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## **Reconceiving the British Isles: The Literature of the Archipelago**

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## **England Versus English Literature**

To chart the rise of the national in relation to the discipline of English Literature, we first have to date the discipline itself. English Literature – not literature from England, or literature in the English language, but English Literature – developed between the 1810s and the 1910s, lost some validity with World War One, revived somewhat during mid-twentieth century consensus, then was gradually overwhelmed by national factors from the late 1950s. It solidified as a set of methodologies and as *the idea of a canon* of civilizing texts only as it became the cultural expression of a trade empire, enabled by a unifying period which saw the subduing of Jacobite Scotland between the 1740s and 1780s, Jacobinism in the 1790s, Irish nationalism in the 1790s-1800s, and finally France in the 1810s. English Literature, in other words, was a specifically British-imperial body, and it grew with the apparent victory of a Burkean conception of the state between the 1790s and 1810s, one which avoided the French Revolution by pointedly excluding modern ideas of the national. This state coding was globalised after the post-1815 expansion, and followed a period of professionalisation and specialisation of cultural life, a growth in learned societies, and a glut of classic texts produced in cheap editions, adding to the sense of a coherent British canon.

This discipline's paradigmatic successes were often late-romantic models of the legitimacy of inheritance, seen most obviously in the new fame of Jane Austen, and the organicist philosophy of converted anti-revolutionaries such as Wordsworth and Coleridge, often keen to set up a strong canon with Shakespeare at its centre. This anti-Revolutionary period gives English Literature not just a canon but a *canonicity*, a belief in the idea of the organic spread of familiar values, individual sensibility, natural heredity, and therefore validates modes of criticism which are biographical, ahistorical, and often non-textual, which survive all the way through to the T.S. Eliot of 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', to F.R. Leavis's portraits of authorial character, and even to British multiculturalism's obsession with the 'identity' of individual authors.

Anti-revolutionary Britain therefore needed to present as 'national', interests which really coalesced around ancient capital, and within English Literature it inevitably followed the Burkean protocol of assuming that whatever was already most familiar

and authoritative, in this case an increasingly idealised vision of England, had been time-tested and so should draw other bodies towards itself. This led to a massive output of embedding statist literature after 1815, or, as David Punter puts it, ‘the long-drawn-out war with France produced a curious kind of cultural Indian summer’.

Although the understanding of Britain as a set of class interests rather than as a nation-state has always been an undercurrent within this, this critical insight only really re-emerged as a force as the outward ‘organic’ push of empire decayed, most famously in those sections of the New Left which came to prominence in the late 1950s. For the ‘Nairn-Anderson thesis’, where normal nation-state development encouraged the middle class to force an overturning of the constitution, in Britain, capital interests were entrenched by the failure of English revolution, ultimately seen in the settlement of 1688, and so the middle class failed to develop its own ambitions beyond the ambitions of longstanding capital. Where this is really concretised as a state ideology, though, is in the later British unification, and in particular in the contradistinction with revolutionary France. Burke’s *Reflections* argues that the authority of 1688 was based on *heredity* and therefore legitimate, whereas 1789 was a new and violent abrogation which was illegitimate because it opened the state up to *action*. The state then becomes a manager of national action, and *national* challenges, understood in the sense of national civic institutions, came to mean exposing the bond between class and state.

This structural historical point is more significant than the fates of individual writers. So although Robert Crawford has stressed that English Literature was first named as a chair at Edinburgh University in 1762, at this point there wasn’t the global cultural mission or the reinforced state form to justify any such disciplinarity. What concretised English Literature rather was the result of a battle between a vision of the state as an expression of present-tense experience, or as an untouchable principle of heredity claiming *never* to have been the product of any action by any person in any present, a pastness defined precisely by never having been experience, an identity requiring a form of British doublethink which, as Punter puts it, ‘requires continuous and massive efforts of will and repression’. Pushed outside of history, Burkean-British ‘legitimacy’, whether understood in terms of the rights of Hanoverian or Austenian estates or in terms of Romantic and realist literary history, was then

claimed to take the shape of nature itself. Britishness had to be a kind of instinct – as Burke says, ‘incapable of definition, but not impossible to be discerned’ (92).

England, on the other hand, was then pushed into an idealised and frozen space as the prior source of the organic, meaning that as a place and as a nation it was effectively de-activated. From the 1810s, the idea of English Literature as the national literature of England was almost entirely suffocated, leaving England with unusual and semi-permanent problems of definition – so that, although these days Scottish universities do have the germ of a national body of literary study, in England this is almost entirely lacking. However, the devolutionary era brings signs, albeit often misleading and confused, that a national literature could, and indeed should, emerge.

In a sense, for anti-Burkeans and Jacobins during the formative period, this was always the case. The importance of ahistorical heredity in English Literature also forced the *counter*-Burkean nightmare that the authoritative dead, safely outside of history, might once more become active, rising and walking the earth, living and acting in the present like zombies – in the mode we now call the Gothic. The acceptance of *death* as an action, gruesomely visible in the French revolution, was contrasted to a British state culture defined as the lack of action – and this is the source of the famously managerial culture of Health and Safety, or more generally the patrician nature of British welfare provision. The anti-Burkean Mary Wollstonecraft hinted as much about the way Britain avoided exposing death-as-action, noting that for some, hell was already earthly.

Indeed ‘Terror writing’, with its Jacobin and national implications, boomed in the 1790s. Especially after the 1794 Treason Trials, aesthetic ‘terror’ was also often linked to mob action; William Hazlitt even pointed out that the secret attraction of ‘terror writing’ was linked to discontent with a British *ancien regime*.

Even more significantly, the Gothic also flagged up a fear of writing *as writing*, during a time of worry over mass literacy. As early as 1750 Samuel Johnson had expressed anxiety over ‘sensational’ fiction’s effects on inexperienced readers, and by the end of the eighteenth century the fear of mass literacy had been exacerbated by a mechanisation of book production and an increase in the numbers of travelling

libraries. As the Romantic poets turned against the Revolution, they lent their voices to a campaign *against* an excess of decadent and ‘empty’ aesthetic stimulus, seen most clearly in Wordsworth’s *Prelude to Lyrical Ballads* in 1800.

And as Maggie Kilgour has noted, reading was increasingly generally associated with political self-determination. Burke perceived the danger of *writing* in the French Revolutionary attempt to codify human rights in terms of ‘blurred shreds of paper’ which attempted to stand against tradition; the Jacobin is misguided in attempting to rewrite national rules, or to ‘consider his country as nothing but *carte blanche*, upon which he may scribble whatever he pleases’. In direct response, William Godwin’s 1794 Jacobin novel *Caleb Williams* linked literacy to critical access to the world of hereditary power. In this most dangerous year, Godwin is almost suggesting that people themselves can rewrite the rules by which they are governed.

And the political ‘nationalness’ of the Gothic and the neo-Jacobin do spill over into the social discontents of post-Napoleonic England, as in the moment of PB Shelley’s 1819 *The Mask of Anarchy*, which calls for an assembly created by a mass uprising after the ‘slumber’ of the Burkean constitution – imaged by spots of blood. But after 1815 it is the Burkean compact which increasingly wins the day, and in doing so it continues to ‘de-nationalise’, or idealise, England. Writing continued to be a dangerous form of national *action*, and the British defence against mass literacy lasts all the way through empire to New Criticism, whether in TS Eliot’s 1919 ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, or in QD Leavis’s 1932 warnings over mass literacy in *Fiction and the Reading Public*.

It is not surprising then that new crises appear both on constitutional and disciplinary levels when the organic growth which had found outlet in empire again contracts, from the 1950s but seen most clearly in the political isolation of Scotland from 1979, precisely the time which saw Burke *reinvoked* in mainstream British political discourse by radical conservatives. Nor was it a surprise that this was answered, particularly in Scotland’s ‘fiction renaissance’, by a growth of non-Standard dialects used for narration – an ‘illegitimate writing’ belonging to a period which also saw a new critical interest in the Gothic. In the terms of Julia Kristeva, ‘hidden’ voices were

emerging in a writing which failed to correspond to the hereditary bond underwriting both the constitution and the English Literature canon. And just as the dissenters of the 1790s had fled to Edinburgh to hold counter-constitutional conventions, the same process *after* empire led to the Scottish Constitutional Convention of 1988.

The thoroughgoing constitutional criticism which followed was also, just as in the 1790s, fought in small literary-political journals, especially in Edinburgh, where English nationalism was often discussed in a British-constitutional frame. In Spring 1977 *New Edinburgh Review* ran an 'English Nation' number, in which Tom Nairn's essay used as its epigram Chesterton's 'The Secret People'. The 'secret people' trope, once a *bona fide* marker of an English nationality sunk under a British state, had by the time the national really was threatening, become a general and confused statement of victimhood, and by the early 2000s had been mangled by, amongst others, Martin Bell after his victory over Neil Hamilton, Iain Duncan-Smith on behalf of farmers facing foot-and-mouth disease, and even, by the Scottish Tory MP James Gray to bemoan the 'West Lothian Question'. Meanwhile, where were the English who were really pushing to emerge from Britain, and where was their national literature?

In fact the more recent claims of enforced secrecy, of dare-not-speak-its-name England, have in large part been a construct of British neoliberalism, frequently presenting England in the very terms of the British state form in order to complain that nothing can be done about it (this, for example, is the *modus operandi* of UKIP, as well as innumerable *Daily Telegraph* column writers). This makes things easy for any managerial British government, which can then describe England in ethnic, rather than civic terms, and so smother the national lived-experience of Englishness. And this is also the default position of the bulk of the British press, which is anti-national, anti-action, and also peculiarly anti-English, indicating the scale of the struggle a new literature of England faces. Since devolution, state-sympathetic media and state-owned media have worked hard to demonise the national (as in, for example, *The Guardian's* obsession with the BNP). The 'state nationalism' which constitutes the British managerial response can even, as Tom Nairn has described, amount to a 'soft totalitarianism', rendering action impossible *in perpetuity*. In this Nairn of course follows Orwell, whose take on the British state was so telling as to have turned into a

cliché in the mid-2000s. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* describes a Burkean British state which has undergone a kind of communist-consensualist modernisation, closely resembling surveillance-saturated Britain. Similar interests are at work (as Orwell indeed intuited in this novel) when the terms ‘nation’ and ‘Britain’ are linked on prime-time TV, most pointedly in the retrograde tax known as the National Lottery; and in the same way, individual writers are studied in neo-racial terms via a British idea of multiculturalism which was largely accepted within English Literature.

In everyday experience, of course, England dares speak its name quite often, and lived-experience has tremendous power. Moreover, Britain as management has now been exposed irreparably, less by minor scandals than by the failure of public opinion to prevent war on Iraq, and by the creation of a debt bubble struggling to bind people to the state in a post-industrial and largely post-imperial era.

In short, English Literature is over, because the state-form which enabled its disciplinary conditions is over. If the discipline suffered body blows with the imperial disaster of World War One, it was further embattled by the breakdown in consensus in the late 1950s which gave us the Suez crisis, and the nation/ state disconnect was made obvious in the early 1980s, leading to the gradual understanding that devolution is not simply another controllable managerial process, neither in ‘devolved London’ *nor* in devolved Scotland. The organic English Literature of idealised, canonical England has simply run out of new spaces to which to spread.

Although this is sometimes presented in dystopian terms, terms which of course properly belong to the British *state*, this semi-formed literary Englishness signals a tremendously optimistic moment, opening up the possibility of a national culture which can be touched, reached, and exposed to dialectical negotiation. The fact that the form of this England and its culture is as yet unknown may at first appear frightening, until we recognise this fear as a Burkean addiction to the organic, and to an ahistorical authority which ensures that *no-one* takes part.

Of course this does leave a nomenclature problem – what would we *call* a post-British national literature of England, especially if we want to register that an epistemological break has taken place? This argument has yet to be had in university departments up

and down the country, but whatever the answer, it should be sought in critical method, rather than by simply adducing more individuals into a pre-existing ghost of English Literature, whether or not this goes under the misleading name of multiculturalism. It will be a question of gradually feeling out methods to replace those ideas of immanence and heredity. It will be more textual as well as more historically contextual; it will look at how specific linguistic figures can be historicised, and at the effect that literary language actually has in the world, as well as the systematic powers behind them; it will have a grown-up sociolinguistic outlook that neither fudges the distinction between literature and language in the name of its subject nor forgets that the authority of dialects is relative rather than absolute; it will not be Gallophobic or Europhobic; it will be better placed for comparativism since it understands better what it is; it will be less reliant on a re-heated concept of 'race'; and it will take its place more confidently, and less repressedly, within the world of literary networks.

### **Further Reading**

Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (London: Penguin, 1982 (1790))

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Michael Gardiner, *England Versus English Literature*

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