The British Problem, *c.* 1534–1707

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The British Problem, c. 1534–1707

State Formation in the
Atlantic Archipelago

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THE BRITISH PROBLEM, *c.* 1534–1707

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Preface

In 1988 we jointly created an option for students taking Part II of the Historical Tripos at the University of Cambridge and called it ‘The British Problem, *c.* 1534–1707’. The problem was how to conceptualise the relationship between the Kingdoms of England and Scotland and their relationship with the Kingdom of Ireland and the Principality of Wales; to trace the development of a multiplex composite or triple monarchy with the accession of the Scottish House of Stewart to the thrones of England and Ireland in 1603; and to examine the reactions of the various peoples of the islands of Britain and Ireland to the growth of the English state. It was and is a study of state formation and the emergence of new nationalisms.

We begin our course with the 1530s because of the extraordinary succession of formal changes that were clustered together in the first decade after Henry VIII’s schism from Rome: the expansion of royal authority throughout England – the effecting of a new ubiquity of royal writs and the forging of a new and omnicompetent instrument of royal policy, the parliamentary statute; the development of a new doctrine of imperial monarchy; the destruction of the regional magnates who for decades controlled the Tudor borderlands of Ireland, the Welsh March and the Anglo-Scottish borders; the creation of the Kingdom of Ireland with its ambiguous relationship to the Crown of England in 1541; the incorporation of the Principality of Wales into the Kingdom of England between 1536 and 1543; and the crushing defeats inflicted on the Scots in the 1540s, accompanied by demands for dynastic union and the reassertion of English feudal claims to suzerainty over Scotland. The course ends in 1707 with the formal union of the Kingdoms of England and Scotland and the creation of a Parliament for the whole of Britain. In Irish or Anglo-Irish relations 1707 is

not a key date. Nevertheless, it follows closely the treaty of Limerick of 1691 and the enactment of the penal laws by the Irish Parliament, which together marked the completion of the process of political and constitutional transformation inaugurated by the Tudor Revolution of the 1530s, a process that resulted also in the radical transformation of landowning and a radical transfer of social, political and cultural power.

Together – and ably assisted by David Smith, Jim Smyth and John McCafferty – we have taught this course to some 150 Cambridge students over the past seven years. And the more we have taught it, the more convinced we have become that the relations of the peoples of these islands need to be seen in terms of their interactions. It is not the only way in which they need to be seen; but it is *an* essential way of making sense of their history. John Pocock, the great pioneer of ‘British History’, provides the motto for this volume: ‘British history denotes the historiography of no single nation but of a problematic and uncompleted experiment in the creation and interaction of several nations’ (or, as he also put it, British history must show how the component parts of these islands ‘interacted so as to modify the conditions of one another’s existence’). As the years went by, we found that many other scholars had also responded to Pocock’s invitation and challenge, or to their own inner convictions. Many others recognised the importance of the debate but were unconvinced by the claims being made for the new approach. To some it risked degeneration into English historiographical imperialism or simply into a celebration of the growth of the English state.

We found ourselves increasingly involved in debates and discussions with fellow-scholars about the merits and hazards of the enterprise, not least with Steven Ellis who pioneered a similar course at University College, Galway, and who has been a regular ‘guest’ lecturer in the Cambridge course. And more and more conferences have been held to debate the issues. We felt it was time to explore the themes in a form that would lay out the issues before as wide an audience as possible. We therefore approached Macmillan with a view to putting together a collection in their enterprising **Problems in Focus** series, which we knew from experience managed to get onto the reading lists and into the classrooms that other collections of essays cannot reach. And to our delight, Macmillan, in the person of

their then History Editor Vanessa Graham, agreed to publish a collection with the same title as the Cambridge course: *The British Problem, c. 1534–1707*.

To facilitate the preparation of the volume, we decided to get the authors together for a weekend colloquium. This was held in Cambridge in early July 1993, with generous funding assistance from the Faculty of History Trevelyan Fund and additional assistance from the Master and Fellows of Queens' College who hosted the occasion. We are deeply grateful to both bodies.

We invited John Pocock to attend and to give a keynote address to inaugurate the discussion; and that paper was so brimful of ideas and suggestions that we co-opted it to the volume in place of an article on 'The War(s) of the Three Kingdoms and the Unification of Britain' which one of the editors had intended to write. However, this left the 1650s untreated, and it was with great pleasure that we heard about and read Derek Hirst's distinguished essay on 'The English Republic and the Meaning of Britain', due to be published in the *Journal of Modern History* (1994). We are delighted to be able to republish it here and are grateful to Professor Hirst and to the *Journal* for permission to do so. The other eight essays were written especially for this volume.

Between them we hope that these essays cover most of the major issues comprehended by the title of this book. The authors do not share a common view on what the British Problem was, only that historically there *was* one (and that historiographically there *is* one). We hope this volume will enable readers to achieve a fresh perspective on the historical process by which the political and constitutional relationships between the communities of the two islands were transformed in the early modern period and through which they gained a new sense of their own identities as national communities.

BRENDAN BRADSHAW
JOHN MORRILL

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