

**David J. Baker, Willy Maley, eds..** *British Identities and English Renaissance Literature*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002. xvi + 297 pp. \$60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-78200-5.



**Reviewed by** Krishan Kumar

**Published on** H-Albion (February, 2004)

Literature and History in the Study of Early-Modern British Identities

This timely and important collection of essays, mainly by students of literature, is placed squarely within the "new British history" pioneered by John Pocock in the 1970s and 1980s. Pocock argued that the history of Britain, or of the United Kingdom, had largely been English history writ large. This had led not just to the neglect of the parts played by the other peoples of the British Isles but to a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of the United Kingdom itself, as a culture and a polity. One had to consider the mutual and reciprocal relations between the different parts of the British Isles, and to see that those parts not only created "the conditions of their several existences but have also interacted so as to modify the conditions of one another's existence." [1]

Properly understood, such a perspective should have made one cautious of the "four nations" approach to British history that has become popular in recent years (see, for instance, Hugh Kearney's *The British Isles: A History of Four Na-*

*tions* [1989]). This runs the risk of merely adding Scottish, Irish, or Welsh developments to the traditional English ones, thus ignoring the extent to which each is reciprocally the product of the other. More seriously, it can impose a spurious uniformity and equality on the contributions of the various parts, thus distorting the fundamental unevenness and asymmetry of the actual history of the British Isles. Indeed one somewhat unexpected effect of the new British history has been to open up the peripheries--Wales, Scotland, and Ireland--but to leave the center, England, as something of a black box. In their zeal to avoid Anglocentrism, new British historians have vigorously explored the multinational character of the "the Atlantic archipelago"--i.e., the British Isles--but have largely ignored the character of the Englishness that was the largely unexamined center of traditional accounts.

And yet, as the editors of this volume insist, "it is precisely English dominance that makes of British history a 'British problem'" (p. 6). Anglocentrism is best tackled by focusing on England, not by ignoring it and shifting attention to the pe-

ripheries. English identity must be as much the concern of scholars as the more frequently interrogated Scottish, Irish, and Welsh identities. This is not simply a matter of evenhandedness; it reflects the obvious though sometimes unpalatable fact that the English were not simply one group among others but the dominant political, economic, and cultural force. This volume therefore, claim the editors, "places 'Englishness' at centre stage, without apology but with a thorough examination of the implications of its dominance, however unevenly construed and constructed" (p. 7).

This is a book about collective identities, though, perhaps wisely, neither the editors nor contributors attempt anything like a formal analysis or definition of the term. What they do bring however are the skills and expertise of literary scholars in an area that has largely been the province of historians. The editors rightly remind us of "the specificity of literary culture as a key carrier of national identity" (p. 7). Texts, with their multiplicity of meanings and variety of users, can convey the nuances and contradictions of identity perhaps better than more conventional historical documents. While historians, moreover, have sought to redirect attention to the British dimension of the "English" state, they have tended to ignore the cultural Englishness that was an equally important element--in both its positive and its negative effects--in archipelagic developments. "State formation and canon-formation go hand in hand" (p. 6).

Like many of the contributions to the new British history--perhaps reflecting the interests of Pocock himself--this collection focuses on early modern Britain, the Britain marked crucially by the passing of the crown from Tudors to Stuarts and so bringing the British question inescapably onto the agenda. But since the target is Englishness, most of the contributors concern themselves with texts and authors that touch on this dimension, if only to show its multifacetedness. This must mean, say the editors, a concentration on

"iconic texts--'Shakespeare'--that were and are implicated in a hegemonic 'Englishness'" (p. 7). Shakespeare therefore gets pride of place, with no less than four of the fifteen chapters devoted to him. What most contributors stress is the need to rethink the use of Shakespeare in the usual accounts of English national identity, ones that see him as affirming a strong, almost insular, Englishness against barbaric Celts and other nations. The key plays here are of course the history plays, which Derek Hirst rightly says have been "central to the writing of England and its destiny" (p. 257). Matthew Greenfield on *I Henry IV* and Pat Parker on *Henry V* both show how shaky the sense of English identity is in these plays, how threatened by a sense both of the internal divisions within England and of the questionable nature of English ambitions in relation to its near neighbors (including the French). And though Mary Floyd-Wilson argues, in her analysis of Shakespeare's "British" play, *Cymbeline*, that Shakespeare there "helps establish the exclusivity of English history" (p. 113) by disparaging the Celtic peoples and emphasizing Anglo-Saxon roots, a more persuasive, and more traditional, interpretation sees this play as presenting the case for an Anglo-Scottish union and the construction of a British identity.[2] Certainly, as Derek Hirst shows in his account of *The Tempest*, though Caliban can plausibly be seen as a portrait of the "wild Irish," with the cannibalistic associations conventionally attributed to them, Shakespeare does nothing to refute Caliban's great cry for autonomy, "This island's mine by Sycorax my mother / Which thou tak'st from me" (*The Tempest*, 1.2.331-2).

Equally welcome, as an antidote to the common understandings of English and other identities in this period, is the stress in this volume on the fluidity, incompleteness, and incoherence of national identities. Thus John Kerrigan illustrates the complexity of British identities in an exemplary analysis of the life and works of the Restoration dramatist, the Earl of Orrery. Orrery was a scion of an important "New English" family plant-

ed in Munster under the Tudors. In Irish terms he was thus an "Old Protestant," to be distinguished from the (mainly Scottish) "New Protestants" of the Jacobean Ulster plantation (and both of these distinguished from the Catholicism of the "Old English" and the native Irish). In a complicated diplomatic life that took him all over Britain he illustrates the range of influences that went into the making of identity in this period: archipelagic within a European context. Orrery's "self-presentation," says Kerrigan, "as not Irish, not fully British, but as--in a peculiar sense--one of "the English in Ireland" (p. 213) was shaped by life in London and Somerset, residence in Munster, and service in England, Ireland, and Scotland--the latter experience giving him a vivid awareness of the global designs of the French monarchy and strengthening his attachment to the English crown. Of course Orrery, as a landed gentleman and scholar, was not representative in any statistical sense. But he was representative of a time when class, religion, and politics had more to do with identity than ethnicity or nationhood in the modern sense.

In an incisive comment on the essays in this volume, Jane Ohlmeyer writes that "clearly identity-formation defies any easy explanation, particularly in the multi-lingual, religiously diverse, and culturally complex contexts of early modern Britain and Ireland where 'Englishness,' 'Irishness,' 'Scottishness,' and 'Welshness' meant a variety of things to different people" (p. 246). It has been too common an assumption that a strong sense of English identity, in particular, emerged in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as part of a developing English hegemony in the Atlantic archipelago.[3] This invaluable collection of essays goes a long way towards questioning that assumption, even if sometimes against the explicit purpose of the contributors.

#### Notes

[1]. J. G. A. Pocock, "The Limits and Divisions of British History: In Search of the Unknown Sub-

ject," *American Historical Review* 87, no. 2 (1982): p. 317; see also Pocock, "British History: A Plea for a New Subject," *Journal of Modern History* 47, no. 4 (1975): pp. 601-628.

[2]. See, for instance, Constance Jordan, *Shakespeare's Monarchies: Ruler and Subject in the Romances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); and Leah Marcus, *Puzzling Shakespeare: Local Reading and Its Discontents* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

[3]. For a criticism of this view, see Krishan Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), chaps. 5 and 6.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

**Citation:** Krishan Kumar. Review of Baker, David J.; Maley, Willy, eds. *British Identities and English Renaissance Literature*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. February, 2004.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=8931>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.