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Romantic Scotland, tragic England, ambiguous Britain: constructions of 'the Empire' in post-devolution national accounting

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ABSTRACT. This article compares the ways in which references to 'the (British) Empire' were constructed and used in interview accounts of national identity and domestic politics in Scotland and in England. In Scotland, spontaneous accounts of Empire were typically formulated in conjunction with nationalist moral meta-narratives. Respondents variously inferred heroic national character from Scotland's role in Empire, or cast Scottish history as an enduring struggle between progressive forces of nationalism and atavistic forces of Anglo-British colonialism. The construct of Britishness was often seen to derive from, and to be synonymous with, the history of Empire. In England, the Empire story tended to be framed within anti-nationalist meta-narratives. Imperialism was generally understood to represent a product of excessive nationalism, and tales of Empire were used to draw exemplary moral lessons concerning the deficiencies of Anglo-British national character and of the catastrophic consequences of the pursuit of national self-interest more generally. The existence of Britain, and the construct of Britishness, were generally understood to both predate and postdate the history of Empire.

Introduction

From Renan's (1882) account of the importance of 'historical error' to national consciousness in nineteenth century France, to Anderson's (1983) account of the generic significance of temporal imagery for the imagination of national community, commentators have emphasised how ideologies of nationalism may be fundamentally reliant upon particular forms of historical consciousness. Within the UK, the role of historiography in 'forging the nation' (Colley 1992) has been widely discussed (Bradshaw and Roberts 1998; Brockliss and Eastwood 1997; Grant and Stringer 1995; Pittock 1997; Wormald 1992), and an extensive body of research has considered the representation of Britishness in popular historiography, with particular attention being paid to the dissemination of Anglocentric narratives of imperial mission in nineteenth and early twentieth century school texts (Ahier 1988; Mangan 1988).

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Although some commentators have focused on the ways in which a particular canonical historical narrative of British nationhood came to be ideologically accomplished, others have emphasised the status of British history as an object of enduring contestation, noting challenges to imperialistic 'drum and trumpet' accounts posed by the domestic turn after the Great War, the emphasis on the local and the global ('world history') in the progressive histories of the 1960s (Samuel 1998), and challenges to narratives of continuity posed by multiculturalism (Grosvenor 1999; Ramdin 1999) and devolution (Finlay 2001; Brocklehurst and Phillips 2004; Phillips et al. 1999; Wood and Payne 1999).

Academic debates generally presume that formal and popular historiography will both formulate and reflect popular national consciousness. However, the question of how ordinary social actors actually construct and use accounts of national history has rarely been subjected to empirical scrutiny. Survey research has occasionally included questions concerning 'British history', but these have seldom been accorded any particular analytic attention. For example, Cinnerella (1997) noted that, among a sample of university students, the most common type of response to the open-ended question, 'What things about Britain and about British people make you feel pleased to be British?' fell within an analytic category of 'rich tradition and heritage'. However, Cinnerella provided no information concerning the substantive nature of these responses or of how they may have been related to understandings of national self-identity more generally. Similarly, Dowds and Young (1996) noted that 85 per cent of a sample in England claimed to be 'very' or 'somewhat' proud of 'Britain's history'. The authors interpreted their survey data as evidence of the prevalence of a 'backward looking' version of nationalism, involving 'what might also be termed the "Pomp and Circumstance" version of national identity' (1996: 143–4). However, in the absence of any substantiating evidence, this interpretative gloss probably tells us less about the actual forms and functions of popular images of British history than about the researchers' own stereotypes concerning Anglo-British national sensibilities (cf. Condor 1997, 2000 and in press).

It may be noted that although both of these studies were in fact conducted in England, the authors referred to 'British' identity and 'national' history without minding the semantic gap. Cinnirella treated British citizenship and 'nationality' as synonymous terms (cf. McCrone 1997), and although Dowds and Young started out by acknowledging the distinction, this did not inform their actual research practice: in all cases, their measures of 'national' identity and pride used the labels 'Britain' and 'British'.

Post-devolution survey researchers generally display more sensitivity to the distinctions between English, Scottish, Welsh and British identities. To date, however, survey research on national representation and identity has been relatively restricted, often doing little more than document the extent to which people say that they prefer to call themselves English, Welsh, Scottish or British (e.g. Curtice and Heath 2000; Curtice and Seyd 2001; cf. McCrone 2002; Paterson 2002). However, recent years have also witnessed an increasing

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interest in investigating everyday understandings of nationhood and citizenship through qualitative interview research, with a number of studies focusing specifically on the different kinds of orientations that may be adopted by people in Scotland and in England (e.g. Condor and Abell 2006; Condor and Faulkner 2002; Kiely et al. 2005; Paterson 2003). In this paper we consider some of the ways in which various representations of national identity and domestic politics in Scotland and England could be informed by different narratives concerning British imperialism.

Methods

The data used in this article was drawn from a large-scale study designed to map national and state consciousness and identity, in Scotland and in England, in the immediate aftermath of constitutional change.[1]

Study design and procedure

In line with standard recommendations for qualitative research, respondents were recruited with a view to ensuring sample diversity. Four key sites were first selected on the grounds of their contrasting character: Glasgow and rural Perthshire in Scotland; Greater Manchester and rural East Sussex in England. Within each site, individuals were recruited through a combination of open and theoretical sampling to ensure that each respondent group included people of different ages (range: 16–89 years), and a range of political affiliations and socio-economic statuses. Although the original samples included respondents from ethnic and national minority backgrounds, for present purposes we will be focusing on the white respondents born in Scotland ($N = 57$) and England ($N = 100$).

A semi-structured narrative interview technique was developed, whereby the interviewer started out by asking the respondent to 'tell me something about yourself', and once the respondent appeared at ease the interviewer would start to bring the conversation round to issues germane to the research, such as local and national identity, and constitutional change. Talk about national history was occasionally invited through direct questioning, but in most cases respondents introduced the topic spontaneously.

Analytic techniques

Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, anonymised, and thematic content indexed using ATLAS.ti. For present purposes, we will focus primarily on those sections of talk indexed as pertaining to matters of national or British history. These accounts varied widely, but across the respondent group as a whole allusions to Empire and to colonialism represented the single most common theme, with 30 extracts of spontaneous (non-prompted) talk being identified in the Scottish transcripts and 58 in the English transcripts.

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Subsequent analysis sought to identify the ways in which British imperialism could be represented, following standard recommendations for inductive research as outlined by Silverman (2000). Initially, each reference to British imperialism was analysed in detail, with features of each account entered as dummy variables on an SPSS spreadsheet in order to facilitate frequency estimation and the identification of patterns of covariance. Each reference to Empire was coded in terms of boundary-definition, collocations and the ways in which the category of Empire was constructed in relation to other constructs, such as 'British', 'nation', 'identity' and so forth. Subsequently, each reference to Empire was analysed in terms of its location in the ongoing conversation, including the context in which it was raised, and its function within an ongoing line of argumentation. Finally, the accounts were reduced to a number of generic categories using techniques based on the Grounded Theory methods of constant comparison and deviant case analysis.

The interview accounts were originally approached as an undifferentiated set. However, at an early stage of the analytic procedure it became apparent that a good deal of the variability in content and style of argumentation could be attributed to the respondents' national providence. In the following pages we will outline some of the different ways in which the 'Empire' could be formulated in the interviews conducted in Scotland and in England, and will then turn to consider the specific ways in which the category of Britain could be formulated in relation to Empire.

In the course of presenting the data we shall be adopting a perspective of ethnomethodological indifference (Garfinkel and Sacks 1970). Our concern will be focused on mapping the ways in which speakers could assemble particular versions of the Empire story, and the ways in which the speakers themselves used these narratives to render issues relating to national identity and Britishness intelligible and accountable. For present purposes we shall not be attempting to evaluate these popular representations of Empire against some external standard of historical accuracy, nor will we attempt to speculate on their historical or cultural origins or consequentiality.

In order to illustrate how particular constructions of Empire could be used to work up particular forms of argument over the course of conversation, we will exemplify some of our general findings using illustrative extracts of talk. The selection of particular extracts was based on two considerations. First was the requirement of typicality: that is, that any relevant features should be manifested in similar ways in analogous cases. Second, preference was given to succinct exchanges that could be quoted without editing.

Empire stories in Scotland

In the interviews conducted in Scotland, the respondents' accounts of Empire varied a good deal. However, whatever form they took, these accounts were generally subordinated to an overarching meta-narrative corresponding to

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Northrop Frye's (1957) description of the archetypal romance: a marvellous national adventure, a story of national triumph over adversity, or a Manichaean struggle between nation and antagonist. These accounts were almost always accompanied by an authorial voice which positioned the respondent within a historically expanded national 'we' category.

Greater Britain: Scotland's marvellous imperial adventure

It was common for respondents in Scotland to warrant personal claims to national pride by drawing on emblematic historical figures, events and narratives. On occasions, allusions to Empire or to colonialism could be incorporated into these accounts in the form of an exemplary instance. In extract 1, Tom is responding to the interviewer asking whether he is proud to be British:

Extract 1: 'Doing well'

Tom: Well there was the British Empire who were all over the world and the people that's left Britain, and went abroad, and you think, you hear so many people doing so well, Canada, Australia, places like that. Everywhere the British go, especially the Scottish people, they always make a good impression. They always seem to do well.
I: So it's that sense of people going out-?
Tom: Because it's a small country too, spreading worldwide and doing so many good things.
I: If somebody said Britain or Britishness to you, does it conjure up any images in your mind?
Tom: Obviously winning the World War II, that's the big thing because they'd conquered Europe, hadn't they, and they stopped here. The last bastion of defence for the whole of Europe, really. (Tom, aged 59, Conservative)

In reflexive accounts, respondents often treated these sorts of formulations as characteristic of older people espousing Conservative political views. However, while the instances identified in our corpus were, indeed, voiced by people identifying with 'the older generation', there was little evidence that the use of this type of repertoire was necessarily restricted to people with right-wing political commitments:

Extract 2: '...we were the ones providing the get up and go...'

Ernie: You had the fiery Scots, the Welsh, the Irish, which you needed to develop, if you like, the Empire. You couldn't have done it just with the English. You had to have – but you needed the English as well, to be the steadying influence before, if you like. And we were the ones providing the get up and go. (Ernie, aged 63, socialist)

Celebratory accounts of colonialism and imperialism were relatively rare. Of the thirty references to Empire identified in the Scottish transcripts, in only six did the speaker explicitly valorise the British imperial or colonial past. In five additional cases, however, respondents employed a spirit of the age defence, which downplayed the significance of British imperialism by casting it within the wider historical context of European expansionism:

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Extract 3: '. . .every country had a go'

Bill: [. . .] I'm not at all ashamed of being British, not at all. I suppose every country had a go at getting what it could for itself, at one time, and making other people suffer. I'm not really ashamed but I'm very conscious of the fact that everything that Britain did is not something that we should be proud of. (Bill, aged 77, Liberal Democrat)

One common feature of celebratory or justificatory versions of British imperial history was that the speaker generally did not forge a clear distinction between the Scots, as an historic and extant people, and Britain's national story. Consequently, this sort of formulation of British imperial accomplishment could be accompanied by somewhat negative attitudes to devolved governance as a 'backward step'.

Scotland small: tales of heroic struggle over adversity

A second type of formulation used by fourteen people, most of whom claimed Labour, socialist or SNP political affiliations, involved the speaker adopting an unambiguously critical orientation to British imperialism, while maintaining a heroic narrative of enduring Scottish national character and history by rhetorically detaching the categories of Scottish and British.

In its weaker versions this type of account could be realised through a form of selective historical amnesia, whereby the speaker flagged their awareness of Scottish imperial involvement, but effectively bracketed this knowledge for purposes of national evaluation. In extract 4(a), for example, Jenny is responding to a question concerning her sense of British identity:

Extract 4a: 'It makes me shudder'

Jenny: When I think British and I think English, I think colonialisation. I think(pause) extermination of cultures, of languages, of religions, of replacement with which, good for the white bwana. That's what I think. I know that there was Scottish people, I know that there were Glaswegians, I know that there was probably some of my forebears played a hand in that but that's what it conjures up, and it makes me shudder. It makes me shudder, it makes me shudder that, again it comes down to this superiority.(Jenny, aged 46, New Labour)

Earlier in her interview, Jenny had been asked about her sense of Scottish identity. In response, Jenny claimed a strong sense of national pride, which she warranted with reference to history. It is notable that, in this particular context, Jenny brackets consideration of Scotland's imperial involvement in favour of an emphasis on domestic narratives of national genius and triumph over adversity:

Extract 4b: 'I swell with pride'

Jenny: [. . .] I'm so proud of my country. I'm so proud of my countrymen, not only those that are living but those that have gone before and the contribution that's been made over the centuries. I'm just so proud to be part of that, albeit that I had no input in it whatsoever. I'm proud, by association.

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I: Do you mean by that em ?
Jenny: Fleming, figures in history. Even right down to the unsung. The girls that worked in the munitions factories down in Clydebank and risked their lives night after night when the German bombers kept confusing the moonlight on the tarmacadammed road, but they still went. You just feel this incredible fierce pride.
I: You do feel pride?
Jenny: Yes, I swell with pride. See when the old ones get together and they tell stories about the Blitz, I just think my God you were great wee ladies. Or even forget the Blitz, the fact they dragged themselves out the gutters and poverty in the east end of Glasgow or the Gorbals or wherever they were brought up, particularly where there's deprivation [. . .]

The distinction between the way in which historical imagery is articulated in relation to Scottish national identity in extracts 4a and 4b illustrates a more general tendency apparent in the interviews, whereby the salience of Scotland's involvement in Empire could vary as a function or topic of talk. Eighteen respondents alluded at some stage specifically to Scotland's active role in the British Empire in the course of discussion concerning Britain or Britishness, and in ten cases respondents treated this as morally reprehensible. However, there appeared to be little 'carry-over' effect to their discussions concerning Scottishness *per se*. In no case did a speaker treat the Imperial past as a factor that might mitigate their own sense of Scottish identity.

A stronger version of this kind of accounting practice involved the speaker explicitly excluding Scotland from involvement in, or culpability for, the British Empire. In extract 5(a) Alan (whose father was a Polish émigré) is describing his experience of living in a small town that had in the past benefited from '*the wealth of the Empire*':

Extract 5a: Scottish national identity against 'the English Empire'

Alan: In some ways it's maybe strengthened my sense of nationality and my attachment to Scotland. Poland has a chequered history as well. It has a history of being partitioned and governed by more powerful neighbours so I've always had a keen sense of social justice and a sense of wrong, in the way that a stronger economic power can dominate your country. In Poland's case it was the Austria-Hungarian Empire, the Swedish Empire, the Russian Imperial Empire then Communism. In our case, of course, it's been the English, the English Empire. (Alan, aged 45, SNP)

Like Jenny in extract 4b, Alan uses references to Scottish national history to assemble a composite national 'we', which collapses the narrative past and present, and elides the national with the local and the personal, thereby constructing what Cohen (1996: 810) has described as a sense of 'iconic intimacy of Scottish collective identity, its proximity to the circumstances of everyday life'. In the case of extract 4b, Scotland's rhetorical Other is left unspecified, although earlier in her interview Jenny had defined Scottishness explicitly in contrast to Englishness. In extract 5, however, the meanings associated with Scottish identity are clearly established through explicit rhetorical juxtaposition to '*the English Empire*'. The Scottish–English distinction is rendered additionally meaningful through a series of equivalences:

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between Scotland and Poland, and between England, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and Communism.

Although in extract 5a Alan explicitly reformulates British imperialism as '*the English Empire*', he does not exclude Scotland from imperial involvement, but mitigates the significance of this using a cycle of abuse defence:

Extract 5b: Scottish colonialism as cycle of abuse

Alan: I'm really happy that the Irish have felt a kindred spirit to the Scots, instead of a feeling that we were more British. You look at the amount of Irish farmers who were dispossessed by Scottish farmers, who in turn had been dispossessed by English settlers and take that further, the Scots who went out and dispossessed Native Americans. In a lot of ways, the Scots were in the vanguard of this dispossessing having had it perpetrated on themselves. (Alan, aged 45, SNP)

In the strongest kinds of formulations, speakers could strategically trace British imperialism to enduring facets of English as opposed to Scottish national character. In extract 6, Dennis is explaining to the interviewer why he would not call himself British. He starts out by describing colonialism as an enduring project on the part of '*the British government*', but subsequently reforms his account to remove Scots from the colonial frame by substituting the category of '*British government*' with '*the English*':

Extract 6: 'the British Government' as 'the English'

Dennis: [. . .] you don't go into someone's house and start telling them what to do and their families what to do. That's exactly what the British Government's done all over the world, well the English, rather. All over the world they've done it.
I: Would you see Britain and Britishness as sort of quite tied up with England and Englishness?
Dennis: Aye, I certainly do. Britishness rule and conquer, divide and conquer. Look what they did to India and Pakistan, the one country. They divided them. Look what they've done to Ireland. It's the same thing. They've divided them. It started with the Incas, I think, they absorbed them into their culture. That's how the Incas took over the Aztecs [. . .] It's a very real thing, Englishness is a very real thing. It's this power 'We can rule the world'. 'We can beat the world'. (Dennis, aged 66, socialist)

Again this type of formulation, which ostensibly simply attributes responsibility for Empire to the English as opposed to the Scots, involves a complex series of category elisions and distinctions. Like many of the respondents in Scotland, Dennis treats 'English = British' and 'Scottish' as mutual comparison terms (cf. Kiely et al. 2005) such that the meaning of one is effectively established in contrast to the other. This becomes apparent later in his account, as images of enduring English character and historical stasis are juxtaposed with images of Scottish capacity for reflexivity and progressive change.

In addition, as extract 6 illustrates, Dennis does not simply set up a specific contrast between the Scottish nation and the Anglo-British imperial state. Rather, his argument is predicated on a more generic contrast between the constructs of nation and Empire. According to this account, colonialism

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represents a violation of the natural order of nationhood, home and culture. A similar presumption that nationalism represented the antithesis of imperialism was apparent in almost seventy per cent of the interview accounts in Scotland.

Empire stories in England

The accounts of Empire produced by respondents in England tended to vary rather less than those from Scotland. No respondent born and educated in England accorded Scotland any role in the British Empire save that of passive victim of English colonialism. No respondent argued in favour of the Empire, or used imperialism as historical evidence of enduring national genius.

Respondents in England generally used Empire stories to construct versions of national history that conformed to Frye's (1957) archetypal tragedy, involving a catastrophic fall from grace precipitated by a fatal and enduring flaw of character. These accounts were accompanied by a distinctive authorial footing, whereby respondents marked their ontological status *as* English or British using a historically expanded national 'we', while at the same time positioning themselves and their contemporaries at an ironic distance from images of enduring national character.

Whereas respondents in Scotland often linked xenophobia with imperialism, and treated both as distinguishable from nationalism, in England this kind of formulation was apparent only among those respondents who supported far right political groups. Other people were more inclined to treat imperialism as the product of uncontrolled nationalism, and to regard both as potentially antithetical to liberal values of equality, civility and universalism.

Decline and fall: post-imperial 'loss of character'

Like Dowds and Young (1996; see page 4), respondents in England often assumed the existence of a typical 'Pomp and Circumstance' form of Anglo-British national sentiment. However, analysis identified only seven instances in which speakers (all older people with conservative political attitudes) used a 'Pomp and Circumstance' repertoire uncritically (see extract 12a for an example of a speaker adopting an ironic orientation). Moreover, in none of these cases did a speaker use images of past imperial glory to construct celebratory accounts of the national present. On the contrary, in all seven instances the speaker invoked a repertoire of past imperial glory precisely in order to emphasise a process of national decline (cf. Wright 1985):

Extract 7: Decline and fall. . .

Carter: I [. . .] can't help but think, you know, of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, you know, the Decline and Fall of the British Empire. And we are, in fact,

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seeing, not quite a Sodom and Gomorrah, but, you know. (Carter, aged 68: Conservative)

and loss of reputation:

Extract 8: 'we're laughed at now'

Kitty: I mean, I know we did, we made a lot of mistakes when we had the British Empire, but we were respected all over the world, we're laughed at now, we're not respected anymore, we were a force to be reckoned with. We were one of the greatest countries in the world. (Kitty, aged 60, Conservative)

Significantly, Kitty prefaces her argument with a disclaimer: '*I know . . . we made a lot of mistakes*', thus signalling her acknowledgement of the potentially accountable status of her subsequent reference to past imperial glory. It is also worth noting how Kitty invokes the imagined appraisal of national others in her account of national identity and Empire. Respondents in Scotland commonly invoked the narrative figure of 'foreigners' as a device by which to legitimate their own claims to national pride. In these accounts, foreigners were typically granted the role of envious or appreciative voyeur of Scottish historical accomplishments, or were cast as part of a community of common suffering. In contrast, respondents in England usually cast foreigners either (as in extract 8) as displaying *schadenfreude* in relation to 'our' loss of Empire, or as justifiably resentful victims of Anglo-British imperialism.

At the start of the exchange reported in extract 9, Nora is extemporising on historic loss of national character, and mentions how, during '*the war*', '*we were a grand race of people*'. Her son Norman then reformulates his mother's category of '"*the" war*'[2] as '*a war*', an instance of the more generic category of '*warmongering*' that also includes '*the Empire*'. He then goes on to present the loss of Empire as a form of historical nemesis:

Extract 9: '. . .you shouldn't be proud of. . .the history'

Nora: [. . .] I think that we were a grand race of people, and in times of trouble you're all there
Norm: We're warmongers, Mum. If there's a war going (.) always was a war mongering nation. I think the only reason why we lost the Empire was because we were too bigoted and short sighted. Going up and down the channel in their little tin boats saying, 'Look how good we are', with all the braid, and that, and not really looking to see what was happening in the areas under our protection. So, I think you shouldn't be proud of all the history, but you should never forget it. (Nora, aged 56 and Norman, aged 31, both Conservative)

Learning the lessons of Empire: narratives of national enlightenment

Although respondents in England seldom used references to Empire to construct celebratory accounts of enduring national character, neither were they inclined to regard English national character as subject to change over time. Rather, they

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were inclined to adopt the kind of rhetoric of reflexive ethical self-management used by Norman in extract 9, often reflected in bifurcated representations of national identity in which the nation-present was presented as reflecting critically on the nation-past. According to these kinds of formulations, the Anglo-British are understood to possess continuous national character, which includes, among other things, a propensity towards nationalist hubris and xenophobia. However, as a nation 'we' have now achieved a measure of reflexivity and we recognise the need for constant vigilance in order to regulate the potential consequence of the unfettered expression of 'our' national character. The point of historical schism between an unreflexive national past and the reflexive present was commonly located at the end of Empire.

In twenty-seven of the fifty-eight identified stretches of talk concerning British imperialism from the interviews conducted in England, respondents explicitly invoked a historical disjunction between the age of Empire and the present, and depicted their nation as having undergone a collective post-colonial *prise de conscience*. Interestingly, there was no evidence that the younger respondents were more inclined to employ this trope than older people. However, respondents over the age of fifty could present narratives of personal epiphany alongside accounts of national historical enlightenment (see extracts 10 and 11).

There was also little difference in the extent to which people with different party political commitments were inclined to use narratives of post-imperial national enlightenment. In general, accounts did not so much differ in terms of their assessment of the Empire *per se*, as in the way in which the respondent framed British imperialism within a more general historical narrative of national and world history.

Nationalist reflections on Empire

The first, and least common frame of reference involved a general presumption of historical progress as moving towards the alignment of polity and nation. Whereas in Scotland right-wing political attitudes were associated stereotypically with a valorisation of Empire, in England some of the most voluble critiques of British imperialism were from the four respondents with far-right political affiliations, for whom any mode of governance other than national self-determination (including, significantly, the multi-national British state) represented a violation of the natural order. Extract 10 comes from a longer narrative of personal epiphany, in which Les tells of his dawning recognition of the reality of his English as opposed to British identity, his positive attitude towards devolution and Scottish independence, his support for an English parliament, and his opposition to multiculturalism:

Extract 10: Imperial rule as slavery

Les: Well I used to be patriotic in the days when you had an Empire and all that, didn't you? I'm not saying that we should have kept the Empire because it seems looking back

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on it, we had a way of driving people into slavery right up until recently, but we did it under the fact that we were looking after them and the tea plantation people were getting tuppence a day, and it was all done on an official basis. We didn't whip 'em anymore and call them 'black slaves' but they were still slaves. (Les, aged 59, BNP supporter)

Cosmopolitan reflections on Empire

In the next extract, we see another example of the repertoire of post-imperial epiphanies, this time from a woman with left-of-centre political sympathies.

Extract 11a: '. . .that was really nothing to be very proud of'

Mandy: [. . .] when I was growing up Britain had an empire, we were British, we'd won the war. All this sort of thing it's very, strong and you just took that all for granted. And then when you learn more about history and what happened and you think well that was really nothing to be very proud of, other people had a far worse time than we had in the war, the countries that were occupied and all this sort of thing. Um, and the Empire is really felt ashamed of now really rather than it exploited all those people and left them in a terrible mess. (Mandy, aged 54, Labour)

The essential difference between Mandy's account in extract 11a and Les's argument in extract 10 lies not so much in their depictions of British imperialism as the way in which they subsequently use the story of Empire as a moral exemplum. Les, like the other respondents who identified with far-right political groups, treats the Empire story as a cautionary tale concerning the exploitative character of polity forms that do not coincide with nationality. Mandy draws the opposite conclusion. She presumes that historical progress involves a move away from concerns over national particularism, and treats the Empire story as a lesson concerning the dangers of the uncontrolled pursuit of national self-interest[3]. This kind of orientation was relatively common in the accounts produced by the England sample. In thirty-nine (sixty-seven per cent) of the identified cases in which respondents alluded to Empire spontaneously, imperialism was rhetorically elided with nationalism, and the construct of nationalism in turn elided with xenophobia.

The fact that many respondents in England – with political commitments from 'soft' conservative through to socialist – treated nationalism, imperialism and xenophobia as members of the same class of phenomenon could impart a dilemmatic quality to their orientations to UK constitutional change. On the one hand, they could recognise the right of national minorities to self-definition. On the other hand, concerns over national identity could be seen as fundamentally incompatible with values of cosmopolitan tolerance and inclusiveness:

Extract 11b: National identity as narrow and intolerant

Mandy: I don't really want to see myself as English, that doesn't seem a very good thing to be now. Um, what can I say? And I wouldn't want to think of myself as, if

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I was Scottish I wouldn't really want to think of myself as Scottish or Welsh or whatever or Irish. I'd rather be part of something bigger, something wider, that was more tolerant and could accept everybody and accept that they were going to be different and that those differences would be interesting, but not something to be afraid of. (Mandy, aged 54, Labour)

Similarly, while Scottish self-rule could be regarded on the one hand as part of a progressive historical process of decolonisation, on the other hand any political movement towards the (re)instantiation of national forms of governance could be understood to be antithetical to progressive liberal values. In the following extracts, Ned is talking about nationalism, imperialism and devolution. Ned is an active Liberal Democrat and an enthusiastic supporter of the EU. Throughout his interview, Ned made it clear that he saw talk about national identity as representing an anachronistic and fundamentally irrational throwback to imperial mentality:

Extract 12a: 'Our' delusions of imperial grandeur

Ned: you know, we were very, successful, weren't we? In colonising everywhere, (laughs) India, and goodness knows, only for a brief period, it was only, in historic terms, it wasn't all that long, was it? A hundred and something years.
I: Yeah.
Ned: Marvellously successful. We couldn't go wrong, and I really think, perhaps, that's got into our collective (laughs) consciousness, that we're better than the others, well, despite evidence of one's own eyes. Lovely saying. Erm. (.) What is it? [. . .] 'Prejudice, not being based on reason, is impermeable to argument'. (Ned aged 73, Liberal Democrat)

For present purposes, the especially significant aspect of Ned's account reported in extract 12a lies in the fact that his critique of prejudiced imperialist mentality is not a critique of imperialism *per se*. This becomes apparent as Ned struggles to articulate a consistent attitude towards the Scottish parliament:

Extract 12b: Devolution as a double-edged sword

Ned: The Roman Empire, worked, that was a super state that worked beautifully, I mean, with its unification, and then it made thing work extremely well, they brought civilisation, and the bad things too, but, once it started to break up with the Picts and Celts the quality of, of corporate life started to be broken up and so on, too. So what do I think about devolution, [. . .] it's like a sharp knife, it can save a life or it or it can kill, you know.

Note how, according to this account, the root problem was not that British imperialism contravened a moral order of nationhood, but, on the contrary, that it exemplified the irrational excesses of an unfettered expression of national chauvinism. The Roman Empire (here glossed as a unified European 'super state') is, in contrast, cast as an exemplary model of civilisation and rational governance.

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The place of Empire in the biography of 'Britain'

Up to this point we have been considering some of the ways in which respondents could use the Empire story in matters relating to nationhood and to national identity. In this section we will briefly outline some of the ways in which different versions of the Empire Story could underwrite qualitatively different understandings of the category 'Britain' in Scotland and in England (cf. Abell et al. 2006; Kiely et al. 2005; McCrone 2003).

British = Empire stories: 1707 and all that

Interview respondents in Scotland often treated the (Scotland-England) Act of Union and the Age of Empire as the point of origin for the construct of British identity:

Extract 13: UK as British Empire

Ellie: I suspect I prefer *[to call myself]* European to British. I suspect that I see British as something more to do with the past and European as something more to do with the future. British is tied up with British history, Empire history, probably predominantly to me that period from the end of the Scottish Parliament, that 200 odd years was the British bit. Now we have devolution it's not the same [. . .]. (Ellie, aged 47, Labour)

Of the fifty-seven respondents in Scotland who spontaneously referred to the British Empire, twenty-two explicitly treated it as the origin of the construct of Britishness, although others (like Dennis in extract 6) implicitly anchored the construct in the history of Empire. As extract 13 illustrates, the simultaneous attribution of the label 'British' to the establishment of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and to the British Empire afforded an elision between the use of the term as a reference to state and to imperial polity.

In addition, as extract 13 also illustrates, Union-and-Empire accounts could operate as a form of historical bracketing, such that the loss of Empire and the establishment of a separate Scottish parliament could be seen to have rendered the notion of 'British identity' obsolete:[4]

Extract 14: 'British' as 'no longer appropriate'

I: If someone said Britain, Britishness to you, what does it make you think of?
John: It just seems so old now. It's like the colonies and the Empire and that just minds me. It's like an old name, it's no longer appropriate and I never felt it was appropriate anytime. I'm sure at the time when they were building empires and the Clyde or Belfast or wherever that was making boats and we were all prospering from it, I'm sure everybody felt quite British at the time. At no point in my life did I feel British. You just need to watch something like Gandhi and you go 'what?' (John, aged 41, SNP)

In most of the interview accounts collected in Scotland, histories of Britishness were subordinated to overarching narratives of Scottish nationhood. According to this form of historical accounting, Scotland was attrib-

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uted with a continuous national history in the context of which Britishness figured as an identifiable, and possibly temporary, moment: as Ellie puts it in extract 13, '*the British bit*'. This kind of formulation could also be associated with a distinctive form of ontological accounting, whereby the category British could be treated as a historically contingent social construct, and its legitimacy fundamentally contingent upon rational calculation of practical costs and benefits:

Extract 15: British identity as contingent upon calculation of rational interest

Alan: I don't feel that the British Empire has ever been anything other than the English Empire. I don't think someone living in the sub-continent of India or someone who was indigenous to one of our former colonies in Africa, would consider themselves British unless it suited them to be so [. . .] But I think there's fewer people benefit from being British than do not benefit from being British. (Alan, aged 45, SNP)

In accounts such as Alan's in extract 15, the constructed nature of British identity was not accompanied by a parallel consideration of the contingent character of national distinctions. On the contrary, the same speakers who emphasised the artificial and historically contingent character of Britishness were inclined to treat nations in general, and the Scottish nation in particular, as ahistoric components of a natural and enduring global order.

British/Empire stories: 55 BC and all that

Seven respondents in England treated the Act of Union and Empire as the historical points of origin for the category British, and cast the loss of Empire and changes to the British constitution as undermining the essential foundations of the notion of British identity. Interestingly, these people all shared particular characteristics which distinguished them from the rest of the English national sample: three claimed extreme-right political attitudes, and four had close family or personal experiences of living in Scotland or Ireland.

More usually, respondents in England treated imperialism as a short-lived (although possibly exemplary) episode of British history, but Britain itself was not understood to be literally coterminous with Empire. This was particularly apparent in cases where respondents argued that the construct of British identity was potentially capable of being recovered for the expression of postcolonial *prise de conscience*:[5]

Extract 16: 'Britishness' as a 'nice' and 'inclusive' identity

Hattie: Even though it's got connotations of colonialism, and all the abuses, that go with that, British has a much more international, the British went abroad, yeah? [. . .] So even though there is a history of abuse around that, there's also a history of being open to influences beyond Britain, so in some ways, it's not just negative, it's also, can be a positive identification. And of course it includes a lot of people from the colonies who also identify with Britishness. So, I feel that that is a nice identity, to combine the different groups that now live in Britain. (Hattie, aged 50, Labour)

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It is worth noting that although Hattie displays sensitivity to the potential (erstwhile) imperial '*connotation*s' of the category British, she does not actually trace the historical origins of the category to Empire. Even respondents who did not explicitly voice this kind of account could share Hattie's assumption that Britishness may take on different guises, and may be understood in different ways in different points in time.

Among the respondents in England, the most common presumption was that the category 'British' referred fundamentally to place rather than to any particular polity (Abell et al. 2006). Geographical constructions of Britain could locate its origins in deep geological time.[6] These kinds of formulations could present the category or entity of 'Britain' as existing historically prior both to Empire and to the establishment of the United Kingdom state, and also often prior to the construct of Englishness. This formulation could in turn be used to frame narratives of evolutionary or episodic change that did not necessarily entail presumptions concerning teleological process.

Although respondents sometimes alluded to the historical contingency of 'British' as a political referent, in no case did a respondent without personal (e.g. family) connections to Scotland source this historically in the 1707 Act of Union. When respondents did spontaneously allude to the specific historical genesis of the category 'Britain', they were in fact more inclined to refer to the Roman than to the British Empire:

Extract 17: 'I think of Britain starting with the Romans'

Dena: I think of Britain starting with the Romans. I don't think it was written about before then. That was the start of civilisation. And I don't think they said anything about England because it was Wales too then. English was a later invention I think. England wasn't England it was all broken up into parts.
I: So has Scotland always been in Britain?
Dena: This is tricky. I don't know much ancient history. This is the dark ages. I don't know. Then there was Great Britain, Scotland and England and Wales combined. But that was very late in history. (Dena, aged 64, Labour)

In so far as Britain was understood to refer primarily to a category of territory rather than polity, respondents in England could sometimes experience difficulty engaging with debates about the possible effects of devolved governance. In particular, they could display trouble understanding why a Scottish parliament might conceivably affect their sense of '*British identity*', as illustrated by Norman's response to the interviewer's question about whether his sense of 'British identity' had been influenced by the political process of devolution:

Extract 18: 'The United Kingdom's not the same as Britain'

Norm: I don't understand. I thought Britain was England and Wales. I thought – I thought Britain was, the place, England and Wales. That was the old Britain. Scotland come in and then we got Northern Ireland, is – and then that's what makes us the United Kingdom it's the state. England and Wales, that was the old Britain. Scotland

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come in and then we got Northern Ireland, is – and then that's what makes us the United Kingdom. But the the state's the United Kingdom. It's not the same as Britain. (Norman, aged 31, Conservative)

Concluding comments: two nations divided by a common history?

Nations do not typically have a single history, but there are competing tales to be told (Billig 1995: 71).

Theoretical work in the social sciences often emphasises the significance of what Jameson (1981:13) called the 'all-informing process of narrative' for granting meaning to events, for the construction of categories, for moral reasoning, and for the constitution of human identities. It is, therefore, remarkable to note how little of the current empirical work on national identities and representation has paid analytic attention to the ways in which historical events may be cited, and narratives utilised, in commonsense talk and thought. In many respects, the scope of the current study has been severely circumscribed, both in terms of population (being limited to the indigenous, white ethnic 'majority' populations of Scotland and England), and in terms of subject matter, focusing solely on the ways in which British imperialism may be invoked in the context of talk about nation, state and self. Nevertheless, we were able to draw attention to the existence of pervasive, marked and systematic differences in the ways in which British imperialism was formulated and, perhaps more significantly, the ways in which narratives of imperialism could be used to work up particular kinds of accounts of national identity, the British state and contemporary domestic politics.

The competing versions of British imperialism outlined above clearly varied in matters of historical detail. However, in this case, it is relatively easy for the analyst to abide by Spiro's (1986) injunction concerning the need for empirical and normative relativism in cross-cultural research. In both national contexts, respondents narratives combined elements consistent with formal historical accounts with assertions that could be positively antithetical to canonical academic versions of British imperial history. Although it is beyond the scope of the present article to explain how these different narratives may have developed, or to speculate on the processes by which they may be promoted, disseminated, sustained or modified, it was interesting to note that differences apparent within and between the national samples could not be attributed simply to differences in formative educational experience (cf. Marsden 1989; Phillips 1996 and 1998).

In the process of outlining our findings, we paid particular attention to the ways in which accounts of Empire in Scotland and England could be subordinated to incommensurable moral meta-narratives of nationalism. In Scotland, nationalism in the broadest sense was commonly cast as a progressive historical force, and the Empire was consequently represented either as the triumphant moment of British nationalism, or as a historical

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impediment to the ultimate triumph of Scottish nationalism. In England, moral meta-narratives of liberal universalism and cosmopolitanism prevailed, although these tended to be articulated in conjunction with a banal acceptance of Britain as part of the natural order. In these cases, the British Empire was cast precisely as a terrible lesson in the destructive potential of atavistic nationalist impulses, which could be used as a moral exemplum in relation to post-devolution concerns over particularistic forms of national identity.

Notes

1 Project 'Migrants and Nationals' conducted jointly with David McCrone, Frank Bechhofer and Richard Kiely at Edinburgh University, funded by the Leverhulme Trust (Grant number: 35113)

2 In Scotland it was common for 'the war' to be treated as a legitimate source of British (extract 1) or Scottish (extract 4b) pride. In England, celebratory accounts of 'the war' were generally subject to a similar opprobrium as celebratory accounts of Empire.

3 One reason why respondents in England could be disinclined to engage in debates concerning self-labelling (*'are you English or British?'*) was that neither category could easily be divested of connotations of imperial guilt. Respondents occasionally justified their self-labelling preference (whether 'English' or 'British') on the grounds of the category concerned having the least resonances with Empire, although there was no consensus as to which category did in fact carry the least 'baggage'.

4 Respondents in Scotland often used 'the Empire' and 'the war' to demarcate the boundaries of the historical period within which a sense of common British identity prevailed over older and more enduring national attachments. In England, 'the Empire' and 'the war' were commonly cast as historical landmarks delimiting the period within which a popular sense of English identity was at its height.

5 These kinds of arguments illustrate the importance of distinguishing between the formal properties of accounts and their functional applications. These same arguments – the value of cultural hybridity and respect, the need for national modesty, the dangers of English arrogance, the benefits of open-minded internationalism – were also used in support of Anglo/British colonial and imperial governance (Young 1995).

6 In these cases, the term was normally associated with the 'mainland' (i.e. England, Wales and Scotland) rather than the 'British Isles'.

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