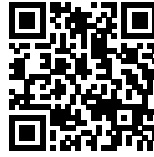




WHAT IS ENGLAND?

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Not to submit forever, until
The will of a country is one man's will,
And every soul in the whole land shrinks
From thinking – except as his neighbor thinks.
Men who have governed England know
That dreadful line that they may not pass
And live.

These lines are from [*The White Cliffs*](#), that famed long poem by Alice Duer Miller, written in September of 1940, in the very midst of the Battle of Britain, that epic struggle of the few against the myriads of the Luftwaffe. By the time this opening phase of a six-year long war finally ended in October of that year, 544 of the “few” had been shot down and killed over English skies. Eighty years on, their sacrifice is remembered by way of commemorative events, but what of the England that they died for? Has it endured in its will, in its national character, which Miller points to in her poem?

This, perhaps, leads to a larger question, one more difficult to answer - what is England in the 21st century? Further, is a nation a set of ideas, or the shared experience of a group of people bonded by common origins, or simply a geographical location in which people live without espousing anything essential other than circumstance of birth, or economic necessity and advantage?

To write a history of a nation encompasses far more than the tracing out of events, since the past must now more than ever also be justified as possessing intrinsic worth that will yield its value to all upon its retelling. Given the entrenchment of intersectionality, the past is fraught territory, lest anything within its ambit be glorified and thus foreground essentialist conclusions of “Englishness.”

Jeremy Black's most recent book, [*A New History of England*](#), rather deftly navigates these tricky waters to arrive at an apt justification, in that “past and future also exist in a counterpoint with each other.” Black understands that “The future and identity of Britain... have become unclear...” and thus, “...In this context, there is renewed interest in considering the identity of England.” He is also well aware of the now-contentious ground of history: “Those who fear the future tend to praise the past, while those who chart hopeful destinies for the future are often critical of the past. The curse of the past is particularly present for those who seek to empower themselves through past grievances, whether real or imagined; but to abandon history leads to the broken continuity with the past in which identities are lost and values

atomised."



Perhaps the reason why history is now so problematic is that we have a lot of problem defining the discipline properly. What is history? The totality of events, or the written report of said events? Adding to the ambiguity is the shift away from any and all notions of human destiny in favor of causal laws, which then makes history a rational explanation, by way of description or reconstruction of what happened in the past. Since modernity lacks cohesion, only point of view, opinion remains. Thus, existentialist, neopositivist and historicist opinions see history as capricious, without true description - which means that history is not an explanation but simply another story, in a much-tangled network of narratives. Nothing but this network exists or matters. The great flaw in this argument is that history is not a natural science that it must meet standards of rational causation - and more importantly, it is a necessary component in contemporary life - and thus cannot be rejected nor simply be a story poorly or deftly told.

Black rather admirably grounds the importance of history within the expanse of *res gestae*, by both acknowledging that consciousness is the standard of truth for modernity, while also recognizing the necessity of transcendence, in that history must also contain "...the far more complex reality of overlapping and often very different, if not clashing, senses of identity. Alongside nationhood, people can also identify through social structures, religion, gender, ethnicity and other factors, although there is a risk of putting excessive weight on modern ideas of self-identification through gender, ethnicity and other factors."

Such an understanding allows for a rather precise conclusion: "... the English are those who live in England." As to why the book is about the history of "England" rather than a history of "Britain," Black offers this clarification: "...the idea of Britain, especially of the Anglicised bits of Scotland, Wales and Ireland, is, in many (but by no means all) respects, essentially a 'bigger England' view: an English identity was stamped on some of the 'Celtic Fringe' and, in turn, opposition to real or alleged English interests and values helped drive local identities and political activism." The "idea" of Britain is also summarized. It is the "...strength of the core of England - Westminster, London, the monarchy, the [national] system."

Thus, the first chapter is geographical in nature, or that other "history, that of the relationship with the

environment." Accordingly, the impact of human activity throughout the breadth of the region is examined, with the ensuing loss of certain species of both flora and fauna. However, the area that comprises England is also the most fertile in the entire island, thanks to the Gulf Stream and reliant rainfall. This gave those who lived in this region economic power and thus the "fuel" to extend control.

Further, being an island, geography required an outlook and thus institutions which were markedly different from the Continent. Thus, there was a reliance on the navy, which made conscription for a standing army less important (although this did not preclude England from getting involved in various military ventures). Raw materials also played their part, especially coal. Therefore, it is not surprising that the notion of environmentalism as integral to history is developed in England, in the 19th century by Charles Pearson.

The second chapter looks at the condition of England before the arrival of the Romans, starting with early hominid presence, and then the coming of the modern humans in the Paleolithic period, the hunter-gatherers of the Mesolithic, and the eventual spread of domesticated animals and wheeled vehicles and metalworking (copper, bronze and lastly iron). By the second millennium BC, there are stone circles and henges, with Stonehenge being the most famous, though certainly not the only one.

From 800 BC, England came to be dominated by the Celts, who spread westwards from what is now Germany. There were many settlements and towns, but no real indication of an urban civilization. What can be learned about this era is from archaeology mostly, as the Celts were not literate and left no written culture. This means that it is impossible to speak of a "proto-England" at this early era.

With the coming of Julius Caesar in 55 BC, the island became part of the Roman world, and thus Chapter 3 deals with Roman Britain. The subduing of the island was no easy maneuver and required much hard-fighting and effective military leadership, which lasted well into the next century, with the invasion by Claudius in 43 AD. This process finally ended with the conquest of Wales in 76 BC. The Romans, of course, never managed to hold sway over Scotland and Ireland. Hadrian's Wall (seventy miles long), built in 122 AD, was an admission of this inability.

As Britain became a Roman province, it acquired the many benefits of Mediterranean civilization. Towns were established, provincial capitals established, with London being the capital of the entire province. As well, roads were laid down, agriculture improved, technology imported and trade with the rest of the world established. And important cultural changes, such as, Christianity, had immediate impact. On the

whole, Roman Britain was peaceful; the source of the unrest were Roman military units who were always in turmoil because of the political ambitions of their commanders. Eventually, Britain, as with the rest of the Roman world in the West, could not hurl back the relentless attacks by barbarians. Rome itself was captured by Alaric the Goth in 410 AD. This also spelled the end of Roman Britain, which was left defenseless in the face of barbarian threats from the Continent.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 deal with three pivotal events in the history of the island - the coming of the Anglo-Saxons (which established the English language and England itself), Danish conquests (the Danelaw), and thirdly the Norman Conquest. The Anglo-Saxon period, from 450 AD to 1066, was one of rich culture, as evidenced by the finds at Sutton Hoo, as well as high literary achievement, in both Old English and Latin, such as, *Beowulf* and the work of the *Venerable Bede*.

During this 600-year period, the character of England may best be described as "Scandinavian," since it was finely integrated with that northern world, culturally and linguistically. The fateful year of 1066 changed all that, for with the Norman Conquest, England not only changed dynasties but cultural alignment - the Normans sheared away Scandinavian influence (and made Scandinavia itself a backwater of Europe) - and merged England with the life of Europe.

Chapter 7 examines the medieval period, in which kingship was Norman and French. However, during this time, England also created institutions that were unique, for feudalism gave way to the Magna Carta, with the growth and establishment of parliament. The Church was a cultural engine, for it established monasteries, hospitals and universities. The resultant intellectual and economic growth led to innovations in technology and flexible civic structures (towns and corporations). England also extended westwards and now included Wales, which began the transformation of England into Britain. However, this was also the time of the Great Plague, the Hundred Years' War and the devastation of the War of the Roses, which effectively ended the medieval age.

Chapter 8, examines the Tudors, which saw emerge a new energetic type, namely, the "gentleman," who possessed power not by virtue of noble birth, but because of individual effort. The Tudors greatly promoted gentlemen, who in turn gave them wider influence and wealth. Such men defeated the Spanish Armada, brought English colonies into North America, extended trade, and gave England a novel status - that of world influence. Paradoxically, such expansion also meant that a more dynamic type of governance was needed. This was found in a refurbished parliament - and the consequent diminishing of royal power. By the time Queen Elizabeth I died, royalty had lost most of the "divinity"

that once hedged a king.

Chapter 9 concerns the Stuarts and the Interregnum in which the Civil War and Cromwell's rule ensured that parliament would now be above the crown. This meant that law was paramount (the habeas corpus) and the State limited in overreach so that the subject possessed rights that could not be supervened. More importantly, the crown, because it was under parliament, became an integrated part of the nation, instead of an overarching system of power. As well, England formed a union with Scotland (1707) and became Britain.

After the Stuarts, parliament could also readily "import" suitable sovereigns (William from Holland, who was in fact the grandson of Charles I, and after him the German Hanoverians). Such integration - people, parliament and crown - ensured great social, economic and political stability, something that the rest of Europe would never enjoy until well into the 19th and 20th centuries.

Chapter 10, concerns the 18th century, which was a period of great innovation and invention, for this saw the Industrial Revolution, the Age of Reason, and a global reach of the English language. France, with its Napoleonic Empire was defeated and humbled, which gave England the baton of a world power. But England had also suffered its own humility, with the American Revolution, which meant the loss of half the continent of North America and the creation of the United States. Internally, however, England saw none of the upheavals that gripped Europe throughout this period. This is because of three factors - the entrenchment of a powerful and independent legal system; Whig liberalism; and socially conscious Anglicanism, which fostered gentility, or what could come to be called, "the Sentimental Revolution." These three political and social forces allowed England to maintain stability and cohesion.

Chapter 11 deals with the 19th century, which is also generally known as the Victorian Age, after the monarch whose reign spanned for much of the century. England saw its prestige and influence increase globally, as it also became an empire on which it was said "the sun never set." This imperial achievement (thus, Great Britain), came as a result free trade (beginning with the abolition of the Corn Laws) and a more streamlined fiscal system that also had simplified taxes. There was also the establishment of the post office; the laying down of an extensive rail network; the creation of a civil service that was not political aligned but concerned with the responsible management of the nation. England also brought an end to the international slave trade.

But rapid industrial growth created untold misery, for the ordinary factory-worker had no real protection and exploitation was rife in a Britain rapidly industrializing. The Factory Act of 1819, and its later refinements, imposed limitation on the number of work-hours for men, women and children; which, in turn, brought about the weekend holiday (beginning with half the Saturday off). The work week (the "English week") gave dignity to labor that was previously absent. More importantly, a new class of citizenry was created - the middle-class, which soon became the backbone of the nation. All this did not mean that there was no mismanagement and bad decisions (like the Great Famine in Ireland). Nevertheless, there was always the higher ideal of working towards stability and peace.

Chapter 12 deals with the 20th century, which brought an end to the power of England, by way of two World Wars, even though Britain won both. The cost of victory was great, for meant dismantling the empire itself into a Commonwealth of nations and dominions (beginning with Ireland). England, as in the start of its history, slowly retracted until it once again became an island nation, within the broader context of Europe, which eventually brought it into the European Union (an economic and cultural relationship that is now, in turn, being dismantled through Brexit). Britain is no longer Great, but merely the United Kingdom.

The final chapter engages with an interesting issue - that of English identity, where the unity itself of the Kingdom is now being called into question by those who would like to see it dissolved, so that England once again becomes surrounded by other nations - Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Thus, regionalism has meant a collapse of another kind - that of cultural continuity, so that "Englishness" is nothing more than a heap of fragments which cannot really be glued back together again - for there is no "glue" available to accomplish such a task. As Black observes: "Thus, the destruction or weakening, from the 1980s, of traditional and, until then, still vital benchmarks of national identity - the Common Law, Parliamentary sovereignty, national independence, the monarchy, the Church of England, a culture of tolerance - was not followed by the creation of any viable alternatives."

So, what lies ahead? Black is not overly optimistic about England: "Not only the sovereignty and the cohesion of the United Kingdom, but also the character and unity of England are being recast, or is it destroyed, in the name of modernity. It is difficult to feel optimistic about the outcome." It appears that those who now govern England have now rather blindly passed that line which Alice Duer Miller warned about in her poem.

This book was a joy read, for it is marked by deep insight, clarity of thought, and an impressive

marshalling of facts. It really should be on every thinking person's bookshelf, for it possesses that rare quality among books of its genre – it does not disappoint.

The [*image*](#) shows, *"The Departure of a Troop of 11th Hussars for India,"* by Thomas Jones Barker, painted in 1866.

