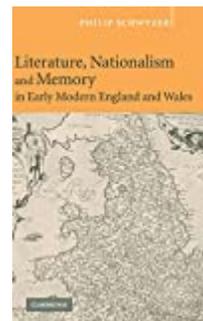**Philip Schwyzer.** *Literature, Nationalism and Memory in Early Modern England and Wales.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. xi + 194 pp. $75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-84303-4.

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English or British? National Identity in Early Modern Britain

The upsurge of interest in national identities in early modern Britain has been evident in a spate of books in recent years. For most of us that renewed interest was signaled by the appearance of Richard Helgerson's *Forms of Nationhood: The Elizabethan Writing of England* (1992). Helgerson is a literary historian, and indeed a remarkably large number of these studies have been by literary historians. (Schwyzer conveniently lists a selection of them.) Schwyzer joins that company with a book that is consistently engaging, entertaining, and challenging.

Most recent studies have endeavored to show that the literature of Tudor and early Stuart England projected a new or at least more sharply defined image of Englishness and English national identity. Here, whatever the novelty or ingenuity of their particular approaches, they have largely endorsed–explicity or implicitly–the well-known view of Liah Greenfeld, in her *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (1992), that it was sixteenth-century England that invented the modern form of nationalism. One consequence of this view is to see "England" coming before "Britain," English national consciousness before British national consciousness. A further consequence,

natural though by no means inevitable, is to regard English (as well as Welsh, Scottish, and Irish) national identity as the more firmly established identity, with Britishness forming a light and easily discarded cloak.

The argument of this lively and refreshing book is that most of these scholars have got it wrong, at least for the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. If–and it is a big if–Englishness had achieved some sort of definition by the sixteenth century, it was challenged in Tudor times by a wide-ranging and sustained effort, by writers as much as or even more than statesmen, to subordinate Englishness (along with Welshness, Scottishness, and Irishness) to a prior and more inclusive British identity.

The reason for this becomes obvious as soon as it pointed out. With the Henrician Reformation, England had to come to terms with what would otherwise have been considered centuries of humiliating tutelage to Rome. The response was–almost brutally–to attempt to annul in the national imagination the one-thousand-year period of "Anglo-Saxon" history. It was the Saxons, converted by Augustine, who had put England in

thralldom to Rome. The Britons of old, on the other hand, had converted to Christianity before the coming of Augustine. British Christianity was therefore older–and purer–than Roman Christianity. It was an inheritance, kept alive in the Welsh mountains, that was restored with the accession of the Welsh Tudors, seen as fulfilling Merlin's prophecy that a descendant of the last British king, Cadwallader, would restore the fortunes of the British. That, in turn, meant restoring the "British empire"–to use the term apparently first coined by the Welsh scholar Humphrey Llwyd in his *Breviary of Britain* (1573). By this was meant not the familiar overseas empire of later times, but the united kingdom of England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland–the empire, it was claimed, ruled by Arthur and other British kings.

Henry VII, while exploiting his Welsh ancestry to please his Welsh subjects, did little else–apart from naming his eldest son and heir Arthur–to realize these imperial ambitions. For Henry VIII and his successors the matter was evidently more serious. The Reformation faced them with a more urgent task of historical interpretation. Court writers threw themselves enthusiastically into antiquarian research to show the impeccably British origins of the Protestant reformation. The Act of Union with Wales (1536) proclaimed that Wales and England had always been united under "the Imperial Crown of this Realm." Under Protector Somerset, in the episode known as the "Rough Wooing," a determined effort was made to bring Scotland into the empire–not as England's feudal dependent, but as a constituent element of "the empire of Great Britain." The wooing of Ireland, as always, was somewhat rougher, but the same intent was there. The British policy, and British advocacy, reached something of a climax with the accession of James I, the most wholeheartedly "British" king of the period.

Many of these British projects came to naught or had to be deferred; nevertheless there is no denying the seriousness with which they were pursued. For the better part of a century England–or at least the English–had to be suppressed; Britain and the British returned triumphantly into their own, to the great satisfaction especially of Welsh poets and scholars. The collocation "Anglo-Saxon Protestant" has become so common that it is something of a shock to be reminded that at one time "English" and "Protestant" belonged to separate ideological camps. (It was the English Catholic recusants, Schwyzer shows, who were, not surprisingly, the most enthusiastic proponents, if not the inventors, of "Anglo-Saxonism.") There was no room here for the Teutonomania that later became all the rage; the English, properly

so-called, were more likely to be portrayed as the cowardly and uncouth Pistol of Shakespeare's Henry V, set against the courageous and patriotic Fluellen or the sensibly skeptical MacMorris ("What ish my nation?").

Different aspects of this story, as Schwyzer is well aware, have been carefully examined by a number of scholars, such as Arthur Williamson, Roger Mason, Colin Kidd and David Armitage.[1] What Schwyzer adds is not simply some telling details, but, more importantly, the placing of the whole discussion within the context of the debate about Englishness and English nationalism. No one has done it as well or as forcefully as he. His particular strength is, of course, his knowledge of the literature of the period. There are impressive and thought-provoking treatments of the more familiar texts, such as Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, and Shakespeare's *Henry V*, *King Lear*, and *Cymbeline*, with a particular focus on the British dimension. Most valuably there are discussions of the less familiar literature–Welsh poetry and historiography, Robert Aske's defense of the Catholic Pilgrimage of Grace as an assertion of the medieval English legacy, the Protestant John Bale's retort in the vein of British antiquarianism, Sir John Prise's *Historiae Brytannicae Defensio* (1573) as a statement of the specifically British Renaissance, concerned with the importance of retrieval and memory in a nation's life. Indeed the interest of this book goes beyond its contribution to debates about Englishness and Britishness. Schwyzer is sensitive throughout to questions about the general phenomenon of nationalism. He is illuminating, through his discussions of particular texts, on the role of history, memory, the cult of the dead, and nostalgia, in the constructs of nationhood and nationalism.

You may or may not be convinced by the argument about Britishness in this period; Schwyzer indeed leaves the whole question hanging by suggesting that British thought and policies ran into the sands in the later Jacobean period (and that both *Lear* and *Cymbeline* express Shakespeare's disillusionment with the British project, and with nationalism in general). I think he underestimates the continuity of the pursuit of Britishness, which, of course, receives its fulfillment in the Union with Scotland in 1707. But no one with an interest in English and British identities, and in nationalism in general, can fail to find this book enormously stimulating. Beautifully written and cleverly conceived, it is one of the most important studies of the culture of early modern Britain.

Note

[1]. See, for example, Myron C. Noonkester, "Re-

view of Colin Kidd, *British Identities before Nationalism: Ethnicity and Nationhood in the Atlantic World, 1600-1800*," H-Albion, April, 2000 <`http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=17962955997576$>$`; and Eliga H. Gould, "Review of David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire*," H-Albion, July, 2001 <`http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=18047997200327$>$`.

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