THE REVIVAL OF INTEREST in the phenomenon of the nation over the past few decades has been largely determined by a constructivist perspective. In contrast to older generic or racial paradigms that tried to prove the natural foundation of the nation, there is now a broad consensus that national identity is an invention in terms of a collective creation determined by a multitude of historical factors. This has led to a heightened degree of attention being paid to culture at large rather than to politics in a narrower sense, and to those historical changes within various cultural domains that led to the rise of the modern nation-state.

While there is overwhelming evidence that nationalism reached its peak in the later nineteenth century, views about when precisely national thinking and sentiment became strong enough to override all other forms of collective unity differ considerably. On the assumption that the bourgeoisie was the ruling class of the nineteenth-century nation-state, the origin of the modern nation is located in the eighteenth century, when this class gained ascendancy over the aristocracy. According to this view, earlier national thought and sentiment are accommodated under the label “patriotism.” When, however, one looks for the historical moment when the concept of the nation became a serious – and subsequently victorious – competitor to the monarchic dynasty as the most

effective principle of collective unity, one must, at least for England, go back as far as the sixteenth century.  

The decisive change occurred when a split between the dynastic ruler and "England" could be widely conceived of and intensely felt, a split that established the nation as an autonomous – and more precious – body. Whereas such a differentiation between king and country was still imperceptible under Henry VIII, it was already an historical reality during the reign of Queen Mary.

That the most important factors in this radical change were the Reformation and the printing press is by now well known – the Reformation, insofar as the spokesmen and adherents of the reformed English national church withstood Mary's attempt to enforce a general recatholicization of the country; and the printing press because it removed from the ruler any monopoly on information and facilitated the broad dissemination of oppositional views.

---


Introduction: "Writing the Nation" in a Literal Sense

Whereas it had been possible for Henry, who for chiefly personal reasons ceased to be a staunch defender of the Catholic creed and became the founder and head of a reformed English national church, to make the country follow the ruler without too much opposition, Protestant propaganda under his and King Edward’s reign had been too successful to allow Mary to turn back the wheel. With Henry’s move for independence from Rome by setting up a national church of reformed religion, a new relationship between church and state, reformed religion and England, had been established, and – as Stefanie Rück shows below – the pamphlets that were to defend this change already reveal increased recourse to nationalist arguments, appealing repeatedly to patriotic sentiment. What is considered as of utmost value in the pamphlets is national unity, a unity held to be possible only if there is also unity of religion, a religion that can only be that of the English national church: reformed religion.

Such officially instigated pamphlets show that the new print medium was taken seriously very early on, and that it played a decisive role in the dissemination of nationalist ideas. This role becomes still more visible in the oppositional pamphlets written and distributed during the reign of Queen Mary, and in some of the more radical ones “England” (or “the country”) is established as an independent body of much greater significance than the ruler and her submissive councillors. What I try to show below in detail is, above all, the ubiquitous employment of two kinds of argument to justify the audacious propagation of a split between the Queen and “England,” the dynastically legitimated ruler and the English people. The first kind is theological: the claiming of the primacy of “right religion,” the attempt to demonstrate that an English nation reformed by God’s grace has to be preserved at the cost of disloyalty to an initially God-ordained yet apostate ruler, and that even open rebellion can be justified by the Scriptures. The second kind of argument is partly religious, partly political and economic: it builds on the fear that, through his marriage with Mary, Philip of Spain might use his power to enforce even more resolutely a recatholicization of England, and that the English might become enslaved and plundered by a foreign prince (worse still, by a Spaniard).

What this pamphleteering shows is that “writing the nation” can be taken in a quite literal sense; that English national identity was constructed in and disseminated by the new print medium – above all in the genre of the pamphlet as a forerunner of the newspaper.
The particular aim of this volume is thus to demonstrate the pivotal role of pamphleteering – and the growing importance of public opinion in a steadily widening sense – within the process of the historical emergence of the concept of the nation as a culturally and politically guiding force. This is not to belittle the still very potent oral medium of the sermon, yet this older medium could be much better controlled and was thus largely restricted to the support of official policy. When it came to the voicing of dissident opinions, above all under Queen Mary and later during the reign of King James and Charles I, the printed pamphlet proved to be far superior. It was essentially more difficult to suppress the distribution of hundreds of copies of a pamphlet, often enough printed abroad and smuggled into the country, than to silence a rebellious preacher. The greater likelihood that the pamphlet could evade control – along with its up-to-dateness thanks to rapid production, and its accessibility to a wider readership thanks to cheapness – provided it with a notable advantage over the bulkier book.

This does not mean, however, that books played no role in the early development and dissemination of the concept of an English nation. As becomes evident in Claus Uhlig’s contribution, the compendious new English histories written at the time did much to support the growth of cultural identity. These histories invented tradition as much as they served contemporary needs – a common trait in the codification of a national past, as more recent investigations of the creation of national identity have shown. Thus it is not surprising that the new historical writing was primarily concerned with demonstrating genealogically the legitimacy of Tudor rule and seems to be more at the service of the older dynastic than of the upcoming national conception of the English state. Yet what must not be overlooked is that behind the strong support for Queen Elizabeth’s rule was a massive interest in securing a staunch defender of reformed religion and national unity. Even her celebration as a “virgin queen” must be seen at least in part as a strategy to ward off foreign influence (as is shown in the opposition to a viable French marriage); and it acquires a strongly nationalist colouring in the metaphor of her being married to “England.” For this metaphor shows – though now in a positive manner – that the distinction between the dynastic ruler and “England” as an autonomous body that arose under Mary remained powerful even within the context of the glorification of Elizabeth. The Queen was a God-sent blessing for England, but she was no longer England in the matter-
Introduction: "Writing the Nation" in a Literal Sense

of-course manner in which Henry V in Shakespeare's play is addressed as "England."

The xenophobic quality observable in the diatribes against the Spanish from Queen Mary's time understandably became even more prominent in the anti-Spanish pamphlets of the period when the presence of the Armada made submission of England to Spanish rule an even greater threat. As Martina Mittag demonstrates, the concept of an English nation, which so far had been developed primarily as an antidote to internal disunity and a means to preserve reformed religion, was now strengthened by xenophobic polarization, by the setting-up of a horror-image of the Spaniards as a negative foil to English national identity. And the pamphlets written under James against another possible "Spanish marriage" show that this process continued even after the imminent danger of an invasion was over. Indeed, it continued into the reign of Charles I, when the ascendancy of the Low Countries as an economic power had created — as the anti-Dutch pamphlets from that period show — yet another negative foil.

What is not to be found in this volume is an investigation of nationalist argument in the intensive pamphleteering conducted during the Civil War and the Commonwealth. Especially the vast number of pamphlets from the time of civil strife calls for a separate compendious study, which unfortunately has not yet been written. The very fact of military opposition to the anointed monarch that resulted in his being beheaded is, however, drastic proof of how powerful the conviction of a possible split between "England" as the country and the people and its dynastic ruler had become. The claim to represent the interests of the nation was raised, of course, on both sides of the quarrel, and it is telling that, as in the time of Queen Mary, it was again the defence of "right religion," this time including the dispute over church government, that primarily was to justify political opposition.

If subsequently, during the period of the Commonwealth, the predominant function of the concept of the nation was to restore collective unity, this remained so even until after the Glorious Revolution. As is made clear in Franz Wieselhuber's essay, the foremost task was to find a compromise between the urge for national unity and the desire for religious uniformity which implied the exclusion of not only Catholics but also Dissenters. As the Act of Tolerance of 1689 showed, the concept of the nation had in the meantime become strong enough to make toleration of Dissenters a viable solution, whereas in the case of the Catholics it was at least as much a fear of foreign
influence, of the danger international Catholicism posed to English national independence, as an insistence on theological difference that still demanded their exclusion.

The two remaining contributions present overviews of the historical factors that in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England fostered the rise of national thinking and feeling. Philipp Wolf starts off by pointing out that the new emphasis on national unity and identity was a reaction to the potential and real disunity created primarily by both the Reformation and the medium of print. Taking into account the historical changes within the various domains of culture, he then shows how the emergent national identity was constructed along spatial, temporal, literary and economic lines.

Rather than looking at these various changes, in my final contribution I attempt to underscore the strong impact of the new concept of national identity by considering it as a founding myth in terms of a collective utopian postulate. If one lends due weight to the enormous impact of the chiliastic interpretation of English history presented by John Foxe in his *Actes and Monuments*\(^4\) and if one traces the subsequent controversies up to the time of the Glorious Revolution, what becomes apparent is not only the close entanglement of religion with politics, but also the pivotal role of the new collective conviction that reformed England was God’s chosen country. It was this conviction of being the “Elect Nation” that soon became the most potent myth of national identity and excellence. Though this has, of course, been noted before, what I try to show in some detail are the consequences of the fact that, owing to the central role of the Book of Revelations within its religious foundation, this myth was Janus-faced, letting England appear as a country and a nation that was not only exceptionally favoured but also constantly endangered. For, due to the antagonism between God and Satan, having become the “Elect Nation” meant being both a “Blessed Island” and a “Beleaguered Isle,” and it can be shown that the national pride engendered by the former view as well as the xenophobic fears triggered by the latter were the most salient features of early modern – and to some extent, after four centuries, still valid – English national identity.

What further becomes evident is the pivotal role the new medium of print played in this major cultural and political change. Irrespective of support or suppression by changing state or church authorities, it fostered the wide

---

\(^4\) Published, despite its 1820 folio pages, in no fewer than nine editions between 1563 and 1688, not to speak of numerous abridgements and excerpts.
dissemination of a utopian postulate that in its double vector had such a powerful impact on the collective self-image that it became the founding myth of a new English national identity.