Chapter Two: Very well, alone! Denying the narrative arc

The first chapter insisted that Brexit was a tale of two unions, not one, and that it was at least as likely to upset the British Union as the European Union. It is unsurprising that Philip Stephens' recent book *Britain alone* ends with the question: Would it be Britain alone or England alone?[1] Later this book will attempt to outline both how the British Union might hope to survive Brexit and how the European Union might reform itself after the withdrawal of the UK. But the book begins by considering what it is that so easily encourages a large number of people inside the UK in general, and England in particular, to relish the thought of being on their own in a world that is clearly becoming not only ever more inter-connected but also more dangerous.

In April 2010 the historian Niall Ferguson wrote an article in the *Financial Times* arguing that an excessive focus on the Third Reich and the Tudors was harming the teaching of history in British schools.[2] He pointed to a disturbing paradox. On the one hand, the general level of interest in history appeared to be high. Historians on television attracted large audiences and a large following for the books that followed their broadcasts (one million copies of Simon Schama's *History of Britain* were sold), while journalists like Jeremy Paxman and Andrew Marr reached mass audiences with historical material. But despite this high level of general interest, history was unpopular in British schools. It was not a compulsory part of the secondary school curriculum after the age of 14, which it continued to be in most other European countries. In 2009 only 4% of GCSEs taken were in history – fewer than sat the Design and Technology GCSE. Only 6% of 'A' levels taken were in history – more pupils sat 'A' level Psychology.

1 Stephens, *Britain Alone*, p. 418.

2 Ferguson, Niall. 'Too much Hitler and the Henrys', *Financial Times*, 9th April 2010.

The immediate presumption is that this must be because the teaching of history is littered with dates – it's a case of *1066 and all that*, the title of W.C. Sellar and R.J. Yeatman's famous satire written nearly a century ago. But Ferguson's take is different. What has gone from the teaching is what he calls a 'narrative arc', essentially the sort of historical overview that existed in Henrietta Elizabeth Marshall's *Our Island Story, A Child's History of England* published in 1905 (modern editions feel free to make the title a history of 'Britain') and is outlined in Brendan Simms' 'update' of that story, *Britain's Europe: A Thousand Years of Conflict and Cooperation*. Instead, students picked from a smorgasbord of unrelated topics – and when they did, a huge number of them chose to concentrate (for both GCSE and 'A' Level) on Hitler (studied by over half of GCSE candidates and four-fifths of 'A' Level students) and the Tudors. As Ferguson put it in his *Financial Times* article: 'Knowing the names of Henry VIII's six wives or the date of the Reichstag fire is no substitute for having a real historical education.'

Ferguson's article was a snapshot from a decade ago, and one must be careful about 'narrative arcs.' Some of those who, like the well-known British politician Michael Gove, criticise what they see as the 'unpatriotic' approach of history professionals, have done so in terms of claiming that their approach is essentially fragmentary, ignoring the single, unifying narrative of 'our island story.' But even if Gove is correct to call for the 'narrative arc' to be maintained, there is every reason not to make it describe a linear chronology of national progress.[3] Such a reading of the past is particularly associated with the idea of an 'ancient constitution' handed down through the ages. It is closely associated with the sovereignty of a parliament which, having thrown off the constraints of monarchy, gradually came to represent the will of the people and was always associated with the preservation of liberty. Such a narrative not only misrepresents the past but frustrates the attempt to develop a constitution which might keep the United Kingdom from fragmenting today. However, a false narrative is no reason for commending silence.

Nor does the recent concern to stress women's history or black history, for instance, undermine the concern for a narrative arc. No one can suppose that 'black history month' means abstracting people of colour from the flow of history and studying them in the abstract. A focus on Hypatia, mathematician, astronomer and philosopher, as an example of the importance of women in the

3 See Professor Matthew Watson's contribution to the LSE blog: 'Michael Gove's war on historians: extreme Whig history and Conservative curriculum reform', https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/michael-goves-war-on-historians/

history of philosophy, is going to place her in historical context and talk about Neoplatonist ideas in Alexandria, as well as the society in which she lived and (probably) died at the hands of a Christian mob. This is a case of strengthening the narrative arc, not abandoning it.

Ferguson is therefore right to have criticised a fixation on specific periods rather than placing them in the context of a long process of historical development. It could be argued that concentrating on the highlights is a natural part of studying history. But the highlights may be misleading when studied without their broader setting. Shorn of context – but only when shorn of context – these two periods of history can easily be seen in 'island fortress' terms. Taken in isolation, they bolster a belief that we do better on our own, tied to no one else. And it is precisely that belief which has helped to detach the United Kingdom from the European Union and now threatens to unravel the United Kingdom itself. For the 'Very well, alone!' attitude, the phrase in the famous David Low cartoon after the fall of France in 1940, with the shaking fist held high on the cliffs of Dover behind the protective moat of an angry sea, could easily transpose itself into an angry fist shaken across the border between (for instance) England and Scotland. That is why this book is a tale of two unions rather than one.

The Tudors

Take the first of the two periods mentioned by Ferguson. The Tudor period begins with England as a member of Christendom (or at least the Western half of it), a supranational organisation based on the Roman Catholic Church. Membership arguably began with the adoption of the Roman liturgy and Roman calendar at the Synod of Whitby in 664. For nearly 900 years after this, the English church was the church not 'of' but 'in' England. There was one English Pope during all this time, Adrian IV in the 12th Century.[4] There were also protest movements against the ecclesiastical establishment such as the Lollards, gathering pace as the Reformation approached, arguing for the equivalent of more

4 Norman Davies argues that 'the tradition in England until well into the twentieth century was to minimise if not deny completely the country's long association with the Papacy.' Of Adrian IV he comments wryly: 'He ascended the throne of St Peter in the same year as Henri Plantagenet ascended the throne of England. As things stand, this is not considered a particularly memorable achievement.' See *The Isles*, p. 339.

national autonomy where the form of Church services was concerned. The relevant issues concerned matters such as the chance to read the Bible in English translation (rather than in the Vulgate, the official Latin translation of the original Greek and Hebrew texts) and to celebrate communion in both kinds (receiving both the bread and the wine). The theological details are not essential: the point is that there should be a degree of what would today be termed subsidiarity, having the Bible available in the language spoken by the common people in one of the distant parts of Western Christendom, and tailoring the ritual practices of different areas to the needs of their inhabitants. Receiving communion in both kinds might seem irrelevant and abstruse; yet in its way it was the equivalent of any protest against an elite trying to reserve to itself the privileges of enhanced status. The priest who alone is entitled to receive the blood of Christ in an age of faith later became the male property-owner who alone was entitled to have a say in his nation's affairs during a time when democracy was beginning to establish itself.

In the reign of Henry VIII, these protest movements exploded into a decision to withdraw from the Western Christian establishment. How did this come about? Despite the influence of Lollardy and the writings of John Wycliffe among others, the divide was hardly ideological, in the sense of reflecting the deep theological issues like 'justification by faith' and 'predestination' that concerned the famous Protestant Reformers on the continent, Luther and Calvin. Indeed, Henry VIII seems to have been theologically conservative throughout his reign. He received the title *Fidei Defensor* (Defender of the Faith) from Leo X for an early work in support of the seven sacraments and defending papal supremacy. F.D. remains on British coins beside the sovereign's head to this day, the present monarch content to inherit the title awarded to his ancestor for defending the Catholic Church against the heretical ideas of Martin Luther. Indeed, Henry was steadfast in his opposition to Luther and spent several vacillating years trying to find a way of remarrying within the Church. In theological terms he wanted Catholicism without the Pope, just as some people in the UK would like the single market without the European Court of Justice. He didn't want the Protestant faith. In a famous speech to Parliament in 1545, towards the end of his life and ten years after the Acts cementing the break with Rome had been passed, Henry conceded that the Bible was now available to people in their mother-tongue but complained in his final speech to Parliament in 1545 about the way 'that most precious jewel, the Word of God, is disputed, rhymed, sung and jangled in every ale-house and tavern.' It was hardly

the words of a Protestant Reformer celebrating the power of Scripture. From Henry's point of view, he did not want anarchy breaking out in his realm.

He might have been bought off. Emphasis is always placed upon the issue of Henry's divorce, but there were other matters too, like his desire for a more prominent place inside Western Christendom, perhaps as Holy Roman Emperor, or through receiving a share in the new lands being opened up in South America (which ended up being divided between Spain and Portugal).[5] Naturally enough, the Pope's own room for manoeuvre was limited and there were plenty of other powerful monarchs insisting that such prizes should go to them. But it provides important perspective to recognise that Henry was interested in playing the power game from within the ecclesiastical establishment for as long as he could and had no ideological convictions motivating him to leave it.

Although these debates from nearly half a millennium ago are centred upon theological divisions that for most people would not be nearly so important today, a parallel with Brexit is not hard to discern. Whatever the influence of sheer passion (or lust) upon a King who is fated to be remembered above all for having had six wives, one can perfectly well see a purely political motivation for the break with Rome. It could even be described (to borrow the language of Nigel Farage) as an attempt to 'take back control' – or perhaps to take control for the first time. The Church of England that emerged had (and arguably has) no distinct theology. Despite Thomas Cromwell's attempt to portray the English Reformation in terms of a return to an older, purer state of affairs before papal corruption, (an argument repeated to more effect by Cardinal Newman as part of the nineteenth century Oxford Movement before his conversion to Rome) it was closer to the Caesaropapism of the Orthodox Church. In the best Byzantine tradition, Henry VIII was ensuring that he had a religion tailored to supporting his dynasty, the 'defender of the faith' managing to turn himself into the Ivan the Terrible of the Western church. Anglican theology would be bound by the interests of the English state rather than by external controls. It was for this reason that Henry VIII banned the study of canon law

5 Simms says that Henry saw himself as 'Europe's arbiter, no less.' See Simms, *Britain's Europe*, p.23. This was a view originally made clear by J.J.Scarisbrick's *Henry VIII*, in the chapter on 'The Renewal of the Hundred Years War', pp. 21–40. First published in 1968, Scarisbrick's book remains magisterial – a new edition by Yale University Press was published as recently as 2011.

and made it treasonable to contact Roman jurists. For canon law was something that applied throughout Christendom. It was an example of supranational law, a higher legal order than that which exists at the national level. For this reason, canon law has sometimes been seen as anticipating the supranational law which Robert Schuman introduced through the Treaty of Paris establishing the Coal and Steel Community.[6] Some critics of the Schuman Plan, noting the fact that five of the six original members of the European Community were overwhelmingly Catholic and the sixth, West Germany, was evenly divided between Protestants and Catholics, even managed to see in the formation of the EEC a Catholic plot to restore mediaeval Christendom.

When Henry's divorce from Catherine became unavoidable, the popular mind was steered towards certain perceptions of Rome, just as it has more recently been steered towards certain perceptions of Brussels. Rome was presented as a centre of indulgence and corruption, full of pampered prelates, just as Brussels is seen as full of over-paid bureaucrats. As John Wycliffe had attested more than a century earlier, the criticism was not without foundation. Similarly, the financial arrangements of the time were interpreted to mean that a lot of money streamed out of England to the hotbed of corruption in Rome, while nothing was ever seen as coming in the other direction. An act concerning 'Peter's Pence' (1534) ended financial contributions to Rome, the equivalent of ending the UK's contribution of 1% of GDP to the EU budget. In fact, in Henry's case it was much clearer than it is today in the context of Brexit that there were financial advantages to be had from leaving. The dissolution of the monasteries (1536) brought considerable benefits to the Crown, which acquired a great deal of land that could be redistributed to Henry's supporters.

In the end, the son that Henry VIII had so desperately sought to have turned into the traditional 'sickly boy' who doesn't survive, and ironically it was his two daughters, both strong women in different ways, who survived and (at least in the case of Elizabeth) showed that the country could prosper in a Hexit environment. An attempted Spanish invasion was foiled by Francis Drake (but with crucial help from the Dutch that is often under-stated), while the nation's wealth increased through the buccaneering equivalents of modern venture capitalists. A cultural Renaissance through Marvell, Shakespeare and others completed the picture. England (plus Wales, which was effectively

6 See A.C. Fimister's *Neo Scholastic Humanism and the Reunification of Europe.* Fimister's book is one of the few to give serious attention to the influence of conceptions of mediaeval Christendom upon the 'fathers' of the European Union.

annexed in 1536) went on to become a successful trading nation open to the whole world, as the Brexiteers have convinced themselves that it will now. Nothing could better respond to their hopes than a connection between the end of the second Elizabethan age and the glories of the first Elizabethan age, when a generation after the break with Rome England began to 'connect' with the rest of the world through the development of ships that were able to cross oceans. All the trade deals 'waiting to be had' after throwing off the shackles of EU legislation provide the equivalent of the exploits of those Elizabethan adventurers.

Reconfiguration through the narrative arc

This is, of course, a far from complete account of the century in question, but what would immediately render its incompleteness clear is the recovery of Ferguson's 'narrative arc' that was mentioned earlier. It needs an examination of the century that followed when England was plunged into what used to be called the 'English Civil War' but is now more often referred to as the 'War of the Three Kingdoms'. It also needs an examination of the century before, when England came to terms with the loss of territories in France at the end of the Hundred Years War. It is the picking and choosing that by focusing on a particular period obscures the complexities of England's (and later Britain's) real past.

If, for instance, we take the narrative arc backwards and follow the account given by Brendan Simms, we can return to the moment when the Normans were victorious at the Battle of Hastings. At this point the ruling class of clergy and nobles in conquered *Angleterre* spoke French and wrote in Latin, while a carefully planned inventory of the spoils of war (the Domesday Book) was used to allocate them to the victors. Victorious though they had been, the Norman conquerors remained culturally and socially attached to French-speaking Normandy. They thought in what some people today call 'continental' terms because this is where they had their legal obligations and their cultural roots, besides being the land where they spent much of their time and perhaps even

where their hearts lay. They, and the Plantagenet Kings who succeeded them, never distanced themselves from their French origins.[7]

The extent to which mediaeval England remained essentially part of a French-run feudal network has been understated because of the focus on the period of the English Reformation described above. The 'break with Rome' appears differently when it is remembered that for many centuries England remained a significant part of Catholic Europe, and indeed the sort of dispute over marriage and divorce that finally led to the English Reformation had been a regular feature of disputes between the mediaeval papacy and various heads of state. It is worth recalling that a similar conflict between monarch and pontiff took place three centuries before Henry VIII, when Pope Innocent III made Cardinal Stephen Langton Archbishop of Canterbury, investing him in Rome without the King's knowledge. The King reacted by expelling the clergy at Canterbury and confiscating their property. As a result, King John was excommunicated. England was placed 'under interdict', its places of worship closed, and its sacraments suspended. In theory anyone who died was now denied salvation. In an age of faith, it was the equivalent of a trade war. In the end, King John backed down, Archbishop Langton was received in England and there was restitution for the exiled clergy. This is important background for the events taking place at Runnymede. The signing of Magna Carta in 1215, often seen as a crucial moment in the evolution of some kind of homegrown parliamentary democracy, was partly an expedient to deal with England's problems in Europe. Duly conciliated, the Pope went on to excommunicate all the barons who had forced John to sign the Great Charter.[8]

These events illustrated that 'the Kingdom of England was not a modern sovereign state, but an integral part of that great inchoate feudal commonwealth of Latin Christendom, of which, in theory at least, the Pope was head.'[9] After all, it was hardly as if Innocent III was exclusively concerned with King John of England. He was also busy managing the rivalry between the Guelphs

---

7 The point about how much of English culture post the Norman invasion was imported from France is brought out in David Carpenter's contribution to the Penguin History of Britain, *The Struggle for Mastery. Britain 1066–1284*.

8 Keen, Maurice *English society in the Later Middle Ages 1348–1500*, p. 301. He concludes that 'the Parliaments that answered the summonses of Yorkist and early Tudor kings are recognisable as the ancestral form of the institution that we know; the gathering that met King John at Runnymede is not…'

9 Davies, Norman *The Isles*, pp. 302–303.

and the Ghibellines in order to ensure the success of his candidate for emperor, Frederick II. He applied another interdict, this time to France, forbidding the rites of the church until Philip Augustus, searching for an heir and wanting to give up his Danish wife Ingeborg in order to marry the daughter of a Bavarian duke, agreed to remain with Ingeborg. One of Philip Augustus' arguments was that King John of England had received a papal dispensation to leave his wife Isabella, Countess of Gloucester. Mediaeval history is full of instances where monarchs demand a divorce, often with precisely the sort of concerns about securing a line of male descendants and thereby (they imagined) a stable dynasty which applied to Henry VIII. Often the arguments surrounded the issue of whether the King had married someone to whom he was related by blood (and the definition of how close a blood relation had to be was revised during the period). Thus, Innocent III chose to annul the marriage of Alfonso IX and Berengaria of Castile on grounds of consanguinity (Berengaria eventually retired to a convent). The same pope deposed the King of Navarre for making a treaty with the Moors and in 1212 approved a crusade against the Moors which began the 'reconquest' of Spain. In 1215, the year of Magna Carta, he summoned the Fourth Lateran Council, which the King of England (alongside those of France, Aragon, Hungary and Jerusalem) rushed to attend.[10]

There was therefore a lot more happening in early thirteenth-century 'Christendom' than troubles with the English king, and where royal marriages were concerned there was already ample precedent for the sort of difficulty in which Henry VIII was to find himself three hundred years later and the sort of arguments which he used in order to seek papal sanction for his divorce (such as the fact that his wife Catherine of Aragon was his late brother's widow).

Following the narrative arc backwards from the Tudors provides one with a rather different impression to that of an independent country finally throwing off the shackles of continental involvement. It is more as if the country was used to defining itself in terms of its continental role and presence. It expected to have an important part to play in the affairs of Christendom. The problem where Henry VIII was concerned was that the usual levers which could be pulled in order to ensure that he was a powerful player on the continental scene didn't work for him in the way they should have – and in different circumstances might have. Was he not a 'Renaissance prince' who could take his

10 See the summary in Roland Bainton's *Penguin History of Christianity*, Volume Two, pp. 37–40.

place at the heart of Europe and even in due course have a claim to the imperial throne?

Part of the reason why this was such a sensitive issue in the sixteenth century lay in the events of the previous century when England had to come to terms with losing the Hundred Years War with France. England had to accept the loss of territories on the mainland, of Europe and acceptance came only after a traumatic period of civil conflict in the late fifteenth century with the Wars of the Roses. It was the Tudor dynasty that finally put an end to that civil war when Henry VIII's father ascended the throne in 1485 after the Battle of Bosworth, but the Tudors were uniting a nation against the background of its exclusion from the mainland so far as the possession of territory was concerned.

Therefore, the broader narrative arc suggests that when the Tudors came to power England had been thrown onto the defensive, losing much of its presence on the continent and some of its ability to be at the centre of European affairs. Henry's failure to secure papal support for his divorce from Catherine (not least because her nephew was the emperor Charles V) reflected this loss of influence. When England (and Wales, which was annexed in 1536) broke with Rome, it was more a reaction to loss of influence in mainland Europe than a desire to be free of European control. Moreover, the English Reformation itself threw the country even further onto the defensive against Catholic reprisals and for precisely that reason increased rather than decreased its involvement in European affairs.

In the late sixteenth century England had to face the might of the Spanish Armada. In this context it was careful to maintain links with the Dutch, partly because of a shared Protestant faith but also because this was another coastline from which attacks could be launched against England. It was vital to ensure that the Dutch ports were not taken over by Spanish forces. The ability of ships from Dutch ports to blockade the Spanish Duke of Parma's forces was crucial to the success of English resistance to the Spanish Armada. This reinforced the significance of the North European coastline to English security. Having lost control of parts of France, England remained concerned about what was happening in the Netherlands and the German principalities, but this continental interest was primarily defensive, a means of deterring invasion when it was impossible to have complete control of the seaways.[11]

11 Simms remarks that 'the defence of Protestantism and liberty in England, it was generally believed, demanded the defence of Protestantism in the Dutch Republic and,

These essentially defensive concerns kept England constantly involved in the affairs of mainland Europe throughout the period after the Anglican Reformation, an interest to which the break with Rome made absolutely no difference. England showed itself prepared to be involved in later military actions on the continent, such as the siege of the Habsburgs in Cleves, and in dynastic affairs which were always part of building alliances, such as the marriage of James I's daughter to Frederick, the Elector Palatine, later deposed as King of Bohemia. In the early seventeenth century, the Czechs were certainly not living in a 'faraway land of which know nothing', as Neville Chamberlain famously said about them during the Munich crisis of 1938. In the seventeenth century, though regrettably not in the twentieth, their interests were recognised to be part of the defence of the English realm.

The narrative arc thus reminds us that the break with Rome fell within a context in which England sought to retain its influence and to maintain its security through an enduring involvement in European affairs after it had lost territories on the mainland. Since mainland Europe was vital to England's own security, the country was quite prepared to become involved in military operations to increase that security. Viewed from the wider perspective provided by the narrative arc, it is clear that the break with Rome could never possibly have amounted to a break with Europe. This might provide contemporary Brexiteers with some insight into why, while their hearts may be set in the 2020s on trade deals with faraway places like India and Australia, their heads must focus among other things on finding enough truck drivers from mainland Europe and how to secure sufficient energy supplies from across the Channel.

The Second World War

As the narrative arc moves in the other direction after the Tudors, we observe how in later centuries what becomes Britain and later the United Kingdom acquires a worldwide Empire. The loss of the American colonies in the late eighteenth century was as traumatic as the expulsion of England from France three centuries earlier. Yet Britain recognised that it happened partly because she had made enemies of other European powers (who intervened to considerable

ultimately, of the European balance everywhere.' (*Britain's Europe*, p. 30) Even in the sixteenth century one can recognise an intense concern with maintaining a balance of power in Europe.

effect to ensure a victory for the settlers). Just as Britain maintained its Empire partly in order to strengthen its hand in Europe, so it needed to strengthen its hand in Europe in order to avoid the sort of imperial disaster (from a British perspective) that came with the loss of the American colonies. By the end of the eighteenth century, it had become clear again that Britain must focus its attention on Europe, a lesson that it learned from the American Revolution just in time to deal with the revolution brewing in France.

Simms admits that in nineteenth-century Britain there was now a clear school of thought advocating an 'imperial' rather than 'continental' approach.[12] But he insists that Britain always kept a watchful eye on Europe throughout the nineteenth century, pleased with the limitations put upon French power through the creation of an independent Belgium in 1830 and later keen on a united Italy and on a strong Germany to deter Russia and France. Hence there is every indication that Britain's 'balance of power' concerns were as strong as ever. Even the role of its navy was not only to build up and police a world empire. It was instrumental in ensuring that the balance of power was maintained in Europe, for instance by enabling Britain to mobilise and transport (by ship) forces to fight in the Crimean War. Thirdly, even that world empire secured primarily through naval expansion was inextricably linked to European interests. This became clear at the end of the century when Britain reacted to its unexpectedly long Boer War (1899–1902) by summoning an imperial conference whose real purpose was to enable what Joseph Chamberlain described as 'the weary Titan', one that 'staggers under the too vast orb of its fate,' to deal with a growing threat from within Europe. Chamberlain's words were hardly the bluster of someone proud of an empire on which the sun never set. It was an address designed to deal with his growing awareness of a menace near to home.

New technology also increased the concern with Europe, as the spread of railways across the Eurasian land mass made the Western expansion of Russia more plausible, while the development of aeroplanes only reinforced the traditional concern for the Low Countries and Northern France, once feared for being able to despatch hostile invasion fleets but now also for being places from which air attacks could be launched. Britain spent the first decade of the twentieth century with its focus on Europe, looking for allies, worrying about

12 Simms, B. *Britain's Europe: A Thousand Years of Conflict and Cooperation*, Chapter 6, pp. 116–142.

new threats to its survival and seeking to draw its Empire into the European fight when necessary.

That war should come over the invasion of the Belgium in 1914 was entirely consistent with traditional British and earlier English concerns about the lands opposite, following the same pattern as the declaration of war against Napoleon over his actions in Flanders in 1793. The mobilisation of forces from the colonies was enormous. Something like a million fought in the trenches in the First World War. The huge number of Indians who fought there has often gone unacknowledged.[13] And not only in the trenches. The fate of Australians and New Zealanders at Gallipoli is well-known. They also provided material help – a quarter of Britain's munitions needs were supplied by Canada. Of course, they were often compelled to fight – but the key point is that once again Britain's Empire was put to the service of its European commitments rather than being a means of escaping those commitments. Between the wars Britain managed to get support from the dominions by granting them equality and the right of secession, so that once again, in the Second World War, support from Canada, Australia and New Zealand (whose casualties in proportion to population were the highest of any country bar Russia) was vital to the success of Britain in another continental conflict, albeit a conflict that soon became a global one. The conclusion is that Britain never sought isolation from the European mainland, even when it acquired an empire. It was determined to be involved and it knew that involvement meant building alliances. It meant bringing the Empire in moments of crisis to fight with the 'motherland' in Europe.[14]

However, this perspective does not emerge so clearly when the focus is simply upon the Second World War and when the wider context provided by the narrative arc is forgotten. Instead, the focus becomes Low's cartoon of the lone soldier with the caption: 'Very well, alone!' This caption, produced shortly after the fall of France, becomes the image of go-it-alone Britain resisting the Nazis single-handedly. It is significant that Philip Stephens' recent tome on what it calls 'the path from Suez to Brexit' is entitled *Britain Alone*, and at the beginning of the book he remarks of Britain: 'How many times we were reminded that it

13 For a very revealing four-volume account of that war from the perspective of those who fought in it, see David Hargreaves and Margaret-Louise O'Keeffe, *As We Were.*

14 See David Edgerton's *Britain's War Machine. Weapons, Resources and Experts in the Second World War*, especially Chapter Three: 'Never Alone'.

had stood alone against the Nazis in 1940.'[15] It was in June 1940 that the King, George VI, declared himself pleased at having no allies to 'pamper and be polite to'. Perhaps he'd forgotten that he was still the head of a vast empire that had once again to be pressed into the service of liberating Europe, not to mention exiles from occupied Europe such as the many Polish pilots who were to fight in the Battle of Britain.

The idea of Britain standing alone against the Nazis, the only country to stay fighting from beginning to end, is still dominant three generations on and is in danger of obscuring the point about its traditional need for alliances in Europe. A generation or more ago it used to be said half-jokingly that it was time to move on from war films, from *Dam Busters* and even *The Battle of Britain*, to the challenges of another time. But the problem was never the interest in history as such; the problem was context. Two films made in the last decade focusing upon 1940, *Dunkirk* and *Darkest Hour*, reflect a continuing interest in that year of surviving alone before Hitler launched his invasion of the Soviet Union. Both films are largely accurate historically, though *Dunkirk* underplays the French role in the evacuation and *Darkest Hour*, in which Churchill is effectively rebuffed by Roosevelt in a 'phone call he makes from the loo, underplays the extent to which ways were sought and found to get round restrictions on American aid (something Jean Monnet, the most important of the 'founding fathers' of the European Union, was deeply involved in).

In fact, the screenplay seems to have made use of the account given by John Lukacs in *Five Days in London; May 1940*, which showed the enormous pressure Churchill was under to reach a deal with Hitler and his determination to accommodate the concerns of his inner cabinet colleagues while resisting at all costs the deal they were pushing him towards.[16] But once again this represents a narrowing of focus to the year of hanging on and refusing to be drawn into some kind of 'compromise peace' between the fall of France, through the Battle of Britain and the Blitz, to the launch of Operation Barbarossa when the Germans put the UK to one side and turned East. It is a focus which gives rise to the sort of view which says: 'we do best when we're alone', something that the narrative arc, even when it takes in the time when the Empire was at its height, shows to be completely unrealistic.

Churchill was a great leader because he refused to do the deal with Hitler that Halifax might have done and the country managed to survive, making it

15 Stephens, *Britain Alone*, p. xv.

16 Lukacs, *John Five Days in London: May 1940*.

as far as possible too much of a distraction for Hitler to divert all his resources to invading Britain. The strategy was perilous, but it worked. What Britain managed to do was to hang on until help arrived, a strategy it arguably shared with the occupied countries of mainland Europe. Everyone, whether occupied or unoccupied, was waiting for the fateful moment when Hitler overreached himself by moving against the Soviet Union. Just six months later the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbour, bringing the Americans into the war. Once again Hitler, who might have done better to have condemned the Japanese attack, overreached himself by declaring war on America. By the end of 1941 Churchill had been vindicated for his strategy of survival rather than surrender, but it was others who would play the biggest role in winning the war and in the case of the Soviet Union at far greater cost in terms of human life.

When the war was over, the UK did not come down to earth in the way that the occupied or defeated countries had to. This was perhaps understandable. It had emerged victorious from six years of conflict. But the point about the country's dependence upon others throughout its history, made clear by the narrative arc, remained just as pertinent after the war was over. Western Europe was now trapped between the Big Two (the USA and the USSR) and forced into the sort of cooperative venture that eventually produced the European Union. The UK's place was obviously to be part of that cooperation, but as we shall see later in the book it never accepted this (until too late, when the edifice was already half built). The narrative arc might have shown that the proposal for a European Economic Community was simply an extension of traditional alliance-making in Europe. But the undoubted courage of its plucky single-handed resistance to German might between 1940 and 1941 tended to override the UK's traditional search for alliances (which had been all too evident a generation before in the run-up to the First World War). Instead, it tried to cling to Great Power status and this made it a late arrival at the EEC, which was already up and running before it even tried to join. By the time it did join (after de Gaulle's two vetoes had delayed entry further) the EEC had been fashioned in a way that made British participation difficult. By not being one of the first in, it became more rather than less likely that it would be first out.

The 'Inner Empire' and the 'Outer Empire': the other narrative arc

This chapter started by talking about England and ended talking about Britain or the United Kingdom. This illustrates the point that within the narrative

arc of what Norman Davies' massive tome chose to call 'the Isles' in their relation to Europe, (a shorter attempt at neutrality than the historian J.G.A. Pocock's suggestion in 1975 of 'Atlantic archipelago') there is another narrative concerning the way the different parts of the Isles developed in their relation to one another. It also raises the question of whether the sort of analysis offered in Michael Hechter's revealingly titled *Internal Colonialism. The Celtic Fringe in British National Development 1536–1966*, published half a century ago, is a fair one.[17]

In *Britain's Europe: A Thousand Years of Conflict and Cooperation*, Brendan Simms argues that Wales, Scotland and Ireland were looked upon by the English partly as potential sources of supplies for continental campaigns, and partly as potential threats in the event of a pincer movement attacking from North and South at the same time. After all, that is what had happened to devastating effect in 1066, when Harold had to overcome the King of Norway at the Battle of Stamford Bridge before heading South to be defeated by the Norman King William at the Battle of Hastings. This is often presented as the last successful invasion of England, and it produced a determination not to have to fight on two fronts again.

The argument is that England was therefore driven by its engagement with mainland Europe to seek what Simms calls 'some sort of constitutional order' in both islands taken as a whole.[18] He links the Act of Union between England and Scotland in 1707 to the threat from France at the time of Louis XIV. He suggests that the same concern for French exploitation of the 'back door' at the time of Napoleon led to a further Act of Union in 1800, drawing Ireland into Britain by merging the Parliaments. Thus, Napoleon forced Britain and Ireland together, just as a century earlier Louis XIV had forced England and Scotland together.

Simms believes it is possible to interpret English expansion into the rest of the Isles in essentially defensive terms as a means of deterring attacks from mainland Europe. It is a similar point to the one made earlier in relation to England and later Britain's involvement in Europe, where England's occupation of some of the coastal ports, like Calais, on the other side of the Channel could be presented as an essentially defensive manoeuvre. The problem is that

17 Hechter, Michael *Internal Colonialism. The Celtic Fringe in British National Development 1536–1966*. See especially chapter 3, 'The Expansion of the English State' and chapter 8, 'Servitor Imperialism and National Development in an Age of Empire.'

18 Simms, *Britain's Europe*, p. 47. He notes the 'back door' idea came from Daniel Defoe.

both Europe and (for England) the rest of the Isles are presented as a shield behind which England can make itself secure rather than as part of what fashions the identity of England to be what it is. It is not just that the idea of the other nations in what became the UK as 'back door' and 'supply store' (presumably the back door was a kind of tradesmen's entrance for deliveries from the wilder parts of the Isles) hardly attests to a very respectful view of what lay outside England. It is that England is set apart from both its European and British neighbours whose role is simply to be part of the fortifications around which England protects itself from its enemies. They cease to be influences that have made it what it is. Europe ceases to flow through England's veins and instead becomes what exists on the other side of the Channel, the mainland 'over there'. And what came to be called disparagingly 'the Celtic fringe' becomes the Other which must be under constant surveillance lest it be the launchpad for an assault coming from a different direction. It is this perception that is so damaging to the attempt to defend both the European and the British character of every part of the Isles, including England.

The sort of approach which sees the rest of the Isles as nothing more than a shield behind which England can simply hide itself from its enemies easily develops into the view than in more secure times the rest of the Isles can simply be shrugged off. England can now 'do without' the outer wall protecting the fortress. What is lacking is a sense of the intermingling and mutual growth of the four nations so that each would be poorer without the others. It is this sense that needs to be at the basis of attempts to make a British Union effective. On the other hand, treating the rest of the Isles as an umbrella to be thrown away when the sun comes out will only encourage the view that in better times England can 'go its own way' without the encumbrances it had to put up with in the past.

One clear influence upon the relationship between the various parts of the Isles was religion. The break with Rome threw them into a religious ferment whose consequences have continued to this day. It not only led to a fear of invasion by foreign powers like Spain and France who considered how they might restore the Catholic faith. It also intensified concerns about rebellion within England (Henry VIII faced major rebellions in Yorkshire and Cornwall) and within the Isles as a whole, which became the location of several different and competing forms of Christianity. There was a religious dimension to conflict between the different parts of Britain and Ireland which even in a 'secular' age has never entirely gone away. The religious differences which emerged as a result of the break with Rome proved crucial to the history of the Isles in the

seventeenth century, when the extraordinary developments that led to what was traditionally called 'The English Civil War,' but might better be seen as the War of Three Kingdoms, led to the execution of a monarch and then the enthronement eleven years later of his son.[19] These differences also provided important background for developments in later centuries through industrialisation and imperial expansion. They remain significant in the present day as the Isles struggle to determine their identity in a post-Brexit environment. The book will return to aspects of this other narrative arc, since its central theme is that the UK's relation to the European Union is always linked to its own perception of itself as a British Union.

Conclusion

The argument of this chapter is that although the sort of chronological tale which tells 'our island story' as a narrative of continuous progress is clearly inappropriate, without a 'narrative arc' which sets key moments in the nation's history in context it is all too easy to misunderstand their significance.

In the sixteenth century, during the reign of Henry VIII, the country ended its participation in a supranational order in a way that throws up obvious parallels with the modern day. However, neither before nor after the break with Rome did England (at that time) intend to detach itself from the European mainland or lose its interest in European affairs. If there is, as we have suggested, a certain parallel between the break with Rome and the modern-day 'break with Brussels', the narrative arc reminds us that this never entailed a belief that England could go it alone. It was out of the civil wars provoked by its forced retreat from the continent in the fifteenth century that the Tudor dynasty asserted the need for a strong ruler at home. That was the background to Henry VIII's famous divorce, but what is not often emphasised is the fact that this divorce followed strenuous efforts on Henry's part to assert his position at the heart of Europe.

In later years, with the rise of Empire, the British continued to treat their Empire as a support for their continental interests in Europe. The brief moment of isolation 1940–1 was in fact an aberration, something forced

19 See 'Two Isles: Three Kingdoms', Chapter 8 of Norman Davies' *The Isles*. The nomenclature has been picked up by others. See, for instance, Trevor Royle's *Civil War: The Wars of the Three Kingdoms 1638–1660*.

upon Britain by the unexpected Nazi-Soviet pact and the later fall of France. Survival in such conditions was certainly an extraordinary achievement, but it cannot be treated as an advantageous strategy to be exploited in normal circumstances.

The trouble with the 'fortress England' (later Britain) idea is that it forgets how vital an involvement across the Channel has been to the security of the fortress itself over the last millennium. It encourages the thought that what is now the UK can go it alone in a way that it could never have thought itself able to do even at the height of Empire, when the 'weary Titan' found itself entering into a desperate search for allies and friends.

A stronger sense of the narrative arc might have made Britain more willing to participate in attempts made after 1945 to find a way of ensuring that the mistakes made after the end of the First World War were not repeated after the Second. The country might even have been more willing to support the development of an effective supranational structure in the Western part of what had become a divided continent.

In the event, a few years after its successful efforts to survive the Nazi onslaught, the UK saw the proposal to share sovereignty as an intrusion upon its national identity rather than an invitation to share in the rebuilding of Europe. In this there were echoes of an earlier insistence that whatever the theological implications of doing so, the country must sever its ties with the Church of Rome and reap the immediate economic and political benefits. England's Reformation was in effect a letting loose of the chains that held its rulers under some sort of control. In a famous quote of St Thomas More, the Chancellor executed by Henry VIII, 'If the lion knew his own strength, hard were it for any man to rule him.' The sovereignty-sharing proposals of the late 1940s represented those controls seeking to reassert themselves in a more secular age. But as we shall see, they were no more acceptable then than they were in the sixteenth century.

Finally, we should never forget that other narrative arc, that which saw the development of Britain and eventually the United Kingdom as a single nation-state. This was a more complex development than a simple expression of England trying to shore up its base. It was deeply influenced by the religious turmoil unleashed by the Henrician Reformation. And it is of crucial significance today, as the 'four nations' seek to understand their future in a post-Brexit environment. While the book can in no way claim to give an adequate account of the history of the Isles, we shall certainly look in closer detail at the history of these nations in the chapters to come. For just as 'Hitler and the Henrys' has a

tendency to focus on the 'highlights' and in doing so distort their significance by taking them out of their European context, so there is a tendency to see the development of Wales, Scotland and Ireland as if they can simply be seen as appendages to the history of England. In both cases England's neighbourhood, whether across the Channel or to the West and North, is seen more as a barrier behind which she can be kept secure than as part of what has made her what she is, a part of Europe and a part of Britain.

There is one other important narrative arc which must be mentioned before we can look more closely at developments in post-war Europe and Britain. Europe too has a narrative arc, and although we cannot possibly claim to be able to trace it in the way Norman Davies has attempted in another of his monumental tomes,[20] it is necessary to highlight some of the features of Europe's development too in order to provide a suitable context for what is to come. The next chapter will attempt to do that.

20 Davies, Norman *Europe: A History.*