

BREXIT & ENGLISH HISTORY

Stephen Cooper

“It’s Waterloo! It’s Crécy! It’s Agincourt! We win all these things!”

(Jacob Rees-Mogg MP, October 2017)

The Referendum

The question put in the EU referendum held in June 2016 was whether the United Kingdom should remain in the EU or leave; but the answer given was overwhelmingly the one given by the voters in England. In the UK as a whole, there were 17.4 million votes for Leave, and 16.1 million for Remain; but, since 84% of the population lives in England, 15.1 million of the votes for Leave were cast in England. Moreover, while the overall percentages were 51.89 (Leave) and 48.11 (Remain), the figures in the constituent parts of the country were as follows.

England 53.4% (Leave), 46.6% (Remain).

Wales 52.5% (Leave), 47.5% (Remain).

Scotland, 62% (Remain), 38% (Leave).

Northern Ireland, 55.8% (Remain), 44.2% (Leave).

I live in England, and I voted ‘Remain’, indeed I voted to stay in the European Economic Community (or EEC) back in 1975, when the previous referendum on the issue was held (when there were 17.3 million votes for ‘stay’ and 8.4 million for ‘leave’). I confess that I was shocked by the result in 2016, and I was also troubled by the animosity shown towards the EU during the Referendum campaign. The explanation may be that the nature of ‘the beast’ had changed in the four decades of our membership of the Union and its predecessors; but I was left wondering whether the origins of ‘Brexit’ were not far older. After all, Alex Salmond said the Scottish lion had “roared”, after he won the Gordon constituency in the elections for

the Scottish Parliament in 2015, and in 2016 I seemed to detect the roar of the English lion, indeed I heard it clearly in my local pub, on many occasions.

Insularity

In *The Invention of Scotland* Hugh Trevor-Roper wrote that 'scholars customarily overvalue the influence of historical truth as against historical myth'; and the biggest myth of all that England is an island. She is not – it is Britain which is an island, as is Ireland, and there are of course many others in the British archipelago. However, if the English are not geographically insular, they are culturally insular, or at least Anglocentric, and it is their history which has made them so.

From the time petty Anglo-Saxon kings began calling themselves 'Bretwalda' (or 'leader of the Britons') in the 7th century CE, English monarchs claimed hegemony in Britain as well. In the late 13th century Edward I succeeded in making the claim good in Wales, while he, his son and his grandson also tried to do so in Scotland. Despite their lack of success, the English continued to believe that they were supreme in Britain – which they were, or certainly became, in terms of population, wealth and military strength.

Yet there is a vast difference between the history of England and that of the other parts of the UK. While many historians have written about the former in terms of gradual change and evolution, towards parliamentary democracy, economic growth and social improvement, the history of Wales, Scotland and Ireland is (at least in part) a story of repeated invasion and conquest, of resistance and rebellion, and a struggle for independence (with the Anglo-Saxons, Anglo-Normans, English and even the British cast in the role of conquerors and oppressors). If you don't agree, try reading Gwynfor Evans's *Land of My Fathers* (1974), or any of the many books written by Patrick Sarsfield O'Hegarty about Irish history. Or consider Alex Salmond's fond reference to the way he learned about the Scottish Wars of Independence, while sitting on his Granddaddy's knee and listening to tales of William Wallace and Robert the Bruce. Or visit the village of Pennal near Machynlled, where the real Princes of Wales are honoured, and the English Princes of that name do not feature at all.

And yet, until recently, it was conventional to write the history of England and the history of Britain, and even the history of these Islands as if it was all the same, or rather that the main plot related to England, and the rest – the history of 'the Celtic fringe' - was treated as an appendage. As late as 1965 A.J.P. Taylor could write (in *English History, 1914-1945*):

When the Oxford History of England was launched a generation ago, 'England' was still an all-embracing word. It meant indiscriminately England and Wales; Great Britain; the United Kingdom; and even the British Empire. Foreigners used it as the name of a Great Power and

indeed continue to do so. Bonar Law, a Scotch Canadian, was not ashamed to describe himself as 'Prime Minister of England', as Disraeli, a Jew by birth, had done before him.

Notwithstanding the geographical facts, the English have long been regarded as 'insular'. It was the French academic André Siegfried (1875 – 1959) who told his students "*Messieurs, l'Angleterre est une île, et je devrais m'arrêter là.*" (Loosely translated: "Sirs, England is an island, and I ought to stop right there." President Charles de Gaulle said much the same in 1963 when he vetoed the first British application for membership of the European Economic Community (or EEC): "England in effect is insular. She is maritime; she has very marked and very original habits and traditions."

The various Anglo-Saxon kingdoms became one during the reign of Alfred the Great ((871-899 CE). It was only then, several hundred years after the withdrawal of Roman forces, that the various Germanic tribes who had settled in the South of the former province of *Britannia*, came together in the face of invading Scandinavians, to form a new polity. Thereafter, the kingdom was engaged in intermittent warfare with Welsh, Scots and Irish for the next 1,000 years, In other words, we English had a long history of suspicion, fear, hatred and contempt for the foreigner in these Islands, born in times of genuine enmity, before we ever started to call ourselves British. It was only later that these sentiments were directed against the French (and sometimes the Italians and Flemings) and ultimately the Spaniards and Germans.

Many examples of the phenomenon could be given. The word 'Welsh' originally meant 'foreigner'. When he left Scotland in 1296, Edward I remarked "A man does good work when he rids himself of a turd". When he wrote about Ireland in 1189, Gerald of Wales repeated that the purpose of the Anglo-Norman conquest of Ireland was:

to the end that the filthy practices of that land may be abolished, and the barbarous nation which is called by the Christian name, may through your clemency attain unto some decency of manners.

At the dawn of modern history, the Italian Andreas Franciscus told a friend how the Londoners hated all immigrants, and would attack anyone from Bruges in particular, on sight. In the *Italian Relation* of 1500 another reporter explained that

The English are great lovers of themselves and of everything belonging to them. They think there are no other men than themselves, and no other world, but England; and whenever they see a handsome foreigner, they say 'he looks like an Englishman', and 'It is a pity that he could not be an Englishman.'

Euroscepticism

I believe that it is insularity, or Anglocentrism, which lies at the heart of Euroscepticism. Some people may say that all this is to dwell in the distant past, and that we (or most of us) in these Islands, have enjoyed a common British identity for the past three centuries, as a result of the political, legal and constitutional changes brought about by the three Acts of Union of 1535, 1707 and 1800 and as a result of a much wider and deeper cultural assimilation. However, this process has on any view been only partial. Twenty-six of the 32 counties of Ireland broke away in 1920, while *Plaid Cymru* was founded in 1925 and the SNP was formed in 1934. It could also be argued that the idea of being 'British' is a late construct (see Linda Colley's *Britons* (2005)) and was most popular and prevalent during the British Empire, which is now a thing of the past. Moreover, cultural assimilation is often seen (outside England) as domination and oppression.

I was very struck by a remark made by Norman Davies, author of *Europe, A History*, *The Isles, A History* and many other works, at a launch of his *Vanished Kingdoms* (2012). He said that nationality is about sentiment and the best evidence about this can be gleaned by looking at the crowds at international football matches, and who they support; and it is also true that we remain English, Welsh, Scots and Irish when it comes to national anthems and heroes, some of whom are villains in the eyes of anyone other than ourselves. The English have Robin Hood and Henry V, the Welsh have Owain Glyndwr, the Scots have William Wallace, while the Irish have Brian Boru, the women of 1798 and numerous others, who died in the cause of freedom. On the other hand, Oliver Cromwell is a hero to many Englishmen, but a villain to most Irish people (notwithstanding Tom Reilly's attempt to re-habilitate him (see *Cromwell: Honourable Enemy*, 2006).

In *Brexit: How Britain Will Leave Europe* (2015) and in *Kind of Blue, A Political Memoir* (2016) Dennis McShane and Ken Clarke explain the rise of Euroscepticism in Britain in terms of recent politics; and they both trace it back in particular to Mrs Thatcher's speech in Bruges in 1988 and the Treaty of Maastricht of 1991, which gave birth to the Euro and created a deep rift in the Conservative Party. But, if the roots of Euroscepticism lie in English soil, they may well be much older and deeper than they appear to be; and this would explain why so many politicians have drawn such dubious parallels, and made so many misleading statements about Europe, often confusing British and English history in the process.

In 1962 the leader of the Labour Party, Hugh Gaitskell spoke against the idea of our joining the EEC. He said it would mean 'The end of Britain as an independent European state... the end of a thousand years of history.' But Britain did not have a thousand years of history behind her in 1962. So he must have been referring to England.

Boris Johnson has drawn a most inappropriate parallel between the EU and

the Third Reich. On 15 May 2016 *The Daily Telegraph* reported that he was warning that, while 'bureaucrats in Brussels' were using different methods from Hitler, they shared the aim of unifying Europe under one authority and that Germany wished to take over the Italian economy and destroy Greece.

Jacob Rees-Mogg MP has recently encouraged his supporters to celebrate Brexit as a victory to stand alongside Agincourt. This is a dubious parallel indeed, since Agincourt was an English victory. Contrary to the myth created by Shakespeare's play *Henry V*, there were no Irish contingents in the English army, and there were very few Welsh, while the Scots were allied with the French, and provided them with an entire army soon afterwards. It is also worth pointing out that Rees-Mogg coupled his latest reference to Agincourt and others historic victories with the cry 'We win all these things!' Well, yes; but while we may have won the Battle of Agincourt, we lost the War.

UKIP has always stood for independence, and is not alone in making a comparison between the decision to leave the EU and the American Declaration of Independence in 1776. But despite its title, UKIP has never had much support in Scotland, and it is very artificial to draw any parallel between the UK in the early 21st century and the American colonies in the late 18th century. It is also worth bearing in mind that, as Mrs Thatcher said in her Bruges speech in 1988:

Some of the founding fathers of the [European] Community thought that the United States of America might be its model. But the whole history of America is quite different from Europe.

She might have added that, no sooner had the American colonists fought the War of Independence and had it recognised by the Treaty of Paris of 1783 than they set about turning their wartime 'Confederation and Perpetual Union' into a Federal State. They did this by adopting their famous written Constitution in 1788, which has only seriously been challenged during the Civil War of 1861-5.

Consequences

Eurosceptic Middle England won the day in 2016, but the English have had a great tradition of participating in European affairs, if not exactly of being 'at the heart of Europe'. In the 9th century, Alcuin of York was a leading light at the court of Charlemagne. In the 12th century the English played a major role in the expansion of monasticism and Nicholas Breakspear became Pope, while in the 13th century Richard of Cornwall was elected King of the Romans, though he never became Holy Roman Emperor. In the 19th century Pitt, Palmerston and Salisbury – Englishmen all – strove to maintain the balance of power; but we helped to save the Continent from tyranny in 1815, between 1914 and 1918 and again in 1944-45. 'Splendid isolation' was never a conscious policy: it was a reaction to unfortunate circumstances. In the last sixty years Winston Churchill, Ted Heath, Roy Jenkins, Tony Blair and Timothy

Garton Ash, again all Englishmen, were awarded the Charlemagne Prize, for contributing to the unity of Europe.

Nevertheless, MPs have voted to 'respect' 'the will of the people' (by which they must mean the English and Welsh peoples). Following the decision of the Supreme Court in Gina Miller's case - that the UK government could not use the royal prerogative alone to trigger the 'Brexit' process - the Westminster Parliament enacted the European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Act 2017, and has now given a second reading to the EU (Referendum) Bill 2017. This means that the UK will leave the legal order established by the EEC, and continued by the EU, on 'exit day', which is currently 31 March 2019.

What are the consequences? Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty provides in effect that the EU "shall negotiate and conclude an agreement with [the UK], setting out the arrangements for its withdrawal, taking account of the framework for its future relationship with the Union." The emphasis here is very much on withdrawal, not on the future relationship; and currently, we are locked in negotiations with the EU as to the former. I fear there may be no agreement at all about the latter.

The core of the English electorate is motivated by an Anglocentric view of history, and of the Continent of Europe. The politicians in charge of Brexit - the Prime Minister, David Davies, Liam Fox and Boris Johnson - are all MPs who represent English constituencies, and the nationalist parties in the UK are not represented in the process, indeed are opposed to it. Three of the four politicians mentioned were 'Leavers', and their approach to the negotiations is combative; but, as I was repeatedly told by a friend who worked in the EU at the highest levels, the only way to reach agreement with other members of the EU is to be '*communautaire*' - to show some respect for the principle that we were and are partners in a common enterprise, and are not just in it for what we can get out of it. Neither the UK government nor the English people has shown much sign of a willingness to be '*communautaire*' recently. The result is likely to be a (very) 'hard Brexit'.

Psephologists have also noted that the result of the Referendum, at least in England and Wales was a victory of the older over the younger generations, although there is little or no data on this from Scotland and Northern Ireland. It seems reasonable to link this with a kind of nostalgia, given the popularity of Nigel Farage's rallying cry: 'I want my country back.' But which country did he want to return to, and at what period?

In *Kind of Blue* Ken Clarke recalls his Brexit Speech in Parliament, delivered on 31 January 2017, when he spoke of Leavers searching for the Wonderland which Alice found herself in, when she emerged from the rabbit-hole; but many people of his age and mine can recall the 1950s. This means that we can recall Empire Day, the last of which was celebrated in 1958. On Empire Day, we used salute the Union Jack and sing *Jerusalem* and *God Save the Queen*. These things stay in the mind and, more importantly, in the heart. However, as they say about holidays and holiday romances, you can never go back. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus put it more eloquently, when he wrote that

No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man.

So I fear for our future; but I also fear for the future of the UK itself. The vast majority of votes for Leave were English votes; but the majority of voters in Scotland and Northern Ireland were for Remain. I fear that by voting to 'respect' the result of the Referendum, MPs of both major parties at Westminster will be seen as kowtowing to the English, and bullying the nationalist communities in Scotland and Northern Ireland. Eventually, this is likely to lead to a second referendum on Scottish independence, and a referendum on whether Northern Ireland should merge with the Republic of Ireland. Either of these would mean the end of the UK as we have known it.
