**How Britain Ends: English Nationalism and the Rebirth of Four Nations**

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**BRITISHNESS**

**Chapter 1 - The English Question** pp. 15-16

*You, Me and Us*

Like most Scots of my generation I have several identities. Born in Scotland, I live in England. I have family roots in Northern Ireland, lived for a time in South Wales and I’m a Londoner by choice. I place more emphasis on one or other of these identities depending on circumstances. On the London Tube I am definitely a Londoner, the greatest city in the world. I get impatient when visitors stand on the left on escalators in rush hour despite all the signs urging them to stand on the right. I dislike people saying London is ‘unfriendly’. It isn’t. It’s brusque and fast and businesslike, which is why I love it, but it’s also warm, tolerant, diverse and welcoming to strangers, including me. Watching rugby or football I am definitely Scottish. At the Olympics, I am definitely British. And when I walk the streets of European cities, in Lübeck or Berlin, Salzburg or Rome, Athens or Edinburgh, I feel undeniably part of European culture. But an old Scottish friend of mine, who has similarly complicated loyalties and identities, expressed the frustration many Scots now feel. We met at the Edinburgh Festival during the impassioned Brexit debate in the summer of 2019. My friend said: ‘Like you, I am Scottish and British and European. But now these bastards in London are telling me I have to drop one of my identities. Well, I am not going to stop being European. And I cannot stop being Scottish.’ There followed a pause. My friend is from a pro-unionist background. In 2014 he and most of his family voted ‘No’ to independence in the Scottish referendum. ‘Are you saying you would now vote Yes for independence?’ I asked him. He nodded. ‘And so would most of my friends and family.’ I was surprised.

‘So what changed?’

‘What changed,’ he replied, ‘is that in 2014 we were told that voting No to independence meant Scotland would stay in the European Union. Well, that’s not true, is it? F\*\*\* them.’

My friend worked for many years in England and has many English friends. He has never been remotely ‘anti-English’. He is rather the epitome of a liberal unionist Scot with an internationalist spirit, uneasy about anything that could be called ‘nationalism’. But he was clearly aggrieved. He saw a resurgent English nationalism directly affecting how he thought about himself, his country and Europe. I argued that Scotland is not a radical place. It is a small-c conservative country in which change comes slowly. Because Scottish independence is a radical change it has been a hard sell, especially in Edinburgh where the ‘New Town’ where we met is 200 years old.

‘The conservative thing to do in 2014 was to vote No to independence,’ I said. ‘For those who do not like sudden change.’

‘True,’ he agreed. ‘But voting for Scottish independence next time will also be the conservative thing to do. Keeping us in the EU. It’s the wreckers in England who are the revolutionaries taking the leap in the dark. The English Conservative Party is not a conservative party any more. They are wrecking the union.’

(522 words)

**Chapter 4. Another English Question: England, which England?** pp. 78-79

*Which flag?*

Like all matters rooted in national identity, the English-British confusion is trivial until suddenly it is serious. A national flag can seem little more than a sheet of multicoloured cloth, until someone decides to desecrate it or wipe their feet on it or try to burn it. Then it becomes a symbol of something bigger, a lack of respect towards the ‘imagined community’ of a nation or national group. During the Vietnam War in 1968 Congress tried to outlaw flag burning in the United States. The US Supreme Court ruled that, however offensive it might be, flag burning was a protected form of free speech. In Northern Ireland flags are a constant source of friction with the red, white and blue of the Union Jack and the green, white and orange of the Irish tricolour constantly in contention. Fly the wrong flag in the wrong place and you may start a riot. Driving around West Belfast or Portadown in summer during what locals call ‘the Marching Season’, you can immediately spot which area you are in. The kerbstones in Protestant areas are often painted red, white and blue. Those in republican areas may bear the Irish national colours, green white and orange. Beyond Northern Ireland, an Ipsos Mori survey back in 1999 showed that national flags were of great importance in Wales and Scotland but *not* in England. For English people at the end of last century it was the British emblem, the Union Jack, which was much more significant. The survey concluded:

In England, 88% identify with the Union Jack and only 38% with St George’s Cross; but in Wales the dragon outscores the Union Jack by 85% to 55%, and while 75% of Scots identify with the Saltire only 49% do with the Union Jack. This ‘Britishness’, if not exactly an English invention, is now primarily an English survival.

If two decades ago England was the last bastion of the survival of Union Jack flag-waving Britishness, that bastion has now fallen. Until recently English people were often hesitant at the idea of identifying with England’s St George’s Flag, since it had become associated with the far right and racist groups. But that has changed. In *The Dog That Finally Barked: England as an Emerging Political Community*, the IPPR:

presents evidence which suggests the emergence of a new kind of Anglo-British identity in which the English component is increasingly the primary source of attachment for English people. It also suggests that English identity is becoming more politicised: that is, the more English a person feels, the more likely they are to believe that the current structure of the UK is unfair and to support a particularly English dimension to the governance of England. It has long been predicted that devolution to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland would provoke an English ‘backlash’ against the anomalies and apparent territorial inequities of a devolved UK state. The evidence presented here suggests the emergence of what might be called an ‘English political community’, one marked by notable concerns within England about the seeming privileges of Scotland in particular and a growing questioning of the capacity of the current UK-level political institutions to pursue and defend English interests, and one underpinned by a deepening sense of English identity.

The evidence is here for all to see, literally. England’s St George’s flag is now much more widely in evidence than in the past, when it was often confined to England football matches and could be regarded with a degree of suspicion. Politicians who blunder into discussions about the English flag nowadays do so at their peril. Emily Thornberry is the Labour MP for the quintessentially metropolitan north London constituency of Islington South. In 2014 she was forced to resign as shadow attorney general after posting on Twitter a picture of a house in Rochester, Kent draped with three large England flags and with a white van parked outside. The Tweet was criticized as snobbish and out of touch, and seen as a symptom of why the Labour Party was losing English working-class votes. A Welsh Labour Party candidate for the Ceredigion constituency, Huw Thomas, was also forced to apologize in 2015 for suggesting (some years earlier) that Tippex be thrown on cars displaying English flags. He had claimed that the flags were displayed by people who were simpletons or casual racists. Mr Thomas was making an offensive generalization about a symbol whose popularity has grown even if – in the view of some English commentators – what they call the ‘detoxification’ process for St George’s flag still has a long way to go.

(768 words)

**Chapter 4. Another English Question: England, which England?** pp. 83-84

*The Race Question: Where are you from?*

The underlying question for the United Kingdom in the twenty-first century, then, is what Britain, British or Britishness mean. Do people in these islands consider themselves primarily English, Scottish, Welsh, Irish, Ulster or some other signifier of identity? And whatever your personal preference, is Britishness a significant part of the mix? If so, what does that mean in practical terms for how we can bring the United Kingdom together, given that nationalism is a feeling as much as a set of characteristics?

The changing figures on identity reveal a change in mindset. In the 2011 census, 80.5 per cent of people in England and Wales declared they were White or White British, and 19.5 per cent said they were from ethnic minorities. ‘White’ according to the UK government website means:

* English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British
* Irish
* Gypsy or Irish Traveller
* Any other White background

(The censuses in Scotland and Northern Ireland had a different ordering and nomenclature for ethnic groups.) The most ethnically diverse region was London, where almost half, 40.2 per cent, of residents identified with either the Asian, Black, Mixed or Other ethnic group. London had the smallest percentage of White British people, at 44.9 per cent, while the north-east of England had the highest percentage, at 93.6 per cent.

The Office for National Statistics commented on the 2011 census results (England and Wales only):

English identity (either on its own or combined with other identities) was the most common identity respondents chose to associate with, at 37.6 million people (67.1 per cent). English as a sole identity (not combined with other identities), was chosen by 32.4 million people (57.7 per cent). British identity (either on its own or combined with other identities) was a common identity chosen by 16.3 million people (29.1 per cent). 10.7 million people (19.1 per cent) associated themselves with a British identity only. Welsh identity (either on its own or combined with other identities) was chosen by 2.4 million people (4.3 per cent). 2 million people (3.7 per cent) associated themselves with a Welsh only identity.

A number of things are clear from these figures, even though the census is now out of date. First, there has been a significant growth in the numbers of people in England who consider that Englishness is their ‘sole identity’. This group is three times greater than those who consider their sole identity as ‘British’. But it is also clear that of the 19.1 per cent of people in England and Wales who consider themselves British, a very significant number are from ethnic minority or migrant communities. Surveys talk of Black British, Asian British and White British as identities, but do not speak of Black *English* or Asian *English* – perhaps because English officialdom considered at least until recently that to be ‘English’ meant to be white. The website openDemocracy noted among other things that ‘the 2011 National Census… is something of a misnomer, as the Census has in fact been devolved: there are separate Censuses for England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland’, and, as the writer David Rickard pointed out:

In England and Wales, ‘non-white’ persons are not offered the option of including ‘English’ or ‘Welsh’ as part of their ethnic-group identity: they’re classified only as ‘Black British’ or ‘Asian British’, and not ‘Black English’ or ‘Asian Welsh’, for instance. By contrast, black and Asian persons living in Scotland are permitted to identify as ‘Black Scottish’ and ‘Asian Scottish’.

(578 words)

**ENGLISHNESS**

**Chapter 4. Another English Question: England, which England?** pp. 71-72

*Nostalgic Pessimism*

History, as Napoleon Bonaparte once said, is a set of lies agreed upon. A conversation I had a decade or more ago with an English taxi driver, makes the point anecdotally in a different way. I had completed a BBC Radio 4 series on Britishness, in which I suggested in Benedict Anderson’s phrase that nations are ‘imagined communities’. We belong because we feel we belong, and we imagine what we mean by our national identity, especially in respect of being ‘British’, since the shape of Britain had changed so much over the years and would change again.

The taxi driver, an avid radio listener, took exception to what he had heard in the broadcasts. In a tetchy conversation he told me that Britishness might be ‘imagined’ but Englishness was real. Britishness had no meaning for him because he was English ‘through and through’. As a red-blooded Englishman he was ‘fed up’ with foreigners and immigrants ‘taking over the country’. He went on to criticize the number of people of colour (although he did not use those words) on the BBC when he wanted to see ‘English’ faces. He meant white people. (‘It’s supposed to be the *British* Broadcasting Corporation for goodness sake.’) The taxi driver also wanted what he called English jobs for English people, because migrants and foreigners were in some way ‘taking over’ the country. Pubs were closing because London was ‘full of Muslims’ who ‘didn’t drink’ alcohol, which for him was a signifier of them not being English. In all this he said he wasn’t being racist. I suppose in some ways that observation was correct. He was a xenophobe. He disliked equally all whom he considered foreigners, including some white people. Since I have lived more out of Scotland than in it, he probably did not clock that I was part of the Celtic hordes who had settled in England but who he wished had stayed at ‘home’.

‘We are all migrants,’ I said. ‘Everyone in Britain has roots somewhere else, including you.’

‘Not me,’ he protested. ‘Pure English. Born in God’s own country. English raised for generations. 100 per cent.’

I looked again at his taxi-driver ID card on display on the dashboard.<

‘But your last name is Fleming,’ I said.

‘So what?’

That means your family at some point migrated to England from Flanders. They were called Fleming because they were Flemish. You are Belgian somewhere in your past.’

The driver did not have the fluency of Shakespeare’s Jean de Ghent 400 years ago but he did have the same Belgian background and a similar attitude to England – a country he loved but which was now not as good as it should be. National identity as an act of imagination means that the nation we love is not always what we think it is. Daniel Defoe was correct when he wrote that ‘A true-born Englishman’s a contradiction / In speech an irony. In fact, a fiction.’ But that’s true of almost any country you can think of – especially since the phrase ‘true-born’ doesn’t have any clear meaning. And yet the fiction persists.

(518 words)

**Chapter 4. Another English Question: England, which England?** pp. 75, 77-79

*England’s ancestor worship*

From the very beginning of his *England: An Elegy* the conservative writer Roger Scruton is driven by nostalgic pessimism. ‘What was England: a nation? A territory? A language? A culture? An Empire? An idea? All answers seem inadequate … the English enjoyed the strange privilege of knowing exactly who they were but not what they were.’ Scruton wryly notes that despite the English confusing their identity with Britishness ‘only one group of Her Majesty’s subjects saw itself as British: … immigrants’. This is not quite right, as Scruton himself must have known. Even with the rise of English nationalism many English people, and plenty of Scots, Welsh and Northern Irish folk, still cling to a sense of British identity, from the marching bands and Orange Lodges of Ulster to those who remember the fallen on Remembrance Sunday. [….]

The most revealing part of Scruton’s *England: An Elegy* is not the content. It’s the fact that it is composed in the past tense. It is an obituary for a nation. His first sentence asks ‘what *was* England?’ He then goes on to say that the English ‘knew’ who they ‘were’, and that they ‘bumbled on’ and ‘required so little explanation of their customs and institutions’. An elegy, as Scruton was well aware, is a tribute to the dead. Scruton’s own Englishness is the self-pitying nostalgic pessimism of John of Gaunt, Norman Tebbit and the leading proponents of Brexit. It is sentimental tears shed for the loss of this other Eden. What Scruton and the others really demonstrate is the fear of change, the end of England as their own ‘imagined community’. This fantasy England – white, upper-middle-class, rural, warm-beer-drinking, conservative, church-going – has for decades been replaced by the real England of kebab shops, Cool Britannia, *Kes*, *I Daniel Blake*, Damien Hirst, grime, trans rights, Mo Farrah, the enlargement of university education beyond the narrow ground of Oxbridge, Tinder, Extinction Rebellion, Greggs vegan sausage rolls, Jürgen Klopp, and a list of thousands of cultural changes which make England what it is in reality – a complex, diverse, wonderful country where anything you can say about England is probably true.

The observations from Scruton and others who share his brand of complacent intellectual conservatism are the usual clichés which describe the narrow band of Englishness he sees when he looks in the mirror – white, male, public-school-educated and emotionally constipated. He and other English nationalist writers routinely observe that ‘the English’ are a ‘reserved people’. Mr Scruton presumably never made it to Leeds, Manchester or Newcastle city centre on a Saturday night, or visited Glastonbury Festival or a Millwall or Liverpool home game. Then there is the idea that the English have hot-water bottles instead of a sex life. Not, presumably, the ones who end up shocking the locals in Ibiza and Ayia Napa by copulating on the beach or who end up on *Love Island*, or who become prime minister of the United Kingdom without being entirely clear about how many children they have fathered. England, in other words, is not exceptional in its belief in its own exceptionalism, but in reality it is quite like everywhere else in that it is a work in progress, a nation of constant reinvention and full of contradictions in which, unfortunately, the past is misremembered and regurgitated as myth. This can be harmless enough. But nostalgic pessimism, pining for the past, has the habit of blocking out rational consideration of the present and therefore the realities for the future.

(581 words)

**Chapter 4. Another English Question: England, which England?** pp. 90-91

*Extremism and intellectual failure*

There is a disjunction, especially noticeable in working-class areas of England-outside-London, between the lives people lead, their memories of how things were for their parents in their towns and communities and what they are being told by experts. The better the statistics – low unemployment, booming house prices – in some cases the greater is the anger in communities where the sense of decline and loss of status is real. The left-wing writer Owen Jones recounts stories that bear out this phenomenon. In his 2011 book on the demonization of the English working class, *Chavs*, […] Jones’s focus is relentlessly on working-class English people who have reasons to be angry not just about the struggles of their daily lives but at the way they are laughed at and portrayed as feckless, lazy and hopeless by those in power and in vast swathes of popular culture. Jones points out that John Lennon’s ‘working-class heroes’ are no longer ‘something to be’. Often working-class English men and women are not even given the opportunity to find meaningful work. Jones points to the profound consequences of deindustrialization and the marginalization of groups of people who in the past had played such a central role in the British economy. The steel workers, miners and shipbuilders who literally built Britain have seen their industries eclipsed by foreign competitors, their communities impoverished by the lack of skilled work, and they themselves have been demonized as unthinking uncultured ruffians – chavs. The jobs which are available – in fast-food shops, as delivery drivers, Uber drivers or in Amazon warehouses – are precarious, often unskilled and less prestigious. The statistics of life in the UK tell them unemployment is low, but so is the pay. These jobs are unrewarding in every sense.

Worse, in Jones’s analysis, is a lack of self-worth. Key figures in the political classes have a habit of blaming the victims for their multiple problems. Here’s former prime minister David Cameron:

We talk about people being at risk of poverty or social exclusion: it’s as if these things – obesity, alcohol abuse, drug addiction – are purely external events like a plague or bad weather. Of course circumstances – where you are born, your neighbourhood, your school and the choices your parents make – have a huge impact. But social problems are often the consequence of the choices people make.

People do make bad choices. But this empathy-free lecture on self-reliance and personal responsibility was delivered by a politician who described his own background in these terms: ‘I have the most corny CV possible. It goes: Eton, Oxford, Conservative Research Department, Treasury, Home Office, Carlton TV and then Conservative MP.’ As Jones wryly points out, Cameron describes his wife’s upbringing as ‘highly unconventional’ because ‘she went to a day school’. David Cameron’s father was a stockbroker and controlled investments worth millions of pounds in a number of offshore tax havens. Cameron inherited a great deal of money. His wife, the daughter of a hereditary baronet, is also extremely wealthy. Cameron’s CV is not ‘corny’, but it is disconnected from the England in which most people live.

And yet David Cameron was quite sympathetic to the woes of the English working class in comparison with his more right-wing colleagues. A year after Jones’s book was published, in 2012 a group of English Conservative MPs including future high-flyers Dominic Raab, Elizabeth Truss, Priti Patel and Kwasi Kwarteng, published a book claiming that British workers are ‘among the worst idlers in the world’. Britain, they claimed, ‘rewards laziness’, and ‘too many people in Britain prefer a lie-in to hard work’. Taken together – cultural ridicule, nasty tropes about English working-class culture, shocking contempt from right-wing Westminster MPs, failed traditional industries and poor educational opportunities to prepare for a high-skilled information economy, the rise of English nationalism is not just understandable. It is inevitable. What is also understandable is why on the fringes it tips into political extremism.

(648 words)

**SCOTTISHNESS**

**Chapter 6 – Othered and scunnered** pp. 172-174

*The News Where You Are*

During the 2014 independence referendum campaign [the Scottish poet James Robertson] performed a new work, ‘The News Where You Are’, to amused Scottish audiences. At its heart it is an exploration of ‘us’ and ‘them’, using broadcasters as an example. When the BBC1 national *Six* or *Ten O’Clock News* ends – that is, the London-based British and international news from London’s New Broadcasting House – Huw Edwards or another news presenter will say, in the opening words of James Robertson’s poem, ‘That’s all from us. Now it’s time for the news where you are.’ If social scientists ever want a clear example of the marginalization of the non-metropolitan parts of Britain, including the north of England, Wales and Northern Ireland, then Robertson’s poem provides it. The division between ‘us’ and ‘you’ is one in which ‘our’ news is important while ‘yours’ is merely ‘the news where you are’. To gain a real sense of his wit, it’s worth watching Robertson himself performing the poem on YouTube. [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZhL57cjN8xY>]

Here is the text in full:

That’s all from us.

Now it’s time for the news where you are.

The news where you are comes after the news where we are. The news where we are is the news. It comes first. The news where you are is the news where you are. It comes after. We do not have the news where you are. The news where you are may be news to you but it is not news to us. The news may be international, national or regional. The news where we are may be international news. The news where you are is never international news. Where you are is not international. The news where you are comes after the international and national news. The news where you are may be national news or regional news. However, national news where you are is not national news where we are. It is the news where you are. If the news where you are is national news it is only national where you are. The news where we are is national wherever you are.

On Saturdays, there is no news where you are after the news where we are. In fact there is no news where you are on Saturdays. Any news there is, is not where you are. It is where we are. If there is news where you are but not where we are it will wait until Sunday.

After the news where you are comes the weather. The weather where you are is not the national weather. The weather where you are comes after the news where you are, and after the weather where you are comes the national weather. Do not confuse the national weather with the weather where you are. The weather where you are comes first but is lesser weather than the national weather. Extreme weather is news. However, weather that is more extreme where you are than where we are is not news. Weather that is extreme where we are is news, even if extreme weather where we are is only average weather where you are. On average, weather where you are is more extreme than weather where we are.

Tough shit. Good night.

Of course Londoners have their own regional news too, and all across the United Kingdom regional or local news programmes are extremely popular. But James Robertson touches on a specific Scottish exasperation with London-based media and irritations which have resonance beyond Scotland and beyond broadcasting. The suspicion persists that not only are events in London considered more important than similar events in other parts of the UK but also that decisions taken in Westminster have relevance all across the country. That is not the case […]. In his poem, Robertson focuses on apparently minor details as symbols of a larger sense of neglect. There is no ‘news where you are’ on Saturdays because BBC Scotland did not have the resources to cover Scottish news that day. The BBC in London refused demands for a Scotland-based *Six O’Clock News* – the ‘Scottish Six’ – which would be presented at teatime from the studios at Glasgow’s Pacific Quay, although eventually the BBC did react, launching a dedicated BBC Scotland TV channel in February 2019. There is a particularly sharp observation about metropolitan or London bias in Robertson’s lines: ‘If the news where you are is national news it is only national where you are. The news where we are is national wherever you are.’ This is the key point in the poem. It is the sense that Scots, and by extension everyone in non-metropolitan England, Wales or Northern Ireland, listening to the ‘national’ news, is not where ‘we’ are (London and Westminster), but separate, less interesting and ultimately less important – although in the case of the BBC paying exactly the same licence fee as the better-served folk in London and the south of England.

To be clear: the point here is not to second-guess BBC decisions and its use of limited resources, or those of ITV, which at times comes in for similar criticism. In some ways Scotland is super-served by the BBC. BBC Gàidhlig produces Gaelic-language programmes for BBC Alba (Scotland) and has been doing so since 1985. According to the 2011 UK census there are only 57,375 Gaelic speakers in Scotland – 1.1 per cent of the population, and only 32,400 can actually read and write the language. The number of speakers has been falling since 2001, although ‘original’ languages continue to play a significant role in nationalism. In Ireland, Raidió na Gaeltachta and TG4, the Irish-language channels, serve the small minority of actual speakers of Irish. Yet symbolically these minority channels are evidence of commitment to a distinct Irish culture. Irish is a remarkable survivor, refusing to die, with most Irish people retaining fragments of it, and officially it remains the primary language of the state.

In Scotland, despite the investment in services for Gaelic speakers, the BBC, for at least some licence payers, is an omnipresent British national institution which at times replicates the ‘othering’ of Scotland seen in parliament and other institutions of the British state. The BBC in this sense becomes a metaphor for Britishness, its strengths, burdens and increasingly its weaknesses. Everyone pays the same for a service everyone uses, a bit like paying the same taxes (according to income) for the services the government provides in the NHS, or schools or transportation or policing – except that not everyone feels satisfied they are receiving the same services as London or other more favoured areas of the country.

(1094 words, including poem)

**Chapter 3 - Us and Them** pp. 45, 47-49

*The End of an Old Song*

The United Kingdom began in 1603 with the Union of the Scottish and English crowns. [….]

In 1707 the union of the United Kingdom was renewed again. Once again renewal came after a crisis, and more power shifted to London. Formally the Scottish and English parliaments decided to unite. Scots sometimes see this moment sentimentally in the words of the Earl of Seafield as he signed the Act of Union: ‘Now there’s ane end o’ ane auld sang’ (an end of an old song). More negatively this was (and by some still is) seen an act of national betrayal by the Scottish aristocracy, gentry and business leaders. Almost a century after the Union of Parliaments Robbie Burns reflected this bitterness in ‘Such a Parcel of Rogues in the Nation’ (1791):

Fareweel to a’ our Scottish fame,

Fareweel our ancient glory;

Fareweel even to the Scottish name,

Sae famed in martial story…

We’re bought and sold for English gold –

Such a parcel of rogues in the nation!

The English Treasury did pay a price to bail out Scottish debts. The Scottish aristocracy and merchant classes were desperate to be rescued from the self-inflicted economic and political disaster known as the Darien scheme. This was a badly thought-out attempt in the 1690s to create a Scottish ‘empire’ beginning with a colony in Panama. The Scots were seduced into thinking that a faraway tropical land was a rich and hospitable place just waiting to be colonized by Presbyterians with their Bibles and heavy tweeds. The Company of Scotland behind the scheme is estimated to have sucked up about 20 per cent of the money circulating in Scotland at the time. It was a reckless gamble. Some 2,500 bold pioneers set off and fell prey to heat, hunger, exotic diseases and the indifference of indigenous people who, they found to their surprise, were uninterested in bartering food for Scottish baubles, gewgaws and gimcracks. Only a few hundred survivors returned. This was a national humiliation. The failure of the Scottish harvest in 1698–9 compounded the misery. An estimated 5–7 per cent of the Scottish population died from starvation. The bodies of poor crofters were found with half-eaten grass in their mouths.

Beyond English money paying off Scottish debts incurred by the Darien scheme, north of the border merchants, traders and the political classes had other reasons to welcome the Union of Parliaments. Some Scottish Protestants – the majority of the population, especially in the more populated southern areas of Scotland – hoped that the closer parliamentary union with England would extend protection against Catholic-inspired and French-supported insurrections. After all, 1707 was less than twenty years after the Battle of the Boyne (1690) and the Battle of Aughrim (1691) in which William of Orange’s Protestant forces finally defeated the Catholic army in Ireland and guaranteed that future British monarchs would have to embrace Protestantism. Even after the Union of Parliaments, Scottish Protestants did not always feel secure. Catholic insurrections continued, although the 1707 parliamentary union helped ensure that the 1745 Jacobite rebellion was brutally and thoroughly defeated by British forces at Culloden. That battle lasted barely an hour. The Jacobites and Bonnie Prince Charlie are figures of a romantic past, and they continue even now to endure in song and sentimental folklore, but Culloden – despite the myth-making – was in military terms the Jacobite equivalent of the Charge of the Light Brigade: hopeless.

(566 words)

**Chapter 2 - British or English?** pp. 31-33

*‘The Vow’*

I’m guessing that unless you are Scottish, if I mention ‘The Vow’, you’ll have no idea what I mean. If you are Scottish, you will know exactly where this is going and you will have an opinion, probably a very forthright one. In Scotland, just two days before the September 2014 independence referendum vote, the popular Scottish tabloid newspaper *The Daily Record* published a front-page report with ‘The Vow’ as the headline. It was one of the most dramatic interventions in the independence campaign. ‘The Vow’ was a written promise signed by three Englishmen, leaders of three British unionist parties, David Cameron, Ed Miliband and Nick Clegg, on behalf of the Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats respectively. They promised more powers for Scotland in the event of a No vote taking independence off the table. Scots talked excitedly of ‘Devo Max’ or ‘Home Rule’ – that is, maximum devolution to Scotland while still remaining in the UK. Two days later Scotland did indeed vote to reject independence: the No vote was 55 per cent and Yes was 45 per cent. ‘The Vow’ helped the unionist cause, at least for a time. But that was short-lived.

Once independence was rejected by Scottish voters, Mr Cameron offered Scotland something which – disappointingly for those nationalists who felt betrayed once more by Westminster – looked very different from the Devo Max they had hoped for. It began with that age-old bureaucratic device of delay and distraction, in the form of a committee to produce a report. Cameron set up a commission of inquiry under Lord Smith of Kelvin. He was asked to consider new powers for Scotland. The Smith Commission acted and reported in good faith, but Cameron had already moved on to other problems. He had ahead of him the 2015 General Election, which opinion polls suggested he would lose because of the surge on the right to the English nationalists of UKIP. Granting more powers to Scotland potentially would make the English nationalist problem even worse. Cameron was confronted with a cat-fight on the right wing of his own party over Europe, with Tory MPs fearful they would lose their seats to UKIP and Nigel Farage. Besides, the 2014 Scottish referendum was old news. Alex Salmond resigned as SNP leader and his successor as first minister, Nicola Sturgeon, accepted that the independence question had been settled for a generation, although with an important caveat: ‘Something material would have to change in terms of the circumstances or public opinion before I think it would be appropriate to have a proposal for a referendum.’ Something material was about to change, but not in the way anyone could have predicted. Two competing nationalisms were on the rise, one in England, the other in Scotland. In Scotland’s case many voters, not just SNP supporters, were angry that David Cameron in the end offered only relatively minor changes to existing devolved powers. Nicola Sturgeon summed up the sense of disappointment: ‘I want to have the power in our hands to create a better system to lift people out of poverty, to get our economy growing. That’s the kind of powerhouse parliament I want. Sadly it’s not the one that’s going to be delivered.’ Scottish nationalists believed that ‘The Vow’ had been broken. Their anger was reflected in the results of the 2015 British General Election, in which an overwhelming SNP victory represented the collapse of unionism in Scotland. Yet even that was nothing compared to what was happening within English nationalism, especially in the shires and small towns across vast swathes of England-outside-London.

(594 words)

**IRISHNESS**

**Chapter 3 - Us and Them** pp. 53-55

*The Irish Question*

In 1801 Ireland joined the union. For England it was a shrewd move. Ireland was potentially the weakest flank in the military defence of the United Kingdom. In 1798 a rebellion initiated by the non-sectarian democrats of the United Irishmen had collapsed into chaotic violence, with Protestants massacred by Catholic rebels in the south of the country and savage repression carried out by British forces. England’s great enemy, the French, landed a force of 2,000 men in support of the rebels in the west of Ireland, and, although it was too small to influence the rebellion, the implications were obvious in London. The British prime minister William Pitt was rightly concerned that Ireland posed a security risk as it had done for centuries, turning England’s flank. The back door to Britain had to be closed. [….]

The 1801 union was forced through, to England’s advantage but with much less support among the Catholic Irish population than even the contentious union of the Scottish and English parliaments a century before. For the government in London the union meant that the western flank of the British Isles was more secure, although the issue would never completely disappear, right through to the Second World War. The Irish parliament was dissolved, and, with echoes of Scotland 100 years previously, there was rioting in Dublin. But again, like Scotland, Protestants rejoiced, and many merchants and wealthier Irish people hoped that the result of union would be full Catholic emancipation. Despite some optimism, assimilating an island in which the vast majority of people were Irish-speaking Catholics into an English-speaking, Protestant-dominated political culture at a time when Catholics in Britain were denied fundamental rights proved at first difficult and then impossible.

It took another twenty-eight years, under the leadership of the charismatic lawyer Daniel O’Connell, to achieve Catholic Emancipation. He then launched a movement for the repeal of the Act of Union, and the granting of Home Rule. His campaign mobilized vast numbers of supporters in mass meetings of a size that had no historical precedent – one was said to have attracted a million people. Westminster refused to consider any reform of the union, and O’Connell’s movement collapsed during the Great Famine of the 1840s, when the British government failed to offer significant humanitarian relief. This was an outrage then and remained a raw wound which nearly 200 years later has yet to heal. The failure of O’Connell’s resolutely peaceful campaign sparked a despairing belief that only armed action would force the British to make concessions, giving birth to a long tradition of militant Irish republicanism, especially with the rise of the conspiratorial Fenian movement in the 1860s.

In 2019 the British home secretary and Conservative politician Priti Patel suggested using food as a weapon against Ireland in future Brexit negotiations. The anger and astonishment in Ireland at her insensitivity and ignorance was profound. About a million Irish men and women died in the Great Famine. Another million or more emigrated. I blundered into this historical morass many years ago. Working as an inexperienced correspondent for the BBC in Northern Ireland, I found myself in Buswell’s pub in Dublin, just across from Dáil Éireann, the Irish parliament, spending a delightful evening drinking Guinness and whiskey with a group of Irish politicians. One of them was the then Irish foreign minister, the affable Brian Lenihan. We discussed how historical events could achieve mythical significance way beyond the facts – the 1745 Jacobite rebellion in Scotland, Crécy, Agincourt and Ireland’s Great Famine. Very unwisely I tried to put the Famine ‘into context’ by pointing out that Ireland was not alone in suffering in the 1840s. Across Europe these years were known as the ‘Hungry Forties’. France was hit by several famines. The 1840s of Dickens’s London was a far from pleasant place. My drinking companions went silent. Brian Lenihan patiently and politely ‘had a word with me’. I was in my early twenties and ignorant. He generously forgave my bad manners. I learned something and apologized. Ms Patel, a senior British government minister, hasn’t and didn’t.

(676 words)

**Chapter 7 – Ireland’s English Question** pp.179-181

*Ireland’s English Question*

What English, Scottish and Welsh schoolchildren do learn about Ireland is that there is something called ‘The Irish Question’. Seen from England, this question was mostly associated with agitation for Irish Home Rule, bitter and sometimes violent sectarian divisions between Irish Protestants and Catholics and attempts by the British prime minister William Ewart Gladstone to deliver an acceptable kind of self-rule for Ireland in the 1880s. Gladstone’s great rival, Benjamin Disraeli, phrased the Irish Question most succinctly. In the House of Commons in 1844 during the years of the Great Famine Disraeli put it this way:

A dense population, in extreme distress, inhabit an island where there is an Established Church, which is not their Church, and a territorial aristocracy the richest of whom live in foreign capitals. Thus you have a starving population, an absentee aristocracy, and an alien Church; and in addition the weakest executive in the world. That is the Irish Question.

Indeed it was. The catastrophe of the Great Famine eventually passed, but the Question remained, as did the absentee aristocracy, the alien church and the weak and remote executive.

The English attitude to their apparent inability to ‘solve’ the Irish Question in the nineteenth century was reflected in the humour of the historical satire *1066 and All That*, first published in 1930. It suggested that Gladstone ‘spent his declining years trying to guess the answer to the Irish question; unfortunately, whenever he was getting warm, the Irish secretly changed the question’. Amusing though all that may be, it suggests Ireland was and is still a problem or a question for the British, more specifically the English, rather than the other way round. This pressing problem stretching back centuries could easily be rephrased as Ireland’s English Question. At its heart it is this: what, after centuries of living with English or British conquerors, does Ireland have to do to find unity on the island of Ireland, domestic tranquillity and a degree of understanding from their closest neighbours and former occupiers? The answer to that question – at least for most people on the island of Ireland – was the Good Friday Agreement or Belfast Agreement of 1998. The Irish Republic no longer claims jurisdiction over Northern Ireland; unity can happen only by consent. Only Sinn Féin pursues the aim of unity as a priority, but even they accept that it must be consensual. There remain many obvious barriers to the unification of Ireland. What future awaits those from my own family background, Scots ‘Planters’ who settled in Ulster during ‘the Plantation’ as far back as the seventeenth century and who remain stubbornly Protestant and stubbornly British? How welcome in a united Ireland would such people be after years of sectarian Troubles including 3,600 dead, half of them civilians, in the most recent outburst of violence, from 1968 until 1998? And why would the increasingly prosperous and modern Irish Republic wish to take on the responsibilities and financial burdens of Northern Ireland and its sometimes recalcitrant unionist majority?

Within Ireland there are three main strains of Irish nationalism reflected in political parties with long roots and historic disagreements. The two traditional Irish democratic parties created in the 1920s are Fine Gael (in English, Tribe of the Irish) and Fianna Fáil (Warriors of Destiny). The third party, the tribe or warriors which have agitated most strongly for it, is Sinn Féin. Just as the Scottish National Party has distanced itself from previous Anglophobic incarnations, Sinn Féin has had an even tougher job. Although they do not like being reminded of it, their former military wing killed people, accounting for the majority of the deaths during the recent Troubles. The inner core of Sinn Féin’s current leadership still includes former IRA commanders with blood on their hands. Some do not admit their IRA past. Others talk of their regret at ‘innocent lives’ being lost, with the implication that some of those whose death they caused must have been ‘guilty’ of something – ‘guilty’ of being a police officer, or political opponent, perhaps.

The IRA (or PIRA) was the armed insurgent group that for thirty years until the Belfast Agreement was in armed conflict with British forces in Ireland. [….]

If the Great Famine is not forgotten, nor the Easter Rising, nor the British repression carried out by the Black and Tans, neither are the murders carried out by the IRA in a campaign supported by Sinn Féin. The killings include the Enniskillen bombing of 1987, the murders of former as well as serving members of the police, off-duty policemen murdered on their doorsteps, farmers who had joined the part-time British army regiment the Ulster Defence Regiment and countless ordinary people going about their business who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. These victims were mostly Protestant, but there were many Catholic victims too, some of whom were ‘executed’ because the IRA believed them to be police informers known as ‘touts’, some whose bodies have never been discovered, others in Catholic areas who were ‘kneecapped’ in punishment shootings as part of the IRA’s rough justice on those who caused it offence. In England the dead include the civilian victims of the indiscriminate Birmingham, Guildford and Woolwich bombs and the Brighton bombing, which was planned as the assassination of the prime minister, Margaret Thatcher. These attacks will not be forgotten, however much Sinn Féin hopes otherwise.

(897 words)

**WELSHNESS**

**Chapter 7 – Ireland’s English Question** pp. 211-212

*Wales*

Support for independence, especially in South Wales, has never been high on the political agenda, although Brexit and English nationalism mean that the phrase ‘Indy Curious’ has entered the popular vocabulary in Welsh politics. Carwyn Jones, Labour’s former first minister, was one of those who publicly suggested the union was not working for Wales. But Wales has always been told it is too weak, too poor, too small and too divided between Welsh-speaking areas, especially in the north and west, and the bigger population centres in the south to make independence work. Carwyn Jones spoke of Wales being regarded as ‘subsidy junkies’ during the rise of English nationalism.

In the *Atlantic* magazine of December 2019, Helen Lewis wondered aloud why cultural nationalism in Wales – love of the Welsh language and culture – did not translate into the strong political nationalism in evidence in Scotland. She called it ‘the dragon that never roared’, with support for independence only at 28 per cent, and Wales narrowly voting in favour of Brexit alongside England. One reason the Welsh dragon has failed to stir may be economic insecurity. Most Welsh jobs are in towns within thirty miles of the English border, including the capital, Cardiff. Wales is also divided by geography – North Wales is better connected to Liverpool than to Cardiff in the south. Getting from Anglesey to the Welsh capital is more convenient via England. Politically, the Welsh nationalist party, Plaid Cymru, is, despite its efforts, at times regarded as an exponent of Welsh language and culture rather than a voice for all of Wales, and, unlike in Scotland, a charismatic leader for Welsh nationalism has not emerged.

But […] the event which caught countries around the world unprepared, the coronavirus pandemic, on the face of it should have brought nations together. We all want the same things, to stop the spread of the virus, stay healthy, find a cure and keep the economy moving. But the rules set by the government of the United Kingdom in London have at times been dismissively rejected by the administrations in Wales, Northern Ireland, Scotland and even in some local authority areas of England. Boris Johnson’s ‘Four Nations’ approach was rejected very clearly by the Welsh first minister, Mark Drakeford. He said Welsh police would patrol the border to ‘advise and explain’ to holidaymakers arriving from England that they should go home. Wales, along with Scotland and Northern Ireland, also rejected the changing messaging on the virus chosen by Boris Johnson. Mr Johnson said the UK should ‘Stay Alert’, while Wales joined Scotland and Northern Ireland in insisting a clearer message was that we should instead ‘Stay Home’. By the end of June 2020 the Scottish newspaper *The National* carried a front-page headline, announcing ‘ENGLISH BORDER BIGGEST RISK TO BEATING VIRUS’. Edinburgh University professor Devi Sridhar, one of the Scottish government advisers on the pandemic, suggested Scotland could with patience and hard work be Covid-free by the end of the summer, and officials in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland implied that England could be the weakest link in the Covid response. When it came to operating quarantine measures for holidaymakers coming home to the UK from abroad, England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales again all acted differently. Johnson’s plea that we should ‘pull together as a United Kingdom’ simply did not work in practice.

(557 words)

**Epilogue** pp. 346-348

*An End and A Beginning*

An Irishman, George Bernard Shaw, once quipped that ‘England and America are two countries separated by a common language.’ The same appears true nowadays for England and Scotland. On one side of the border, Mr Johnson speaks of his ‘fantastic’ successes, ‘world leading’ tracing systems for coronavirus and ‘world beating’ policies. He compares himself to Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt and claims he is ‘as fit as a butcher’s dog’. To increasing numbers of Scots the union he claims to save is as outdated as his vocabulary. For them, Mr Johnson personally is a symbol not of Britishness or the union but of a living fossil, the out-of-touch English nationalism which they reject.

All four nations of the United Kingdom are divided by that most potent political expression of English nationalism – Brexit – which of course is still not ‘done’. It will rankle for years. To take just one example, the Scottish government asserted its right to set food standards for Scots after Brexit begins to take effect in 2021. Similar impulses in Northern Ireland and Wales have deepened the gulf with Westminster. Scotland’s Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, Europe and External Affairs, Michael Russell, wrote to Michael Gove, the UK government minister in charge of Brexit planning, setting the tone for the struggles ahead:

I am writing following reports that it is the UK Government’s intention to consult on proposals that would dramatically undermine devolution and the democratic choices made by the Scottish Parliament. I do so prior to their publication because I want to make it crystal clear at the earliest possible moment, that the Scottish Government could not, and would not, accept any such plans. Nor would we co-operate with them.

Boris Johnson was equally contentious. He claimed the SNP wanted to take control of seventy different legislative powers over various issues transferred from the European Union. He said giving these powers to Scotland rather than Westminster would be ‘the biggest single act of devolution in modern memory’.

Around the same time a new poll by Panelbase for *The Sunday Times* showed a record 54 per cent of Scots backing Scottish independence. The poll forecast that Nicola Sturgeon and the SNP could be heading for a landslide victory in the 2021 Holyrood elections. Boris Johnson’s phrase about the union as ‘sheer might’ began to sound like a Spoonerism.

Meanwhile, the Conservative former health secretary Andrew Lansley offered a boost to a possible future federal Britain by asserting in a newspaper article that there had been a ‘chronic failure to give autonomy and cash to (English) local governments’ and that the ‘pandemic response failed to take account of different local circumstances’. He called for more decentralized decision-making in England.

In Wales, First Minister Mark Drakeford expressed his frustration over travel arrangements and other restrictions caused by Westminster’s cack-handed response to coronavirus. He said that ‘dealing with the UK government over the last few days has been an utterly shambolic experience… I just have to say it’s been an impossible experience to follow.’ The Welsh nationalist party Plaid Cymru renewed its call for a Welsh independence referendum.

In Northern Ireland preparations continued for operating a customs border between the province and the rest of the UK. No one appeared sure how the new bureaucracy would work, amid continuing speculation about another poll on Northern Ireland’s future. Boris Johnson achieved the near-miracle of uniting Ulster unionists and Irish nationalists who both had reasons to distrust him. First Minister Arlene Foster, the leader of Ulster unionism, spoke of Northern Ireland’s ‘betrayal’ by ‘the person who broke their word’.

And, finally, back in England, a You Gov/YesCymru poll noted the ways in which the Conservative Party had become the English nationalist party rather than the party of union. The pollsters concluded that ‘half of the Conservative supporters in England do not want the United Kingdom to continue’. When ‘don’t knows’ and ‘won’t say’ were ruled out, among Tory voters 49 per cent in England favoured what was described as ‘English independence’.

(666 words)