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ENGLISHNESS, ALIVE AND WELL IN THE MIDDLE AGES?

by Kristen Lee Over

A. D. M. Barrell, *Medieval Scotland* **(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000) x + 296 pp, 3 maps.**
Robert Bartlett, *England Under the Norman and Angevin Kings, 1075–1225* **(Oxford: Clarendon Press 2000) xxx + 772 pp; plates, maps, tables.**
Graeme J. White, *Restoration and Reform 1153–1165: Recovery from Civil War in England* **(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000) xvii + 248 pp.**

For several years we have heard talk of the "crisis" of modern English-ness that has arisen out of political decentralization and fragmentation, out of declining, devolving empire and reemergent nation-states.[1] Popular culture has translated such crisis into the more dramatic threat of identity loss.[2] To be sure, current trends toward increased regional autonomy in Great Britain have put the reality of contentious, internal differences at the forefront of discussions of Britishness, not only making tenuous any clear notion of nation or national identity deline-ated under colonialisms but reflecting the changing status of the tradi-tional others—the "peripheries" and "satellites" of a now past Em-pire—by which England has long defined itself. By realigning national or regional identities with political autonomy, the power-sharing as-semblies of Ireland and Wales, the parliament of Scotland, and talks of a "me-too" parliament for England[3] are theoretically as well as practi-cally dismantling the political unity of the United Kingdom.

A growing collection of critical work in the field of medieval stud-

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[1] Thatcher-era conflation of British and English history only heightened the difficulty in defining a nation built on continuous conflict with its colonial peripheries. See, for instance, Salman Rushdie, "The New Empire within Britain" in *Imaginary Homelands* (London 1991) 129–138; and Simon Gikandi, *Maps of Englishness: Writing Identity in the Culture of Colonialism* (New York 1996). Such crisis is not peculiar to England, of course. See the referendum analyses in Bridget Taylor and Katarina Thomson, eds., *Scot-land and Wales: Nations Again?* (Cardiff 1999); also John Osmond, "Does Wales Need a National Newspaper?," *Planet: The Welsh Internationalist* 123 (1997) 23–34.

[2] As in Julian Stapleton's review article from the *Guardian*, "Whatever happened to Englishness?," (Friday, November 4, 1994); or Marjorie Miller's article in the *LA Times* (Wednesday, June 9, 1999), "Will There Always be an England?," with its opening tag-line: "as the Celtic fringe frays, an identity crisis brews at Britain's core."

[3] The term is David Walker's, wondering what will happen to England in the aftermath of both a Scottish parliament and a Welsh assembly ("It's Coming Home, Maybe," the *Guardian*, Tuesday, April 13, 1999).

ies, similarly concerned with rethinking the complexities of ethnic or national identity, has grounded the exploration of both medieval colonialisms and the processes of medieval nation-building in postcolonial thought.[4] This work is compelling and important for several reasons, not the least of which for its direct challenge to the temporal and historical limits of postcolonial precepts—particularly the lingering modern theoretical assumption that the medieval period was necessarily prenational, or, to use Etienne Balibar's phrase, "non-national."[5] My point here is not to reprise the still problematic debate on the medieval European nation.[6] Neither do I mean to force "ethnicity" into every account of twelfth-century Britain. I want rather to highlight the relative lack of such concerns in three recent studies of post-Conquest insular history: a one-volume history of medieval Scotland, a detailed reassessment of the first decade of Henry II's reign, and an exhaustive 800-page study of kingship and culture in England between 1075–1225. All three overlap in coverage of a period identified by some literary historians[7] as a moment of national vernacularization and intensified collective mythmaking; yet the works considered here for the most

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[4]Notable examples include: Simon Forde, Lesley Johnson, and Alan V. Murray, eds., *Concepts of National Identity in the Middle Ages* (Leeds 1995); Kathleen Davis, "National Writing in the Ninth Century: A Reminder for Postcolonial Thinking About the Nation," *Journal of Medieval and Modern Studies* 28: 3 (1998) 611–637; Michelle R. Warren, "Making Contact: Postcolonial Perspectives through Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britannie*," *Arthuriana* 8: 4 (1998) 115–134; Kathleen Biddick, *The Shock of Medievalism* (Durham and London 1998) 3–12; Paul Freedman and Gabrielle M. Spiegel, "Medievalism Old and New: The Rediscovery of Alterity in North American Medieval Studies," *American Historical Review* 103: 3 (June 1998) 677–704; Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Introduction: Midcolonial" in *The Postcolonial Middle Ages*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (New York 2000) 1–17.

[5]Etienne Balibar, "The Nation Form: History and Ideology" in *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, ed. Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, trans. Chris Turner (London 1991) 88. As remarked by Kathleen Davis [(n. 4 above) 612], "Balibar thus defines the Middle Ages as a negative in terms of a modern positive."

[6]Standard accounts include: Bernard Guenée, "État et nation en France au Moyen Age," *Revue Historique* 237: 1 (1967) 17–30; Karl Ferdinand Werner, "Les Nations et le sentiment national dans l'Europe médiévale" in *Structures Politiques du Monde Franc (VIe–XIIe siècles)* (London 1979) [reprint from *Revue historique* 244 (1970)] 285–304; Susan Reynolds, "Medieval *Origines Gentium* and the Community of the Realm," *History* 68: 224 (1983) 375–90; Josep R. Llobera, "State and Nation in Medieval France," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 7: 3 (1994) 343–62.

[7]For instance: Warren (n. 4 above); Michelle R. Warren, *History on the Edge: Excalibur and the Borders of Britain, 1100–1300* (Minneapolis and London 2000); Ian Short, "Patrons and Polyglots: French Literature in Twelfth-Century England" in *Anglo-Norman Studies XIV: Proceedings of the Battle Conference 1991*, ed. Marjorie Chibnall (Woodbridge 1992) 229–249.

part leave aside questions of cultural ideology and the construction of sociopolitical communities, and despite the close attention paid to the development of state apparatuses and governmental structures they do not engage the problem of distinct insular identities. A largely straightforward portrait of Norman and Angevin England results: an England that subsumes Scotland as if by accident and remains uncomplicated by tensions between language and race, mythical past, or geography.

No such "modern" colonial crisis afflicts A. D. M. Barrell's *Medieval Scotland*, for instance, whose recent addition to the Cambridge Textbook series offers up a brand of apologetic amnesia that seems overly concerned with clouding the colonial tensions that eventually absorbed the kingdom of Scotland into England. Focusing in eight chapters on the political and ecclesiastical aspects of Scottish history from the mid eleventh century to the Protestant Reformation, Barrell covers the development of state institutions and charts what is, to him, the relatively late origins of Scottish national identity (vii). Limitations of a one-volume history aside, it is this latter aim, directed presumably in response to the scholarly trend mentioned above, that distinguishes each chapter of his history. Thus did Malcolm III's (d. 1093) marriage to the granddaughter of the great English king Edward Ironside inaugurate "the process whereby Scotland was drawn from Celtic introspection into the international family of European states" (14).[8] The nebulous and never-defined ethnic category of Celt represents for Barrell the historical phase out of which Scotland emerged,[9] drawn into medieval modernity thanks to unproblematic foreign contact and influence.[10] Malcolm is deemed an "outward-looking reformer" for having English adherents (14)—this despite the fact that the "foreigners" were expelled from the royal court immediately upon Malcolm's death in 1093.[11] Later support by the Norman kings of England for Malcolm's half-English sons is viewed as a crucial link "in the introduction of administrative and social changes in twelfth-century Scotland." In the imme-

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[8]And again at 15, where the principal schema of medieval Scottish history is envisioned as the progressive development from "a traditional Celtic society" to a kingdom "which could take its place among the states of Western Europe."

[9]Barrell seems throughout his history to employ "Celt" as representative of the kind of primitive, "naïve," tribal solidarity thought at one time to predate political and economic communities. See Werner (n. 6 above) 285.

[10]"Unproblematic" in the sense of Barrell's relatively easy use of the terms English and Anglo-Norman, compared to his anxiety about using the term Scottish to refer to either a political or an ethnic community.

[11]In a battle of primogeniture, uncomplicated by any dimension of ethnicity (14).

diate context of the 1090s a natural process of cultural absorption thus defines nascent Scottish identity as assimilative, and Barrell cautions against "according too much significance" to the ethnic tensions caused by external influences on political change in Scotland (15, 88).

This perception colors the king portrait of Malcolm's son, David I, who shared his father's "outward" gaze by deliberately encouraging immigrant settlements of Saxon-English, Normans, and Flemish (19). Barrell equates such "new-fangled ideas" with a royal policy of "Normanization," euphemistically crediting Scottish political innovation to adopted "Anglo-Norman values" (26). "Successful governance" of Scotland thus depended on "the assimilation of new ideas"—new ideas associated precisely with "the impact of Anglo-Norman immigration" (19). A "fairly routine" recognition of Scottish military inferiority, as well as accepted vassal status vis-à-vis England, complete Barrell's account of David's reign (70–72).[12] Yet Barrell shies away from the implications of his insistence on David's assimilative policies: in reference to the thirteenth-century northern uprisings against David's patronage of Norman immigrants, Barrell finds it "unhelpful" to see such rebellion as a "Celtic reaction to Anglo-Norman settlement" (82). Ambiguous celticity indeed has no place in this context, and Barrell is surely correct to see here a reaction against the exercise of royal government. Yet in his haste to discount any ethnic dimension to the uprising, Barrell neglects the possibility of a more local outrage against royal policies of granting land to foreign immigrants (82–88).

Elsewhere Barrell warns against seeing "a deliberate policy of English imperialism" in Edward I's arbitration of Scottish succession (97)—arbitration that made Edward legal overlord of Scottish kings. We are likewise cautioned against reading retrospective historiography in the 1320 Declaration of Arbroath,[13] directed to beware its expression of the "community of the realm" and to ignore its provocative suggestiveness because (despite the text itself) "notions of exclusive national identities and ethnic purity were alien," and we cannot ascribe "to medieval men and women a concept of the "nation state" which was alien to contemporary mentalities" (129–135). Barrell's point, that there was

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[12]There is no mention of the king's role as one of the three royal powers vying for extended control over northern England during Stephen's reign. Compare, for instance, Graeme J. White's account of David's government of northern England, *Restoration and Reform*, 50–55.

[13]Described by Susan Reynolds as "one of the most eloquent statements of regnal solidarity to come out of the middle ages" (n. 6 above) 385.

no Scottish state, demands further attention, just as his late assertion of an ethnic Scottish community[14] seems to fly in the face of his cautionary skepticism.

I have paused briefly on Barrell's reticence to discern and complicate medieval Scottish identity, a hesitation that paints far too clear-cut a picture of developing political structures. But this is not the only aspect of his history that fails to provide an accessible read for its intended audience of university undergraduates. In chapter 5 ("The Wars of Independence"), for instance, John Balliol's alliance with France—deemed "the cornerstone of Scottish foreign policy," 105—escapes developed explanation and detail; Barrell instead refers enigmatically to "the embassy to France" (105), and later mentions the "Franco-Scottish alliance" without further embellishment (106). Throughout chapter 6 ("The Stewart Kings"), the "Guardianship" system of government remains similarly unexplained, and dates are at times difficult to follow and at others omitted entirely. There are obvious limitations to covering 500 years of history in less than 300 pages. Even so, Barrell's *Medieval Scotland* raises more questions than it answers, not least in its over-simplified presentation of the problematic of Scottish national identity.

From the opening page of *Restoration and Reform 1153–1165: Recovery from Civil War in England*, Graeme J. White seeks to complicate the standard view of a nineteen-year "anarchy" between the reigns of Henry I and Henry II.[15] To this end, White devotes the first 2 of 5 chapters to setting the political context and detailing the governance of England during King Stephen's reign, recasting Stephen as an able battle commander, a negotiator of careful calculation, and as a ruler who—in "no mean achievement" (1)—maintained the administrative tradition of Henry I.[16] Stephen certainly had his weaknesses. His early decision to use earldoms as a "cheap form of patronage," for one, enabled a level of baronial independence that only increased the fragmentation of

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[14]"Resistance to Edward I and his successors was the unifying force which encouraged the inhabitants of Scotland to regard themselves as different from the English" (135).

[15]Lawlessness and disorder, yes. Anarchy, no (75–76). Indeed, "if orderly government could be so effectively imposed by a king who spent most of his time elsewhere, had England truly descended in to "Anarchy"?" (11).

[16]It was largely business as usual following Stephen's coup of 1135: financial and judicial systems remained unchanged, and Stephen retained many of Henry I's officials (22).

his government once the civil war began (34–35, 55–76). As to char-
acter, Stephen was perceived to be "open to manipulation;" and his
volatile predilection for unprovoked arrests did little to earn him favor
among those in his "peace" (2–3, 23–26). Yet much in White's detailed
study demonstrates that Henry II's success in both rebuilding royal
authority and imposing orderly government relied in large measure on
the foundations laid by Stephen;[17] for this, White's work offers a criti-
cal contribution to current scholarship on twelfth-century insular king-
ship.

The dates of White's title focus, however, not on Stephen's reign but
on the long decade between the peace settlement at Winchester—when
Stephen passed over his own son to name Henry of Anjou his heir—
and 1165, a year prior to the judicial reform of 1166 but enough after
the financial and legal initiatives of 1163 to "assess their significance"
(xi–xii). Chapter 3 ("Personnel and Property") examines Henry's rela-
tionship with his administrative personnel (his magnates, household,
and servants), delineating the two-fold project of the early years of his
reign to both superimpose his own royal authority over the lingering
vestiges of Stephen's (111–127),[18] and to deliberately and systemati-
cally break comital control by divorcing his earls from any role in the
administration of local government (89–90). Financial recovery pro-
vides the focus of chapter 4, and despite the limits and inconsistencies
of available sources,[19] White outlines the procedural reform measures
of 1163 that reestablished the king's income.[20] In chapter 5, the "water-
shed year" of 1163 continues to dominate the discussion of Henry's
legal administration, and White details the innovative "shift in royal
policy" that produced the Constitutions of Clarendon and effectively

[17]Particularly with regard to the "innovative vitality" of Stephen's administration of
justice and the "decisive advancements" he made in developing judicial writs (32); also
and perhaps unexpectedly in terms of the initiatives begun by Stephen in 1141 (with
admittedly little effect) to reduce the local authority of his earls (89–90). White maintains
that the civil war never posed a serious threat to the ideological "principle of royal gov-
ernment over the kingdom as a whole," that it was precisely the expectation of sustained
royal authority that provided the basis for Henry II's restoration (64–65).

[18]"Respect for hereditary rights which predated 1135 and denial of those originating
under Stephen characterized Henry II's approach to the succession of land" as well as to
the succession of household office (81–82).

[19]Evidence from pipe rolls is limited (130–131), and the itinerancy of the treasury,
chamber, and exchequer render obscure their activities (131–137, 158).

[20]While efforts were made to introduce greater consistency into the pipe rolls after
1163 (137–148), myriad forms of taxation were levied to ensure financial recovery of the
realm (150–157).

extended and increased the scope of royal justice (161–199).[21] Reconstruction of royal government as well as restoration of land and administrative processes thus proved to be the primary directives of the early years of Henry's reign.

As outstanding as White's study is for its reassessment of both Stephen's rule and the early years of Henry II's reign, it is only in light of Robert Bartlett's monumental addition to the New Oxford History of England series—*England Under the Norman and Angevin Kings, 1075–1225*—that the period covering the reigns of Henry I, Stephen, and Henry II comes to life as a French dynastic struggle for colonial insular dominion. Far from suggesting any kind of modern identity crisis, Bartlett yet recognizes and highlights the distinct and contentious groups sharing the Island despite separate language, law, and history.[22] Missing, in this regard, from White's monograph, is any developed mention of the cross-Channel dimensions of post-Conquest English kingship. Of course White makes no claim to write cultural or social history, which is precisely the uncommon breadth provided by Bartlett, whose single volume combines careful assessments not only of political and class formations (parts 1–3), but of warfare (part 4), rural and urban demography (parts 6–7), the Church and religion (parts 8–9), "cultural patterns" of language, literature, education, and art (part 10), life patterns of childhood, marriage, and death (part 11), and concepts of time, the world, and the Great Chain of Being (part 12). Roughly 65 pages of indexing make this encyclopedic work accessible as well as invaluable to the serious student.

Bartlett's coverage of the same period honed in on by both Barrell and White is exemplary of an increasingly interdisciplinary approach to writing medieval history. Whereas Barrell and White tend to perpetuate a false opposition between their clear-cut political spheres of Middle Age Britain and the more complex cultural and political boundaries of our own modern world, Bartlett provides a portrait of multiethnic and multilinguistic complexity that displaces the dichotomy between me-

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[21]Essential here was not only an increased involvement of itinerant royal courts (a revival of regular, systematic judicial eyres); more importantly, although he conceded the Church's exclusive jurisdiction over free alms land and its right to try accused clerks, Henry otherwise succeeded in reviving the laws and customs of his grandfather's reign (196–1997).

[22]Chapter 2, for instance, first situates French-ruled England in relation to Wales, Scotland, Ireland, and the Church; then looks beyond Britain to consider England's role in Germany, the Mediterranean, and in the Crusades (68–120).

dieval and modern. Medieval "Englishness" deserves just such reassessment.

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