope, Galsworthy, and ultimately *Dallas*.) A more effective means of focusing public consciousness surely has never been devised. Only now, as the marital problems of Fergie and Di go over the top, is the script beginning to go off the rails, a mini-debacle in line with Colley's uncertainty about the permanence of the British identity.

The main reason for this uncertainty is the weight Colley places on war as the accelerator of national unity. It was old-fashioned xenophobia, more exactly Franco-phobia, that incorporated the lower classes into the nation. Britain was “forged” above all in the experience of the long war against France between 1792 and 1815. “If the inhabitants of the United Kingdom are now more conscious of their internal divisions,” she suggests, “this is part of the price they pay for peace and the end of world-power status.” This is hardly novel as a general proposition, but by mining some rich evidence of public opinion (an unprecedented, and forgotten, government survey under the first Defence of the Realm Act of 1798), Colley shows that the long-fashionable emphasis on popular dissent, associated with the work of E. P. Thompson, has been misleading. British people were substantially loyal to the authorities who led them against the French.

War may be a precarious basis for identity. Yet that other motor of British opinion, Protestantism—or, more exactly, anti-Catholicism—Colley finds no more congenial. The brute force of Protestant prejudice has provided spectacular assertions of national unity; it has also diminished the appeals of conflicting loyalties by making them too dangerous. After, for example, the anti-Catholic Gordon Riots of 1780, most British Catholics prudently identified themselves slightly more as En-

glishmen and slightly less as Catholics than they had before. Here her argument comes closest to measuring the concrete content of nationality, the "self" itself.

Yet exactness in this matter, however urgently it has been pursued by political scientists concerned with ethnicity, does not greatly interest Professor Colley. Indeed, she dismisses "agonizing over definition," with the aplomb only historians can muster, as being "necessary only if one remains wedded to an unrealistically narrow view of what constitutes nationhood." This tolerance of imprecision may indeed be the keystone of the British structure. Unfortunately for the rest of the world, however, such weddings have been the main aim of most impassioned nationalists. This is exactly the issue between Serbs and Croats, Czechs and Slovaks. Instead of defining an "ethnic self," Colley settles for the humanistic notion that people are "many-layered creatures."

In practice, people do indeed have multiple identities, but they tend to be hierarchically ordered. People do not routinely kill each other on the basis of their subordinate identities (e.g., motorist/golfer, conservationist/gourmet) in the way they do in the name of the fundamentals: Catholic/Protestant, Serb/Croat. That is why nationalism presents a desperate challenge to academic analysis. Rather than brushing aside, as Colley does, the tension between British and English identity, we should perhaps be looking for explanations of how it became fruitful rather than destructive. We really do need to know what kinds of political structures will contain ethnic demands. Where exactly does social trust stop, and why? Can national identities be deliberately constructed, invented, recast, or "forged"? Colley subscribes to the common view that the shared memory of nations is formed by selective amnesia, but how does the selection work? For the British fertility in the "invention of tradition" she provides hundreds of examples but no real explanation. All that we can deduce from *Britons* is that the invention of tradition is a clever way of managing and dis-

guising change. We learn that English people came to accept being ruled by Scots during the late 18th century and also to give Catholics civil rights. But if these happened principally under the pressure of war against an even more threatening Other (usually France), the outlook for peaceful change is rather bleak. If Colley is right, for all its advantages—not least its geographical uniqueness—Britain may not be such a success story.

War may be the most intense expression of nationally shared experience and memory. Yet there are other expressions of national identity that may prove robust enough to sustain this kind of composite nation. In *Imagined Communities* (1983), Benedict Anderson wrote a brilliant essay on nationalism (only fleetingly alluded to in one of Colley's footnotes). The unifying mechanism Anderson describes is one of administrative integration, represented by the "looping flight" of the career bureaucrat. Where this bureaucratic flight path has become well-established and broad enough to accommodate ambitious people of various ethnic groups, it has knit together unpromising political units such as Indonesia and the successor states of Spanish America. This civic-administrative framework for identity, reinforced by the commercial mass journalism that Anderson calls "print-capitalism," seems to mesh rather well with the British experience. Though it is scarcely foolproof on its own—as the fate of the Soviet Communist Party dramatically demonstrates—it does at least form the basis of a peaceful model of ethnic evolution. Bolstered by the distinctive pluralist civic culture which became the hallmark of "liberal England" (a.k.a. Britain), administrative integration can form a sturdy, legitimate, yet flexible structure. If it were to prove replicable in a larger framework, it might even make Europe fly. The people of Bosnia and Belfast and Moldova must hope it can.

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