INTRODUCTION

What did it mean to be an early-modern Englishman? This study addresses that question not through an investigation of state-formation, or social history, but through the detailed analysis of a series of discursive themes. It asks how Englishmen sought to define themselves: what terms they used, what values they adhered to, and what they defined themselves against. It asks about the controversies that such inevitably narrow and exclusionary definitions often involved. Its source base ranges widely, from political treatises and parliamentary debates, to dialogues, dramas, and verse. In the burgeoning print culture of the late Tudor and early Stuart periods, ideas about what it was to be English possessed a rhetorical prominence which has not yet received due attention. That there should be a lively discourse construing and contesting national identity is unsurprising. What it was to be English and what it was not to be English had to preoccupy the minds of the three or four generations following the Reformation if only for the simple reason that the Roman Catholic Church had been dislodged from its position as the focus of supranational identity. A certain amount of intellectual introversion was thus inevitable. Also of significance was an ethos, emerging from the Renaissance, which prompted, in Stephen Greenblatt’s words, ‘an increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process.’

This could be applied to collective identities as well as individual ones: there seems to have been more of an instinct in this period to impose a shape upon a disparate community, to establish its ideological boundaries, than there had been before. Even if this thesis is not acknowledged, it may be granted that discourses about identity came to the surface more than in the past: in short, that they became more public, that they provided a rich quarry for the day’s soothsayer and critic. These were ideas that could be bandied around in print – lazy stereotypes, engrained assumptions, and evolving normative judgments, many of which were national in tone. Then, in England’s case in particular, there was a sense of cultural striving. Her status as an aspiring power spurred the kind of national self-fashioning that stressed the distinctive virtues and freedoms

---

1 Greenblatt 1973, p. 2.
of a Protestant people. Identity construction would be an attempt to control the image of the nation, the impression her people gave off. In some cases, it amounted to damage limitation.

There were geographical impulses at work too. Cartography had become something of a ‘craze’ in sixteenth-century Europe and in 1579, Christopher Saxon collected the first national compilation of regional maps, thus representing the ‘English place in the world’ for the first time. An interest in representing one’s country, one could argue, complemented the desire to fashion the national self.\(^2\) At the same time, and in a much more practical sense, being English came to matter more because the country was ever more open to the world through trade and communication, and thus more exposed to different modes of being and behaving. More elaborate connections with other nationalities prompted self-reflection – even self-interrogation. Moreover, if travel did indeed broaden the cultural horizons in one sense, it also, in quite another sense, fostered the development of – and delight in – narrow cultural caricatures of foreigners. The English quickly caught on to the early-modern virus for typologies: for assessing and judging ‘national types’. There was an increased propensity to think about the effects of climate, religion, culture and polity on a people’s habits and dispositions. For all these reasons therefore, identities needed to be renegotiated, redefined and above all, politicized in the face of change.

Whilst there is no complete history of ideas about Englishness in the period, there are many histories which have focused on the rise of the English nation and what could be called its ‘national consciousness’. Predictably, every period has its own defenders and detractors.\(^3\) For Patrick Wormald, the Venerable Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History* in the eighth century was crucial in ‘defining English national identity’, an identity that remained ‘embedded’ in much of the population even after 1066.\(^4\) John Gillingham positions a revival of the nation in the twelfth century while Adrian Hastings, for his part, maintains that the fourteenth century was ‘the very latest point at which it is plausible to claim that the English nation-state had gelled so decisively that no imaginable circumstance could later have diverted English society into some quite other form’. Liah Greenfeld is no less decided in dating this development to the early Tudor period; Hans Kohn convinced that it is a phenomenon proper to the seventeenth century because of what he calls its Puritan Revolution. He claims to find in

\(^2\) Hale 1993, pp. 16, 18.

\(^3\) Kumar 2003, pp. 39–59 gives a very useful overview of all the views.