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This England: Essays on the English Nation and Commonwealth in the Sixteenth Century

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This volume collects and revises a series of articles by Patrick Collinson, which were first published between 1994 and 2009. It therefore systematically assembles a number of previously independent arguments, in order to provide a coherent vision of the way 16th-century Englishmen ? and most of Collinson?s subjects are men ? imagined their nation. Although the germs of these ideas were initially delivered together as a lecture series given at the University of Richmond, Virginia, this book represents the first time that his mature thoughts appear together in print. *This England* examines parliamentary outbursts, personal correspondence, religious texts and histories, highlighting the importance of patriotism, language, religion, and history along the way. After reading the book, one is left with the sense that Elizabethans were indeed constantly defining themselves as active, Protestant, and specifically *English*, citizens. The problem was that this act of self-definition could induce compromise through gruelling but constructive exchanges, or divide the nation as competing visions of Protestantism and polity clashed in multiple forums.

It is also worth noting that *This England* is less about post-Reformation religious culture ? the work Collinson is most famous for ? and more about his recent interest in early modern English politics and self-fashioning. Collectively, the essays therefore present a history of England, not the British Isles as a whole. Collinson himself admits this, very pointedly stating that despite the utility of what is generally referred to as

the ?New British History? for answering certain questions, *his* questions are about the nation, and ?there has never been a British nation? (p. 3). Although scholars like Linda Colley might take issue with such a statement, it is nonetheless refreshing to see an author stake his claim, for better or for worse. Moreover, Collinson does not deny England?s place within a larger system. He merely seeks to investigate, more specifically, how England viewed itself as a participant in that system and in the world at large.

The book is not divided into sections, but the essays do fall into three broadly based themes: Elizabethan high-political debates about what the nation should be, the link between Protestantism and English identity, and the nation as constructed through history. The first thematic section includes chapters one through five, and although Collinson?s classic essay on the Elizabethan monarchical republic does not appear, readers are asked to engage with arguments that rely on the assumption of an active political community composed of citizens and not subjects. Consistently, then, Collinson argues that while Sir John Neale made too much of political divisions, Sir Geoffrey Elton underplayed them. Unsurprisingly, these contests are said to have taken place in a world where religion and politics were inextricably intertwined. However, religious differences did not translate simply into court factionalism, and Collinson reminds historians that religious pluralism and occasional conformity were designed to mask religious diversity and facilitate political cooperation. At other times religious differences translated more clearly into political confrontations ? as during the 1578 progress ? or political pragmatism divided otherwise unified religious impulses ? as with the question of sending aid to Dutch rebels. These complex divisions existed throughout the politically engaged community, and continued to manifest after Elizabeth?s death through the histories produced about her reign.

In an engaging essay that has hitherto often been overlooked, Collinson reinvestigates what he calls the ?Elizabethan exclusion crisis?. Here, he argues that the sustained attempt of much of the political nation to prevent the ascension of Mary Queen of Scots to the English throne bears a striking resemblance to the better known Restoration events of the same name. Highlighting the 1584 Bond of Association and an association discovered in the Earl of Shaftesbury?s possessions in 1681, he claims that the two exclusion crises had five common characteristics. These were a popular fear of Catholicism, the attempt to exclude a Catholic successor from the throne, the fear of arbitrary government, the divergence of the interests of the political nation from those of the monarch, and the presence of a Sidney (Sir Philip Sydney in the 16th century, and in the following century, his grand-nephew, Algernon Sidney). Moreover, Collinson notes that those living through the crisis of the 1680s themselves looked back on Elizabethan politics to explain and justify their own situation. The republication of this piece urges scholars, once again, to reconsider the nature and longstanding importance of the debates surrounding Mary Queen of Scots and her captivity. This is a worthy endeavour, but many will agree that historians should proceed with caution on this difficult terrain. There is a danger in attempting to draw too close parallels because of that major historical schism that stands between the two crises: the civil wars and interregnum. By the 1680s, two decades disruption had taught people to fear Protestant dissenters as much as they feared Catholics. Equally important, although Collinson convincingly argues for independent capacity among the political nation during the 16th century, one cannot deny that after the Restoration, the size of that political nation and the way in which political action was organized had changed dramatically.

Chapters six through eight function as a discussion of Protestantism and the nation, dedicating considerable space to John Foxe and his *Acts and Monuments*, after examining the nature of prophetic preaching. Chapter six thus reminds scholars of Collinson?s classic argument; that prophetic preaching, by its very nature, brought the nation together as a type of new Israel, but also provided the framework used by the godly when distinguishing themselves from the community at large. The prophetic mode, he claims, was thus ?corrosive and divisive? (p. 183). Several times throughout the collection Collinson suggests that this fundamental division in the nation was of central importance to the upheavals of the next century, returning to a more *longue durée* approach to the causes of the civil wars. This is part of a general attempt, already noted above, to link the histories of the 16th and 17th centuries after revisionism?s insistence on contingency and the importance of short-term causation had effectively severed the tie between them. Such comments remind us that a balance does indeed need to be established between too wide and too narrow a historical lens. Most would agree, however, that finding this balance is painstaking work, and this speaks to the one failing of *This England.*

As each chapter has previously had to stand alone, none of the essays were composed with the luxury of the numerous pages required to explain the complex relationship between events separated by decades, leaving the proposed connections unrefined.

The other essays in this thematic section examine the *Acts and Monuments*. Rejecting William Haller?s elect nation thesis, Collinson reminds readers that there may still have been some sort of community formed in the production and consumption of the text, if not in Foxe?s own personal vision. In order for this to happen though, the book had to carefully balance between truth ? the truth of the historical narrative and well as the true faith ? and fiction ? or the literary skill necessary to interest people and convey the overarching message. The godly favoured the divine and historical facts provided by the book, but it was the literary artifice involved that allowed it to become a ?living text that recorded performances and invited performance? (p. 235). The ?[t]ruth, lies and fiction? of chapter eight?s title is thus somewhat misleading, as Collinson is actually much more concerned with locating the balance between fact and literary skill, and understanding what that meant to Foxe?s contemporaries.

The last thematic section of the book contains essays dealing with how the nation was constructed by historians. In these essays, the concern is thus with historical methodologies and motivations. How does Camden compare to the modern historian? What is lost when a volume is translated? What was different in a period before the boundaries between history, antiquarianism, and chorography where clearly established? And how and why was the notion of ?Merry England? deployed? In answering these questions, the William Camden we have lost is of special interest to Collinson, who spends a great deal of time on the original Latin edition of Camden?s *Annales*. Camden, we are reminded, dwelt upon the drama surrounding the execution of Mary Queen of Scots. And in many ways, the truly great figure of the story he told was not Elizabeth I, but her cousin Mary. Collinson?s work emphasizes, then, that although Camden was the first historian of Elizabeth?s reign, he was not involved in manufacturing the myth of Gloriana. His original text was critical, and there were a number of places where he and his colleague, Robert Cotton, later amended it so as to make it more sympathetic to the virgin queen. The English translations which followed took this trend even further, and lost the ?intense, epigrammatic, often ironical style and tone? of the original (p. 257). It was these later texts that unquestioningly celebrated Elizabeth, not Camden?s Latin edition.

The book closes with a chapter that attempts to better understand the motivation behind the writing of nostalgic histories ? balancing the opening interest in a prophetic gaze forward with a longing gaze towards the past. Many of the men who wrote such texts were Catholic sympathizers, but this was not true in all cases, and Collinson offers William Lambard?s lament of lost monastic manuscripts as an example of devout Protestant nostalgia. Having acknowledged this, Collinson spends most of his time comparing the histories of John Stow and Richard Carew, and the varying degrees of sympathy for the Catholic past that each possessed while remaining conformable to the Church of England. Stow, whose Catholic sympathies were more pronounced, located the golden age of Merry England in the irrecoverable past, while Carew located it in present-day Cornwall. Collinson thus cautions against assuming that the English nation was constructed through histories, precisely because there were so many different visions of the past.

Overall, the collection gives the sense that Elizabethans succeeded in constructing a nation and not just a kingdom, despite Benedict Anderson?s famous assertion that nationalism is a modern phenomenon. Collinson demonstrates that the political community was active and engaged, and that certain ideas, texts, and moments in history served as rallying points around which an English national identity could form. The problem, though, was that this identity was an unstable one, and Collinson illuminates the fissures in Protestant discourses about the nation, and in the ways in which histories might reflect religious and political fault lines. For him, this explains why the nation eventually collapsed into civil war. But this ignores the problem of whether such constructions are ever entirely coherent and stable. Contradictions abound in any identity ? individual or social, past, present and dare I say future ? so what made the inconsistencies in the 16th-century English identity so problematic? To be fair, this is not a question that Collinson set out to answer, and it is the mark of a good book that it raises as many questions as it poses.

As Professor Collinson passed away this year, this will, unfortunately, be his last contribution to a field

which has benefited greatly from his numerous insightful books and articles. His is a voice that will be greatly missed. Scholars will again find his characteristically lively prose and empirically researched arguments as they read through this collection, but they will also find it a very useful text for their students. All of the material is accessible, and the nature of the collection means that essays can easily be read alone, in groups, or as a complete set. Furthermore, the range of material covered by Collinson is impressive and offers several avenues for approaching the Elizabethan national imagination. There are only two noteworthy omissions: legal constructs of the nation, and the nation in literature. Collinson explains in the introduction that he lacks the legal expertise to pursue the former, pointing to recent work by Alan Cromartie instead. But the omission of literary sources, despite the fact that his title alludes so strongly to Shakespeare, is not addressed. Literary scholars have already produced a good deal of quality work on the subject, and it would have been informative to have seen Collinson?s opinion as a historian. This, however, was not Collinson?s subject. He did not set out to write new work, but to survey what he had produced over the past two decades.

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