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For Euan, Orla, and Luke—members of the next English generation

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Introduction

England as an Imagined Community—Myths, Ideas, and Politics

INTRODUCTION

Whether the English have begun to develop a stronger sense of their own national identity, and what might be the wider political ramifications of such a trend, are questions that have been posed with ever greater frequency and urgency in recent years. Even within mainstream political debate, where national and constitutional questions are typically seen as secondary to economic and social issues, they have become more familiar and pressing. Yet, despite their increasingly ubiquitous character, and the volume of evidence and research which have been compiled about English nationhood, this remains a subject which is usually skirted rather than directly engaged, and is mainly confined to the margins of political analysis. There are still only a few academic books devoted to this question, and English national identity has been studied much less extensively than its Scottish and Welsh counterparts.¹

There are several reasons for this reticence. It may in part be a reflection of the difficulty which liberal thinking and commentary has with English nationhood, a subject on which I reflect throughout this volume. For many commentators, Englishness is irretrievably tainted by its regressive, conservative, and ethnically charged character. The prospect of a significant shift in attitudes away from familiar forms of Britishness and towards an avowed sense of Englishness is not welcomed in some quarters. A further reason for the relative lack of academic engagement with this issue, among political scientists in particular, arises from an unease with issues and affiliations that are rooted in identity, rather than individual or collective interest. This is supplemented by a tendency to consider 'the English question' as a narrow matter of constitutional policy, rather than a theme that connects with broader shifts in the nature of collective identity and contemporary forms of belonging. It may also stem from some of the difficulties associated with the appraisal of trends that are still, as we shall see, significantly

disputed. Developing a balanced and proportionate assessment of shifts in mass sentiments when it comes to nationhood is a difficult enterprise, and is made all the harder by the emergence of a number of competing, polemical interpretations of the nature and extent of Englishness. Put simply, these tend either to exaggerate the extent to which a sense of nationalism has spread among the English or radically understate the extent and character of recent shifts.

A related fault of these, and other familiar, judgements about Englishness is that they treat its political dimensions in a reductive and simplistic fashion. Many assume that an upsurge in Englishness reflects a rightward shift among the electorate. Other commentators, as we shall see, regard the most likely cause of the reassertion of English identity as the result of a backlash against the asymmetrical character of the model of devolution introduced by the first Blair government after 1997. Neither of these contentions is borne out by the available evidence, I will suggest. In their place, I explore a rather different interpretive conclusion—that the language and sentiments associated with resurgent ideas of Englishness have a more complex set of causes than devolution itself, and have afforded considerable opportunities for those seeking to promote a variety of political agendas and arguments. These include an emerging discourse of anti-system populism, as well as an embryonic attempt to recast England in a self-consciously multicultural vein.

These are not the only perspectives that appeals to English nationhood have bolstered. I draw attention as well to a new alignment between several long-established ideological traditions within British politics and the language associated with a self-consciously English lineage, and highlight the continuing impact of embedded forms of conservative and liberal thought. I also place emphasis on the need to disentangle some of the main interpretations of Englishness from the phenomena they seek to explain, suggesting that this kind of critical exercise is a precondition for establishing a more proportionate and balanced overview of national sentiment in this case. Overall, I give more weight to political considerations and traditions than do many other accounts of Englishness, the majority of which presume that it is essentially cultural, and not political, in character. But I also supplement the conventional manner in which the politics of Englishness has been explored by observing the various cultural arenas and sources from which a renaissance of English national sentiment has emerged.

The final chapters of the book turn to questions of policy, representation, and normative principle as I consider how the main political parties have, gradually and reluctantly, come to recognize that the consent of the English for the constitutional arrangements and forms of governance under which they live can no longer be taken for granted. And I explore the emergence of new

kinds of democratic principle in British politics on the back of these shifts in national consciousness.

The abiding aims of this volume are twofold. First, I seek to reveal the limited and partisan manner in which the question of Englishness has been considered in academic terms and public discourse. And I set out, in contrast, to bring to bear insights and ideas generated by work that has emerged from various disciplinary backgrounds. While not all of these studies can be neatly or easily combined, I aim to offer a judgement about the political dimensions of Englishness which represents a synthetic overview of the various kinds of research which have been conducted into it. This is offered in counterpoint to the unduly narrow and partisan views that tend to dominate debates in this area. More generally, my reliance upon insights and ideas generated by sociologists and social psychologists, as well as political scientists and policy analysts, stems from a commitment to the idea that the multi-faceted dimensions of English national identity, and the different kinds of political effect they have had, cannot be captured by a single theory or discipline. Each of these fields of study has brought insight to different aspects of Englishness, and its relations with contemporary politics.²

My second, related ambition is to reach beyond the specialist communities of scholarship, campaigning, and punditry which have grown up around this issue, and highlight the various ways in which the English question, broadly conceived, illuminates aspects of British politics and government that have been overlooked or neglected. This approach generates a better appreciation of the gradual waning of some of the leading orthodoxies about British government, and the wider national forms of thinking in which they are encased. But it also suggests that some of the major traditions of thinking associated with modern British politics retain considerable power and resonance, and have been renewed, as much as challenged, by the revival of the English question. Engaging with this, and indeed other, national questions in the UK, is to appreciate a challenging instance of a broader phenomenon which the academic study of British politics has yet to grasp fully: the increasing importance of the dynamics of identity and culture as sources of political allegiance, sentiment, and thought, and the challenges these pose for a party system that still reflects the social structure and cultural assumptions that emerged out of the industrial revolution.

In this introductory chapter I review some of the well-worn caricatures with which Englishness is still encrusted. These reflect the continuing influence of some of the ideas about national character which historian Peter Mandler has identified as influential from the late eighteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries.³ I then proceed to examine the widely held proposition that the prevalence of a familiar stock of national folk mythologies and nostalgic references in the

English cultural imagination reflects a form of nationality that is regressive and pre-modern in kind. I suggest, in contrast, that these be seen as important materials which have been appropriated in different ways by some of the main rival characterizations of the English nation. Towards the end of this chapter, I explore the rationale informing my own approach to the vexed issue of conceptual terminology.

In Chapter 1 I consider questions of chronology and causation. Specifically, I cast doubt upon the guiding assumption of political scientists and commentators that devolution has been the main source and cause of a revival of Englishness. Instead, I draw attention to a number of different developments and dynamics which coalesced during the 1990s, triggering a sustained bout of soul-searching in public life, sections of the academy, and the political world, about the future and viability of the UK. One of the main outcrops from this set of debates was a growing focus upon the merits and nature of Englishness, at both elite and popular levels.

I focus in Chapter 2 upon the three main broad perspectives that have come to dominate the field of interpretation in relation to English national identity. The leading expressions of these are set out and critically evaluated, and the limitations of their guiding assumptions stressed. I draw particular attention to their collective unwillingness to consider the different, competing ways in which Englishness is expressed in political terms. In Chapter 3, I turn to consider the mass of available evidence contained in many different polls and other recent qualitative studies which have shed light upon the development and character of this form of nationality. Sifting the many surveys that have been conducted on this issue, I highlight some important changes in the pattern of national identification of the English, as well as recent signs of constitutional disaffection. But I also draw upon qualitative studies that tend to confirm the proposition that a rising sense of national self-awareness has arisen from other social changes and trends, and is not primarily driven by constitutional issues. This chapter also considers whether there are abiding social and demographic characteristics attached to a growing identification with English identity.

In Chapter 4 I consider those somewhat overlooked arenas and sites where ideas about the English have been most fully explored and challenged. These are cultural in kind, and span the specialist worlds of artistic production and everyday life. I also draw attention to the various political narratives of Englishness that have developed during this period. And in Chapter 5 I proceed to consider the public policy dimensions of the English question. First, I recount the attempts of the main political parties to come to terms with the interlocking set of national questions that devolution has released into the political ether. I also consider the efforts of various organizations to mobilize a sense of English-focused grievance in recent years, pausing to explore

why these endeavours have yielded so little reward. And then, in Chapter 6, I explore two increasingly symbolic issues—associated with the West Lothian problem and the Barnett formula—where there is growing evidence of English disaffection. In both cases I explore the nature of the difficulties which these embody, and the normative and political prospects for their resolution. In my Conclusion I seek to draw together some of the main strands of argument and consider how the English question is likely to unfold in political and normative terms, and I reflect, more generally, on some of the interpretative challenges associated with this subject.

HABITS OF UNDERSTANDING

It is widely recognized that national identities call upon, and promote, particular ideas about the national past. Yet it is rarer than is often supposed for any single version of the national story to achieve a position of unchallenged dominance. Invariably, different versions of the past are in competition with each other, and these narratives are usually harnessed to different ideas about the character of, and prospects for, the nation in the present. In the English case, this is an especially significant observation given the recurrent tendency to see Englishness as defined solely by the regressive and Arcadian images through which it is often evoked. Such a judgement makes the mistake of regarding the recurrent cultural form in which the national spirit is evoked as the sole determinant of the meanings generated by its evocation. In fact, historical ideas about the development and character of the English people have shaped different visions of the nature and prospects of English nationhood.

One of the principal arguments that I set out in this book is that this more salient sense of avowedly English nationhood has not resulted in a straightforward rejection of a sense of British affiliation or disconnection from the traditions at the heart of the British model of government. The growing Anglicization of English culture and politics for the most part represents a shifting emphasis within the combined and overlapping loyalties associated with England and Britain. In order to understand the new versions of Englishness that have become salient, and their continual reliance on established traditions of political thinking, it is imperative to stand apart from the numerous layers of prejudice and interpretation with which English nationhood has become encrusted. A familiar set of characterizations of the nature and temperament of the English have dominated discourse upon national identity, and have generally had the effect of narrowing, rather than opening up, this topic in terms

of critical understanding. In his major recent study Mandler has illustrated how central ideas of the English personality were to elite political discourse from the eighteenth century onwards.⁴ And he observed the disappearance of the terminology associated with 'character' in the last half-century, and its replacement by the conceptual language associated with national identity. He may well, however, have underestimated the continuing role that assumptions about the English temperament, and its abiding cultural expressions, have continued to play since the middle years of the twentieth century.

A host of clichés, caricatures, and canards are indissolubly attached to the subject of Englishness, and a number of these have their roots in the earlier period that Mandler excavates. Their combined effect has been to signal that an interior core, made up of a bundle of unchanging inclinations and dispositions, lies at the heart of this form of nationhood. In addition to the empirical difficulties attendant upon such a conception, this manner of characterizing Englishness is vulnerable to a normative challenge which this vernacular literature has tended to avoid: what about those who do not display these particular attributes? In what sense, and with what consequence, do they become less English than their fellow citizens?

In contrast to such essentialism, a more historically inclined approach sheds light on the many different ways in which Englishness has been 'decontested' in political and cultural terms.⁵ This study takes this observation as its starting point, and treats Englishness as more akin to an 'empty signifier', which has been painted in various cultural and political colours and corralled in the service of a surprisingly wide range of arguments and ideas. The recurrent appearance of a pretty standard set of national images, mythologies, and folk references in English cultural life has also led many commentators to the erroneous conclusion that English nationhood can be characterized in simplistic, reified terms. One of the secondary ambitions of this book, therefore, is to illustrate how mistaken such an assumption is, and to prompt fresh thinking about the different kinds of meaning and resonance achieved by assertions and expressions of the English idea.

A more rounded and probing analysis of the provenance and purchase of current ideas about the English is attainable if we desist from relying upon stock characterizations of this people and identify more carefully those traditions of feeling and thought that have endowed these with plausibility, and ensured their perpetuation. It is particularly important to appreciate that such observations about the English character, or references to other common mythologies—about the iconic significance of the English countryside, the provenance of the 'free-born Englishman', or the idea of the Norman yoke, for instance—have a polysemic, rather than singular, character.⁶ This means that they have been recuperated by various different ideological perspectives,

rather than simply reinforcing an established view. I give emphasis at different points in this study, therefore, to the competitive appropriation of a common stock of mythological and folkloric elements. I part company too with those scholars and critics who see the ubiquity of ancient, mythical, and folkish themes in references to English culture as by-products of a national imagination that is inherently backward-looking and nostalgic in kind, and which remains fundamentally inadequate as the basis for a modern sense of nationhood. Some of the ideas which deploy these elements may well comply with such a characterization; but many do not. In contrast, I maintain that it is in part through the recuperation of these well-worn myths and vernacular ideas that rival versions of 'the nation' seek to establish authenticity and resonance. Mythological and folkloric elements are integral parts of the construction of different kinds of modern nationhood, and their persistence does not constitute a priori evidence that Englishness lacks the capacity to be conceived as an inclusive and democratic identity.

As well as stressing its essentially contested character, my assessment of current forms and expressions of Englishness adopts a broadly historical approach, even though my attention is largely upon the recent past. Taking the longer view enables an appreciation of the sources and patterns of current thinking, and offers a helpful vantage point from which to evaluate many of the polemical and partial interpretative responses that Englishness has elicited. It also provides a sense of perspective upon the different purposes served by such ideas, as well as throwing light on the enormous variety of different, and often conflicting, traits and attributes that have been projected onto the English as a people.

In the course of this analysis I highlight the recurrence of several particular mythologies. One is the often repeated assertion that this is a people who are congenitally unwilling, and perhaps unable, to define who they are in national terms. This, for instance, is the sentiment encapsulated by a character in Ronald Harwood's resonant recent play *An English Tragedy*: 'The English have never understood why anyone should be concerned with the mystery of identity. That's because they're so certain of their own. The notion of belonging is alien to them because they belong.'⁷ Or, as literary critic David Gervais put it: 'Not only do the English resist articulating their "Englishness", they feel truer to themselves by *not* articulating it.'⁸ This canard is an almost ubiquitous accompaniment to discussions of the collective identity and character of the English. Its familiarity should not, however, disguise its paradoxical quality, given that its many proponents are so easily able to identify this as a defining feature of the English. Equally, the empirical validity of such an assertion is not hard to call into question, given the great number of occasions on which attempts have been made to represent the quintessential qualities and character of the

English. Mandler, by contrast, has highlighted the 'periodic bouts of obsessive self-scrutiny' which the English have displayed since at least the middle of the eighteenth century.⁹ Nevertheless, innumerable writers have reasserted that the latter are, by nature, disinclined to articulate their shared national identity in an ordered or explicit manner, and have accordingly been happy to accept the wilful muddling of British and English identities upon which the edifice of modern British nationhood has been built.

Such continually reiterated, commonsensical thinking has been buttressed, as Krishan Kumar has observed, by the trope which stipulates that nationalism happened to other people but never quite made it across the English Channel.¹⁰ Such an assertion has provided a common point of reference in both elite and popular cultures over the last three hundred years, and continues to figure in discussions of English culture and identity. But the proposition that the English populace is temperamentally immune to the lures of nationalism is also open to challenge, in empirical and historical terms, and tells us more about the governing frameworks shaping ideas about the English than the sentiments of its people. Yet, exposing its falsity does not necessarily destroy the resonance of these characterizations. For nationally rooted mythologies of this sort gain meaning and traction only in part from their historical verifiability.¹¹ They perform important roles too as elements within a much broader web of national thought and sentiment.

The disavowal of nationalism and the insistence that Englishness consists of ingrained characteristics, not a reflective sense of shared identity, underpin the prevalence of many of the commonsensical observations which are so hard to prise apart from Englishness, and which render its analysis so difficult. Social psychologist Susan Condor has shown how this kind of mythology mediates the relationship between English people and their sense of identity. In several of her studies, English respondents who exhibited a broadly liberal set of values were typically reluctant to talk about, let alone define, themselves in national terms. They often condemned expressions of nationalistic pride, and were prone to deny that being English defined them in any important way.¹² And yet this reluctance is best explained, she has argued, by the fact that, for these respondents, overt expressions of nationalism are associated with forms of chauvinism that conflict with their own, preponderantly liberal, values. And, as sociologist Steve Garner has observed, there may be a further complicating factor at work here—the delicate entanglement of nationhood and class distinction in England which means that nationalist sentiments are identified as the natural expressions of the lower orders, representing an idiom that 'respectable' citizens are keen to disavow.¹³ England, therefore, remains for many a place where 'hot nationalism' and its deplorable consequences have supposedly been avoided, and, as Condor concluded, this claim exerts a

significant influence upon perceptions of its national identity. Leading sociologist of nationalism Michael Billig has also observed how English people often distance themselves from patriotism as a way of distinguishing themselves from those who are seen as indulging in vulgar displays of national pride and greatness.¹⁴ Such representations have themselves become a factor influencing and inhibiting perceptions of the nature of the national identity that it is deemed legitimate to hold in England.

THE ENGLISH AND THEIR LISTS

Several commentators have noted that attempts to capture the essence or spirit of the English are often expressed in particular idiomatic forms. One especially revealing mode of national reflection is the habit of listing those practices, pastimes, and cultural features which are said to be unique to the English.¹⁵ This genre illustrates the highly particularistic and exceptionalist manner in which English culture and nationhood is often conceived. It also suggests the powerful connection that has been established between a specific set of objects and practices and the values deemed to be integral to this particular nation. Authors compiling such lists have often been content to reproduce items listed by their forebears, as well as adding new ones to these, typically without comment or justification. This was most obviously true of Prime Minister John Major, whose much derided foray onto this territory in a speech he made in April 1993 ushered in a period when a growing number of political actors and commentators were drawn towards the themes of nationhood and patriotism.¹⁶ What Major termed the 'unamendable essentials' of English life had all figured on the lists compiled by a previous Conservative Prime Minister in the 1920s, Stanley Baldwin, and various other prominent national intellectuals throughout the twentieth century, including T. S. Eliot, George Orwell, and John Betjeman. More recently, new lists have been offered by high-profile commentators Peter Ackroyd, Christopher Hitchens, and Jeremy Paxman, and the English habit of list-making has been satirized in Julian Barnes's novel *England, England*.¹⁷

The recurrence of these lists, and many of their contents, is suggestive of a sense of the *patria* that is acquired through experience of the habits, assumptions, and artefacts of a culture, rather than a nationalism that is actively propagated, defined, and stipulated. It also expresses the proposition that this cultural tradition is continuous in its evolution, and can be seen as akin to a club with subtle and non-intrusive rules.¹⁸ But this seemingly non-stipulative

form of association actually implies secure possession of a shared cultural hinterland, enabling appreciation of the iconic value of the references included on these lists. And this assumption is an increasingly contentious one in a context of growing cultural diversification and social division.

These lists arose from a rich seam of national self-understanding that has long found favour with intellectuals, politicians, and commentators in England. That produced by George Orwell remains the most widely cited, notably his 'solid breakfasts and gloomy Sundays, small towns and winding roads, green fields and red pillar boxes'.¹⁹ Writing a decade earlier, the American-born, but impeccably Anglicized, Eliot defined culture itself through the particular forms he encountered in England, characterizing it as 'Derby Day, Henley Regatta, Cowes, the twelfth of August, a cup final, the dog races, the pin table, the dart board, Wensleydale cheese, boiled cabbage cut into sections, beetroot in vinegar, nineteenth-century Gothic churches and the music of Elgar'.²⁰ For Betjeman, broadcasting on the BBC during the Second World War, England conjured up:

the Church of England, eccentric incumbents, oil-lit churches, Women's Institutes, modest village inns, arguments about cow parsley on the altar, the noise of mowing machines on Saturday afternoon, local newspapers, local auctions, the poetry of Tennyson, Crabbe, Hardy and Matthew Arnold.²¹

Each of these collections includes some of the iconic objects, practices, and artefacts that have, over time, become integral to leading forms of English national mythology. All make reference to the countryside, which has recurrently been invested with an enormous degree of symbolic significance as the crucible of the national spirit. The village, the country house, the thatched cottage, and the garden are itemized within numerous reflections on the character and culture of the English. And these highly familiar elements have once again become prominent in recent years. Yet, for all their ubiquitous, even hackneyed, character, they have been put to a multiplicity of uses in ideological and cultural terms.

These lists are also notable for what they do not include. There are few signs of Empire, the industrial revolution, high politics, or commercial activity within them, despite the undoubted impact of all of these episodes and dynamics upon England and its people's consciousness. Instead, since the early twentieth century, as historian Alison Light has demonstrated, English nationhood has been typically imagined through reference to objects that signify the commonplace, the domestic, and the particular, with dashes of nostalgia and pastoral fantasy added to the mix. The grandeur and expansiveness that were hallmarks of the Englishness that was projected during the era of Empire are implicitly identified, through their absence, with the separate history and

institutions of the British state. As we shall see, features of this style of national reflection have re-emerged in the current period, as a swathe of nostalgic and elegiac appeals to a disappearing England have filtered into contemporary culture.

INTERPRETATIONS OF ENGLISHNESS

A reaction against the parochialism and Arcadianism associated with these and other related expressions of Englishness has animated an important counter-tradition of critical thinking. This reflects a deep scepticism about the viability of redeeming Englishness from the nostalgic and retrospective tones in which it is typically expressed. This mode of critical thinking has also been powerfully rejuvenated in the current period. It has been harnessed to great effect in the work of Tom Nairn, who has supplied a widely influential account of the pathologies of contemporary Englishness, and the stunting effects that the persistence of the British 'state-way' has had upon the English imagination.²² His thinking is examined in detail in Chapter 2.

A separate, more nuanced, perspective upon English nationhood, which has been too readily overlooked in the increasingly polarized debates that this subject attracts, strikes a very different note altogether. This maintains that the qualities and attributes that are commonly identified with Englishness represent one side of a more varied national coinage. Its flip side consists of an unbroken affiliation with the institutions, rules, and purposes associated with Britain. Various commentators in these years observed the growing appeal of England as a meaningful and attractive point of identification, the source of a more intimate and rich sense of belonging. 'Britain', by contrast, came to carry a very different set of overtones—being more official and formal in character. But for the most part, these different forms of national identification were seen and experienced as inter-related, and sometimes synonymous, rather than as rivals to each other. On this view, the various strains of whimsy, sentiment, and nostalgia associated with Englishness form the inner elements of a layered sense of nationhood which also possessed an outer shell defined by the institutions and codes associated with Britain. What is often derided, notably by progressive critics, as an abiding sense of confusion about where Englishness ends and Britishness begins, is in fact a reflection of an enduring and hybridized form of national consciousness—what Anthony Barnett has termed 'the strange half diffusion of Englishness with Britishness and the many elisions to which this leads'.²³ This kind of understanding enabled Britain to be,

often unthinkingly, imagined in English terms, and reinforced the notion of the national temperament as pragmatic, adaptive, and moderate. One of the major questions which the current focus upon Englishness raises, therefore, is whether this mode of understanding has now broken down at both elite and popular levels, or whether it is still intact, though with an altered balance between its internal elements.

These three broad perspectives upon English identity—comprising a highly particularistic form of everyday conservatism, a progressive scepticism towards its merits and implications, and a residual loyalty to an Anglo-British form of nationality—have become prominent in the context of a recent upsurge of interest in English identity. In addition to them, a more aggressive and populist national idiom has moved into the political mainstream, and a counter-opposed attempt to recast England as a multicultural nation has also become visible. Each of these perspectives builds upon older traditions of thought, and all call upon an overlapping set of national mythologies, while also putting these to different political uses. These include the age-old claims that: the spirit of England lies in the countryside, rather than the urban behemoths generated by the industrial revolution; Englishness tends towards quiescence and decay, until the moment when the nation is in danger; the English are an island race, dispositionally unable to join the alliances associated with other great powers; and this people developed a unique form of political liberty which was the product of gradual historical evolution, not major revolutionary rupture. Each of these axioms has been subjected to significant historical challenge, yet each continues to figure prominently within current ideas about, and expressions of, Englishness. One of the themes I stress in the concluding chapter of this book is that extant debates about Englishness underestimate the different uses served by the language, sense of cultural authenticity, and rhetorical opportunities afforded by appeals to the beleaguered, but resurgent, English nation.

In several of the chapters that follow, therefore, I highlight the continuing appeal of various iconic, mythical, and folkish references, and point to a renewal of interest in the lineage of English pastoralism in particular. These have been vital elements within a rich seedbed from which current ideas have been compiled. I give particular emphasis to the growing importance of references to place in general, and to localities and landscapes in particular, within the revival of the English imagination. The idealization of the national landscape, and the sense of belonging it has been said to embody, have afforded a symbolically rich and resonant language within which to express a sense of social alienation and political disenchantment, both of which have become powerful motifs in contemporary public discourse. Place, landscape, and cultural tradition have also been important points of reference for a renewed set

of conservative and radical claims on behalf of the English nation which, we shall see, have become prominent within the political system in recent years. For the most part, the conclusions drawn from these currents of thought have proved difficult for the political parties to accept, though many of the themes and concerns associated with them—including references to the position of the countryside, the decline of traditional institutions, and the perils of over-centralized governance—have bubbled to the surface of political life in this period. But the main barrier to the growing influence of the voices of Tory and radical England has been the continuing presence of a lineage of constitutional orthodoxy, itself rooted in both liberal and conservative values, underpinning the doctrines of British parliamentary government.

Liberal constitutionalism has its roots in Whiggish ideas about the exceptional and exemplary character of the British constitution which date back to the nineteenth century.²⁴ This broad mode of thinking has tended to stress the ‘civilizing,’ non-nationalistic qualities of the English people, as exhibited by their identification with values such as freedom and tolerance. England, on this view, was a cultural nation which divested its sovereignty to the institutions and forms of the British state.²⁵ There are good reasons to think, however, that this vein of sentiment began to fade, as a pessimistic view of Britain’s place in the world and relative economic position gained ground from the 1950s onwards. Claims about the unique and exemplary features of the British state and the English people were increasingly lacking in appeal in a context where the UK was being outperformed by other states, in economic and geo-political terms. And yet, weakened as it may be, this Whiggish-liberal lineage continues to shape the thinking of political actors and public servants overseeing the British state, and still gives life to the idea that a British form of nationhood retains uniquely valuable qualities, not least its ability to obviate the kinds of nationalist sentiments that have proved so disruptive and challenging elsewhere.

PROGRESSIVE FEARS

This mode of thought has in recent decades shown increasingly obvious signs of decay. And, as the idea that an avowed sense of English nationhood is being renewed has become prevalent, commentary has increasingly revived a number of long-standing fears about some of the properties associated with Englishness, especially among liberals and leftists. In his 2006 novel *Kingdom Come*, for instance, J. G. Ballard evoked the concerns of those who have long

seen the English psyche as suffused with irrationality, populism, and a latent violence.²⁶ The English have become a disparate collection of consumerist junkies, inhabiting a society where the lower orders are consumed by bursts of atavistic nationalism. The novel's hero Richard Pearson travels to a suburb close to the western edge of London's M25, and reflects on a ubiquitous new presence: '[e]verywhere St George's flags were flying, from suburban gardens and filling stations and branch post offices, as this nameless town celebrated its latest victory'.²⁷

Many other writers and commentators have echoed and amplified these fears. Scottish author Andrew O'Hagan offered an even more hostile account of the state of English consciousness in a public lecture he delivered in 2009.²⁸ What counts as culture in England now, he argued, is the detritus left behind by the disappearance of the stolid independence and self-reliance of its working class. In its place has emerged a loud, rude, and self-interested individualism which occasionally erupts in the form of chauvinistic nationalism. For such critics, the once great nation that was England has lost its soul and sense of direction. Its people now exhibit a 'riot of individualism with no real sense of common purpose and no collective volition as a tribe'.²⁹ A good deal of commentary has concurred, though without adopting quite such condemnatory language. O'Hagan's critique painted English nationalism as the pathological consciousness of a declining and resentful working class. For others, too, it is axiomatic that a greater emphasis upon Englishness reflected the lowest aspects of the English temper. One recent academic study of its role in sport, for instance, cited the tendency to display the '*English* flag of St George rather than the *British* (Union) flag' as a self-evident cause of a rise in aggression among English supporters, without feeling the need to supply any evidence for such a contention.³⁰ And, according to one of the leading contemporary progressive thinkers, David Marquand, no one has advanced a positive case for Englishness 'based on a moral vision of what England and the English stand for', and this is because there is no meaningful 'English national myth'.³¹ The abiding assumption that the pre-modern roots of the form of nationhood have inhibited its development as a species of modern nationalism is ubiquitous within many academic studies, political speeches, and comment pieces.

Yet, disagreement on this score has opened up in progressive circles as a small, but growing, band of writers, artists, and politicians has sought to revalue English nationhood and stress its positive potential and implications. This sensibility has been most extensively and creatively developed in various artistic and cultural quarters, as we shall see in Chapter 4. For instance, in Rachel Joyce's 2012 novel *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry*, we encounter a protagonist who undertakes a modern-day pilgrim's progress through contemporary England.³² In the course of his journey to see an old friend, now

dying in hospital, the novel's hero walks the length and breadth of England. In the process he reconnects with forgotten parts of himself and enlightens many of those he encounters. Joyce's treatment breathed new life into the well-worn trope of making sense of England and the English in relation to different places and landscapes, and illustrated that the quest for roots which this form of national reflection evokes can provide the basis for decidedly modern ideas about community and identity. Other commentators have concurred that an England shorn of Empire, and the baggage associated with the British past, may flourish anew, and more generous and culturally capacious ideas of the England nation might now be forthcoming.

These divergent lines of progressive thinking about Englishness—emphasizing cultural decline and mass pathology, on the one hand, and its recuperative potential, on the other—have become entrenched polar opposites in an emerging field of debate and contestation. Other commentators have insisted upon the multi-faceted manner and ambivalent fashion in which the English nation has been reimagined. This, for instance, was the position taken by John McLeod, in his introduction to a recent volume on English culture: as the social conditions of England have changed, he argued, so too has the content of its self-images evolved over time.³³ Such a characterization supplied an important counter-weight to the tendency in public discourse to narrow, rather than stimulate, the imagination when it comes to ideas about English identity. As McLeod maintained, England has been continually refashioned and reclaimed in imaginative terms. There is an abiding plurality to the range of cultural and political meanings that can be hung onto Englishness.

DIVERSITY AND THE ENGLISH

This is an important point to bear in mind when considering one of the touchstone themes at the heart of recent debates about Englishness. How much diversity can the English sense of nationhood bear? And how deep is the sense of cultural commonality that Englishness entails? A key, related question is whether this mode of nationality carries ethnically exclusive connotations. For many, this represents the most troubling and revealing aspect of the renewal of Englishness, which is sometimes framed as a retreat into the defensive laager of 'whiteness'. Rather strikingly, as we shall see, the rhetoric associated with multiculturalism has been hijacked and redeployed by populist tribunes for the downtrodden indigenous people, and the 'white working class' depicted as a seething mass of resentment lacking a voice within representative politics.

And yet, as we shall also find, a more optimistic reading has also become prevalent, insisting that the diversity of the inhabitants of England is gradually imprinting itself on the wider national culture.

This debate returns to an age-old set of arguments about the racial and cultural character of the English. The leading expressions of the English spirit that emanated from the influential Edwardian 'moment' identified by Kumar (which is discussed in detail in Chapter 2) have, for the most part, traded upon the fantasy of England as an ethnically pure, rural nation. And many contemporary analysts insist that little has changed on this score. Yet long-running counter-arguments have always contested this picture, maintaining that the English are a hybrid people, forged out of the patchwork of migratory movements onto the country's shores ever since the Norman conquest. One of the leading cultural authorities on English culture, Ackroyd, reflected that 'Englishness is the principle of diversity itself. In English literature, music and painting, heterogeneity becomes the form and type of art. This condition reflects a mixed language comprised of different races.'³⁴

The tradition of thinking which Ackroyd invoked has also been prominent in the recent period. It has sometimes been signalled through reference to Daniel Defoe's iconic poem from 1701, *The True Born Englishman*, in which the illusions of nativism were heavily satirized and the emergence of an idea of nationhood founded upon a common life, spanning cultural and ethnic differences, was glimpsed:

The Scot, Pict, Britain, Roman, Dane, submit,
 And with the English-Saxon all unite:
 And these the mixture have so close pursu'd,
 The very name and memory's subdu'd:
 No Roman now, no Britain does remain;
 Wales strove to separate, but strove in vain:
 The silent nations undistinguish'd fall,
 And Englishman's the common name for all.
 Fate jumbled them together, God knows how;
 What e'er they were they're true-born English now.
 The wonder which remains is at our pride,
 To value that which all wise men deride.
 For Englishmen to boast of generation,
 Cancels their knowledge, and lampoons the nation.
 A true-born Englishman's a contradiction,
 In speech an irony, in fact a fiction.
 A banter made to be a test of fools,

Which those that use it justly ridicules.
 A metaphor invented to express
 A man a-kin to all the universe.³⁵

This vision has been reanimated, as we shall see in Chapter 5, by various practical endeavours and projects that have set out to reimagine England in a cosmopolitan and multicultural vein.

PLACE, EMPIRE, AND RACE IN THE ENGLISH IMAGINATION

A growing number of campaigners and advocates have stressed that the English can only regain a sense of purpose and rootedness by rediscovering the national past, and by reconnecting with the places and landscapes that define the history and character of the country and its people. Most of the debates about who the English people are, and what they have in common, are typically conducted in a retrospective mode, and are littered with references to iconic authors, figures, texts, and periods from the past. And while this is fairly typical of modern forms of nationhood, in the English case the themes of place and landscape have played a particularly important role in the retelling of the national story. As Ackroyd put it, 'English writers and artists, English composers and folk-singers, have been haunted by this sense of place in which the echoic simplicities of past traditions sanctify a certain spot of ground.'³⁶

Historical geographer Ian Baucom has set the recessive appearance of these themes in a striking interpretative perspective, arguing that prior to the nineteenth century Englishness was mostly expressed in relation to locally rooted mythologies, iconic places, and a romanticized sense of landscape.³⁷ This mode of reflection was displaced, first, by the expansionary and outward-looking thinking demanded by Empire, and, more recently, by a new sense of national mythology which ascribed a fixed set of ethno-cultural characteristics to the English. This approach, he argued, was disseminated following the rise of the New Right in British politics, and put into circulation the fiction of England as an ethnically and culturally homogeneous national community.³⁸ In this view, the division in the English imagination occasioned by Empire has had momentous consequences. It set in motion a recessive split between the kind of national outlook which Kumar termed 'missionary nationalism'³⁹—a universalizing idea of an England that will be discovered in overseas lands, just as much as in England itself—and a more parochial and insular sense of

nationhood defined in relation to the unique properties of physical landscape and locality. This bifurcation, Baucom suggested, established a deeply rooted, enduring split within the English psyche, and still haunts debates about who the English are. Intellectuals and politicians remain fundamentally uncertain about whether a consciousness forged in the era of Empire is still secreted within the national psyche, and needs to be restrained by the civic culture and laws associated with Britain, or if English nationhood is rooted in the innumerable forms of particularity associated with its locales and places. If so, it might be reconstituted as an inclusive sense of identity founded upon these elements, rather than as a nationalistic ideology in which ethnicity is predominant.

The growing estrangement between these distinct forms of national thinking has given rise to open antagonism on only a few occasions, as, for the most part, these modes of reflection have developed on separate lines. One such moment occurred when figures from the 'little Englander' current of the early twentieth century offered a powerful critique of the emotional and cultural costs to the nation associated with the drive to imperial expansion.⁴⁰ Another was when Enoch Powell in the late 1960s redefined England as a country defined by a set of institutions and mores that were not amenable to the immigrant populations of the former colonies who were laying claim to a common British citizenship.⁴¹ But, in the most recent period, a further point of overt disagreement has developed. This takes the form of an Anglo-British form of liberal internationalism—in which the UK remains a moral leader and civilizing influence in world affairs, on the one hand—and a desire to scale politics back from the state and to reconnect it with the communities and places that ground the conservative instincts of the English people, on the other.⁴²

More generally, the burgeoning academic and public debate about the genesis and meaning of Englishness would benefit considerably from a more nuanced sense of the values that are promoted through reference to place, landscape, and heritage. A renewed interest in folk aesthetics, as we shall see in Chapter 4, has contributed to the revival of the English cultural imagination in recent years. Simply dismissing such elements as dewy-eyed expressions of a regressive national imagination tells us little about why they have once more gained appeal among a wider set of audiences. Kumar's historical account of the origins of modern Englishness offers some important pointers in this regard.⁴³ He identified the vitality of national sentiments associated with a wide-ranging body of writing, poetry, art, and rural preservationism which emerged in the Edwardian era and established the template for Englishness as a sensibility that was always on the verge of disappearing. But this extended 'moment' of national consciousness was, he suggested, predominantly cultural, and not political. In key respects it complemented, rather than

challenged, the parameters of a British-focused tradition of liberal constitutionalism. The nostalgic and pastoral themes that Kumar observed may not have become central to party politics in the early twentieth century, but they were nevertheless put to a wide range of rhetorical and political uses. As historian Julia Stapleton has shown, leading cultural figures, such as John Betjeman and Arthur Bryant, began, during the inter-war period, to harness appeals to the value of the English countryside to a conservative opposition to new forms of urban planning and the pattern of ribbon development associated with suburban expansion.⁴⁴ These trends were deemed to be jeopardizing the forests, villages, and landscapes that formed the crucible of Englishness. This seam of thinking provided an important precursor for some of the most resonant declarations of English grievance in the last few years.

The national consciousness that emerged from the Edwardian period involved a subtle dialogue between the historical past and the present, with the past often presented as the more authoritative interlocutor. This characteristic has remained troubling for critics who discern at the heart of these sentiments the consciousness of a people who dream only of living in an old country, and are incapable of fostering the kind of inclusive modern nationality that would enable them to deal with the realities of the present. This kind of criticism (which is considered in greater depth in Chapter 2) insists that the democratic aspirations of the English people have been stymied by their loyalty to the institutions and codes of the British state, on the one hand, and the lures of nostalgic Englishness on the other.

But an important counter-perspective has long insisted that England is an age-old political and institutional entity, having developed a centralized state form earlier than any of its European counterparts. The British state was grafted onto the style of governance and network of institutions that had originally been devised to rule England. Several leading historians maintain that as early as the eleventh century an English nation-state, founded on a 'substantially uniform' system of national government, was instrumental in defining and inculcating a common Englishness.⁴⁵ A larger number have tended to argue that it was during the late medieval and early modern periods that the idea of England as a nation developed.⁴⁶ But, over time, they suggested, the English hold upon this system was gradually loosened, to the point where the benefits of union were available only to elite groups that were increasingly wary of ideas of English sovereignty, while being ever more disposed to ensure the quiescence of the non-English territories through resource transfers and the granting of limited degrees of legislative autonomy. This perspective has become much more prominent in recent years, as a growing band of campaigners, scholars, and commentators have insisted that current signs of a rebirth of English nationhood signal a renewed appetite for an English political community.⁴⁷

Proponents of this perspective are increasingly inclined to argue that the English are the last, unwilling subjects of a state that was forged around the imperatives associated with its external and internal empires. Historian and broadcaster David Starkey has consistently argued that what sets England apart from the other countries of the UK is not its cultural symbolism or romantic heritage but its political inheritance—the institutions which have been claimed as British, but are, in essence, English. The notions that the English are starting to wake up to the reality that they have, over time, lost their own national sovereignty, and are denied the opportunity to celebrate their own traditions, have been aired ever more loudly in recent years. In a situation where the rest of the UK enjoys varying forms of self-government, and the Westminster parliament is caught between its roles as a UK-wide body and legislature for England, such complaints have acquired a readily defined target. For many proponents of this view, it is only by granting the English an equivalent form of devolution that the kind of civic nationalism that has become established in Scotland and Wales might emerge.

This major intellectual divide between the vision of England as, on the one hand, a perpetually regressive form of imagined community, and, on the other, a once great political nation which might yet be regained, runs throughout public and scholarly debates on this issue. One of the main questions I consider throughout this book is whether either of these stances generates a sufficiently plausible and nuanced understanding of the political dimensions and ramifications of English identity. The starkness of the alternatives they represent has, I will argue, served to obscure the complex, shifting relations between the cultural and political imaginings of England. As Aleks Sierz has observed, ‘Englishness or Britishness is a state of mind, an imaginary place, a fictional way of being, a set of stories we tell ourselves.’⁴⁸ It is my contention that some of the leading story-lines of the current period have come to carry an increasingly political charge.

Both of these views have become more prominent as a result of the dawning realization that some important changes have been happening to English sensibilities and perceptions in the recent period. Elsewhere in this volume I review the large body of data on these issues supplied by a considerable number of academic studies and numerous opinion surveys. And, while I caution against simplistic or unidimensional accounts of what are fluid and complex trends, I conclude that there is a considerable body of evidence to support the conclusion that an avowed sense of English national identity has become more salient and meaningful for many people, and that this has developed at a greater distance from an established sense of allegiance to Britain. This emerging pattern of national identity may well turn out to constitute one of the most important phases in the history of the national consciousness of the English