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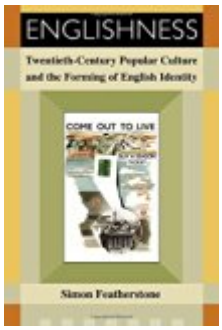

Simon Featherstone. *Englishness: Twentieth-Century Popular Culture and the Forming of English Identity.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009. 202 pp. $110.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7486-2365-5.

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Commissioned by Thomas Hajkowski (Misericordia University)

Many historians, political scientists, cultural critics, and other commentators have convinced themselves that Englishness was largely absent from discussions of national identity until the last three decades of the twentieth century. As Simon Featherstone points out in this wide-ranging and interesting examination of what it meant to be English across the twentieth century, it could be considered that there now exists a school of "Englishness studies." The school includes academics such as Alison Light, Anthony Easthope, Linda Colley, Robert Colls, Stuart Hall, and Paul Gilroy (one could add Peter Mandler, Wendy Webster, Jeffrey Richards, and Arthur Aughey to this list) as well as non-academic writers such as Simon Heffer, Roger Scruton, Jeremy Paxman, and Billy Bragg. This makes for a crowded field and Featherstone seeks to develop a distinctive approach from his employment in a university drama department, suggesting that "the focus of the nine chapters is upon performances" (p. 5). He combines this with another distinct perspective in the consideration of place, explaining that the book will take as one of its themes "the suppressed significance of regional identity in both the establishment and problematising of Englishness" (p. 5).

There is an impressively broad assortment of themes discussed in the book. Across its 180 pages, there is consideration of English nostalgia and modernity, folk-dance and Scouts, festivals, the Miners' Strike of 1984-85, literary journeys, northern England, race and ethnicity, sport, accents, and romance. Each chapter has a mix of the familiar and the unfamiliar. One stimulating juxtaposition is in the chapter on the north. George Orwell and a discussion of Blackpool sit alongside analysis of the visits of Mohandas Gandhi and the cricket writer C. L. R. James in the 1930s. Likewise, the chapter on "race" discusses the English nationalist and racist Enoch Powell, but also Randolph Turpin, the black middleweight boxer from Leamington Spa, who defeated Sugar Ray Robinson in 1951 to become world champion and a national hero. Sometimes these linkages work less well. When discussing "festivals," Featherstone in-

cludes the Festival of Britain in 1951 and the Millennium Experience in 2000, but also the Miners' Strike of 1984-85. Given that the Miners' Strike was fundamentally a very real class conflict fought by people defending jobs, families, and communities, its discussion as "festival" seemed strained.

Featherstone's justification is that the strike provided "a disorderly, unofficial commentary ... [that] dramatised arguments about national identity and cohesion," and he is surely right in such an argument (p. 47). The strike might be seen as "political theatre" that took place away from the customary places of English self-representation, and it was "performed" in films like ***Brassed Off*** (1996) and ***Billy Elliot*** (2000), yet at its root the strike was not a performance but a battle in which lives and livings were at stake. This also points to one of the book's two flaws. While Featherstone claims that his is a book about performance, discussion of the theme has not been followed through. It makes fleeting appearances, so Powell's "Rivers of Blood" speech, in which he forecast racial violence, is seen as performative, as is the Bodyline cricket tour of 1932-33, when English cricketers bowled balls directly at the upper body of their Australian opponents. So too are the Notting Hill riots of 1958, which are described as "a performance of a moment of change in the politics of English identity" (p. 109). There is much discussion of actors, so Gracie Fields and Frank Randle from Lancashire appear, as do films like ***A Canterbury Tale*** (1944) and ***Brief Encounter*** (1946). There is, though, no discussion of Englishness as performance in the otherwise strong conclusion.

The second flaw is a common one in discussions of national identity in the United Kingdom. It has become something of a commonplace to conclude that the English did not express an English identity while they had the empire to divert them. Following Krishan Kumar, Featherstone argues that "instead of inventing its own nation, as the rules of nationalism demand, England had invented entirely different national and colonial structures to stand in for it" (p. 178). Yet one wonders how it is that so many writers have found so much material about English national identity/character that the number of books on Englishness rises so steadily.

In part at least, the cause is that Englishness was so complex. It did exist in a multinational United Kingdom. Like the Scottish and the Welsh, the English were also British. They could combine both national identities, not in a hyphenated form, but as Englishness within Britishness, merging, infusing, and blending at the boundaries and at the core. It was different ***and*** the same. This is why reading through Featherstone's ***Englishness*** it is so frequently the "B" word--Britain--that is found, rather than England: the Festival of Britain, the British National Party, the miners' strike in England, Scotland, and Wales, the Scouts (in which the first Glasgow troop claims to be the first officially registered), and the British Empire, which brought Gandhi and James and hundreds of thousands of other immigrants to Britain. "I was British," C. L. R. James wrote (p. 106). Yet "Britishness" is mentioned only once in the book. Without doubt, place matters in the United Kingdom and Featherstone uses a sense of locality and region very well to explore the ambivalence within unified versions of Englishness, but the same perspective might have been considered in terms of the way England fitted into Britain. As Bolton was a continuum with Lancashire and the northwest and the north and Britain and the empire, so too did England fit within this continuum.

The reason for so many words being written on Englishness is because we, as academics, have not come to terms with the way in which the English found it so remarkably easy to perform so many identities all at once. Englishness was neither absent nor anxious for much of the twentieth century. In the end, Featherstone draws his book to a close with a recognition of this. As he says,

"England, then, remains in search of itself as a nation and that search has been an integral part of its culture and politics for over a century" (p. 182). This book provides an engaging addition to "Englishness studies," but not yet the last word.