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Mark Nicholls. *A History of the Modern British Isles 1529-1603: The Two Kingdoms.* Oxford and Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1999. xxvi + 387 pp. $50.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-631-19334-0; $99.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-631-19333-3.

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Two British Islands with Three British Kingdoms, 1529-1603

Since "three kingdoms" analysis became fashionable in the early 1990's publishers have been rushing to adapt their British history textbooks to give Scotland and Ireland equal prominence with England. Mark Nicholls' *The Two Kingdoms* is Blackwell's entry in this race to retell the story of modern Britain.

This conception of British politics works well for the period after 1603, when the story is of one king in three kingdoms. For the sixteenth century, however, it works less well, as Nicholls is quick to point out. Scotland and England were separate, sovereign, and antagonistic nations with definite national identities, while Ireland, technically a separate kingdom after 1541, lacked unifying sovereignty and national identity. To write a history of the "two kingdoms" is really to write a history of three kingdoms, with nods to the Welsh, Cornish, Highlanders and border peoples. The political complexity of the British isles in the sixteenth century is daunting, requiring an awareness of geographic realities as well as linguistic patterns, economic conjunctions, and evolving religious allegiances. National identities were being forged in relation to religion in the sixteenth century, just as all the nation states in the Isles were suppressing and assimilating those who spoke neither English nor Lowland Scots. The complexities and rate of change across the century are so great that the historian is faced with a nasty organizational problem, deepened by his or her awareness of contemporary identity politics. Even finding a neutral name for a book on the British Isles in the sixteenth century is problematic.

Nicholls admits all of these challenges, facing them with an honesty that nearly convinces you not to read the book. Confessing that it is a product of the "mood of the times" (p. xiv), he warns that "a pan-British approach runs the risk of presupposing parallels where there is in fact nothing but coincidence, distinction or divergence" (p. xv). Although he admits that the histories of peoples on the peripheries are important, he believes a textbook does not serve students well if it does not teach them to understand the world of Shakespeare and Knox. Therefore, he believes, the main political narrative must come before attempts to explain the interplay between the centers and the margins.

Nicholls' solution to his impossible job is a book in which the political histories of England and Scotland are the focus, existing independently but marching together, with Ireland appearing only as a part of the emerging English empire. This side-by-side approach makes finding a starting date problematic, so he arbitrarily opts for 1529, the beginning of England's Reformation Parliament, and the end of the earlier volume in the Blackwell's series. For obvious reasons, 1603 provides a proper terminus, with the arrival of the Stuart's in England and the beginning of the next volume in the series.

Having thus limited his ambition to the political history of two nations, Nicholls writes a coherent, up-to-date history in which England dominates. Fourteen of his nineteen chapters are on England, four are on Scotland, and one is on Ireland, so that, although it is truly a history of two kingdoms, England is recognized as dominant, and its history is rehearsed in greater detail. Nicholls does not apologize for his Anglo-centric approach, since England will emerge as the dominant partner in the United Kingdom, and because the historical research on England has been conducted to a greater depth than that on Scotland and Ireland.

Nicholls' awareness of research and researchers is one of the pleasant aspects of this well-written volume. In most textbooks the student is presented with a magisterial view of the history, not knowing that most generalizations about history are current debates dressed as truth. In this book historians are often allowed to speak for themselves, or, if paraphrased, their names are attached to the paraphrase. The result is a book that is obvi-

ously current in its research, and which gives the reader the sense of research as on-going. Phrases like "Gordon Donaldson has argued ..." (p. 295) move the argument along and honor the ideas of others but, in Nicholls' hands, they do not detract from the text.

To anyone who teaches the sixteenth century, Nicholls' narrative is familiar. For instance, his chapter on "UnElizabethan England" tells the story of the 1560s in terms of the debate over Elizabeth's marriage and the succession, the structure and function of the Privy Council, the emergence of Cecil and Dudley, Parliament, the arrival of Mary of Scotland, and the Revolt of the Northern Earls. Taken together with a chapter on the Elizabethan Settlement, this is a walk through the high politics of the era, without much attention to the religious, social, economic or epidemiological issues which drove those politics. His treatment of the reign of Mary in Scotland is of a similar ilk, though the key role of Knox and the religious nature of the civil strife in the 1560s gives religion more prominence as an agent of constitutional change. The focus, however, is always political.

Of course a political history of the two kingdoms must treat of their relations with one another, and Nicholls gets the battles and treaties and negotiations in– though often more as a part of Scottish history than of English history. He posits that there was no conception of "Britain" in the minds of the islanders, and so there was no "British policy," except for England's Monroe Doctrine, designed to keep the French out of the British Isles.

In sum, this is a fine textbook on the political history of the British Isles. Well written, it provides a good introduction to the political history of Scotland and England, making no grandiose claims along the way. To his credit, Nicholls refuses to describe the history of the British Isles teleologically. The New Labour version of British history is, in his view, in danger of becoming New Whig history. We are, he says, "in danger of building a new high road to civil war, focused on a mirage and unwarranted by the available evidence" (p. 317). He wants contingency left in the history, warning against oversimplification and making parallels where none should be found. Instead, we must keep our eyes on the "ad hoc responses of successive administrations to successive crises and constitutional difficulties" (p. 319). If there is something contributed to the making of the modern British nation by the sixteenth-century experience, it is that both states were theoretically absolutist but practically consensual, with limited means of compulsion but a desire for central administration, providing a cultural matrix for what came next.

Looked at from the angle of political history, Nicholls' argument may be correct. What he does not do, and which he does not claim to do, is to see the Isles in ways that might make them appear more integrated. Religious identity, whether Catholic or Protestant, does not appear as a real force here, though the Lords of the Congregation and several Elizabethan Privy Councillors thought it might be. Cultural relations between England and Scotland are not touched (how can a John Knox have a career in both nations so easily?). Economic ties between regions, as well as family ties, are not given serious treatment, either.

But, that said, would I assign this book to my undergraduates? I would. It does what Nicholls promised, providing a political narrative that is easy to read and accessible to beginners in British history. I would certainly supplement it with social, economic and cultural histories, but it is a good foundation on which the build a more complex understanding of the British Isles in the sixteenth century.

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