

The Reality of England

by Michael Curtis



In the contemporary political climate where Scottish independence and the reunification of Ireland are being seriously discussed as political possibilities, the concept of “Englishness” has become more prevalent as a definition of identity, one not merely submerged as British in the national identity of the UK. The initial problem is that for a long time the words “English” and “British” have been used interchangeably for self-description, and it is still not easy to disentangle the two terms. Now, due to the devolution of political powers to Scotland and Wales, English citizens, in reaction, are more prone to be self-conscious and to regard England as a nation with a specific identity and cultural traits, different from other nationalities within the UK. This has partly resulted, not only from the devolution process in Scotland and Wales, and differences over Brexit, but

specifically from the "West Lothian question." In the UK Parliament in Westminster, MPs from Scotland can vote on matters affecting England, but English MPs cannot vote on an issue which has been devolved to the Scottish Parliament in Holyrood. Not surprisingly, English people think they have a right to an English parliament of their own.

A qualification to any generalization on identity is that citizens of ethnic minorities are more likely than white people to identify as "British" because they regard this as more neutral, while English national identity is regarded as divisive. Thus, British Pakistanis can combine "British" with their ethnic or racial identity.

In recent years there has been a growing sense of English identity and nationality, one which may evoke explicit images and some symbolic artefacts of "Englishness," warm beer, private clubs, fair play, cricket, strawberries and cream at Wimbledon, Harry Potter, and recently innovative architecture, the London Eye, and Canary Wharf. Even if official symbols are not understood, Tudor Rose, the three lions on the Royal coat of arms of England adopted by Richard the Lionheart in 1189, or the Oak tree representing strength, they remain emblematic of "this blessed plot." England itself does not have an official national anthem, but the UK glories in "God save the Queen."

The story of England is not without its ironies. The very English song, "We'll gather lilacs in the spring again and walk together down an English lane," was composed by Ivor Novello, a Welshman born in Cardiff. The new national flagship being built is likely to be named after Prince Philip, who was Lord High Admiral, and have the title Edinburgh. The third century martyr George is the patron saint of England, "upon this charge, cry God for England, Harry, and St. George," but St. George was not English, but thought to have come from the area of modern-day Turkey. Yet undoubtedly, English is the lingua franca of the modern world, as Latin was the common

tongue of the Roman Empire; it is the modern language of business, communications, education, science, diplomacy, travel.

Everyone knows, or is supposed to know that William the Conqueror won the Battle of Hastings 1066, and many may recall other battles, Bannockburn, Bosworth Field, Battle of Britain, that have played important roles in the history of the British Isles. Virtually unknown until fairly recently is the Battle of Brunanburh, 937. Yet this encounter was as significant as the well-known battles and was decisive in determining the existence and future of England. The historian Michael Livingstone calls it one of the most significant battles in the long history not just of England, but of the whole of the British Isles.

In the 10th century, the government in the British Isles was divided and controlled by at least a dozen rulers of different groups, all interested in obtaining more land in the British Isles. The Celts, originally with cultural and linguistic connection to south west Europe, were in control of the far north, with two main kingdoms, Alba, mainly Scottish, led by Constantine, and Strathclyde ruled by Owain.

Northern England was ruled by Norse earls of Viking descent, the earls of Northumberland. They also controlled much of Ireland and were led by the king of Dublin.

The Anglo-Saxons controlled most of central and southern England, an alliance of a number of fiefdoms but not a unity, headed by King Athelstan of Wessex, grandson of Alfred the Great, who took the throne in 924. Grandfather Alfred had stopped the Vikings from taking over all of England, but some Vikings settled in and controlled east England in an area called Danelaw, as a result of a treaty made in 886 by Alfred with the Danish warlord. His successor, Edward, recaptured part of the Danelaw.

The Vikings who controlled the north, had been pushing southwards and were stopped in 927 by the Anglo-Saxons who invaded Northumbria, and occupied York. Athelstan conquered the last Viking kingdom. After Constantine and Owain accepted his overlordship, he was made king of England, the first to claim that title. England was born.

But the Celts were then concerned for fear of the Anglo-Saxons and began building alliances with the Norse. Consequently, a united Celtic-Norse army, led by Olaf or Anlaf, the Viking king of Dublin, and overlord of much of Ireland, invaded with the largest Viking fleet ever seen in British waters in summer 937 to fight against Athelstan who was able to combine the Anglo-Saxon noblemen into a force. A very bloody battle ensued at Brunanburh. Athelstan led what is regarded as the first unified English army, combining Wessex and Mercia, and in effect created a new country which was saved from the Vikings. His victorious English army killed the Scots and Vikings mercilessly.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for the year 937 contains a poem which is a celebration of the victory. It says that most of the army of Anlaf and Constantine perished, and five kings and seven earls were killed, "no slaughter yet was greater made e'er in this island of people slain, with the edge of the swords." Lord Athelstan, the lord of warriors, and his half-brother prince Edmund aged 16 won themselves eternal glory.

Strangely, the exact site of the battle remains uncertain with historians and archaeologists offering numerous suggestions and differing on the location, in Yorkshire or Merseyside near present day Liverpool or County Durham. The recent discovery of broken weapons suggests the locale was the Wirral.

The site of the battle is not the only unknown fact in English history, and discoveries are continually discovered. The skeleton of Richard III, defeated at Bosworth Field in 1485, was found in a supermarket car park in Leicester in 2013. In

2019, the human bones of 11th century Queen Emma of Normandy who died in 1052 were found in a chest in Winchester Cathedral.

The Battle of Brunanburh was fought between Athelstan, king of England, against Olaf king of Dublin, Constantine, king of Scotland, and Owain king of Strathclyde. If Athelstan had been defeated it would almost certainly have been the end of Anglo-Saxon England.

He prevented the dissolution of the kingdom, created the first English army, and a new country and can be regarded as the first king of England who preserved the unity of the country and maintained the power of England. The last Viking invasion took place in 1066 when Harald Hardrada, king of Norway who claimed both the Danish and English thrones, marched to Stamford Bridge in east Yorkshire with his army but was defeated by Harold, the English king, in a bloody battle with heavy losses on both sides. The battle is memorable as the last time Vikings attempted to conquer England.

The current problem is the reverse of this story. It is a question not of invasion of England, but of divorce from it. The local elections to be held in May 2021 could influence the political structure of the country. This is particularly true of elections in Scotland where the SNP party, though weakened by a political feud between two rivals, may gain control of parliament. The SNP may then seek to obtain legal powers to hold a new referendum on independence.

However, the legal issues is unsettled of whether Scotland can act unilaterally or needs approval of Westminster before a referendum can be held. It is not coincidental that Prime Minister Boris Johnson is currently planning to spend billions on infrastructure to strengthen road and rail links to Scotland to prevent the threat of Scottish independence, and has allowed testing Scottish patients on beds in English hospitals.

English nationalism may explain the vote on Brexit. The issue now, because of the sense of grievance about England's place in the UK, is the degree of continuation of English commitment to the UK in its present form. Scots have kilts, Welsh have dragons, but there is still a full English breakfast. And England will still have Brunanburh, wherever it is.