

Deconstructing History

Review of *The Isles* by Norman Davies (Macmillan, 1999, ISBN 033376370X, £30)

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Historian Norman Davies's latest book claims to offer an approach to the history of the British Isles that challenges traditional nationalist readings of British history by "integrating" the British Isles into Europe. What the reader actually gets is a deconstruction, not just of British history, but also of the discipline of history itself, as Davies dispenses with all of the concepts that have been developed by historians in the last two centuries.

Since its inception, modern history has been concerned with the nation-state—its origins, external relations and internal workings, the social classes that comprise it and the way in which their differing interests impacted on events. Davies supposedly deals with this tradition by simply drawing a line through the words British and Britain.

After toying with various names for the title of his book, such as the Anglo-Irish Archipelago and Europe's Offshore Islands, Davies opted for *The Isles*. He professes to find the concept of Britain confused and contradictory, because it can apply to the United Kingdom, to Great Britain, or the island of Britain. Motor vehicles, he complains, still drive with "GB" plates whose letters denote "an eighteenth century designation" which is "set in mental stone" when the state has long since become the United Kingdom.

This confusion in nomenclature has contributed to an Anglo-centric view of history, according to Davies, in which the contribution of the Welsh, Irish and Scottish nationalities has been downplayed and early periods of history, before the existence of an English state or the arrival of English settlers, have been attributed to English history.

Davies's declared aim is to "pay due respect to all the nations and cultures of the Isles." In pursuit of this objective, he transposes all the names in the first chapter dealing with British prehistory into "imaginary but time-neutral forms." Thus the British Isles become the "Midnight Isles" because, he tells us, "Ancient man" navigated by the stars and would have identified the north with midnight.

There is no consistent system to this renaming of the British Isles. At one moment Davies is claiming to be reconstructing how "Ancient man" would have seen the world; the next he refers to the English Channel as the "Sleeve". This is simply La Manche, the French name for the Channel, translated. Whether the hunters who settled the British Isles after the last Ice Age wore tailored clothes equipped with sleeves, Davies neglects to inform us.

From 600 BC the "Midnight Isles" become the "Painted Isles" because of the "well-known habit" which the inhabitants had of painting their bodies with woad. There could not be a clearer indication that we are entering the land of the stereotype. In this case, Julius Caesar's stereotype of the wild Celtic warriors whose fierceness was an ornament to his reputation as a general.

Roman stereotypes are not the worst ones in Davies's book, however. The picture he paints of the Celts is that of a people peculiarly given to mysticism. He criticises archaeologists for relying on the physical

evidence of Celtic culture rather than Celtic myths, which he regards as a more reliable historical source. He indiscriminately mixes extracts from ancient Irish literature with modern sentimental songs, William Blake's poems and the guidebook of a Welsh theme park, to create an entirely unhistorical impression of the Celts.

He consigns the Celts to an insular twilight world to satisfy the present fashion for mysticism, but the Celts were no more prone to mysticism than any of the other ancient cultures of Europe. They worshipped in sacred groves and had sacred trees and lakes, but so did the Germanic tribes, and for that matter the Romans.

For all his pretensions to write a history that gives due weight to all the nations and cultures that inhabit the British Isles, Davies has written an entirely Anglo-centric book in which the Welsh, Scots and Irish get walk on parts. He pays merely a ritual deference to the most socially traumatic events—the Highland clearances and the Irish famine in the 19th century—but he does not explain why these things happened. His account of them remains superficial. He never considers what the historical significance of depopulating vast tracts of the British Isles was, what its causes were, whose interests it served, and what its social, political and economic consequences were.

The Irish famine (in which two million people died and another two million emigrated) and the Highland clearances (in which the landlords replaced their tenants with sheep) are dealt with in little more than a page, compared with the four pages Davies devotes to cricket. "Cricket," we are informed, "was always an archetypal English game." Davies traces the English passion for it back to the Hundred Years War during the 14th century. This ignores obvious anomalies. Jane Austen, a quintessentially English writer if ever there was one, played baseball. But there is neither nuance, subtlety nor depth to Davies's portrait of the English. His view of them is no less stereotyped and hackneyed than his view of the Celts. Even his account of cricket is superficial. Not once does he find it necessary to mention one of the best writers on cricket in the 20th century - C.L.R. James.

No doubt James's brief association with Trotskyism was enough to exclude him from consideration. Marxism, revolution and social class have no place in Davies's Britain. He makes a point of warning his readers that in archaeology "scholars with a materialist philosophy, including Marxists and Marxists, hold prominent positions." Christopher Hill, author of many seminal works on the Cromwellian Revolution, is described not as the former Master of Balliol College, Oxford, but as a product of "the Stalinist University of Moscow".

Apart from Hill, who is clearly labelled as a dangerous character, the Marxist History Group, which included E.P. Thompson, Rodney Hilton and Eric Hobsbawm, is studiously ignored. Yet whether one agrees or disagrees with their approach, it is impossible to write a history of Britain without examining their work. Not only was their contribution to the

writing of history significant, but also they themselves represent a particularly critical phase in British history, when Britain lost its world hegemony to the USA and class conflict became more intense. They represent a layer of socialist-minded intellectuals who looked in this period of crisis to the Soviet Union and the Russian revolution for a new model of society. Davies fails even to acknowledge the existence of this period of recent British history.

All Davies's revolutions come from above. James II is a revolutionary and the coup that overthrew him in 1688 is also a revolution. Davies instinctively craves order of the most repressive kind. A consistent feature of the book is his desire to rehabilitate that most reactionary institution, the Roman Catholic Church.

While admitting the existence of a working class, Davies does not want us to run away with the idea that it might be a political force. We are told that, "The working-class Chartist movement was particularly ineffective." Davies's workers are strong in arm and weak in brain—perpetual hewers of wood and drawers of water who cannot aspire to any higher intellectual, cultural or political activities. Kier Hardie, the founder of the Independent Labour Party, is praised for steering "British socialism away from Marxism and egg-headed Fabianism."

The General Strike of 1926 is not mentioned, nor the struggles that preceded the First World War, nor the Dockers' and Matchgirls' strikes in the 1890s that led to the formation of general unions. The word "strike" does not even appear in the index.

He follows the same policy with all revolutionary upheavals. The bourgeois revolution of the mid-17th century is simply written out of history. The reader is informed, without any discussion of the evidence, that the idea of a revolution "looks outdated". Davies does not inquire what forces, if not those of class struggle, lay behind the civil war. It is just something that happened and possessed both "edifying and disgusting episodes."

Similarly, the Reformation carried out by Henry VIII in the mid 1530s owes nothing to class forces or contending economic interests. It is merely a result of "the deficiencies of Henry's own reproductive system". We are left to imagine that a change in religion, the deaths of hundreds of those proclaimed as heretics, including Sir Thomas More, and the major change in property relations that resulted from the dissolution of the monasteries was merely the result of Henry's inability to produce a male heir.

Causes only exist for Davies in the most contingent form. History becomes a series of accidents. In his previous book *Europe: A History* Davies argued, "The historian, like the camera, always lies." He believes that what the historian does is record a snapshot of events. An historian might take a series of such "snapshots" to give a simulation of life, or take "snapshots" from many different points of view to give a more accurate impression, but always history is this record of individual events. History as a series of disconnected events is precisely what we get in *The Isles*—one event after another—with no explanation of their causes or interconnections.

History cannot exist as a social science without a concept of causation. The historian follows a complex chain of causation from the present to the past. In a process the philosopher Ernst Cassirer, in his *Essay on Man*, called palingenesis, the past is recreated as a living organism in which every separate element is connected. These connections are not only within the past but reach into the present, so that their study can give us a deeper understanding of the direction of historical development and of its future prospects.

History of this kind is one of the great contributions that the Enlightenment made to human understanding. Davies wants none of this. In *The Isles*, the Enlightenment is routinely denounced along with Marxism. But the Enlightenment was the first time it became possible through historical study to see a progressive development of human society through time. Historicism, whereby history is understood as a

process in which, despite periods of regression, human society advances, first appears as a conceptual outlook with Vico (1668-1744) and Herder (1744-1803).

With the 18th century historians Hume, Gibbon and Robertson, historical events began to be seen as having definite causes rather than being accidental or the result of divine providence. History was found, like nature, to be susceptible to reasoned analysis. Human society was seen to have advanced through different stages as the ability to control nature increased.

In the following century historians such as Ranke, Guizot, Carlyle, Michelet, Macaulay and Mommsen defined the methods and scope of historical study. Ranke declared that the aim of the historian was "simply to show how it really was". He was responsible for directing historians to make a critical assessment of original documents.

The collection and study of historical documents in modern Europe can be traced back to the bourgeois revolution in mid-17th century England, when the parliamentarians wanted to show that their claims could be traced back to what they called the "Ancient Constitution" of the medieval period, which they believed had established the prerogatives of parliament. In 19th century Germany the collection of documents took on a more scientific character with the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, which was begun in the 1820s and Mommsen's *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinae*.

Within very definite limits defined by the interests of their class, early 19th century historians, Ranke in particular, strove to make history a scientific discipline that could understand the nation-state. Even when they studied ancient or medieval societies, the modern state remained the focus of their attention.

This led to extremely nationalistic histories in some cases, such as that of Treitschke, who would not look at any other archives than those of Prussia. More objective accounts, such as those of Ranke, Mommsen and Carlyle, were not so bound by the undoubted patriotism of their authors. They studied the history of other nations in order to gain a better understanding of the processes that had formed the state and which tended towards its survival or overthrow.

While these early historians were aware of classes and their antagonistic economic interests, they thought of the nation as an essentially cohesive entity because, by and large, their own class was still firmly in charge of it. But by the late 19th century, the 1871 Paris Commune and the rise of Social Democracy in Germany shook this complacency, as Marx's ideas began to become a social force. In response to these developments schools of historians emerged that focused their attention on social and economic history in an attempt to overcome the crisis their discipline faced as it sought to write the histories of nations that could not longer be conceived of as cohesive. The somewhat belated British response to the crisis of classical historicism came to be dominated by the members of the Marxist historians group and the journals *Past and Present* and *History Workshop*.

Davies rejects the social and economic history that developed to overcome the crisis of 19th century historicism, but in attempting to go back to the traditions of narrative history associated with the great historians of the past he can only imitate the form, and that rather badly, because he does not have their conception, or indeed any clear conception, of the nation-state.

The fact that Davies does not know what to call Britain is not merely a problem of classification. He lacks the 19th century historians' conception of the nation-state as the embodiment of democratic principles. Their narratives were accounts of how a democratic state had been achieved. They regarded democracy as suitable only for their own propertied class, but they could not deny that even this limited form of democracy owed its origin to revolutionary struggles. Davies writes the revolutions out of history and with them any sense of the nation-state as an essentially democratic state.

His conceptions are those of Tony Blair's New Labour, with all its inconsistencies, superficiality, vogueish enthusiasms and spin. His book is a "Third Way" history, if such a thing can be imagined. Even Fettes College, Prime Minister Tony Blair's old school, gets a mention.

Like New Labour, the book makes an attempt to be pro-European. Prehistoric Britain is at the heart of Europe, but unfortunately Henry VIII's procreative problems create a complete breach with the Continent.

History is devolved to the component nations of Britain, but then Davies still wants to keep it anchored firmly in the metropolitan centre. Never has a history book devoted so much space to detailed accounts of coronations.

Even his decision to drop the name of Britain from the title has run into trouble. Just a few months ago when *The Isles* was published, this sort of multiculturalism was all the rage among New Labourites. Since then Blair's government has moved so far to the right under the pressure of the corporate interests that control the media that any talk of dropping the name Britain has become heretical.

Labour Home Secretary Jack Straw recently denounced a report from the Runnymede Trust, the think tank that deals with questions of race relations in Britain, which had dared to criticise the traditional conception of the British nation-state. He declared himself proud to be British. Led by the tabloid newspaper the *Sun*, a full-scale media campaign was soon underway to defend the name of Britain, preserve British history and to condemn anyone who dared to voice any criticism of it.

In New Labour terms, Davies's book is clearly already out-of-date. The one benefit of the book is that it reveals how far the intellectual level has sunk among those like Davies, who claim to be leading international academics. Essentially Davies's book is a form of the same attack on history, science and knowledge that has been launched by the French Postmodernists Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard and Baudrillard but expressed with the crude anti-intellectualism prevalent inside the British ruling class. Davies gives us deconstructionism shorn of all its intellectual pretensions and revealed for what it is—a wholesale rejection of reason and human progress.

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