

## The English Nation: the Great Myth

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**Author:**

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**Reviewer:**

Glenn Burgess

Edwin Jones has produced a powerful, complex, eloquent and truly remarkable book. It is a heady blend of history and politics, past and present - committed scholarship in the best sense. It rests on the conviction that historical understanding matters. Achieving a proper understanding of five or more centuries of history may be crucial to making informed and sound political choices in the present. Reading the book has been a rewarding experience, and this in good part I disagree - often strongly - with a good deal of what is in it. *The English Nation* is one of those books that helps its readers to think about important matters, irrespective of their agreement or disagreement with it. I would recommend it to anyone..

### Summary

The argument of Jones's book is complex. Its claims can be summarised under three heads.

(1) *History* The great myth of the book's title, the idea of an English nation, was invented in the 1530s by Henry VIII and Thomas Cromwell. As a result of the Henrician Reformation the English suddenly became insular, and viewed themselves as the elect nation, apart from all others. They became increasingly xenophobic and reluctant to accept that their history, culture or institutions owed anything to anyone else. This contrasted sharply with the medieval world, in which the English saw themselves as part of a wider Christian culture, and happily acknowledged that they were a part of the international papal church.

(2) *Historiography* English insularity, thanks to the propagandists of the 1530s, the common lawyers of the early-seventeenth century, and the Whig history invented late in that century by Gilbert Burnet, became embedded in English historiography until the revisionisms of the twentieth century began to reveal the truth. Revisionism was, however, anticipated in the early nineteenth-century by the remarkable work of John Lingard; but Lingard's history, like that of contemporary revisionists, failed to have an impact on the great myth, which remained and remains entrenched in the history consumed outside of academe. Thus English historiography has been thoroughly Anglocentric, refusing to accept that English history has been part of a

broader European history, and deeply influenced by European culture and civilisation. It has consistently failed to understand properly the medieval period, and thus failed to understand the revolutionary character of the Reformation.

(3) *Politics* The survival of the great myth continues, at the deepest level, to determine or sustain much of the Eurosceptic English response to the European Union and to plans for further European integration. But the English need to see that 400 or so years ago they were, even in their own eyes, part of Europe. Having realised this, and accepted the Europeanness of their nation, they will be able to see the case in the present for full participation in the European Union. Furthermore, just as in the medieval past, the proper basis for European Union must be found in Christian civilisation and its values.

This is a bald summary of a complex, interlocking argument. My reaction to the book can be put equally baldly: I'm unpersuaded by both its historical argument and its political recommendations; I agree with a good deal of its analysis of English historiographical traditions, but - crucially - find it difficult to accept the theoretical assumptions on which its history of English historiography is founded. I'll work through these points in the same order that I have summarised Jones's arguments

## History

There can certainly be no doubting the importance of historical propaganda in the English Reformation. Jones's account can, indeed, be faulted for a failure to give any very full account or analysis of this, even though it constitutes, in the author's eyes, the crucial turning point in English history. There is, most importantly, no mention of the manuscript collection of authorities and precedents, the *Collectanea satis copiosa*, compiled by Cranmer and others, and mined for a good deal of the historical argument that buttressed the early Henrician Reformation; nor is there mention made of the essential research of the scholar who discovered this collection, Graham Nicholson. Nonetheless, there is no doubt considerable plausibility in the claim that the assertion of royal imperial sovereignty and (as part of it) the royal supremacy in the 1530s thereafter coloured English views of the medieval past, and in particular views of the relationship between the *ecclesia Anglicana* and the papal church of which it was a part. But three important reservations should be entered. The first, which will be noted again in my discussion of historiography, is that we need to recognise that the assertion of the royal supremacy, though buttressed by medieval historical examples, was not simply, perhaps not *primarily*, an historical assertion. While, in the words of the Act in Restraint of Appeals (1533), divers sundry old authentic histories and chronicles showed England to have been an empire, nonetheless, the authority that the king wielded was the gift of God. The Act Extinguishing the Authority of the Bishop of Rome (1536) referred to rights due to the king by the Law of God. On such a basis, the exercise of papal authority in medieval England, whether with or without the consent of king and people, could only be a usurpation. This is important, because throughout the book Jones treats the claim for English imperial independence as if it were only an historical claim.

My second, and most important, reservation concerns the leap that Jones makes from the claims advanced in the 1530s to the wider assertion of English national identity. He portrays the change as sudden and immediate, but does not fully document the link that is supposed to join a claim about the church's independence of the papacy to broader assertions of England's insular and peculiar identity. There are reasons to doubt in detail the rather neat picture that results. Jones makes much, for example, of John Foxe and the idea of England as an elect nation. England as elect nation figures as a *leitmotiv* throughout the book. Jones is certainly aware that much scholarship has questioned the validity of William Haller's original work on Foxe and the elect nation (e.g. p. 52 & n. 103), even giving a quick summary of it (pp. 53-4). This leads him, in places at least, to suggest that successive waves of European conquerors. What is interesting - and I will return to this - is why the myth of England's ancient constitution seemed to become entrenched in public life just when scholars were undermining its intellectual plausibility. When this entrenchment occurred, during the early Stuart period, the key source repeatedly cited was Fortescue's *De Laudibus Legum Angliae*. Jones does not mention Fortescue at all. Yet doing so reminds us that the idea of the insularity of English

law, its superiority to the civil law, and the corresponding superiority of English peasants to French, were themes developed well before the Reformation. Nicholas Henshall, in his *Myth of Absolutism*, has written interestingly of this tradition that contrasts the lot of Englishmen with that of their less happy Continental neighbours. It is true that Jones does recognise the existence of pre-Reformation notions of Englishry, contrasting these with the xenophobic attitudes of post-Reformation nationalism. He accepts that benign conceptions of English identity persisted after the 1530s until the present - indeed Jones himself expresses them (especially in the Prologue and pp. 160, 252) - and are said to be found in Shakespeare (pp. 47-8). Perhaps: the persuasiveness of this position is not helped by an account of Shakespeare that says nothing of *Henry V*. It seems to me, then, that Jones's account exaggerates the effect of the Reformation and underplays the continuity between late-medieval and early modern views. His account of the medieval view seems at times (p. 10) to be too church-centred.

It may be possible to suggest an alternative chronology. From the 1530s to the 1640s England's history was seen by those participating in it to have been deeply embedded in the history of the European Reformations. Indeed, it was precisely its place in the European world that proved one of the key issues of contention throughout the period, and which helped to perpetuate the divisions of the English church, as Anthony Milton has shown us in detail. There were competing conceptions of England's place in the European religious world. The construction of the idea of a national church was very much a post-Restoration development, and in good part a High Church development at that. It was only in this period that we can begin (perhaps hesitantly) to talk of an Anglicanism distinct from both Catholicism and the reformed tradition. Jones's account, in contrast, seems to try too hard to make English insularity and isolationism a direct and fairly immediate consequence of the 1530s, and in doing so is seriously misleading about the character of the period 1530-1660. Even beyond 1660, of course, insularity was hardly universal. Indeed, there is a tension between two chief claims of the book: on the one hand, we are told that the English became insular in the 1530s; but, on the other, we are also told that it is the insularity of English historians that has blinded them to the European context of sixteenth and seventeenth century English history (especially the Glorious Revolution). These positions are not exactly irreconcilable, but they require us to believe that for the early modern period and beyond English history was not insular though the people who were making it believed that it was. They did not, at least through the seventeenth century, though Jones is surely right to say that modern historians have not always noticed the fact. But, then, at other times, nor does Jones, as when he tells us that after the Reformation, England was isolated from Europe until 1973 (p. 15). Tell that to William III.

On occasion, this tension in Jones's account becomes startlingly visible, for it is arguable that his historical arguments are themselves guilty of an historiographical Anglocentrism. He has constructed aspects of the Tudor and Stuart English history wrongly because he has constructed them Anglocentrically. The best example of this lies in Jones's brief comments on anti-Catholicism in the British context to English history. Earlier, I asked why the myth of England's ancient constitution became so important just at the time that scholarship was undermining it. At least part of the answer lies in the intense English reaction to James VI & I's plans for perfect Union between England and Scotland, as Christopher Brooks and forthcoming work of my own try to show. The subject still awaits much fuller investigation, but I would certainly predict that any account of the development of English cultural identity over the early modern period will need to take into account the fact that a good deal of it was forged in relation to the Scots. The British perspective is important in another way. Jones is interested in accounts of early British Christianity that suggested an independent apostolic foundation from the English church, and rejected any suggestion that the English church began its life under papal authority. These accounts were of an ancient *British* church, and need to be understood, in part anyway, as one strand in the effort to forge a *British* identity in the early modern period. It remains, of course, true that English attitudes to Scotland were far from free of xenophobia and ignorant prejudice; but in a sense this is why the British context is important. One might venture the too neat generalisation that Scotland did more than Europe to shape English national identity, at least during the first half of the seventeenth century, because the Scots could *not* be viewed so readily through the lens of anti-Catholicism. For a long time after the Reformation, religion remained more important than national characteristics in shaping attitudes to the peoples of the European continent. But religion served, on the whole, to bind the

English with the Scots, as it did with the Dutch, and so hostility to the Scots ran along other channels much of the time.

## Historiography

There is a good deal to admire in Jones's account of English historiography since the sixteenth century. Two things stand out. First, he exposes convincingly the extent to which English historians have adopted a highly insular view of the past. I might doubt whether or not this was all a consequence of the 1530s, but I wouldn't doubt that it characterises a core feature of much historical writing before (and in) the twentieth century. Jones is certainly right, for example, to point out that it is only very recently that the Glorious Revolution has been seen for what it really was, a Dutch invasion - though, oddly, he does not give credit to the important work of Jonathan Israel in this area.

Second, Jones provides a fascinating and powerful account of John Lingard, and convincingly demonstrates the ways in which Lingard prefigures modern revisionist history. Particularly notable in this account are the ways in which Lingard is shown to have been able to escape the clutches of the great myth by insisting on careful documentary analysis, and by his reluctance to risk statements without evidence. He stuck to the facts. Much of this will seem bizarre in our post-modern age, and yet there is something persuasive in Jones's claim that it was through careful use of evidence and adherence to rational principles for its evaluation and deployment that Lingard was able to see the past more accurately than those around him. This is a view of the historical enterprise that is under attack; and I certainly wouldn't want to defend this from documentary positivism too far (as will soon become apparent). Nonetheless, Jones's account is powerfully suggestive of the ways in which evidence informs historical writing; and it invites us to recognise that - all things considered - evidence and reason are more likely than anything else to inform us accurately of the past. His discussion of Lingard may, though, be vulnerable in other ways; and it certainly seems to underplay the role of Lingard's Catholicism, however muted that was, in his historical writing. Lingard shared many of the themes in his account of Britain's relationship with Europe: however false the great myth, it does not follow that England's Euroscepticism is thereby condemned. (This is not written out of any wish to give comfort to Euroscepticism, which is not an attitude that I share.)

To call England's separation from Europe an aberration (p. 24) is misleading in three ways. It is, as I have suggested above, factually incorrect. Jones makes it seem true by the fallacy of the excluded middle: either England is part of a European institutional structure (the papal church, the European Union), or it is separated in its own world of xenophobic isolationism. But for much of the modern period, the truth has lain in between. England has participated in European affairs, and even at times been able to see itself as a part of a European civilisation, while at the same time maintaining a separate national and imperial identity. Secondly, the statement is misleading at the political level, because, even if we accept the aberrational reading, it would be an aberration of such duration that there would seem little reason to suppose that it could be readily reversible. And, third, so what? That England was once part of the papal church seems to me to constitute no sort of argument for (or against) any particular approach to Europe in the present. There is no more reason to return to the past than to move further away from it: the only answer today to the question of monetary and political union, or perfect Union (as James VI & I might have put), must come from the needs and concerns of the present. Rosemary O'Day, writing on Lingard and other Catholic historians of the early-nineteenth century, rightly suggested that Lingard's own sense of context undermined the judgements of value that his history could sustain:

Once historians appreciated that historical context was all important, it became, of course, much more difficult to project contemporary controversies back into the past. Catholicism in Mary's reign had been shaped by sixteenth-century events, habits of mind, and education. Nineteenth-century Catholicism could, in reality, justify its claims to full integration into British society by an appeal to nineteenth-century conditions and attitudes. But neither Lingard nor any Catholic historian faced up to this implication and took the next step. Blithely they sought to vindicate

contemporary Catholicism by an analysis of Catholic and Protestant behaviour under Mary despite their acknowledgement that this behaviour had been moulded by now extinct forces (*op. cit.*, p. 65)

*Mutatis mutandis*, all of this could apply to Jones himself.

Furthermore, Jones's historiography gives very incomplete background to those concerns. His historical vision sustains a view of England's Europeanness; but his vision omits one important strand in the English historiographical tradition - imperial and post-colonial history. This can sustain its own view of England's place in the world, and at the least must seriously modify what Jones says about the insularity of English historical writing. Part of the problem, indeed, is a willingness to treat isolationism, xenophobia, anti-Catholicism, insularity, and nationalism as much the same thing. Imperial Britain (not England) was scarcely isolationist, except perhaps from a Eurocentric viewpoint. And the legacy of Empire surely has sustained two alternative views to that emphasising the necessity of Britain's participation in Europe, one stressing the relationship between Britain and the United States, the other Britain's leadership role in the Commonwealth. Both can sustain conceptions of a modern Britain that are un-European but not isolationist.

In so far as Jones gives us a specific vision of Englishness, it appears to lie in the pages of the Prologue recounting a trip through the Cotswolds. Its focus is on the medieval parish church. It seems, though perhaps I am reading too much into this, that this story establishes from the outset a note to fit. From different parallels they draw different lessons. His example was the Kosovo conflict. Did it resemble Vietnam (in which case, the West ought not to involve itself) or did the situation parallel that of the 1930s, when the appeasement of Hitler failed (in which case, fight)? Of course, it exactly paralleled neither. No complex historical situations ever do parallel one another. It is impossible to draw direct lessons from historical parallels because the range of variables in each situation is so great that only a small set of them match up. The only thing you can be sure of with a political argument drawn from a direct historical parallel is that it will be in some way wrong, and quite possibly dangerously wrong. Jones's book essentially commits the availability error on a grand scale. It assumes a parallel between medieval Christendom and the European union, though more or less the only concrete similarity mentioned is that between canon law and the European law on human rights. All I can say is that no parallel of this sort can ever be valid enough to enable us to draw specific policy lessons from it. We would be much more likely to enlighten ourselves (in the Kosovo case as much as in Jones's example) by asking what distinguishes situations that we may initially be inclined to see as so similar. No comparative history worth anything could fail to explore difference as well as similarity, for comparative history, like all history, helps us to understand why no comparisons are ever exact. Jones never explores the dissimilarities, and as a result his political counsel is not persuasive.

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