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British History: A Plea for a New Subject

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE.—J. C. Beaglehole, of the Victoria University of Wellington, was until his death in 1970 the doyen of New Zealand historians and—together with J. W. Davidson of the Australian National University, who died in 1973—a leader in developing historical consciousness and historiography in the South Pacific world area. His editions of the journals of Captain Cook and his *Life of Captain James Cook* (published in 1974 by Stanford University Press) are not only masterpieces of scholarship and insight into the eighteenth century but unrivaled in their penetration of oceanic, as well as merely maritime, history. The New Zealand Historical Association maintains an annual lecture in his memory, and the essay which follows was originally delivered as the first Beaglehole Memorial lecture when that association met at the University of Canterbury in May 1973. It was subsequently printed in the *New Zealand Journal of History* (vol. 8, no. 1, April 1974) and is republished here with minor alterations by the generous permission of that journal's editors. What follows is a modified version of an essay in historical restatement, which owes much to John Beaglehole's own vision and his understanding of what vision is.

A. J. P. Taylor's volume of the *Oxford History of England* opens—in a way which may or may not have escaped the attention of Scottish reviewers—with a flat and express denial that the term "Britain" has any meaning. It is, he says, the name of a Roman province, which never included the whole of modern Scotland, and was foisted upon the English by the inhabitants of the northern kingdom as part of the parliamentary union of 1707. Moreover, he continues, the term "Great Britain"—which properly denotes no more than the Anglo-Scottish union—is nonidentical with the term "United Kingdom," since the latter's scope included the whole of Ireland from 1801 and the dark and bloody rump of that island from 1922.¹ There could be a Plaid Cymru comment on all this; and one might also like to hear the views of that new breed of Orkney and Shetland nationalists who consider themselves a Norse fragment unsatisfactorily subject to an alien Scots culture. But Taylor's remarks conclude with an announcement that when he has occasion to mention people and things emanating from Scotland—which he clearly implies will be no more often than the exigencies of a history of England compel—he intends to use the adjective "Scotch," not

¹ A. J. P. Taylor, *English History, 1914-1945* (Oxford, 1965), p. v and n.
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"Scots" or "Scottish," on the grounds that the former is the English word and the latter, though used by Scots to denote themselves, no part of his native vocabulary. Now, as Taylor knows very well, there are parts of the world in which men are killed for less; he is deliberately dabbling in the politics of language and the politics of identity, which are among the more murderous and aggressive pursuits of our murderous and aggressive world, but he clearly expects to get away with it. One finds the same insistence on using "Scotch" instead of "Scottish," on grounds which are unmistakably arrogant rather than merely pedantic, in the preface to C. S. Lewis's volume of the *Oxford History of English Literature*, though Lewis redeemed himself by devoting separate and serious chapters to the history of sixteenth-century Scottish literature, which he saw to be written in an autonomous if disappearing variant of the Inglis tongue.² Lewis, after all, was an Ulsterman; but on this occasion he claimed the right to call himself English and to speak of the Scots only in a language which was English, not Scottish, which Scotsmen did not wish to use in speaking of themselves and which he implicitly denied their right to expect him to use of them.

The politics of language, however, are less my theme than some interesting implications that may be drawn, and lessons that I think may be learned, from Taylor's characteristic exercise in coat-trailing. It is informative to hear an eminent English historian—once distinguished for his understanding of the difference between *kleindeutsch* and *grossdeutsch* ideologies³—declare frankly that the term "Britain" has no meaning to him, and none in history either, and that he has no more than an obligatory sense of identity with any of the peoples of his island group other than his own. Within very recent memory, the English have been increasingly willing to declare that neither empire nor commonwealth ever meant much in their consciousness, and that they were at heart Europeans all the time. The obvious absurdity of the second part of the claim is no bar either to the partial truth of the first part, or to the ideological assertion of the claim as a whole; and if it has been psychologically possible for them to annihilate the idea of the Commonwealth—white as well as nonwhite—it is not altogether beyond the bounds of possibility that "United Kingdom" and even "Britain" may some day become similarly inconvenient and be annihilated, or annihilate themselves, in their turn. With communal war resumed in Ireland

² C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, excluding Drama* (Oxford, 1954), pp. v, 66-119.

³ A. J. P. Taylor, *The Course of German History* (New York, 1946), passim.

and a steady cost in lives being paid for the desire of one of the "British" peoples to remain "British" as they understand the term, it is not inconceivable that future historians may find themselves writing of a "Unionist" or even a "British" period in the history of the peoples inhabiting the Atlantic archipelago, and locating it between a date in the thirteenth, the seventeenth, or the nineteenth century and a date in the twentieth or the twenty-first.

These are of course dismal imaginations; we all at least claim to dislike balkanization, and I doubt if the most resolutely nationalist antipodean could say that the disappearance of all meaning from the term "Britain" would do nothing at all to his sense of identity. I am going to advance the claim that there is a need for us to revive the term "British history," and reinvest it with meaning, for reasons relative to the maintenance of a number of historically based identities. But, in order to make this claim intelligible, I must first establish the truth of a proposition which did not become fully clear to me until I read and reflected on Taylor's dictum that the term "Britain" is without historical meaning. He was after all contributing to a history of England, and there is at least this much truth in his claim: no true history of Britain has ever been composed. Geoffrey of Monmouth in the twelfth century, William Camden in the sixteenth, made the attempt according to the standards of their times, and even today there are some distinguished and even brilliant partial exceptions to the rule I am enunciating. But when one considers what "Britain" means—that it is the name of a realm inhabited by two, and more than two, nations, whose history has been expansive to the extent of planting settlements and founding derivative cultures beyond the Four Seas—it is evident that the history of this complex expression has never been seriously attempted. Francis Bacon, on the occasion of the union of the crowns in 1603, proposed to James VI and I the construction of a history which would make that of England and that of Scotland as simultaneously visible as had been the histories of Israel and Judah in the books of *Kings* and *Chronicles*;⁴ but one has only to walk through the relevant section of any library and glance at the shelves to see that his advice has not been taken. Instead of histories of Britain, we have, first of all, histories of England, in which Welsh, Scots, Irish, and, in the reign of George III, Americans appear as peripheral peoples when, and only when, their doings assume power to disturb the tenor of English politics; second, and read by limited

⁴ James Spedding, *The Letters and Life of Francis Bacon*, 7 vols. (London, 1861-74), 3:98, 250.

and fragmented publics, histories of Wales, Scotland, Ireland, and so forth, written as separate enterprises in the effort, sustained to various degrees, to constitute separate historiographical traditions.

I can best begin sketching what a history of Britain might be like by describing one or two of the exceptions to my rule—works which have done something to whet my appetite for more of the same. David Mathew's *The Celtic Peoples and Renaissance Europe*,⁵ though marred by the author's extraordinary pointilliste technique in writing history, did at least achieve a real imaginative sweep. Starting with the appearance of some Anglo-Welsh dependents of the house of Devereux in the Earl of Essex's rebellion in 1600, Mathew worked his way out along the military route to Ireland through South Wales and Milford Haven, and then made a *tour d'horizon* of the whole Celtic frontier and transfrontier world, from Cornwall through Wales, and through Ireland, the Western Isles and the Scottish Highlands, to the Gordon country and Aberdeen; at the end of which the reader was left with the excited sensation of having been introduced to a new realm of historical experience and convinced that it was really there. Though Mathew wrote of the world of the Hebridean gallowglasses—known also to Shakespeare—in terms which indicated that they were so very Gaelic that even the Irish found them a little incomprehensible, and he himself was forced to write of them in Kiltartan English, the effect of his book was strictly non-Ossianic. One found oneself convinced of the existence of a world outside agrarian Western Europe, on which the settled societies of the English, Scotto-Anglians, and Anglo-Irish steadily encroached; and I found this impression reinforced when I read a brilliant and little-known Jacobean work, Sir John Davies's *Discoverie of the True Causes Why Ireland Was Never Thoroughly Subdued until His Majesty's Happy Reign*.⁶ Davies, James I's attorney-general for Ireland, one of whose tasks was the conversion of brehon conceptions of inheritance into common-law land tenures, was moved by this experience to write an early classic of colonial history and administrative literature, its theme being that only the anglicization of tenure could bring settled conditions to Irish society, and that earlier failures to do this had left Norman and Old English ruling groups stranded in an Old Irish world with no alternative but to become *Hibernicis ipsis Hiberniores*. Davies, in fact, wrote an intercultural if still ethnocentric history, concerned with conflict and

⁵ London, 1933.

⁶ Published in 1612. For further analysis, see J. G. A. Pocock, *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law* (Cambridge, 1957).

crossbreeding between societies differently based, and it is my contention that this is how "British history" will have to be written.

Reverting to modern historiography, J. C. Beckett's *The Making of Modern Ireland* performs the service of recounting the whole period which we know as that of the First Civil War, from 1642 to 1646, from the standpoint of the Marquis of Ormond, the greatest Anglo-Irishman of his day and the greatest of the king's servants in Ireland; and, in order to do this properly, Beckett was driven to rebaptize the whole conflict and call it by the name of the War of the Three Kingdoms.⁷ As soon as one looks at it in that way, a revolution in perspectives takes place; one sees that "the First Civil War" is a purely English term, appropriate only to English conditions—since in Scotland there was never a civil war, even Montrose succeeding in launching no more than a Highland raid of a desperately unusual character, and since Ireland had not attained the degree of political integration necessary if the term "civil war" is to have any meaning. The War of the Three Kingdoms was in fact three wars, originating independently if interconnectedly and differing in political character—a national rebellion in Scotland south and east of the Highlands, a frontier rebellion in the multicultural conflict zone of Ireland, and a civil war in the highly integrated political society of England—and flowing together to form a single series but not a single phenomenon. Charles I would not have summoned the English parliament but for the war in Scotland, or been challenged by it for control of the militia but for the war in Ireland; and, though the outcome was such as to increase the ascendancy of England over Scotland and of England and Scotland over Ireland, it is evident that we are studying three, and in some ways more than three, interacting histories. This perspective, I want to add, is maintained with admirable clarity in the volumes of C. V. Wedgwood.

I am using "British history"—for lack, an Irishman might add, of a better term—to denote the plural history of a group of cultures situated along an Anglo-Celtic frontier and marked by an increasing English political and cultural domination. The history of Scotland in relation to England in the seventeenth century, like that of the United Kingdom in relation to Europe in the twentieth, is that of the progressive absorption of one political culture by a neighboring culture complex whose conflicts it fails to dominate; but Scotland is no more English than Britain is European. The fact of a hegemony does not alter the fact of a plurality, any more than the history of a

⁷ J. C. Beckett, *The Making of Modern Ireland* (London, 1966), chap. 4.

frontier amounts to denial that there is history beyond the advancing frontier. Mathew's *The Celtic Peoples and Renaissance Europe* resembles in this respect Owen Lattimore's *The Inner Asian Frontiers of China*; but "British history" is not the simple narrative of a monolithic empire's interactions with its external proletariats. There have been phases in which it can be seen as the interrelations of a number of advanced and sophisticated provinces.

The last work I should like to mention as offering the kind of pluralist treatment I am advocating is J. R. Pole's *Political Representation in England and the Origins of the American Republic*.⁸ Concerned with a highly specific historical problem—the American Revolution and the birth of Federalism that followed—Pole conducts a survey of political structures and electoral systems which moves from England through Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and Virginia, with glances at other subcultures on the way, and returns to the deliberations of the Philadelphia Convention in 1789. The effect is to convince the reader that there once existed, as a single system, a diversity of Anglo-Celtic cultures grouped around the northern Atlantic—an English, two Scottish, three Irish, and an uncertain number of American—increasingly dominated by the English language and by veneration for, if diverse modes of interpreting, English political norms and institutions; and that these were disrupted in the great civil war of the American Revolution, which can be interpreted both in terms of one group of these cultures making a radical choice from among the alternatives before it, and in terms of the geopolitically preordained emergence of an American nation qualitatively distinct from the Anglo-Atlantic culture which gave it birth. To this the response was the authoritarian consolidation of the eastern group of cultures at their weakest point, in the Irish Union of 1801, so that one may look ahead from the second to the third of the major civil wars which have convulsed British history—the Irish Revolution of 1911–22, the first terrorist war of modern times, a marginal campaign of which is still being fought.

The nature of the subject which might be designated "British history" ought by this time to be emerging, though its complete outline cannot be traced within the confines of a single lecture. We should start with what I have called the Atlantic archipelago—since the term "British Isles" is one which Irishmen reject and Englishmen decline to take quite seriously. This is a large—dare I say a sub-subcontinental?—island group lying off the northwestern coasts of geographic Europe, partly within and partly without the oceanic

⁸ New York and London, 1966.

limits of the Roman empire and of what is usually called "Europe" in the sense of the latter's successor states; in which respect it somewhat resembles Scandinavia. Historical geographers supply us with accounts of the configuration of the islands composing it, notably its divisions into lowland and highland zones and the diversity of its littorals as these face towards quasi-inland seas on the European side and an oceanic water region on the Atlantic side. I could imagine analogies between the relation of this archipelago to Roman-Germanic Europe and the relation of the Japanese archipelago to China and East Asia—a main difference being that the North Atlantic contains one archipelagic group instead of the Eastern two or three. Historical geographers, prehistorians, and archaeologists—the only specialists so far to have accepted the perspective I am proposing as a norm—further supply us with keys to the ethnic and cultural patterns of human settlement in the archipelago: the establishment in its various geographical zones of different kinds of maritime, stock-rearing, and agricultural economies, and its linguistic divisions into communities speaking different kinds of Celtic, Anglo-Saxon, and Norse. The incorporation of a large part of the major island as a province of the Roman empire raises the problem of the archipelago's involvement in the history of complex literate and political cultures organizing power on the adjacent continent—in other words, the problem of whether "Britain" is part of "Europe"—but the Roman empire, like Latin-German Christendom after it, does not effectively penetrate to all the oceanic or Atlantic regions of the archipelago, and the second-largest island is not directly affected by Roman government. The period of provincial organization is succeeded by one of resettlement, during which the techniques of the human geographer and archaeologist—those appropriate to periods which have left little documentary deposit—have once again most to tell us. For the first time we become aware of the distinction between history as the recorded and perennially reevaluated memory of literate societies, and history as the past recovered, by whatever means appropriate, where it has not been consciously remembered and preserved, or at points where written and restated memory does not yield whatever results we are looking for. This distinction presents us with what will become the greatest single methodological difficulty in the construction of British history—a difficulty largely coterminous with the problem of nationality.

"English history" certainly, and "Scottish history" probably, begin with the consolidation of kingdoms which later become states—*loci* of government, law enforcement, and service to a king,

which begin to preserve archival deposits and concerning the doings of whose leaders chronicles begin to be written. One of these *loci*—to be called “England”—is formed by the consolidation of the Wessex-Mercia kingdom, of which the Norman Conquest of the eleventh century was a takeover; the other—to be called “Scotland”—is formed because a local kingdom in a northern lowland zone is separated from the southern consolidation by the highland area called “Northumbria,” which for a variety of reasons, including Danish settlement, Norman devastation, and the formation of marcher lordships, is for a long time not fully absorbed by the English kingdom. These two monarchies are differentiated from earlier petty kingdoms by the Anglo-Norman capacity to maintain contact with the clerical and European traditions of church, law, and administration, and, because they are *loci* of centralized military and governmental power, they come to maintain marches, or quasi-militarized border zones; first against one another, in the debatable lands of the Northumbrian highland region, and second, each against its unincorporated neighboring Celtic area: Wales in the south, the Gaelic Highlands and Islands in the northwest. The latter area merges oceanically into that of the Irish peoples of the second great island, but it is not here that the impact of Norman power upon Ireland—to use that geographical expression—significantly takes place. The southern kingdom is, after the mid-eleventh century, partly involved in a series of continental European power systems, and in Anglo-Romance cultural exchanges; and in the twelfth century there takes place that momentous occurrence in archipelagic history, the establishment of Anglo-Norman penetration into Ireland, which in due course takes on some of the characteristics of a march. The governmental and cultural focus to be called England now begins fully to straddle between a French and continental world on the east and a Celtic, oceanic, and extra-European world to the west, and to engage in contacts upon both sides which historiographical tradition will tend to minimize. The northern kingdom, involved in a parallel duality but less insular in its culture because less efficient in its government, develops a consciousness casting far greater emphasis on the Highland Line on the one hand and the Auld Alliance on the other.

With the beginnings of Anglo-Norman power in Ireland, the history of the Three Kingdoms has in a sense begun; or at least we have the makings of a set of themes common to the north and south of the largest island and to both large islands together. “British history”—if the term may be retained—now becomes the history of contacts and penetrations between three *loci* of Anglo-Norman

power—one might use the term “Scotto-Anglian” of one of them, for distinction’s sake—a variety of predominantly Celtic societies based on kinship rather than administration, and a diversity of marcher and marginal societies brought into being by these interactions. Among the latter are powers like the great Norman-Irish lordships, the western and northern marcher lordships in relation to the English monarchy, the Lordship of the Isles and the Earldom of Orkney on the periphery of Scottish power; and, as happens in penumbral systems of authority, some of these sometimes maximize their influence with respect to the settled and administrative zones behind them. Welsh nationalists today like to point out that had the conspiracy of Glendower, Percy, and Douglas against the English king Henry IV succeeded—which does not seem so absurd to them as it did to the English nationalist poet Shakespeare—a belt of marcher principalities, running from Wales through Northumbria to southwestern Scotland, might have fragmented the advance of both centralized kingdoms;⁹ and the modern historian S. T. Bindoff dates the final absorption of the Northumbrian marches into “England” no earlier than the repression of the Northern Rising of 1569.¹⁰ Our historical perspective, it is worth remembering, is not merely Anglocentric; it takes as predetermined the triumph of that Wessex-Mercian-East Anglian combination which has been called “political England.”

It is not only the marcher lordships of the expanding governed societies which create the political and cultural pluralism of the early and middle phases of “British history”; there is also the creation of a diversity of intermediate and counterreactive societies all along the line which links, rather than separates, the conflicting and interacting cultures.¹¹ There are normanized Irish and hibernicized Normans; there are bilingual Anglo-Welsh, as well as monoglot Welsh and English; there are Lowland Scots assimilated to the clan world of the Highlands, as well as clans which expand at the expense of others by methods of litigation rather than war; there are Celts who enter a Norse world and Norsemen assimilated to the Celtic pattern. Culture conflicts, the language barriers, the phenomena of the marches, the distinction between lowland and highland zones; these all join to make “British history”—the expansion of government at the expense of kinship—a history of the constant creation, accompanied by the much less constant absorption, of new subcultures and

⁹ Owen Dudley Edwards, Gwynfor Evans, Ioan Rhys, Hugh MacDiarmid, *Celtic Nationalism* (London, 1968), p. 230; *Henry IV, Part I*, act 3, sc. 1, lines 69–90.

¹⁰ S. T. Bindoff, *Tudor England* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1950), pp. 107–8, 208–10.

¹¹ John Morris’s *The Age of Arthur* (London, 1973) presents primeval “British history,” between the Roman and English dominations, in these terms.

even subnations. The *locus classicus* of this sort of process is of course Ireland, where by the end of the seventeenth century one subnation, the Catholic Old English, has been partly extinguished and there have emerged three subnations in a single island: the Protestant Anglo-Irish or New English, a garrison landholding class who generate a high culture without becoming a nation; the Scots-Irish, who survive into our own times as a classic example, along with the Afrikaners of South Africa, of the settler nation which is at the same time an antination; and the Catholic "old," "mere," or "native" Irish, undergoing a social transformation as violent as any in the history of colonization and for that reason evolving toward the presentation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries of a revolutionary nationalism of an East European or Third World type, situated however within the confines of the history of the Atlantic archipelago.

The pluralist approach which I have been outlining has somehow to be reconciled with the evident fact that the pattern of "British history" is one of the steadily increasing dominance of England as a political and cultural entity. Even the nationalisms of the twentieth century do not reverse this generalization; it can be shown without much difficulty that Ireland became more nationalist and more revolutionary as it was increasingly assimilated to English-derived political and cultural norms, and that, in this case as in many others, revolutionary nationalism is less a means of resisting acculturation than a method of asserting one's own power over the process. But the Irish case is a partial exception—to be considered at a later point—to the generalization I want to put forward. This is that the history of an increasing English domination is remarkably difficult to write in other than English terms. The conqueror, after all, sets the rules of the game; he determines, in proportion to the extent to which his domination becomes effective, what people shall do, how they shall think, and what they shall remember. And the conquering culture may be—and was in the case we are considering—the culture which maintains rules, speaks a language and preserves a history so powerfully effective that it obliges others to act in the same way and submit to, if they do not acquire, its consciousness. This was, by the way, pretty much Sir John Davies's explanation of the Hibernicization of Anglo-Norman settlers; but the problem it sets for the modern historian is best exemplified by the history of Scottish participation in the English theater of the War of the Three Kingdoms. English politics, it is perfectly evident, took the Scots captive; they did not understand the behavior of their allies, who were—partly for this very reason—stronger than they were; and

consequently they were manipulated by events which they had no means of controlling and to which they were never admitted with the status of equal agents. Much against their will, they played the role of the dog's tail.

Now the relative weakness of the seventeenth-century Scots as political and historical actors cannot be separated from the relative dearth of Scottish means of expression. They were then, as they are now, a formidably articulate people; the distant drone of their sermons can still be heard; and we have at least two collections of personal papers, those of Robert Baillie and Johnston of Wariston,¹² in which an excruciating verbal sensitivity to the political and religious scene is amply documented. But these have to be set against the records of the Tower of London, the journals and unofficial diaries of the House of Commons, the many thousand pamphlets of the Thomason Collection; English administrative, legal, religious, and political consciousness was already and long had been in mass production, and this fact was both an index to and a means of England's superior power. The English monarchy, largest, wealthiest, and most expansive of the British political cultures, had for centuries been depositing official records and had recently undergone an uncontrollable explosion of the means of unofficial expression; and this was both cause and consequence of its being the strongest power, as well as of its being currently in a state of revolution. The English were both making and writing their history; it was a cause as well as a consequence of the Scottish inability to make theirs that they were ill placed to write it either. And should it be objected that Cromwell carried off many of the records of medieval Scotland and that a ship bringing them back was wrecked on a sandbar in 1660, this misfortune—like the loss of the Irish records in the Four Courts explosion of 1922—may be considered an illustration of the parable of the talents. The guardianship of one's past is power; the court of record is the kernel of English government; and from the political culture which has not enough self-determined and self-preserved history shall be taken away even that which it hath.

What I am arguing can be put in this way. A highly governed society is a highly literate society; in a multitude of forms from court records to history books, it puts forth articulations, linguistic and mental structures, which are—along a scale varying from official to unofficial, public to private, conscious to unconscious—highly

¹² *The Letters and Journals of Dr Robert Baillie* (Edinburgh, 1841-42); *The Diary of Sir Archibald Johnston of Wariston* (Edinburgh, 1911).

paradigmatic, in the sense that they authoritatively determine the patterns in which men think and the authority they exercise can be replaced only when alternatives to it are found. Among these paradigmatic structures will be found a style of narrating, studying, and criticizing history, with the result that a highly governed and literate society's consciousness of its own history will be of a different order—both more authoritative and, quite possibly, more self-critical—from that possessed by a society less centrally and bureaucratically organized. When a society of the first kind expands at the expense of societies of the second, the paradigmatic command of self which is one source of its power becomes a means by which it exerts power over others. In obliging others to play the game according to its rules, it in some degree obliges them to accept its structuring of history and the past, and from this there will develop conflicts and problems both for the subordinated societies and for historians like ourselves. In the first place, there will appear the characteristic ambivalences of empire: the conquerors' uncertainty whether to impose their consciousness of the world upon the conquered or exclude them altogether from it; the uncertainty of the conquered whether to accept the dominant consciousness unequivocally, to accept it in order to modify it, or to reject it altogether and construct a new ordering of historical consciousness out of their awareness of the dilemma in which they are involved. The problems of the conquered produce a greater diversity of responses, but by no means all of these are valid modes of historical criticism.

These are problems of men living in history, and, given the assumption that consciousness is paradigmatic, they are problems of the modes of exercising power. When the historian like ourselves appears, having—let us assume—no immediate commitment to the maintenance or reversal of any particular exercise of power, he finds himself involved in a related series of problems. The history he is trained to write consists in the inspection and criticism, the restatement and replacement, of paradigms which must be already existent, if for no other reason than that thinking starts with making assumptions and communication with sharing assumptions made by other people. But in a situation of cultural pluralism and partial domination like that we are considering, the history which he is invited to reassess is not only history as seen by the dominant culture; it is actually the history of the dominant culture itself, somewhat to the exclusion of others, since the data, the traditions of scholarship, and the currently operative paradigms he is to criticize are all prepon-

derantly the product of that culture—which is one important reason why it is dominant. As a major obstacle to all that I have said about the need for British history, we have to acknowledge that there are extremely powerful and valid professional and historical reasons pressing us toward the continuation of the Anglocentric perspective.

I practice English history a good deal, and I have no great anxiety to see that subject radically transformed; but I am arguing that “British history” needs to be reinvested with meaning, both because it contains areas of human experience which it would be beneficial to study, and because I have come to believe that we are doing harm to our understanding of ourselves by not studying it. But I have called it a “new subject,” and it should be clear from what I have said that I envisage it as existing alongside English history as an old one. The point next to be explored is that we are now involved in the problems which arise when we turn from the pursuit of one mode of historical understanding to another, of a structurally different order. A recent debate in the *New Zealand Journal of History*, between Peter Munz and the lamented J. W. Davidson—whose name must be coupled in this lecture with that of Beaglehole¹³—seemed to turn on the point that there is a great difference between studying the history of a people who have diligently studied it themselves—notably if you are yourself one of that people, or if your understanding of history has the same sort of structure as theirs—and studying the history of a people which has never been studied by anybody at all. To adopt a standpoint of my own, distinct from either the idealism of Munz or the positivism of Davidson, I would make it the crucial difference that in the former case the conceptual field is already thickly populated with paradigms—authoritative formulations which order the understanding of history and form part of the history they order—and that in the latter case it is not. One is tempted to say that a historical *tabula rasa* would have the charm of untrodden snow, but in practice we have all been trained overwhelmingly in the reformulation of paradigms, and the attraction of the thickly populated field usually proves irresistible. And a methodology heavily reliant on the notion of paradigms impels one to say that two such fields as I have described certainly cannot be studied simultaneously, as if doing so formed a single historiographical operation, because the mental

¹³ Peter Munz, “The Purity of Historical Method,” *New Zealand Journal of History* 5, no. 1 (1971): 1–17; J. W. Davidson, “History: Art or Game?” *New Zealand Journal of History* 5, no. 2 (1971): 115–20. J. W. Davidson died suddenly in April 1973.

actions involved where paradigms are numerous and crowd upon your attention are too far removed from those required where you have constantly to be providing them for yourself.

The Irish historiographical tradition seems to have reached, in the works of Conor Cruise O'Brien, Owen Dudley Edwards, and many others, a point of maturity where it has been emancipated from, by recognizing, its own compulsions. In a recent tripartite volume on *Celtic Nationalism*, Edwards wrote a brilliant piece of history; the Welsh and Scottish contributions, in comparison, were still in the nature of manifestos.¹⁴ Irish historiography has to deal with a theme common in the annals of romantic and revolutionary nationalism: how a collection of premodern cultures were violently transformed—I am anxious to avoid the word “modernization” wherever possible—by an alien power acting on them from without, and how the emerging collectivity discovered the conceptual, political, and social means to take charge of the process of its own transformation. That seems to comply with the modern definition of “revolution,” and the fact that it issued in the foundation of a stolid petty-bourgeois society need not deter us; most revolutions end that way. The history of this process is now highly available, and Irish scholarship has passed, with characteristic delight, from the making of myths to the study of the making of myths and (God help us) the men who made them. But it remains true, of course, that Irish history is to an inordinate degree the history of responses to England, while English historians writing of Ireland maintain—as I suppose they always will—the traditional tone of mild wonder that such things should be going on in their otherwise orderly universe. The obvious first step, pedagogically speaking, in passing from “English” to “British” history would be to make sure that the student read as much of Irish as he did of English historiography, and read them concurrently. A twofold consciousness is part of the equipment we all need; less in order to repent of the sins of our ethnic ancestors than to recognize that things happen in different places at the same time.

The Scottish mode of historical consciousness is of a less concentrated complexity, but for that reason harder to describe. Scottish universities usually maintain departments of Scottish history alongside departments of history in some more general sense, and I understand that this has on the whole proved counterproductive; the emphasis has fallen too much on the prevention of poaching and too little on the development of one's own preserves.¹⁵ Behind this

¹⁴ *Celtic Nationalism* (n. 9 above).

¹⁵ A massive exception is formed by the work of Gordon Donaldson, professor of Scottish history in the University of Edinburgh (see his *The Scottish Reformation*

allegedly unfortunate dichotomy, a sharp distinction between Unionism and nationalism has also been at work; but, what is of more concern to our theme, behind this again can be discerned a Scottish opinion, visible at least as far back as the beginnings of sixteenth-century Protestantism, that the future of the northern kingdom lay less in independence and any relation with either the Celtic or the European world, than in a closer integration with the Anglian chain of societies, for which the term "Britain" even then seemed appropriate. It is true, then, as English writers exasperatedly maintain, that "Britain" is a Scots invention, a piece of pluralist semantics designed to assure that the integration of "England" and "Scotland" should be an *Ausgleich* and not an *Anschluss*. David Hume and other great men of eighteenth-century Edinburgh, who insisted on describing themselves as "North Britons," meant by that term to assert that they were not Englishmen, and that even Englishmen were now British. It is the case, however, that Scottish culture, even at the peak it reached in their time, was not fully able to maintain its autonomy.¹⁶

But to compare these instances is to realize that Scottish national and historical consciousness remains one in which the choices of identity are open, probably because they cannot be resolved. Irish history presents the case of an agony, a classic identity crisis capable of solution only by the death of the divided self and its rebirth in a new, exclusive, and revolutionary form. By comparison, Scottish history has been, and may remain, a mere matter of choice, in which the acceptance of anglicization, the insistence on the concept of Britain, Lowlands localism, and Gaelic romanticism, remain equally viable options and the problem is to reconcile one's sense of identity with one's awareness of so open-ended a structure of choice. I offer this distinction less in order to predict that a revolutionary nationalist solution is improbable—though one senses that there is some deep level on which Yeats was not spurious and MacDiarmid is—than in order to establish a hypothesis of some importance to my theme. This is that there is an important difference—important certainly to ourselves—between a romantic and a tangential identity. In the first of these the subject's crisis is so profound that he must resolve it by recreating his self; in the second, where irony suffices and need not become tragedy, the subject moves eclectically between avenues of possible self-determination and counts it his freedom that he can, since he must,

[Cambridge, 1960], *Scotland: James V to James VII* [Edinburgh, 1965], and other writings).

¹⁶ David Daiches, *The Paradox of Scottish Culture* (London, 1964).

continue to do so. He is given several roles to play and sets out to play them; and he defines the culture, even the nation, to which he belongs as possessing the same tangential identity as himself, and as solving the same problems in the same way. To say this, of course, is not to command success, but it is to exert the freedom to set one's own goals.

The second point we have reached is that one possible presentation of "British history" would emphasize its consisting of the three modes of historical consciousness I have defined. I will assume for simplicity's sake, what may not in fact be true, that there are no more than these three, and that Welshmen, Orangemen, and Orkney-men have not developed complex historiographical traditions of their own. One highly sensible way of beginning to learn some "British history" would be to familiarize oneself with all three; by which is not meant that anyone can achieve an equal degree of empathy with all of them, or that there might exist some ideal synthesis of them all, through which "British history" might be perceived and experienced as a whole. To desire such a synthesis would mean that one had become a "British" nationalist, which I think no one ever has, ever will, or ever should. The fact is that these three traditions make different demands, and arise out of the making of different demands, on the subject's sense of identity, so that no one individual can immediately share the experiences which have called all three into being. English historiography down to the present—though we may be at the beginnings of change here—rests upon a sense of identity so secure as to be unreflective and almost unconscious; Irish historiography affirms and records a romantic crisis of identity, and Scottish a tangential identity consisting in a continuous movement between alternative roles.

Now this may be the reason why Scottish historiography is on the whole the least developed of the three, and why Scottish scholars have tended to remove themselves to English universities, leaving the study of Scottish history to those who have happened to be interested.¹⁷ But it must be clear that, in endeavoring to articulate the case for a pluralist and multicultural perception of British history, I have been outlining an attitude which one would virtually need a tangential sense of identity to adopt, since both ethnocentrism and nationalism entail a high degree of commitment to a single and unitary point of view. Where the Scots have failed—after a glorious start in the eighteenth century—it may seem that I am

¹⁷ For the record of complaints on this point, see H. J. Hanham, *Scottish Nationalism* (London, 1969).

arguing that other tangential cultures must take up the challenge; and though I would be suspicious of myself if I thought I were sounding any kind of patriotic trumpet, the thought has something to do with the location of a gathering of New Zealand historians within the context of another phase of "British history," about which I will say something in conclusion.

The expansion of Anglo-Norman—now English—control to nearly all parts of the Atlantic archipelago was completed by the first half of the eighteenth century. Scottish Gaelic society was effectively subdued, though it was not to be physically extinguished until the Highland Clearances of 100 years later; and Ireland, ceasing to be a mere Anglo-Celtic frontier zone, was in an early phase of that social transformation which was to produce a revolutionary politics after 200 years. The dominant English society was now embarking on two related enterprises beyond the confines of the archipelago, the successful combination of which was to break up only in our own times. These two were the exertion of a real if limited military dominance in the power relations of the continent of Europe, and a related commercial expansion beyond the oceans into North America and Southern Asia. The Parliamentary Union of 1707—the creation of "Britain" as a political entity—came about, it was and is generally agreed, because these were the only terms on which the Scottish kingdom could secure even a secondary role in the two enterprises, and because the English were prepared to let the Scots inscribe "Britain" at the head of the deed of partnership if they really wanted to. The third of the Three Kingdoms obtained no such partnership—to the discontent, be it said, of that natural imperialist Arthur Griffith in the twentieth century.

Transatlantic expansion leads to the establishment of a number of colonies of settlement. As a rule one thinks of these, as they appear to have thought of themselves, as "English," but there is a Scots-Irish immigration and a Highland Scottish immigration, and one may both speculate on the exact ethnic and cultural makeup of the eighteenth-century Americans and wonder what the coasts of the North Atlantic world might have looked like had African labor not been readily available for the American plantations. But the predominance of English political and cultural forms creates that loose circle of Anglo-Atlantic societies of which I spoke in connection with the work of J. R. Pole. This we saw as disrupted by the civil war which led to American independence, with the beginnings of Anglo-Canadian history as a secondary consequence; while the history of other segments reaches a linked series of culminations with the Scottish Enlightenment—clearly a major event in the history of

social consciousness—the upheavals in Irish history from the Volunteer movement of 1780, through the Rebellion of 1798 and the Union of 1801, and in England the beginnings of a political transformation half furthered and half frustrated by the resumption, on a really massive scale, of British involvement in the wars of Europe and the pursuit of maritime power in Asia.

From about this time—perhaps the British decision to abandon claims to the Ohio country in 1783 would do as a date¹⁸—one has to begin ceasing to regard the history of the United States as part of “British history,” to the extent to which that culture passes out of the archipelagic and Atlantic world into a continental orbit of its own. The Imperial Crown, one remembers, did not like frontiers of settlement. Nevertheless, among the diversity of peoples whose history makes up “British history,” a place must be kept for the vanished people—those million or so Britons from the larger island who emigrated to the United States rather than the British colonies and were so effortlessly absorbed, leaving scarcely a hyphen to mark their passage.¹⁹ The complex of colonies known as Canada, however, remained, to involve the Crown in relationships with settler communities and so to provide “British history” with a continuing *outrémer* in which the conflict of cultures and the creation of new subcultures went on as it had been shaped in the archipelago proper. I have quite recent memories—too recent, it might very well be said—of the intellectual excitement of reading some Canadian history and realizing that, in addition to the major theme of *l’histoire québécoise*, I was studying both a North American society which had taken a turn of its own—having been settled partly by Americans excluded by the War of the Revolution, partly by immigrant groups who cared little which side of the 49th parallel they were on—and a British society in which the pluralisms of the archipelago are still vividly reflected, so that even today it may be desirable in parts of Ontario and the Maritimes to know who is Loyalist, who is Orange, who is Catholic, and who is Highland.

From Canada one instinctively turns—though it is unclear how far this is a natural transition—to those other nineteenth-century colonies of settlement which were established outside the zone of archipelagic-Atlantic expansion, for the most part in the Southern Hemisphere. Of these, two have become established as viable na-

¹⁸ For the Canadian perspective on this, see, e.g., Kenneth McNaught, *Pelican History of Canada* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1969), pp. 55–56, 68–69.

¹⁹ Rowland T. Berthoff, *British Immigrants in Industrial America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1953). Cf. A. P. Thornton, *The Habit of Authority* (London, 1966), pp. 157–59.

tional societies; a third and a fourth seem doomed to absorption, one way or another, by the revolutionary nationalisms of Africa—of which Afrikanerdom is one—and a fifth, that of the Kenya highlands, seems to be disappearing altogether. “British history” now takes on a global dimension, constituted by the establishment of the societies I have mentioned, by the partial Anglicization of non-European societies in the Caribbean, Africa, Southern Asia, and Oceania, and by a third phenomenon which our projection must include: the catastrophic Irish diaspora of the mid-nineteenth century, which changed the character of the archipelago, the United States, most overseas British societies, and last but not least, the Catholic church in many of the areas of nineteenth-century settlement. The Irish now became a people visible on a world stage, and Arthur Griffith, employing the Central European distinction between “historical” and “nonhistorical” peoples, contended that they were entitled to share empire with the British as the Hungarians shared it with the Austro-Germans.²⁰ His thought was less nonsensical than it was malignant.

On the global as on the archipelagic and Atlantic stages, then, we may continue our projection of “British history” as the conflict between, and creation of, societies and cultures which it has been since the beginning. I have just been speaking of societies most of which were episodically linked by what has been called *The Commonwealth Experience*.²¹ This remains one important determinant of their history; but we know that this term denotes only a part of their shared inheritance and does comparatively little to explain the internal development of each one of them. That is to say, it is possible to write the history of New Zealand or Australia, as it is that of England, with a minimum of reference to “the Commonwealth experience” and with none at all to the internal development of any other “British” society, as it is remembered and reassessed by the society whose history it is. These are societies which, by and large, do not study one another’s history; each of them studies its own, after which it studies English history, Western European history, American history, and the history of such other civilizations as it may be persuaded matter to it. The same pattern, I was once told by a Puerto Rican historian, obtains among the Hispanic societies of the Caribbean and Central America; each studies its own history and Spanish history but not the history of its neighbors. It is easy to see how a derivative society may fall into this highly insular mode of

²⁰ Arthur Griffith, *The Resurrection of Hungary* (Dublin, 1904).

²¹ Nicholas Mansergh, *The Commonwealth Experience* (London, 1969).

treating its own derivation; I have heard it complained that there are those at the University of Singapore who rely for an understanding of both Chinese and Malay civilization on a somewhat excessive concentration upon Singaporean history. We are back at the problem that history is both a mode of understanding oneself and a mode of understanding others. We can all agree that a society must constantly reevaluate its own history, as part of its own self-image, and that it must study the history of others, partly as a means of understanding its own place in the world. The problem is that of the best strategy for reversing the perspective.

I know no better way of expressing my antipathy to the proposition that "British history" should consist of each society's understanding of its own history first and English history second than to say that it reminds me of the "fragment thesis" of Hartz's *The Founding of New Societies*.²² According to this—if I understand it correctly—each "new" (he means derivative) "society" is definable as a fragment of an older one; an argument whose essential unsatisfactoriness is discoverable as soon as we try to define the components of each "fragment" and state how they got broken off from the original monolith. We now learn that neither "fragment" nor "monolith" can be satisfactorily defined by setting them in that relation to each other, and that the whole enterprise was misconceived and has now miscarried. However, it is very easy for a derivative society to fall into precisely this erroneous manner of defining itself; and possibly Hartz is merely saying that this is what they do. I am contending that for such a society to pursue, first, its own history in isolation and, second, a version of "British history" which is in reality an exclusive presentation of English history, is to repeat the error of "fragment" and "monolith"; and I have tried to present a projection of "British history"—for lack of a better word, since it necessarily includes Irish—which treats our derivation by placing it in a context of inherent diversity, replacing the image of a monolithic "parent society" with that of an expanding zone of cultural conflict and creation. This presentation has room in it for the development of several types of historical consciousness, and I have stressed this because I believe it to be peculiarly suited to the historiographical needs of societies possessing what I described as the tangential sense of identity. That is, it is not a task for those concerned to continue the main traditions of English or Irish historiography, but the rest of us—and I am thinking from the banks of the Mississippi and Chesapeake Bay as well as from those of the

²² Louis Hartz, ed., *The Founding of New Societies* (New York, 1964).

Waimakariri²³—are, I believe, involved in the perspective I have been trying to focus. The British cultural star cluster is at present in a highly dispersed condition, various parts of it feeling the attraction of adjacent galaxies; the central giant has cooled, shrunk, and moved away, and the inhabitants of its crust seem more than ever disposed to deny that the rest of us ever existed. Since it no longer emits those radiations we felt bound to convert into paradigms, we are free and indeed necessitated to construct cosmologies of our own. But the presentation of history I have been advocating, while post-Commonwealth and extra-European, is also highly anti-finationalist: I do not propose that each star should consider itself the center even of its own universe—though this is within limits a legitimate perspective—so much as that it should seek new and interesting ways of defining its tangential identity by remapping the various systems within which it moves. John Beaglehole was a historian of cartography, which he knew as a singularly full human experience, and I have tried to salute him by an exercise in mapping the historical consciousness.

²³ American readers may need to be informed that the Waimakariri, one of the four great rivers of the Canterbury Plains, runs just north of Christchurch, where this lecture was delivered.