

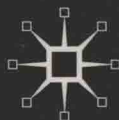
SHAKESPEARE, SPENSER AND THE MATTER OF BRITAIN

Andrew Hadfield



EARLY MODERN LITERATURE IN HISTORY

General Editors: Cedric C. Brown and Andrew Hadfield



Shakespeare, Spenser and the Matter of Britain

Andrew Hadfield

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For Robert and Angela Welch

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Introduction: English Literature and Anglicised Britain

The issue of a union of the four nations that constitute Britain and the imminent prospect of becoming British assumed an especial urgency for English writers in the 1590s. There had been plans to unite Britain earlier in the century, notably an attempt made during the brief, radical and unstable reign of Edward VI in the wake of the Anglo-Scots peace treaty signed on 10 June 1551.¹ Wales had been annexed to England through the Act of Union of 1536, and Henry VIII had assumed the title of king of Ireland, five years later, in June 1541, so that the English crown had ruled over a multiple kingdom for half a century in the last decade of Elizabeth's reign.² Each Act had paved the way for the attempt to spread English law and the administrative and military machines that were designed to make it function to each country. Both nations were to be transformed into obedient and docile territories, loyal to the English monarchy. This did not mean that they necessarily had to become English in every way, but exactly how the differences of Irish and Welsh society were to be accommodated was not an easy or obvious question to answer.

Wales was incorporated into England, through the implementation of English law, so that Wales was divided up into shires and was administered by elected Members of Parliament and appointed justices of the Peace, as was England.³ Wales all too often disappeared as a separate entity. In William Camden's *Britannia* (1586), the title page makes clear that the work will analyse the ancient customs and habits of the 'Angliae, Scotiae, and Hiberniae', but there is no mention of the 'Cambriae', another people who inhabited ancient Britain.⁴ Similarly, Raphael Holinshed entitled his major historical project, *The Chronicles of England, Scotlande, and Irelande* (1577, 1587). There is no mention of Wales. This geographical sleight of hand has led

historians to underestimate the resistance of many Welsh to English rule and has precipitated the myth that Ireland was England's first colony, a statement that is true only if colonised territories have to be overseas.⁵

If Wales proved to be almost invisible to contemporaries and later historians of the period, Ireland was all too visible throughout the sixteenth century, providing such stubborn resistance to English attempts to impose law and order that it was a militarised zone for much of the century characterised by war rather than peace.⁶ In the 1590s the revolt of Hugh O'Neill, which rapidly developed into the Nine Years War (1594–1603), provided the most serious threat to the English crown that it had experienced since the Wars of the Roses and made the Tudors' boast that they had brought stability after a bloody civil war seem somewhat hollow.⁷ The general fear was that the triumph of the Catholic Irish, aided by Spanish and papal forces, would prove decisive in the religious conflict being fought out in Europe, leading to the destruction of Protestantism.⁸ It is hardly surprising that Ireland featured more prominently in an English consciousness than Wales did, even less so if one bears in mind the vast numbers of colonists, civil servants and soldiers who had settled there throughout the century, attracted by the chance of careers, land and status unobtainable in England.⁹ This group became known as the 'New' English to distinguish them from the 'Old' English who had settled in Ireland in the wake of the Norman invasion of the twelfth century.¹⁰ English identity was transformed and mutated in Ireland in a manner which clearly complicated any pious hope of making Ireland English.¹¹

The unification of Britain – or the British Isles, Ireland's place within the geographical unit being problematic, although the *de facto* suzerainty of the English crown tended to settle any possible ambiguity – only required the co-operation or acquiescence, whether forced or not, of Scotland.¹² The problem was that British unification was most likely to occur through the assumption of the English throne by the Scottish king, James VI. Whereas Wales and Ireland had been conquered and assimilated by the English crown, the English did not conquer Scotland with military force, as many English kings had attempted to do with mixed success throughout the Middle Ages. Instead, they were forced to grant the English throne to an alien ruler, establishing an importantly different power relationship between Scotland and the rest of Britain.¹³ It is hardly surprising that many English writers expressed considerable anxiety at this prospect even though James's keen desire to assume the English throne and so be the first king of Britain was by no means a

foregone conclusion even in the months immediately preceding Elizabeth's demise.¹⁴

When James did assume the English throne he tried to enforce a constitutional union of Britain in his first parliament, but found that he did not have the power to enforce his prerogative and eradicate centuries of hostility and mutual suspicion, let alone establish a workable means of uniting Scottish and English legal and political traditions.¹⁵ A series of delaying tactics in the House of Commons made sure that the bill foundered and other issues took precedence despite the king's feeling that the union was the key issue in the parliament.¹⁶ James had to settle for the title of King of Britain, a formula he used even though it had no legally binding significance.

A number of writers on either side of the border debated the question of James's attempted union in a series of pamphlets and speeches.¹⁷ Most wrote in favour of the union. Robert Pont argued that James's plan would enlarge the empire of the king in uniting Britain and soon it would be impossible to tell Scots and English apart because there would only be Britons.¹⁸ John Russell employed an analogy with the union of the houses of York and Lancaster after the Wars of the Roses to argue that Britain would replace England and Scotland just as the Tudors had united and consigned to history the warring dynastic factions within England.¹⁹ However, Sir Henry Spelman argued that the effects of the union would be a disaster. The Scots would consume the greater part of England's wealth, preventing the proposed eradication of poverty south of the border; without the discipline of monarchical rule they would return to their old barbarous ways; and the fiery Scots preachers would transform the churches and universities into hot beds of dangerous radicalism.²⁰

Spelman's hope that there should be an allegiance between James's Scottish and English kingdoms, rather than a fully incorporated union, held sway with the House of Commons, and Britain remained an ideal rather than a real form. In the final analysis too many influential people were afraid that a proper union would bring with it too many disadvantages and relatively few advantages. The hostility directed towards James's court after 1603, his cultivation of favourites and the perceived advantages distributed to the entourage who had followed him from Scotland indicate that the English were not yet ready to consider the possibility of a British union.²¹

Interestingly enough, the range of opinions and the doubts about union expressed at the time have been reproduced in the arguments of later historians since the advent of the New British History which is

usually dated back to J. G. A. Pocock's groundbreaking article, 'British History: a Plea for a New Subject', published in 1975.²² Pocock evidently felt uneasy that British history would have to tell the story of an apparently inevitable English triumph and the British Isles becoming socially and culturally Anglicised and politically Anglocentric from the Renaissance onwards. His article argued that there was a need to balance a pluralistic approach with the reality that 'the history of an increasing English domination is remarkably difficult to write in other than English terms'.²³ Opponents have turned Pocock's attempt to reconcile such obviously contradictory intellectual dynamics into an admission of the inevitable failure of the project, arguing that British history can never really be anything other than English history under a new name and new guise.²⁴ Others have doubted the wisdom of studying a subject which, they claim, always existed anyway and has simply come into being to promote the work of those unable to see that the British Empire doesn't really need any new clothes.²⁵

I would suggest that it is hard to resist the notion of Britain and the British context not because there is anything inevitable, desirable or good about such a proposed political union or geographical reality, but because the notion of Britain loomed so large in the horizons and imaginations of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers. On the one hand there was a clear understanding that the current peoples of the British Isles had developed from the peoples who had inhabited ancient Britain: the Britons, Scots, Picts, Irish and English, a comprehension made explicit in the illustrations to Thomas Harriot's *A Brieve and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* (1588, 1590) (see ch. 4). This historical sense was coupled with an understanding that the union of a Protestant Britain would be desirable as a means of combating the Catholic empire of Spain, which appeared unstoppable in the 1590s.²⁶ On the other hand, English writers in particular were riddled with anxiety about what such a union might mean and how it might transform their status as Englishmen. Edmund Spenser and Michael Drayton clearly expressed their doubts in major works of non-dramatic poetry (see chs 7 and 8), the former causing a significant political scandal, the latter confirming his self-image as a marginalised poet outside the circle of court writers. The more protean William Shakespeare wrote a whole series of plays devoted to the problem of Britain: *Henry V*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, *Cymbeline*, as well as others that can be read as allegorical representations of the historical issues spawned by the proposed union, such as *Hamlet* (ch. 10). But if Shakespeare appears less keen to adopt an obvious position – as one might expect to be the case with a dramatist

required to produce topical and popular plays rather than works which present coherent arguments – it is also evident that his plays express similar forms of anxiety generated by the prospect of a united Britain.

Nevertheless, it should not be assumed that an English desire to unite the four countries of Britain was constant. Nor should we construct a teleological narrative that sees the eventual – partial – union of 1603 as an inevitable consequence of what went before.²⁷ The relationship between England and the other three British nations assumed separate dynamics, as did the relationship between all four countries and the notion of a united Britain.²⁸ England was intermittently at war with Scotland throughout the sixteenth century. The most spectacular military engagement was the decisive Battle of Flodden in 1513, after Scotland had supported France against Henry VIII's claim to the French crown. This resulted in the death of King James V and the slaughter of thousands of Scottish troops.²⁹ More frequently, conflict was localised, limited to border raids while irritable diplomatic negotiations over rights and allegiances took place. However, when Elizabeth succeeded her elder sister, Mary, as queen of England on 17 November 1558, Mary Stuart claimed the English throne for herself, as the great granddaughter of Henry VII. This inaugurated an especially tense and uneasy period in Anglo-Scottish relations, although Mary's claim was rendered ineffectual because of the bitter religious conflict which made her rule of her native kingdom impossible after she returned to Scotland in 1561 when her first husband, Francis II, king of France, died. Mary was eventually forced to seek sanctuary in England after the murder of her second husband, Lord Darnley, crossing the border in May 1568.³⁰ Mary remained under house arrest for the rest of her life, her presence triggering a series of crises – possibly as much fabricated or exaggerated as real – before she was executed in February 1587, as a result of the discovery of the Babington Plot, a desperate attempt to overthrow Elizabeth and replace her with Mary as a Catholic sovereign, which the Elizabethan spymaster Sir Francis Walsingham easily tracked and exposed.³¹

However, the execution of Mary did not substantially transform how many English writers, Spenser and Shakespeare among them, appeared to feel about Scotland (see chs 4, 9, 10). After Mary's death, her son, James VI, became one of the most likely candidates for the English throne, given that Elizabeth would not name a successor and was clearly beyond the age of reproduction, her last chance of marriage and motherhood having come to an end with the failure of the Alençon match in the early 1580s.³² James was an unknown quantity, but it was assumed by many that he might well possess a number of the obvious

disadvantages of his mother. In any case, there was a significant fear of being ruled by a neighbouring monarch who was likely to bring his own entourage south of the border with him. The Jesuit writer, Robert Parsons, in the most sustained analysis of the succession published in Elizabethan England, noted that, although James had the best claim to the English throne, very few English men and women wanted him to become their king.³³ James was, however, vigorously defended by Peter Wentworth four years later, when he urged the queen to show her hand and ease her subjects' understandable anxiety. Wentworth argued that not only did James have the best claim to the throne via his descent from Margaret, Henry VIII's sister, but also that the union of the two kingdoms would work to everyone's advantage, relieving the anxiety caused by the perpetual friction between English and Scots who would assume an English identity under James's wise and benevolent rule.³⁴

When James did become king many were pleasantly surprised that he was keen to end sectarian conflict and was not the autocrat that his writings had suggested he might be.³⁵ Nevertheless, an opposition did clearly develop, based on a nostalgia for the pristine pastoral Englishness that was now assumed to have existed before it was contaminated by James and his attempt to impose the diverse nature of British identity onto his reluctant new English subjects.³⁶ In short, it is hard to read Anglo-Scottish relations simply in terms of an English desire to dominate, control and Anglicise their immediate neighbours, however potent such feelings may have been for many English writers and thinkers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. For Spenser and Shakespeare, the main writers under discussion here, Scotland loomed large as the main threat to English identity in the 1590s.

Anglo-Irish relations are equally problematic and inconsistent. In terms of a British project it needs to be reiterated that Ireland was, as often as not, considered to be an island next to rather than part of Britain by English historians and observers.³⁷ The relationship between the British Isles and the island of Britain could then – as now – be used as a means of including and excluding different peoples depending on the argument in question.³⁸ Ireland provided stout and dangerous resistance to English attempts to Anglicise and incorporate the island into a homogeneous and governable territory. It would be wrong to assume that the strenuous conquest of Ireland was always part of an ongoing British project, even if at least one writer could refer to Ireland as a 'West England'.³⁹ As many historians have argued, an understanding of the concept of the 'multiple kingdom' will do equally well as an attempt to explain English actions in Ireland.⁴⁰ The desire for control over Ireland

did not necessarily indicate that the British union would be the next step. Ireland was indeed made British, as Nicholas Canny has argued, but this depended on more than simply a preconceived plan dating back to the 1530s and the use of the Arthurian legends to replace England's purported right to Ireland granted by Pope Adrian IV's *Laudabiliter*.⁴¹ Any European monarch could rule over a variety of kingdoms – as many did – without feeling the need to make them all part of a larger unity.

The point to be made is that it would be a mistake to try to subsume Anglo-Irish relations under the umbrella of the British question – precisely the criticism of the new British History made by its detractors.⁴² Equally it would be a mistake to deny that conceptions of Britain and Britishness play a part in the history of the British Isles (denial of which has often led to the complicated and confusing battles over the issue of nomenclature).⁴³ Anglo-Irish history must be conceived alongside the history of Britain and Britishness, not conflated with those notions or collapsed into them.

The case of Wales is also different.⁴⁴ Wales was rendered – relatively – invisible for two reasons. As I have already outlined, Wales was assumed to have been seamlessly absorbed into the expanding territories of its larger and more powerful neighbour.⁴⁵ But it also adopted an apparently more hierarchical position in the political history of Renaissance Britain through the Welsh ancestry of the Tudors. How seriously the Tudors took their Welsh-British roots is a moot point, one fiercely debated at the time, even if its actual impact on public policy and royal behaviour may well have been minimal.⁴⁶ Even so, Henry VII saw fit to name his eldest son Arthur, and clearly there were many living in the British Isles who either believed in – or, perhaps, thought it important to make use of – the Arthurian legends.⁴⁷ Many Welsh intellectuals, priests and courtiers found their way into England and became assimilated.⁴⁸ Some Welshmen, such as the historian William Thomas, had successful careers at court, as did numerous Anglo-Irish magnates.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, the effect of the Welsh origins of the Tudors was the same as the assumption that Wales had been annexed without serious difficulty, the disappearance of Wales and the Welsh from public life. Perhaps this explains why the Welsh are invariably represented as sycophantically loyal to the crown on the London stage: ridiculous creatures who are obsessed with cheese and eager to fight at the slightest provocation, but, at heart, trustworthy and dependable. In contrast, the stage stereotypes of the Scots and Irish represent them as far more threatening and potentially disruptive.⁵⁰