What does it mean to be British? It is now recognised that being British is not innate, static or permanent, but that national identities within Britain are constantly constructed and reconstructed. *Britishness since 1870* examines this definition and redefinition of the British national identity since the 1870s. Paul Ward argues that Britishness is a resilient force, and looks at how it has adapted to changing circumstances since the 1870s.

Taking a thematic approach, *Britishness since 1870* examines the forces that have contributed to a sense of British national identity, and considers how Britishness has been mediated by other identities such as class, gender, region, ethnicity and the sense of belonging to England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland.

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Britishness since 1870

Paul Ward
For Oscar and Georgia
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Abbreviations

BUF  British Union of Fascists
CPGB  Communist Party of Great Britain
CSU  Cymric Suffrage Union
EEC  European Economic Community
FA  Football Association
GAA  Gaelic Athletic Association
IRA  Irish Republican Army
JLB  Jewish Lads’ Brigade
LCC  London County Council
NF  National Front
RAF  Royal Air Force
SNP  Scottish National Party
VAD  Voluntary Aid Detachment
WAAF  Women’s Auxiliary Air Force
Introduction

Being British

Since the 1970s there has been a sense of crisis about what it has meant to be British. But not only British. Far from being constants, as had been presumed to be, national identities have been recognised as constructed and reconstructed. This is not to say that national identities are ‘false’ or ‘artificial’, but this idea of the ‘making of national identities’ has opened them up to academic study, not least by historians, who are keen to locate continuities and changes in their historical context. National identities in many countries other than the United Kingdom have seemed to be more obviously contested. Disputes over borders in Europe have been frequent, and often bloody. Alsace-Lorraine was ceded by a militarily defeated France to Germany in 1871 and returned to France in 1919 after the Allies had defeated Germany. The collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the end of the First World War produced numerous new nations, and the reshuffling of Europe in 1945 again changed the nature of many nations. Poland, for example, was created, contracted, and expanded at the military and diplomatic whim of its neighbours, allies and enemies. Belgium has made great efforts to contain Flemings and Walloons within a single polity, as Spain has sought to enable autonomous government to its regions while maintaining national-political unity. In Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, pluralism (of sorts) failed, with bloodshed as a consequence, in the 1990s. After 1945, decolonisation in Africa and Asia saw the foundation of new nations and national identities: sometimes formed against the backdrop of war, as in Rwanda, sometimes through more peaceful transformation, as in South Africa. The Americas too have experienced contests over what it means to be national. In Canada, French-Canadians have urged autonomy for Quebec, and after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York, US American identity has been redefined. The list of ‘national’ problems is as universal as the nation as a political and cultural form.1 The apparent stability of the United Kingdom across much of the twentieth century has made its current ‘crisis’ appear profound. Being British is no longer seen as innate, static and permanent. Indeed, it is seen as under threat. In this book I examine the definition and redefinition of national identities within the United Kingdom since the 1870s. This period embraces the ‘new’ imperialism from the 1870s onwards, around which conservative political forces constructed claims to a monopoly on
patriotism and versions of national identity, and also includes the decades since the Second World War when notions of Britishness have been challenged by the end of Empire, Commonwealth immigration, ‘Americanisation’, European integration and the re-emergence of Celtic nationalisms. The book, therefore, seeks to locate the current perception of crisis in its historical context.

What is meant by ‘Britishness’ is, of course, a complex issue. I argue that across the period since 1870 the majority of Britons, that is people living in the United Kingdom, have adopted cultural and political identities associated with the existence of this multi-national polity. Many commentators believe that states that contain more than one nation are fundamentally unstable and that the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland began its inevitable process of dissolution as soon as it was created by the Act of Union of 1800, if not before with the union of England and Scotland in 1707. In this view, there was only a transient and unstable sense of a British national identity, and it has recently been argued by Christopher Harvie that there was only a brief moment of Britishness, between 1939 and 1970. This has been accompanied by arguments from some that Britain, and therefore Britishness, is no more. Tom Nairn, who forecast the break-up of Britain as early as 1977, declared in 1999 that we were now in a period ‘after Britain’. But Harvie and Nairn are Scottish nationalists of sorts. They describe, but also seek to promote further, the crisis of Britishness. They are entitled to do so, but the historian’s task is more about analysing the past rather than prophesying the future. Harvie and Nairn are not alone in deciding that the death of Britain is occurring or has occurred. Others have declared that England/Britain has been ‘abolished’ and that, therefore, an elegy for England is needed. The sense of crisis is shared by British Conservatives, some of whom see the future in the emergence of a more insular English nationalism, others in a strengthened British unionism. But still others see a sense of crisis. Darcus Howe verbally and visually portrayed a crisis among white English people in his three-part television series White Tribe. ‘These are people who are in a crisis’, he said. ‘Something is finished; there’s nothing in its place. And anything can happen.’ This apparent consensus does suggest that there is a profound sense of crisis in Britishness, that its future is limited. On the other hand, there are others who see major advantages in continuing Britishness. The New Labour government of Tony Blair has sought to defend Britishness through developing political institutions in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, but also, with limited powers, in London with referendums in some English regions in the future. Many Conservatives also see a future for Britishness. John Redwood declared categorically that ‘The United Kingdom is my nation, rather than England or the Wokingham district. That is a fact of history.’ And while Howe saw a crisis in white English identity because too many people had a taste for American line dancing and French wine (and male black strippers), Yasmin Alibhai-Brown and others have argued for a new Britishness that positively embraces cultural diversity.

So what then is Britishness? Some historians, sociologists and political scientists have seen Britishness as some form of economic or cultural imperialism
imposed on Scotland, Wales and Ireland/Northern Ireland by English ruling elites. Hence Stephen Haseler argues: ‘For what is often meant by “national identity” is really “state identity” (identification not with the four nations of the British Isles but with the over-arching nation-state of the United Kingdom.’

For Haseler, therefore, Britishness was an imposition of the English on the non-English, who maintained their diversity in this colonial situation. A much more convincing explanation of Britishness has been provided by Linda Colley. She argues that Britishness was a separate identity alongside other identities. She sees Britishness being ‘forged’ between 1707 and 1837 in conflict with an external ‘other’. War with Catholic France confirmed the centrality of Protestantism in Britishness for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, though surviving much longer in Ulster than elsewhere. The crucial point for Colley was that it was possible to be Scottish and British, Welsh and British and so on, since ‘Identities are not like hats. Human beings can and do put on several at a time.’ Further, Colley sees Britishness as a creation of the Scots in the eighteenth century as a device to defend their nation’s position as junior partner within a wider state. This formulation means that Colley’s interpretation is compatible with that of Keith Robbins, who has suggested that it was ‘the blending of “the English”, “the Scots” and “the Welsh”’ that produced the ‘British’. Both of these interpretations enable ‘the British’, those people who live within the United Kingdom, to be responsible for the development of their own identities. They allow for the inconsistencies, contradictions and flexibility of daily identity formation. Britishness is what people mean when they identify themselves individually and collectively as ‘being British’. This identification relates to the political, economic, social, cultural and personal surroundings they find themselves in at the time they choose to think about their Britishness. This might appear as a highly empiricist approach, but to classify the national identities of nearly 60 million people in one theory does not do justice to the complexity of people’s identities. Hence, Britishness has never been a stable force, easy to describe because it is fixed. In that sense, Britishness has always been in a process of formation. Homi Bhabha has so perfectly commented that a nation is always ‘caught, uncertainly, in the act of composing itself’. Britishness has always been unstable. This has led some to argue that it was always in the process of ‘unravelling’ rather than of forming a collective identity. In this approach, the past is plundered to find examples of the expression of difference and diversity and then this is associated with the inevitability of the break-up of Britain. The revolution in Ireland between 1916 and 1923 is seen as the ideal type of behaviour for the non-English nations of the UK. Expressions of Welsh and Scottish distinctiveness are seen as being demands for separation. The infinite variety of discord and dissent is celebrated as a persistent challenge to the United Kingdom. This welcome recognition of diversity is associated in many ways with the post-modernist influence on historical study. Yet a new ‘grand narrative’ has been imposed, whereby the disuniting of the kingdom is seen as inevitable. But because it took so much longer for the Scottish and Welsh to discover their ‘historic task’, further explanation is required. In the
past, some historians sought to explain why the British working class refused to act in the revolutionary manner expected of them. Now many commentators ask a similar question of the Welsh and Scottish – what has delayed their ‘historic task’ of nation building? This book will not ignore the persistent challenges to the state in the United Kingdom since 1870, but it will argue that equal, if not more, attention needs to be given to agreement and consent in understanding the formation and resilience of Britishness over a century of rapid and radical change.

I started from the fundamental premise that ordinary working- and middle-class people played the major part in constructing their own identities. Their constructions are certainly shaped by external influences, many of which are imposed or coercive, particularly, but not only, in wartime. My approach here is in stark contrast with the supposition of an idealised form of behaviour suggested by Haseler when he argued that ‘Real middle classes are radical and liberal. They also tend to be internationalist.’ Implicitly, this means that the British middle classes – in England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland – were unreal, because they were often conservative and were frequently nationalist. The book looks at the actions and reactions of ‘real’ people without making assumptions about the way in which they should act. This leads on to the next point, now generally accepted as a cliché yet not always taken into account in the assumptions of the break-up of Britain. Laurence Brockliss and David Eastwood described the British Isles between 1750 and 1850 as ‘a Union of multiple identities’. ‘Every Briton in 1800’, they have argued, ‘possessed a composite identity.’ So too did Britons in 1870 and in 2003. Arthur Aughey also stresses that people frequently have a duality of national identities. He quotes Wassily Kandinsky, the Russian artist, who said that the twentieth century would be the century of ‘and’ over ‘either/or’. In many nations, identities are frequently multiple and relatively unproblematic. The notion of being Irish-American is well accepted. Galicians frequently consider themselves Spanish; Germans sometimes consider themselves to be Bavarian. In the United Kingdom, as elsewhere, identities of place have frequently been multiple, combining allegiance to street, neighbourhood, locality, town, county, region, nation(s) and even a global empire.

The frequent intermingling of different people from within and without the United Kingdom has also enforced a necessity for multiple identities. A quarter of people living in Wales and 10 per cent of those living in Scotland in the 1990s were not born in those nations. In any ‘English’ university seminar room, the numbers of students with Irish, Scottish, Welsh, Ukrainian, Polish, African, Asian and Caribbean names are testimony to the intermingled nature of the British Isles.

In addition, other identities have been held simultaneously with these identities of place. Individuals have considered themselves to be mothers or fathers, sisters or brothers, socialists, liberals or conservatives, working class, middle class or aristocratic, gay or straight, with none of these categories being mutually exclusive. The varieties are endless, and while some are incompatible – one
person cannot at the same time be a teenager and a pensioner – not all are so. Britishness has more often than not been compatible with a huge variety of other identities, and that has been one reason for its continuing hold. This book argues that ‘Britishness’ has been a flexible identity, and that fact has enabled its persistence. And persisted it has. Of course, the dissent of millions of people needs to be taken into account across the last 130 years. In 1918, for example, half a million Irish people, nearly half of those who voted, did so for Sinn Féin, a party committed to withdrawal from the UK parliament at Westminster and the establishment of the Dáil Éireann in Dublin. This act marked the birth of a nation. On the other hand though, the change in Ireland can be seen as cataclysmic, caused by the experience of the First World War, the Easter Rising of 1916, and the repression imposed by the British state. T. P. O’Connor, Irish nationalist MP for Liverpool, certainly believed that ‘Before the executions [of the 1916 Rising leaders] 99 per cent of Nationalist Ireland was Redmondite, since the executions 99 per cent is Sinn Féin.’ In April 1916, the majority of nationalist Ireland supported a moderate form of devolutionary and parliamentary nationalism. This form of nationalism may not have embraced Britishness but it could certainly accommodate itself to remaining part of the United Kingdom. Two sides can also be seen in Scotland in the late twentieth century. In a 1997 opinion poll, one in four Scots decided that they were ‘Scottish not British’, but the same poll revealed that one in three of the Scottish considered themselves at least equally British and Scottish. It is of immense significance that these ‘British’ people retain their Britishness in the face of the crises of national identity.

It is even possible to see ways in which Britishness has been strengthened in recent years. This can be seen in the construction of black and Asian ‘British’ identities, and the Labour government’s desire to use devolution to nations and regions within the UK to strengthen Britishness. A further example emerges from the writing of history. A. J. P. Taylor has been widely quoted as an exponent of an Anglocentric version of history writing, but that he is so frequently condemned shows the way in which British historiography has moved towards being more truly ‘British’. Historians such as Hugh Kearney, Keith Robbins, Jeremy Black and Norman Davies have been seeking to popularise a new history that fully takes account of the interrelationships between the separate parts of the British Isles or ‘Atlantic archipelago’, as J. G. A. Pocock described it in his pioneering ‘plea for a new subject’. Some of these writers are pessimistic about the future of the UK, but implicit within their interpretations is a pluralist sense of Britishness, shared by the current government, and reflected in the invitation to Linda Colley to deliver a lecture at Downing Street on Britishness. There has also been a resurgence of Scottish and Welsh historiography, which equally represents a strengthening of a sense of distinctiveness within those nations, but which does not necessarily imply incompatibility. English history has also partly taken on a regional focus with the emergence of academic journals devoted to *Northern History* (1966) and *Southern History* (1979), though again, such journals operate in the context of British history.
There has been a recent spate of books on ‘British’ history, but fewer books on Britishness in the modern period. There are some honourable exceptions. Linda Colley’s *Britons: Forging the Nation* was groundbreaking, locating the emergence of Britishness between 1707 and 1837, as a combination of the deeds of elites and common people. In particular, she emphasises the role played by women in the forging of the nation. Keith Robbins has also contributed extensively to the historical literature about the formation of Britishness in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, offering an alternative interpretation to Colley. Where Colley saw being British as an overarching identity compatible with other identities, Robbins stressed that Britishness has emerged from a ‘blending’ of other identities. Generally, though, there has been a tendency to focus on Englishness. Other books, about identities in Scotland, Wales and Ireland, reject the idea of Britishness as anything other than an imposition of the English, whose roots in the ‘periphery’ were shallow. In many ways, historians are better served by books that consider the formation of Britishness in the medieval and early modern periods, which look for ideas that sought to unite the kingdom rather than tear it apart. This has been a major achievement in the face of what was until recently a conceptual orthodoxy in which nationalism and nations were seen as modern inventions. Most interpretations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, though, look for decline in a sense of British national identity. The three-volume collection of essays that emerged from a History Workshop conference in 1984, edited by Raphael Samuel, had their origins in seeking to understand the widespread British patriotism associated with the Falklands War. Many of the speakers and writers desired to prove how ephemeral such patriotism was, how it was manufactured or invented, and how it was contested and rejected by a variety of opponents of Margaret Thatcher and her patriotic predecessors. The subtitle of the volumes, ‘the making and unmaking of British national identity’, had the suggestion of a chronological narrative.

This is the approach taken by two recent books on Englishness-Britishness, by Richard Weight and Robert Colls. Weight’s *Patriots* is about the end of Britishness. He states clearly at the start that it is ‘a book about why the people of Britain stopped thinking of themselves as British and began to see themselves instead as Scots, Welsh and English’. This emerges from his argument that the United Kingdom and Britishness were functions of capitalism, imperialism and Protestantism, and that therefore British national identity was enforced upon the lower classes, colonies (including Wales, Scotland and Ireland) and non-Protestants, who resisted at each point, and, in the case of the Scots and the Irish, ‘[e]mboldened by the victories they won’, moved onwards towards devolution and autonomy. With the economy facing decline in the regions, the Empire coming to an end, and Protestantism being attacked by secularisation and the growth of new non-Christian religions, English insensitivities led to the inevitable crisis of Britishness at the end of the twentieth century. He doubts whether the United Kingdom will last another century. Weight provides a detailed, clear and wide-ranging argument, but he assumes too easily that British
national identity is imposed, whereas Scottish, Welsh, Irish and English national identities are more organic and therefore more real and permanent. He does not confront the possibility that Scottishness, for example, might also serve the purposes of historic forces, such as a globalised capitalism that needs national peculiarities to create niche markets, or that it too has been historically linked to Protestantism that faces decline. Alternatively, and more likely, it might be suggested that, for much of the twentieth century, Britishness was an identity accepted, put together and lived by the majority of the people within the United Kingdom. It was certainly not the only identity. It was, as Robbins has argued, a blend of other national and regional identities, and as Colley has argued, an identity that in other ways existed above these identities.36

Robert Colls’ argument is that such multiple identities in the United Kingdom have been so unstable as to be doomed to inevitable destruction. Colls views Britishness as a much weaker force than Weight does. There existed a British state, he argues, but not in any real sense a British collective identity.37 There was Unionism, but this was political rather than cultural, and it was wrought with tensions. ‘How could one be authentically Scottish and loyally Unionist at the same time?’, he asks, referring to Tom Nairn’s argument that the dilemma entailed mental illness.38 Colls eventually comes to the conclusion that all national identities are fundamentally unstable, as he states that ‘it is difficult to think of a national identity – any national identity – that can be pluralist and normative at the same time’.39 In the British case, he thinks the crisis will emerge in an unavoidable constitutional dispute between the Scottish and British parliaments, since ‘no Scottish parliament, not even a Unionist one, is going to miss the opportunity of using the Edinburgh parliament against the London one’.40 He also argues that the state and Englishness belonged to the dominant, male classes and that women in particular found themselves outside the state, as the evidence of miners’ wives and Greenham Common feminist-pacifists in the 1980s indicates.41 Certainly, as chapter 2 of this book argues, women’s relationship to the nation has been ambiguous, but most women have felt comfortable within the nation, and have made great efforts to be part of the nation, rather than as Colls suggests locating themselves in the local and the universal but outside the nation.

Weight and Colls share the interpretation that Britishness and the British state have been in continual crisis from at least the 1940s, and that in the near future that crisis will not be able to resolve itself. The argument of this book is that the period from the 1870s to the present has been about the continuing definition of Britishness. Britishness has continued to be made across the whole of the period. While there are certainly deep tensions, Britishness is still in formation. In the period between 1870 and 1914 this was on the basis of a widespread adherence to the monarchy and the British Empire, but was also associated with the strength of the British global economy. Between 1914 and 1945 the context of the development of British national identity changed. The Empire remained a central part of Britishness. But the economy had weakened. This enabled the emergence of nationalist parties in Scotland and Wales, but
most people in those countries continued to believe they were British, looking to the Conservatives deliberately to uphold the Union or to the Labour Party to provide all-British solutions to all-British problems of economic weakness. In addition in this period, two World Wars contributed powerfully to the sense that the British had common purpose. Out of the second of these wars emerged a new form of Britishness that entered into people’s everyday lives through a national welfare state.

The dismantling of the British Empire between the 1940s and the 1990s removed a major prop to Britishness. The monarchy, weakened by the end of its imperial role, did however provide a sedative to relieve some of the pain of the loss of Empire. The legacy of Empire, mass non-white immigration, challenged the racialised version of Britishness that rested on a myth of ethnic homogeneity. The 1960s and 1970s saw political nationalism grow stronger in Wales and Scotland, and the re-emergence of the impact of Irish nationalism in Britain (it had never gone away in Northern Ireland). This was the moment when the end of Britain began to be widely predicted. But the prophecy of change is more exciting than the prophecy of continuity, even where the forces of continuity are far stronger. Thatcher’s election victory in 1979, even if it was based on only just over 40 per cent of the votes cast, did suggest a desire for territorial integrity and political order. The ‘project’ of the Thatcher governments was to make Britain great again, in the face of a sense of decline. That four general elections were won by the Conservatives (one under John Major, no less a Unionist than Thatcher) should suggest the strength of Britishness in this period. But it was not only Conservatives who felt British. Despite massive social divisions in early 1980s Britain, a survey undertaken by Richard Rose suggested that 86 per cent of people in Britain were ‘proud’ to be British. The survey was conducted before the Falklands War. Rose went further though. His research suggested that while the proportions differed between those who were ‘very proud’ and ‘quite proud’ in England, Wales and Scotland, the totals of those who were proud in each nation were the same. He concluded that, ‘Because national pride is so widespread in Britain, it is normal in the literal sense, that is, it is the norm to which nearly everyone conforms.’

Thatcherism, however, was also in the process of removing yet another prop of Britishness. The welfare state had been constructed around Labour’s version of Britishness forged in the Second World War and afterwards. Most people were proud of the welfare state as a ‘British’ institution, but Thatcher who claimed to be a British patriot proclaimed her intention to make people less dependent on the state. In this circumstance there was a substantial rise in support for devolution of power and, in some cases, for independence for Scotland and Wales. The break-up of Britain, it seemed, was back on the agenda. Certainly things had changed. Many young people, Scots, Welsh and English, saw national identity as less important than a huge variety of other identities. Their cultural influences were localised versions of a global culture – of black music, of Asian and Italian food, of drugs from Morocco and the Lebanon that were trafficked through European cities such as Amsterdam. At the same time,
the landslide election of Labour in 1997 brought to Westminster a government with a more flexible attitude to national identity than any since the pluralist Liberal governments of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. That British pluralism emerges at the same time as demands for change accounts for the ability of Britishness to adapt to changing circumstances. But this should be seen not as the product of some unionist or English conspiracy but rather as a reflection of the adaptive sense of Britishness of much of the United Kingdom population. This returns us to the basic premise of this book, that people have been actively engaged in the construction of British national identity, and that this too has made Britishness a resilient force.

Some will say, an ‘English’ historian would say that, wouldn’t he. It is worth therefore coming clean in advance. I was born in the south-east of England, to parents born in England (one in east London, the other in Newcastle upon Tyne). Until I was thirty-five I lived and worked in the south-east, then I moved to Huddersfield. But such a description hides a range of conflicts in my own ‘British’ identity. Both my parents had Irish surnames, Moran on my mother’s side and Ward on my father’s. An academic colleague from Northern Ireland used to mock me that they were Irish ‘knacker’ names. I went to a Catholic primary school in a garrison town during the Provisional IRA’s campaign against mainland Britain. Each morning my brothers and sisters and I had to walk past a Church of England school where our right to be resident in Britain was sometimes questioned. Our school was subject to numerous retaliatory bomb threats after each IRA attack. Perhaps it was these experiences that led to my first political activism around the fringes of the Socialist Workers’ Party in the late 1970s. I attended a Troops Out of Ireland meeting in, probably, 1978. I joined the Anti-Nazi League about the same time. My early politics already addressed the multi-national and multi-ethnic nature of the United Kingdom (not that I knew it). I eventually joined the SWP, which for a long time rejected identities of place entirely in favour of a workerist and internationalist identity. I was a loyal member for many years, but felt a little dismayed in the 1990s when the party refused to discuss a programme of political reform based on republicanism in the four nations of the United Kingdom. Somehow, and I think through the inspirational teaching of John Ramsden, a Conservative historian with a much more open mind than I had, I ended up researching the relationship of the labour movement and national identity in Britain between the 1880s and 1920s. This suggested to me, first, that people do adopt multiple identities of class, socialism and nation, even when people like me did not want them to, but secondly that the break-up of Britain would be a progressive act, breaking with an imperialist and monarchist (British, not English) past. But the achievement of this progressive act is much more difficult than those like Nairn, my political allies in many ways, suggest. This book seeks to explain the strength of Britishness, because it constantly amazes me: I see identities other than those of class no longer as false consciousness, but as part of the complexity of being human. I remain, after ten years of academic research on national identity, ambiguous in my attitude to Britishness. I now take it for granted that the vast
majority of people do adopt national identities (even though these are historical constructions they are no less real) and I would far rather see the emergence of an open and inclusive version of Britishness that not only welcomed diversity but was constituted of that diversity than I would the emergence of a racialised Englishness in response to the break-up of the United Kingdom. It is hard being Anglo-British right now. But then, it has never been straightforward. And it has frequently been harder being ruled by the Anglo-British.

This book has been self-consciously written as a history book. It does not (often) seek to make political judgements on the past. Given its wide scope, it relies on the work of other historians in many ways, but in parts it is based on archival research of printed and non-printed sources, on diaries, letters, newspapers, pamphlets and contemporary books. It uses quantitative sources where they have been available, but it tends to make greater use of qualitative sources because they cast greater light on the complexities of individual and collective identities. It has tried to retain a Britannic rather than Anglocentric approach in each chapter. It seeks to examine, across a range of themes, the forces that have contributed to a sense of Britishness, while also giving due weight to the ways in which Britishness has been mediated by other identities, such as those of class, gender, region, ethnicity and the sense of belonging to England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland. It also looks at some of the processes by which adherence to Britishness has been encouraged or discouraged by politics, leisure and other forms of culture. Each chapter seeks to examine the whole period from 1870 to the present, though the focus in each differs in order to enable some detailed discussion. There has, of course, been a process of selection. National identity intersects with a wide variety of other identities, and impacts upon people’s lives in numerous ways. Religion might, for example, have been given a separate chapter, or analysis of national identity by age across the period might have been undertaken. These issues have not been ignored, but the chapters have been constructed around what I considered the most important themes, which could also incorporate and organise discussion of the abundance of areas in which Britishness had played a part.

In the first chapter, the relationship of the various national identities of the United Kingdom with the monarchy and Empire are examined. Between the 1870s and 1950s, the rule of the British and their kith and kin overseas was perhaps the most significant aspect of Britain’s world image. The extent to which the British themselves internalised this image has been strongly debated, not least because the answer to this enigma has so much bearing upon the impact of the end of Empire on the British and Britishness. The monarchy pre- and post-dated the British Empire. Royalty in Britain gloated over its imperial role and retained a sense of imperial mission long after the Empire had transformed itself into a ‘Commonwealth’ that really did not look to Britain for leadership. The chapter considers the ways in which the royal family has been seen as central to British national identity in the imperial and post-imperial United Kingdom. It suggests that the British monarchy provided a way in which diversity and unity could be celebrated, not as something imposed from
above, but through the participation of thousands, indeed millions, of people. The monarchy validated different social and national identities, while stressing unity within the kingdom.

Chapter 2 examines a different sort of identity, that of gender. Its purpose is to show that Britishness has been mediated by other identities that the British have adopted, in this case of being men and women. It argues that while Britishness has often privileged males with most significance, women have not been any less enthusiastic in asserting their Britishness. It also addresses the argument that Britishness has become ‘feminised’ since the end of the First World War and that the association of the British nation with the family acted as an important component in the war of ideas against Nazi Germany but also tended to exclude non-white people from Britishness after 1945. It concludes by arguing that the perception of a breakdown of traditional family life since the 1960s has contributed to a sense of the break-up of Britishness.

There is a change of direction in chapter 3, which in its first part focuses on the historiographical debate about the relationship between towns, the countryside and the idea of national identity. It argues that the association of Britishness with a rural idyll has been exaggerated, and that the urban has been incorporated substantially into ideas of national identity. This is confirmed by the continuing hold that myths about the Second World War have within ‘British’ memory, but also by the reinforcement to a sense of Britishness provided by regional identities within England, identities which tend to be based on urban experiences: scousers are Britons from urban Liverpool, Brummies are Britons from urban Birmingham, Geordies are Britons from urban Newcastle. Yorkshire is associated as much with Bradford and Huddersfield as it is with the Dales and the North York Moors.

Chapter 4 trawls through various aspects of popular culture in order to examine the ways in which Britishness has been part of the everyday experience of Britons in the last 130 years. It discusses the contradictory, yet simultaneous, processes by which sport in the United Kingdom has acted both to unite and divide collective identities. There is nothing more English than cricket, or more Welsh than rugby, for example. The chapter also considers the central role holidays have played in the construction of Britons’ images of themselves. Finally the chapter explores culture as a site of conflict over the influence of the UK’s most important ally since 1917, the United States of America. The USA may have aided British victory in 1918, 1945 and the Cold War, but for many it has been seen as at the cost of Americanisation of British culture.

Chapter 5 examines the political contests over national identity in Britain since the late nineteenth century. It argues that the ownership of patriotism has never been firmly in the hands of one party or another, and that, for the major parties at least, the extent to which they shared ideas about what it meant to be British confirmed the basic stability of British politics. At the same time, it meant that the electoral advantage of being associated with the dominant ideas of Britishness was transferable. In 1900, the Conservatives won a khaki election, but in 1906 they lost another, given that the election was fought on issues
associated with the impact of the war in South Africa (Tariff Reform, ‘Chinese slavery’, ‘national efficiency’). This happened again when the Conservatives won, as part of a National coalition in 1931 and 1935, but were devastated by Labour’s victory in the khaki election of 1945. The last part of the chapter examines the political debates over European integration since the 1960s.

Chapters 6 and 7 are substantially longer than the others, because they address what are currently considered the most important aspects of Britishness since the 1960s. Chapter 6 discusses the relationship between ‘ethnicity’ and Britishness. It seeks to address the experience of both immigrants and their descendants and the ‘host community’ in coming to terms with the diverse nature of the population of the United Kingdom. As far as I know, nobody has been assaulted or murdered over the issue of European integration, yet the right of non-white and other immigrants and their descendants to be British has frequently been violently opposed in the United Kingdom. The chapter attempts to examine the wide variety of experiences of the encounter with Britishness raised by the global nature of the human population. The chapter does examine the simultaneous sense of separateness and integration within the UK. While it certainly does not seek to provide a whig view of progressive acceptance, it does take a fundamentally optimistic view of the ability of Britishness to become a diverse collective identity. It places the emphasis here on the post-colonial confidence of young black and Asian Britons since the 1980s rather than on any innate tolerance associated with being British.

The final chapter examines the experiences of Ireland, Scotland and Wales within the United Kingdom. Its fundamental argument is that people in these nations have been central to the construction of Britishness in the last 130 years. It does not underestimate the extent to which Britishness has been contested and opposed, particularly in Ireland and Northern Ireland. It does, however, argue that in Ireland until 1916 the majority of the population supported continued association with Britain at the same time as demanding limited political devolution. It suggests, therefore, that in different historical circumstances certainly, it is possible for Britishness to survive the challenge of devolution in the present. It suggests that unionism has been a much stronger force in the United Kingdom than the electoral support of the Conservative Party alone suggests, because, in fact, the Liberal and Labour Parties, not to mention more radical parties such as the Communist Party of Great Britain and the British National Party, have been unionist. Northern Ireland is different, because for possibly a majority of the nationalist population there, the fundamental damage to their tolerance towards Britain was inflicted between 1916 and 1921. Virtually nothing that the Unionist state did between 1921 and 1972 was intended to repair that damage, and the British state has participated in the continuing alienation of the Catholic northern Irish.

Ernest Renan, a French writer on national identity in the late nineteenth century, suggested that nations were ‘not something eternal. They had their beginnings and they will end.’ They existed, he said, by virtue of ‘daily plebiscites’ by their members.43 This provides an essential warning that nations
and national identity are not permanent and unchanging, that they are the products of constant recomposition, renegotiation, contest and debate. The inevitability of the transitory nature of nations does not, however, mean that the end has arrived for Britishness. This book argues that in Britain between the 1870s and the beginning of the twenty-first century the majority of people in the United Kingdom came through such discussions of their national identities with a belief that they shared more in common, as Britons, than they had differences. Certainly the nature of Britishness had changed, and in many ways had been weakened, but Britishness was alive and well.
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