

Archipelagic Identities

Literature and Identity in the
Atlantic Archipelago, 1550–1800

Edited by
Philip Schwyzer and
Simon Meador



ARCHIPELAGIC IDENTITIES



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PHILIP SCHWYZER and SIMON MEALOR

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Introduction

Philip Schwyzer

In May 2000, as the parties in Northern Ireland lurched toward yet another crisis, a disgruntled Ulster Unionist complained that the peace process was robbing her of her identity. ‘They are dimmer-switching our Britishness all the time.’¹ The comment reveals more than the speaker may have intended about the nature of Britishness – and perhaps of nationalities in general. We are used to speaking of national ‘identities’ as if they were attributes belonging to individuals, no less personal, intimate, and essential than one’s eye colour or blood type. Yet if Britishness in Ulster is subject to the control of a dimmer switch in (presumably) Westminster, then it can hardly be a quality inhering in the individual subject. Rather, it would seem to be a field in which the subject is captured and made visible – a way of seeing and, as importantly, of being seen. This field, moreover, seems capable of variation both in territorial extent and in degree of intensity. After a long period of expansion, the range of Britishness has retracted significantly over the last century, and seems almost certain to retract still further in future. Even in its heartlands, Britishness may no longer serve as a primary source of illumination, but rather as a kind of gentle mood lighting.

The ongoing debates in Stormont, Edinburgh, Cardiff, and London about the meaning and future (if any) of Britishness are at once very new and laden with historical resonance. Devolutionary shifts in British governance have been accompanied by constant references and comparison to precedents in the past, though the past in question often seems to be distorted or dimly understood. The Parliament that opened in Edinburgh in 1999 was widely if inaccurately hailed as a resumption of that which dissolved itself in 1707; the new Welsh Assembly, likewise, was greeted as the Principality’s first for 600 years, in a dubious reference to the ‘parliaments’ hosted by the rebel Owain Glyn Dwr. The new ‘Council of the Isles’, an intergovernmental body designed to facilitate power-sharing in Northern Ireland, seems to derive its name if not its political character from the late-medieval Lordship of the Isles. The trend for resurrecting old geopolitical entities has even extended to the heart of England, where the title of Earl of Wessex was recently introduced (to honour a royal bridegroom and his bride), after a hiatus of more than a millennium in the history of that polity. Wherever Britain is heading in the

twenty-first century, its gaze seems to be fixed anxiously backwards, peering into a complex and turbulent past in search of keys to a stable future.

But when was Britain – and where? When we look back on the geographical lore of the late medieval and early modern periods, ‘Britain’ seems less like a place on the map than like a tide sweeping back and forth across it. For some writers, ‘Britain’ described not an island but an archipelago, from which Ireland was certainly not excluded. For others, ‘Britain’ was synonymous and coterminous with England – as the fourteenth-century chronicler Ranulph Higden reported, ‘it is a common saw that ... Scotland ... is departed in the south side from Britain with arms of the sea’.² On other occasions, ‘Britain’ referred to Brittany and/or Wales (both of whose inhabitants were commonly known as ‘Britons’). In the early sixteenth century, Robert Fabyan did his best to clarify matters by explaining that the ‘Isle of Britain’ was identical with ‘Middle England’ (Fabyan, 1811, p. 11), a perspective some present-day politicians would seem to share. But if Britain was no more than England’s ‘middle’, did this suggest that Ireland lay somewhere within England as well? Or was Ireland, as Edmund Spenser among others would insist, nothing other than ‘Scotland’ (Spenser, 1997, p. 45)?

These debates over geographical nomenclature were never mere antiquarian quibbling. Wherever cultures and languages come into contact, and above all where there is a ‘colonial’ dimension, acts of naming play a crucial role in establishing – and resisting – dominance and hegemony (Bach, 2000). Every contested name inscribes a vision that is at once partial and political. Hence the urgency with which the sixteenth-century scholar Humphrey Llwyd insisted that the true name of his nation was ‘Cambria, and not Wallia, Wales, as it is now called by a new name, and unacquainted to the Welshmen’ (Llwyd, 1573, p. 50). Cambria, he knew, was not simply another way of saying Wales; it had different historical borders, different traditions of government, a different vision of itself. And while the particular debate in which Llwyd was engaged has long been settled, his anxiety about naming finds echoes in the present – as it has in all historical eras since the age of Bede. Will we say ‘Cambria’ or ‘Wallia’? ‘Scottish’ or ‘North Briton’? ‘Derry’ or ‘Londonderry’? ‘The British Isles’ or ‘these islands’ – or ‘The Atlantic Archipelago’?

The last-mentioned phrase, which features in this volume’s title, will probably never roll easily off the tongue – but then, that is part of the point. By its very awkwardness, ‘Atlantic Archipelago’ does much to defamiliarize a geographical entity whose story we may imagine we already know all too well. The phrase was coined by the historian J.G.A. Pocock in his seminal ‘British History: A Plea for a New Subject’ (1975).³ Emerging in the mid-

1970s, Pocock's plea went all but unanswered for some years; it may be that the dismal failure of the Scottish and Welsh devolution referenda in 1979 persuaded some historians that the British Question really was settled, after all. Since the late 1980s, however, even as fresh movements for political change in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland have gathered pace, historians have taken up Pocock's challenge with a will. The New British History has reshaped our image of these islands in all historical periods, not least the early modern era. We have learned a great deal about the cultural and political relations between the various archipelagic nations, about the contested expansion of English administrative and linguistic hegemony, and about the myths and memories which formed the basis of national identities (Ellis and Barber, 1995; Bradshaw and Morrill, 1996; Bradshaw and Roberts, 1998). Of course, the New British History still has far to go before it approaches the goal of seeing the Archipelago clearly and seeing it whole. It will need to meet many challenges, not least whether it can truly leave behind the Anglocentrism which, according to some, still lurks beneath the cover of British inclusiveness. But we should not underestimate the significance of the transformation that has taken place. Today it would appear nothing less than absurd to teach the history of England or any of its neighbours in the insular (or rather, profoundly uninsular) manner that was the norm just 20 years ago.

While the salutary influence on historical studies is undeniable, it may appear less clear on the face of it what relevance an archipelagic perspective may have to literature or literary criticism. The large majority of contributors to this volume, after all, are based in departments of *English* literature. Yet English and Englishness have never existed in a vacuum, or as a homogenous field. In the early modern period, as in all eras, English writers were relentless travellers, both literally and imaginatively. How could we hope to understand Spenser's literary works without thinking about Ireland, or – as John Kerrigan argues here – Defoe's without thinking about Scotland? The point applies no less strongly to William Shakespeare, who traced up and down the island of Britain in his imagination, though it seems unlikely he ever passed beyond the Wye or the Tweed. Shakespeare's London was a multicultural crossroads, even as today. He lived in a district populated by Huguenot refugees, of the sort discussed here by Simon Meador. And if his command of Celtic languages did not extend even so far as his 'small Latin, and less Greek', he had a boy actor in his company who could and did sing in Welsh.

But an archipelagic perspective cannot consist simply in noting how English literature absorbed influences and inspiration from neighbouring peoples. To adopt this approach and no other would ultimately be to participate in the

continued silencing or co-optation of non-English voices. A central strand of archipelagic studies, in literature as in history, must be comparative – in this case, between the various languages, native and immigrant, of the region. Examples in this volume include Murray Pittock’s analysis of Scottish Jacobite verse in both Scots and Gaelic, and Simon Meador’s exploration of how Huguenot refugees contributed in French to the cult of England’s Elizabeth. But these studies only hint at what is possible in a field that remains, remarkably, largely unexplored. We should not underestimate the difficulties that lie in the way of a truly comparative approach to the literatures of the archipelago – there are awkward disciplinary barriers, and sometimes long-standing suspicions to overcome. At present, there are probably not many scholars who find themselves linguistically, methodologically, and – not least – emotionally prepared to analyze the Welsh play *Troelus ac Chresyd* alongside Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*, or fifteenth-century Cornish mystery plays alongside their better known sisters from Wakefield and Coventry. But this sort of work will prove vital in future if literary studies is to live up to the challenge of reflecting archipelagic realities.

The essence of what we might term the archipelagic perspective lies in a willingness to challenge traditional boundaries – boundaries, that is, between the histories of different nation-states, and also between academic disciplines. Two scholars who have played a leading role in carrying (or smuggling?) the insights of the New British History over the border into literary studies are David Baker and Willy Maley (Baker, 1997; Maley, 1997b; Baker and Maley, 2002). This collection kicks off with a lively dialogue between the two, in which they explore the genesis of British studies, and its relation to contemporary trends in both British politics and the academy. Baker and Maley chart an ambitious future for this emerging field, one in which the archipelagic perspective seems fated to extend itself towards and finally be subsumed within a new understanding of world literature. For Baker, the essence of the approach has less to do with a particular geographical region than with ‘the demand that apparently distinct entities – call them “nations” – be considered in their constitutive inter-relatedness.’ This is a demand which all of the essays collected in this volume heed, and to which they respond in a remarkable variety of ways.

The section entitled ‘Looking for Britain’ explores literary attempts to imagine Britain at three crucial moments in the island’s political history. Kate Chedgzoy examines the representation of England as an island in two texts written towards the reign of Elizabeth I – a queen who, it must be remembered, ruled over less territory than any other monarch since 1066, in spite of the

imperial rhetoric that characterized her reign. Chedgzoy sets Shakespeare's John of Gaunt's notorious celebration of 'England' as 'this sceptred isle' alongside a similar trope in Anne Dowriche's *The French Historie*, placed this time in the mouth of a French Protestant refugee. She examines the cultural pressures that made it necessary to imagine England – against all evidence to the contrary – as at once effectively bounded by sea and internally homogenous. In the essay that follows, Gillian Wright demonstrates that the union of the crowns of Scotland and England under James VI and I by no means made the task of imagining Britain easier. While the title of William Browne's fragmentary *Britannia's Pastorals* seems to promise a survey of the entire island, what the poem in fact offers is primarily an exploration of the county of Devon and the principality of Wales. Browne's local patriotism does not underpin his depiction of Britain, Wright suggests, so much as undermine it. The final essay in this section, by John Kerrigan, takes us forward almost a century, to the real political union of Scotland and England in 1707. While Defoe busied himself in Edinburgh as a spy and pro-union propagandist, he also, Kerrigan argues, absorbed much from Scotland's fraught cultural environment at this crucial turning point that would inform his later fiction.

While the essays in the first section demonstrate the significance of archipelagic contexts to writers from Shakespeare to Defoe, no such demonstration seems required in the case of Edmund Spenser. Which other English poet has been so intimately or so obviously entwined in the cultural politics of the archipelago? Even before the rise of the New British History, the significance of Spenser's long and troubled Irish sojourn had become clear to literary critics. Indeed, at times Spenser has seemed to serve the function of a whipping-boy, the sole acknowledged representative of the English colonial mentality in this era. While the recognition that he was not alone in exploring issues of archipelagic import takes some of the heat off Spenser, it also allows for a reappraisal of his specific role. Surveying previous work on Spenser and the Irish question, Joan Fitzpatrick explores the gendered colonial perspective of his river-marriage cantos – the fruit of a project which, in its initial outlines, predates *The Faerie Queene* itself. Swen Voekel then takes a fresh look at the poet's colonial politics. While Spenser's engagement with Ireland has traditionally been seen in terms of a clash of cultures, Voekel argues that his work must be read in the context of early modern state formation. It was not Englishness *per se* that Spenser wished to see imposed upon Ireland, so much as the administrative primacy of a freeholding landowner class – a shift in jurisdiction which necessitated the humbling of Ireland's tribal and bastard-feudal chieftains. In the final essay in this section, a critic who has done more

than most to deepen our understanding of Spenser's Irish contexts, turns to explore his relations with another archipelagic nation. Spenser's notorious celebration of the execution of Mary Queen of Scots deeply offended her son, James VI of Scotland. But was this mere tactlessness on the poet's part, or a calculated campaign against the Stuarts and their claim to the English throne?

The essays in the third section, 'Representing the Nation', explore questions that go to the heart of the problem of national identity in the archipelago – and further afield. Who represents the nation? Who, that is, is empowered to author representations of a national community – and who is deemed to be representative of that community? In her appraisal of *Coryat's Crudities*, Melanie Ord argues that it is Coryat's very marginality – the provincial Somerset background relentlessly mocked by urban sophisticates – that enables him to negotiate a position as a writer fit to represent Englishness abroad, and foreign countries to the English. Murray Pittock then turns to the representation of Scotland – as a wronged or waiting woman – in Jacobite poetry and song (both Scots and Gaelic). A form of national representation familiar from Irish literature turns out to have a close parallel on the British mainland, with the difference that while the Irish woman-nation is usually represented by a masculine poetic voice, the Scottish woman-nation speaks in the first person, that is, represents herself. Finally, Michael Roberts examines how the seventeenth-century Welsh nation was represented by and to the English. While William Richards' *Wallography* offers an obviously burlesque description of Wales, it also reflects ironically back on its English readers and author – it is a telling point, Roberts argues, that *Wallography* could later be passed off as the work of Jonathan Swift.

The nations of the Atlantic Archipelago defined themselves, of course, not only in relation to one another, but also in relation or opposition to the outside world. The final section of the volume, 'Immigrants and Emigrants' explores how archipelagic identities were formed and transformed through contact with the 'less happier lands' that lay beyond John of Gaunt's 'silver sea'. Focusing on language and accent as national signifiers, Emma Smith intriguingly reads the debate over the admission of foreign words into English as at once reflecting and intervening in late Tudor debates about the nature of Englishness. Simon Mealor then turns the tables, revealing how French Protestants taking temporary or permanent refuge in England negotiated their problematic status through representations of the English landscape. The final essay, by Christopher Ivic, follows the expansion of 'Englishness' and 'Britishness' across the seas to North America. In the poetry of Anne

Bradstreet we witness new Atlantic identities in the process of formation. It is appropriate, even inevitable, that this volume should conclude with an essay that moves far beyond the bounds of the Atlantic Archipelago – after all, the real essence and value of this approach to literature lies in the relentless transgression of the very boundaries that seemed to define its scope.

Notes

- 1 *Daily Telegraph*, 23 May 2000, p. 12.
- 2 Higden, 1527, sig. 37r-v. Similarly, the fifteenth-century English *Brut* describes Scotland as ‘a land that joined to Britain in the north’ (*Cronycles*, 1493, sig. a6r).
- 3 A version of the essay had appeared a year previously in the *New Zealand Journal of History*. See also Pocock, 1982.

Chapter 1

An Uncertain Union (A Dialogue)¹

David Baker and Willy Maley

This paper was solicited from us by the editors and conference organizers, Simon Meador and Philip Schwyzer, and we are grateful for the spur that they provided. The idea of a dialogue was theirs, but the suggestion was informed by the fact that we had been engaged for quite some time in a dialogue, not only with one another, but with colleagues closer to home and further afield, revolving around the question of British identities, their extent and their exclusivity. So while this is a commissioned piece, in a form that is less familiar than the standard academic essay, it grew out of a genuine dialogue conducted over a long period of time by email, telephone, and in the course of ‘proximity talks’ in Monterey, Glasgow, and Oxford. We have elected to retain the speech rhythms and informalities of conversation characteristic of a live exchange, rather than gloss over the occasional nature of the performance. To that extent, then, this represents the state of play in our thinking at a particular moment, and we have made some cosmetic changes merely for clarity. At the same time, we see this piece as a necessary part of our thinking for another volume of essays which we were then in the process of pulling together (*British Identities and English Renaissance Literature*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). We are doubly grateful to Simon and Philip for allowing us to think outside the box of that book, and to air views that were not easily accommodated within that particular volume. We value dialogue, and we continue to differ creatively in our views of an area that still fascinates and frustrates us in equal measure.

Willy: A report in *The Guardian* newspaper on 5 April 1999 referred to new BBC guidelines coinciding with the election campaigns for the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly. Henceforth, the guidelines say, ‘Rioting fans of English football teams must no longer be labelled ‘British’ in news bulletins and subtitles should never be used for Scots talking English, even if their accents are ‘indecipherable’ to wider audiences ... In Northern Ireland, ‘particular sensitivity is

required. While some people regard themselves as British, others regard themselves as Irish. When referring to the population as a whole we should use the term “the people of Northern Ireland” – but not “the Northern Irish”.² Interestingly, the style book permits the use of ‘British’ in commercial and military contexts. (Presumably, the BBC itself – British Broadcasting Corporation – which is neither commercial nor military, is exempt from this.) And the sporting dimension is always an important one. *The Guardian* report tells us that English football supporters who cause trouble should be described as “‘English”, not “British”, hooligans’.

David: Isn’t ‘hooligan’ an Irish term, though? Derived from the name of a roughneck Irish family living in the south of London in the late nineteenth century? And isn’t it intriguing that such conflicts over nomenclature are fought out in the sports arena before the battlefield? Culture gets caught in the crossfire between institutional interests, some tractable, some not. In the United States, the ‘American football team the Washington Redskins cannot trademark their nickname because it is disparaging to Native Americans, [according to] the US Patent and Trade Mark Office’.³ This ruling was made while Tomahawk missiles and Apache helicopters were being dispatched to stop ethnic cleansing in Kosovo. All this underlines the complexity of such names, now as well as in the past. You recently reminded me that ‘the phrase “the British Isles” is not historically innocent, and helps sustain English supremacy’. In a similar vein, Jenny Wormald has called our attention to ‘that habit which infuriates inhabitants of the other parts of the British Isles to this day: the habit of using “England” as synonymous with “Britain”’. As we’re seeing today, invoking ‘Britain’ can arouse antagonism, but then so too can invoking ‘England’. For me, part of the difficulty of the British Problem is that the term ‘British’ has been so troubled for so long. I want to ask you: given the history of these terms, and the resentments they can elicit, what vocabulary would it be productive to use?

Willy: What has hitherto been regarded by some historians as an adventure in etymology is now the subject of serious debate across disciplines. The habit of mind that sees England as Britain is not simply laziness or Anglocentrism. Rather, it’s an indication of a genuine problem,

the problem of a large nation dominating a multi-nation state. I don't think that there is, or ever can be, any politically neutral, nation-free term, nor is it necessarily desirable that there be such a term. (Though some would argue that 'British' is such a term.) It's much more constructive to acknowledge antagonisms, historical hangovers, identity politics and prejudice, than to seek refuge in geography, particularly since geography isn't an objective science. I was recently asked to contribute an essay to a volume on something called 'the British Archipelago'. I thought this an odd hybrid term, halfway towards Pocock's 'Atlantic Archipelago', and in fact the volume's title has since changed to the latter. In some ways, 'Atlantic Archipelago' is intended to do the work of including without excluding, and while it seems to have taken root in terms of academic conferences and publishing, I don't see it catching on in popular discourse or official political circles, at least not in a hurry.

David: It's true that the 'Atlantic Archipelago' isn't likely to become an official designation anytime soon. But I suspect that, in any case, the inside/outside logic of legal demarcation that applies at the border doesn't actually do much to help us understand what we can mean usefully by 'British'. There are (at least) two reasons for this, reasons that make investigations into 'Britishness' both intractably difficult and, I find, chronically fascinating. First, as recent developments suggest, whatever else 'Britishness' is, it's not a nationality. As you've put it, Britain isn't an entity, it's an argument. Although one might claim to be a citizen of 'Great Britain', it has never been clear exactly what you're a citizen of. To quote the BBC again: 'The words "British" and "English" are not interchangeable. The words nation, country, and capital can be interpreted differently by different audiences. When we talk about things affecting "the whole nation" or happening "across the country", these phrases can mean different things to our audiences in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.' J.G.A. Pocock, a prime mover of the British history, which we'll be discussing, has said that 'no one ever has, or ever will, or ever should' become a British nationalist (1975, p. 616). Britain is an unstable conglomerate of kingdoms, which means, to sketch in the argument I've made recently, that there is not now and never has been a British identity that amounts to more than a tenuous, contradiction-ridden ideal. This is true both 'theoretically' – although

I use that word with caution – and experientially for anyone who takes it upon himself to ‘be’ British. I never have done that, so I’m not the person to testify to the incongruities this ill-fated identity project must produce.

Willy: For me, British citizenship is something of an oxymoron, or a contradiction in terms. The British are ‘citizen subjects’, to borrow a phrase from Etienne Balibar, or Britizens, to coin one of my own. Must every nation have a state, follow the model of the state, in its pursuit of rights and of citizenship? The era of the nation state is far from over as long as nations bereft of states are struggling for statehood. Multi-nation states, on the other hand, may well be a thing of the past. British citizenship could become part of history together with Soviet citizenship or Yugoslavian citizenship. There is in our time – perhaps there’s always been – a challenge to unequal unions and expansionist states, but nationalism always carries with it the risk of racism and of the negation of citizenship. As a coda to all this I might add that I once toyed with the idea of applying for Irish citizenship, to which I am entitled by virtue of an Irish grandparent, but decided instead to remain a reluctant British subject, not proud of it, and a Scottish citizen-in-waiting.

David: And it’s not only in Britain that ‘Britishness’ is ambiguous. It’s part of Britain’s post-colonial legacy that the complexities of this composite identity are not confined to those with British passports. Britain’s borders are often in flux, and, even now, it isn’t always clear what this entity encompasses. As you say, geography is not an objective science. The title ‘Archipelagic Identities’, reminds me that, when Pocock first put out a call for a less Anglo-centric history, he did it in the name of what he called an ‘archipelagic history’, in which he meant to include not just the nexus of kingdoms he termed the ‘Atlantic archipelago’ – England, Wales, Ireland, Scotland – but a ‘constellation of social and political structures’ that had been expanded ‘beyond the seas’, creating as it [went] new contexts in which its history must be interpreted and reinterpreted’ (1982, p. 320). (A crude rubric for this expansion is ‘empire’.) British history, on this model, is global in scope, and British identity is – though in some non-legal, geographically flexible sense – similarly dispersed. For instance, the BBC and the British Council have been successful

in this century in disseminating ‘Britishness’ as a cultural ideal throughout the former possessions and beyond. Living in Hawai’i, as I do now, I’m often struck by just how far and wide the reach of Britishness has been. Hawai’i is an archipelago that’s very far from this one. Indeed, it’s the most geographically isolated site on the globe, many thousands of miles from the nearest land mass. But when you’re trying to map ‘Britain’, it’s not always helpful to think of linear distance. The historical links between the two island chains are on display, for instance, in the state’s flag, which features the Union Jack in the upper left hand corner, along with an array of red and white stripes. At a time in Britain when this emblem is devolving, as we are often told, into its constituent parts – the cross of St George bisecting football jerseys – it still flies half way around the world. This is thanks largely to King Kamehameha I, who adopted it as his kingdom’s flag in 1794, some few years after Captain Cook first arrived. In fact, even today Hawaiian sovereignty activists often display this very flag to express their desire for an indigenous ‘nation’ of their own on the islands. Admittedly, this was not the sort of claim Cook thought to make possible on the archipelago he named the ‘Sandwich Islands’ after the First Lord of the Admiralty. But who’s to say that ‘British history’ does not now encompass this locale, precisely because he did so? Or that the various identities which have been and are being pieced together within the coordinates laid down by the intersecting lines of the Union Jack are not – at least relationally – ‘British’? I came to be interested in the matter of Britain through my study of English Renaissance literature. It was Edmund Spenser and William Shakespeare who first taught me to question whether English literature was really ‘English’. But my interest in ‘Britishness’ has been sustained by the discovery that there are very few places in the world where such issues do not figure in some way. Just at the moment when it seems to be passing, Britain, in its trace effects, is ubiquitous.

Willy: UK-ubiquitous even. My email ends in ‘uk’, the music I listen to is described as ‘Britpop’, the clothes I see in shops are part of the new ‘Cool Britannia’ image, and British Telecom tells me ‘it’s good to talk’. In this light, the British Problem, far from sounding the death knell of British identity, comes along – as Claire McEachern argues Englishness does – at precisely the point at which it is going out of

fashion, and the new British history can itself be seen as a project of renewal, or at least a holding operation that came into being at precisely the point when British identity was being questioned in direct political ways. The Britishing of English history can be seen as a regressive measure to ward off devolution, regionalization, and the impending break-up of Britain from within, and from without in terms of increasing European Union. Your allusion to the ‘Sandwich Islands’ is intriguing. Now there’s a sound bite that might take hold. It certainly beats ‘Atlantic Archipelago’ out of the park. Sandwich Islands captures the meat of the subject, and the aspect of in-betweenness. England is sandwiched between Wales and Scotland, with Ireland on the side. Over all this, a specious unity is thrown.

David: I suppose one thing we ought perhaps to do is to try and account for the misfit between the new British history and recent theoretical developments in Renaissance literary criticism. It’s one of the central paradoxes of the early modern period that a literary canon that would function as a repository of English national sentiment was emerging at just the moment when the English crown was striving to fashion Britain, stretching its authority ever more ambitiously beyond the bounds of England itself. In consequence, those in English Renaissance studies have often seen English identity as unified and unproblematic. Historians of the period have been quicker to recognize the need for a ‘British history’, but they have often concentrated mostly on the politics of the mid-seventeenth century. There are real possibilities for cross-commentary between the disciplines of history and literature as they engage the British Problem – but, often, this hasn’t happened. Why have major critical schools in early modern studies been so slow to take up a British approach?

Willy: New historicism and cultural materialism emerged at almost exactly the same moment as the new British history. On this side of the Atlantic, the new British history didn’t take with the cultural materialists. Why? Aside from the fact that its key practitioners were based at institutions in the southeast of England, there are at least three reasons why cultural materialism failed to register or respond to the new British history. One is the turn towards queer theory in the mid-to-late 1980s in the wake of (1) Foucault’s death, (2) the

work of Alan Bray and others, and (3) feminist critique of gender blindness in much recent historicist work. Another is the reliance on a Marxist historiographical tradition that was as anglocentric as any conservative history, with the exception of its attitude to Ireland, which was precisely seen as an exception to (an) English rule. The British Marxist tradition in historiography was represented, for example, by Christopher Hill, who was anglocentric and (arguably) Unionist to the bone. Raymond Williams was the key figure in terms of the Marxist literary criticism that underpinned cultural materialism, and although Williams has been described as a ‘Welsh European’, those literary critics like Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield who took up his work were arguably a little more insular in outlook. The third, related reason why cultural materialism ignored the new British historiography, is that it drew on an older historiographical tradition, and on a social history which furnished valuable little narratives but generally avoided larger questions of nation and state. The peculiar split in English historiography – between political and social history – explains why it was possible for critics professing to be taking a historical approach to effectively ignore new developments in historiography, and specifically political history. An excellent book like Keith Wrightson’s *English Society, 1580–1680* is typical in terms of glossing over the shift from an English to a British polity. So while political historians argued over the long and the short of the English Civil War/Revolution, social historians were content to engage in local interventions in culture and industry. The bigger picture was lost. The opening line of Dollimore and Sinfield’s Foreword to their influential collection of essays entitled *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism* is revealing. Headed ‘Cultural Materialism’, this foreword seeks to provide a definition of that term. It begins: ‘The break-up of consensus in British political life during the 1970s was accompanied by the break-up of traditional assumptions about the values and goals of literary criticism.’ But within a page we are told that the focus of the volume is ‘Elizabethan and Jacobean England’, and thus the break-up of consensus in British political life has become a crisis in English culture. The opportunity was there to refer to Tom Nairn’s ground-breaking study, *The Break-up of Britain* (1977). Instead, Dollimore and Sinfield retain an English focus. This missed opportunity is all the more unfortunate insofar as one of the key features of cultural