

Krishan Kumar

The Making of English National Identity

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Canadians can become uneasy if pressed to describe the “Canadian identity.” Most have likely wondered what characterises “Canadian nationalism” if indeed it exists at all; some have looked warily, maybe even a little longingly, to other nationalisms and asked, “Why don’t we have one of those?” Canadians’ inability to say who they are is a condition apparently shared by the English who, when confronted with the same question, can become similarly flustered. But whereas the consternation of Canadians stems from the difficulties associated with creating a unified identity from an array of regionalisms, the English face much the opposite problem: how does one delineate a unique identity for a “nation” that has so long been held virtually synonymous with a larger entity, Great Britain? The task is akin to finding an “Ontario identity” for central Canadians accepting of their role as Canadian nationalists. It does not mean that such an identity does not exist; it is just that it has so long been superseded by other representations that it will take some work to find it.

If all this analogising seems improbable it nevertheless depicts the job facing Krishan Kumar in his most recent book, *The Making of English National Identity*. The devolution of British governance since the late 1990s, Kumar says, has forced the English to confront themselves without the added appendages of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. A “stand alone” England in Europe and the world is now a possibility. But what is England apart from its “sister kingdoms?” More importantly, asks Kumar, what is an “Englishman” without his empire?

As an “Ontario identity” would require some digging to discover, an English national identity is not readily discernible, and certainly not available by asking. Indeed, Kumar notes at the beginning of the work that “English national identity cannot be found from within the consciousness of the English themselves” (17). Rather, he writes, “we have to work from the outside in,” piecing together the components of an identity from external sources. The result is a wide-ranging discussion in search of the essence of Englishness, an analysis that draws upon myriad references, historical, sociological and literary, to produce an informative and entertaining narrative that is as likely to cite Shakespeare and Hardy as Hechter and Pocock.

Kumar’s work is located squarely in the “modernist” or “constructivist” tradition of nationalist writing. The English identity that Kumar eventually delivers is clearly a creation of and reaction to the forces of modernity rather than the expression of some “primordial” or centuries-old ethnic affection. Indeed, a good portion of the book is comprised of Kumar’s rejection of other writers who locate an English nationalism in earlier periods. Hence, the claim of Patrick Wormald, Adrian Hastings, and likeminded scholars that English national identity was formed in the eighth century with a full-blown English national consciousness evident by the fourteenth century is dismissed as an anachronistic reading of the past; Liah Greenfeld’s argument that English nationalism emerged in the sixteenth century assumes a more democratic and unified England than can be demonstrated; and the views of Hans Kohn and Gerald Newman that English nationalism appeared in the seventeenth or

eighteenth centuries, respectively, confuse a heightened identification among the English with the British empires, internal and external, with a discrete English national identity.

According to Kumar, there was no such thing as a distinct English national identity until the late nineteenth century when the English, facing a declining empire and strong expressions of nationalism in the British peripheries and on the continent, experienced a “moment of Englishness.” It was a cultural rather than a political event, a low-keyed affair incomparable to other “tub-thumping” declarations of nationhood characteristic of the time, yet recognisable as nationalism nevertheless. This was a restrained Whig nationalism that extolled English liberties and institutions, English pragmatism and hardheadedness, while celebrating the English countryside, the “south country” in particular, the England of tourist brochures. Though reserved, this image of Englishness, says Kumar, endured, and continues to inform the identity of the English today.

If a discrete English national identity is such a recent phenomenon, in what way did the English see themselves historically? Here Kumar follows closely the argument of Linda Colley in her *Britons: Forging the Nation* (1992), describing the English identity as bound tightly to British imperialism. Rather than holding a narrow, “ethnic,” view of themselves, Kumar describes the development of a wider, imperial identity among the English, established first through their dominance in the British Isles and later from the expansion of their overseas empire. This “missionary” or imperial identity as Kumar calls it cultivated among the English the sense that they were “too big” for conventional notions of nation as expressed on the continent, an identity that made it “unnecessary” for the English to ask the searching questions about themselves that other nations came to ponder.

With the demise of the external empire, and the growing nationalisms of the Celtic fringe threatening to splinter what remains of the “inner empire,” the English are now faced with two problems: an historical identity tied to a cause that no longer exists, and a cultural identity unable to integrate an increasingly diverse populace whose lived experience rejects the countrified, tweed-and-hounds image of the late-nineteenth century English. Although the outcome of this is yet to be seen, Kumar ends his journey with the hope that any “new” English nationalism that emerges will not be the “bad” ethnic kind of nationalism, narrow and intolerant, but the “good” civic kind of nationalism that could serve as an example to the world of the possibilities of a national identity inclusive of multiple *ethnies*.

To properly address the claims of these other writers, as well as put forth an argument of his own concerning the emergence of English national identity, it is necessary for Kumar to paint history with a broad brush, and this he does admirably. Not all will agree with his conclusions. While Kumar provides satisfactory histories of England’s subjugation of her peripheries, Welsh and certainly Irish nationalists might refute his subsequent portrayal of Great Britain as a quarrelsome but essentially integrated family of nations. Scottish nationalists would no doubt take issue with his assertion that “the Scots were not conquered by the English; they ‘Englished’ themselves” (78). The confidence with which Kumar moves through several centuries of English history and such a wide array of materials is nevertheless inspiring.

While his command of these works is impressive, what is less satisfying are Kumar’s arguments against earlier forms of English identity. Kumar uses as his reference point late nineteenth century nationalism, a nationalism that is cultural rather than political, democratic rather than exclusive, one

that represents a community over a civic collectivity. But despite his initial recommendation that “we should accept a degree of plasticity and variability in concepts of the nation, nationhood, and even nationalism” (30), when mining history for evidence of national identity, he ends up holding fast to the nineteenth-century definition when judging competing claims. Hence, the emotional attachment to England expressed by the politicised English aristocracy in the Middle Ages cannot count as English nationalism because “a nation composed of elites and expressing only elite-consciousness is not a nation” (48; see also 102-103); the loyalty declared by writers in France and England to the monarch in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is rejected because “royalism or ‘crown-centred patriotism’ is not nationalism” (92). While Kumar is correct in cautioning readers not to read nineteenth-century notions of nationalism into the past, surely the more restrictive political communities that prevailed before the masses were politicised were capable of experiencing a type of nationalistic fervour, a connection with others of “their kind,” even though this did not extend to the greater populace. Even an avowed modernist such as this reviewer found herself sympathising with the “primordialists” in response to Kumar’s rigid stance on this matter.

Further, there is something distinctly unsatisfying about his claim that English nationalism did not emerge at the height of British imperialism because it would have been “impolitic” for the English to “go about beating the drum.” To express an English nationalism comparable to other nations, Kumar writes, would have threatened the unity of the British empire. “The English could not simply celebrate themselves” (179), Kumar says, even though “there was a feeling that the English could stake a particular claim to having carved out the empire in the first place, and to have sustained it thereafter” (191). In other words, the English may have held a sense of self-importance relative to the other British peoples, but had the tact and political wherewithal to keep it to themselves. Providing little evidence to support this claim, it seems that Kumar’s interpretation of the development of an imperial identity among the English depends on our acceptance of what was yet to become a “national” characteristic and point of pride: their humility and predilection for understatement.

This would no doubt sit well with English readers and it is this, perhaps, that chafes at a non-English reviewer. There is a coziness to this book that, while it is a scholarly work, lends it a decidedly non-academic tone. It is a book about the English for the English. Which is fine; few others but Canadians would likely be interested in an exploration of an Ontario identity. But given the breadth of works on which he draws, and the comparative possibilities of his concept of “missionary” nationalism, Kumar could have worked toward a more expansive conclusion. There is truth in the title, however, and *The Making of English National Identity* is precisely what the author delivers.

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