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Sixteenth Century British History: Recent Textbooks

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Author:
Mark Nicholls
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Author:
Patrick Collinson
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Oxford
Author:
Glenn Richardson
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Hodder Education
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Author:
John McGurk
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Cambridge
Reviewer:
Tim Thornton

Two very starkly contrasting approaches to the history of the sixteenth century lie behind three of the books reviewed here: Mark Nicholls' *Two Kingdoms*, Glenn Richardson's *Renaissance Monarchy: the Reigns of Henry VIII, Francis I and Charles V*, and the Patrick Collinson-edited volume *The Sixteenth Century, 1485-1603*. Essentially the contrast surrounds core issues of commonalities, contrasts and boundaries in the definitions of the subject matter, for what was once considered (in appropriately ambiguous terms) as an instinctive English/British history has become intensely and interestingly more complicated.

Nicholls' book is part of one of the most ambitious results of the impact of the New British history. The series in which he writes is an attempt to create a history of the British Isles, not simply from the perspective of England, as has so often been done in the past, but one which allows equal weight to the constituent elements he identifies - essentially the constituent kingdoms of England and Scotland, and the island lordship and later kingdom of Ireland.

Nicholls' response is interesting. He quickly emerges as a distinctly unwilling participant in the project of the New British History. He calls to our attention the observation of Hiram Morgan that there was no British policy in any part of these islands during the sixteenth century, other than a natural English determination to exclude foreign powers. He also glosses John Morrill's speculation that Welshness, Irishness and Scottishness might not be the building blocks of Britishness, but in many ways the products of the imposition of that Britishness itself. He also finds good sense in Morrill's further observation that the English were not interested in the detail of the Britishness they imposed on others, and adds that the reasons for its adoption in Wales and Scotland were either grubbily self-serving or the product of military disaster, *faute de mieux*

. For Nicholls, this is not a group of histories with many common themes: he explicitly rejects the invitation to produce such unifying theses, beyond the uncertainties of dynastic failure, the impossibility of enforcing order, still less justice, in an inherently violent world, and the religious change driving political, social and cultural transformation and disruption.

Nicholls is therefore forced to write a sequence of juxtaposed narratives and analytical passages. Ultimately, it is clear that he believes the British approach is only appropriate in the 'feudal' world, or in the kingdoms united by James VI's accession to the English throne in 1603.

Nicholls remains largely true to his determination to avoid explicit overarching themes in his accounts. What emerges within each chapter is a relatively conventional account of the development of the strong national states of the sixteenth century, if more through fear, opportunism and blind ambition than statesmanship and planning. The historiography is only infrequently overtly examined, as for example in a brief passage generally supporting the idea of faction as a key dynamic force at court; this serves to qualify the Eltonian view of Cromwellian revolution, but also retains a belief in Cromwell as architect of the jurisdictional elements of the break with the Rome, the diversion of the succession, and the enhancement of the authority of parliament, and especially of the Commons. This notwithstanding, Nicholls does provide us with a very useful and stimulating book, in which we can find serious treatment of the assertive monarchies of both Henry VIII and James V, of both the Edwardian and early Elizabethan reformations in England, and of the Scottish Reformation.

It was always one of the problems of the old British history that it treated Scotland, Wales and Ireland as awkward peripheries tangentially relevant to the core narrative. The problem with the approach Nicholls has taken in this volume is that it takes the constituent 'national monarchies' as almost as sacrosanct as the 'England/Britain' of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Thus the intersections of the three receive perhaps less attention than they might, as do the awkward peripheries which provided so much de facto variety within the allegedly unified constituent kingdoms of these islands. Ultimately, too, the insistence on the limited and simple nature of the connections between the two - and later three - kingdoms Nicholls describes must be questioned. These connections were increasingly significant, whether in terms of noble interests which transcended 'national' frontiers, as for example those of the earls of Argyll; or the ideas upon which political and religious life was based, notably the concept of potential British unity, a vision which grew throughout the first half of the period covered here, strengthened by associations with new religious ideas and expectation, and which, despite receding a little in mid-century, rallied strongly in the latter part of Elizabeth's reign. The need for a British history lies in precisely these types of interconnection and collision, and is not simply dependent on the existence, or otherwise, of a 'British policy' in any key centre of power, whether that be a royal court after 1603 or feudal appanage or dynastic assemblage before 1340.

Collinson's *Sixteenth Century* is another product of the new British history, but a more satisfying one. Collinson's contributors seek to describe developments across these islands, and they consistently identify important dynamics affecting all their constituent elements. Moreover they argue that it was the interaction of these constituent elements which was one of the most important factors in the events of the century. For example, Steven Ellis (' The limits of power: the English crown and the British Isles') rehearses his thesis of Tudor centralisation imposing ill-fitting solutions based on lowland England, in the far larger and more complex highland zone. Diarmaid MacCullough in his chapter 'The Change of religion', articulates his discussion around the impact of the imperialist ambitions of Henry VIII and their medium-term consequences, thereby unifying a story of contrasting religious developments in, say, the Protestant Gaelic Highlands and Romanist Gaelic Ireland. While acknowledging the diversity of social and economic microsystems to be found across these islands, Jim Sharpe ('Economy and Society') tentatively detects a 'steady congruence' emerging among them. John Guy, in his contribution 'Monarchy and Counsel: Models of the State', considers with somewhat less emphasis the emergence of ideas of imperial monarchy and quasi- or outright republicanism in the world of political ideas.

In contrast to the seventeenth century, the general reader will be less familiar with the idea of the sixteenth century as a period in which the destinies of so many aspects of life in these islands were ultimately so

bound together. This book will provide an accessible and refreshing approach to an alternative view. On the other hand, we are left still asking questions: perhaps too often there appears a *deus ex machina* to trigger the collisions and interactions of the communities of these islands, and that device comes in the form of Henry VII and his son and their ambitions. Although John Guy explores some of these issues in his discussion of imperial kingship, and Greg Walker, who contributes an essay on 'The Renaissance in Britain', assesses the reception of continental European ideas within the insular context, on the whole this is a British history driven from the English centre by forces unexplored, perhaps ultimately external, perhaps internal.

By contrast, Glenn Richardson seeks to shed light on the monarchies of Henry and his contemporaries Francis and Charles V by giving primacy to the central interactions of European political life and culture. Richardson's case is that there was a common devotion to the pursuit and display of *virtù* uniting the three men: in Machiavelli's words, 'to win the reputation of being a great man of outstanding ability'. More specifically, this led them to seek to excel in their roles as warriors (primarily), governors, and patrons.

The book's great strength is in drawing out this parallelism and reminding us to look for the common features of sixteenth-century monarchy before we rush to look for local and specific patterns and causation. Richardson is systematic in ensuring that discussion of one aspect of one monarch's rule is balanced equally by coverage of the same aspect in others.

Perhaps here the limitations of the book's overall plan are clearest. There is a constant - and for many readers no doubt extremely useful - focus on providing a full and clear descriptive or narrative account. As a result, the book's mission tends to be expressed in the parallel cataloguing of broadly common features, allowing little time for the examination of contrasts and their implications, or even perhaps of the deeper implications of observed common experience.

Further, Richardson's account is that of the court historian, very much in the mould of David Starkey. It is the monarch and those around him who dominate this world, and the power of other factors in the landscape is seen through this refracting prism, ultimately in terms of the degree to which it was potentially limited and in fact restrained or overcome. There is proper acknowledgement of the existence of centres of local power and of influential nobilities, but ultimately this is not the perspective of the book. It is noticeable, therefore, that the primary research of the author is much clearer in contributing to the central perspective than to the local, and that where errors creep in, as they very occasionally do (such as the enfranchisement of Durham on p. 115), it is in coverage of such topics.

John McGurk's book provides a good example of an easily accessible textbook aimed at the A-level market: its material is divided up into very easily digested short sections, and it has document case-study exercises which tie well into the themes of each chapter. The overall approach to the English monarchy is via an assessment of the increasing power of the monarch and the growing checks upon him/her through the emergence of an English bureaucracy - with the ultimate end of the process being the primacy of the council. The book is therefore a gauge, too, of the extent to which the controversies so sharply represented in the former works are finding their way into the school and college class room - and the answer seems to be only in a relatively limited way. The preoccupation with borders and interactions so evident, even in their denial, in the other books is certainly not present here. Where there is consideration of the 'provinces' it is very much in terms of a transitional account of their incorporation. McGurk's style is to approach complex and controversial issues by posing them as questions; but his partial answer on the question of the centralisation is of imposed central authority from the English heartlands, if one more or less effectively resisted.

The stark contrasts offered by these highly accessible text books indicate clearly the excitement of current scholarship on the sixteenth century - and the potential for its further development. No longer can we be happy with a purely Anglocentric approach (or indeed one focussed entirely on either Scotland, Wales or Ireland): we must look at the way we set bounds to our enquiry and provide it with reference points, and be prepared to do so in perhaps unexpected ways.

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