



Weaponisation of Nationalist Heritage in Brexit Era Britain

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Submitted in partial fulfilment for the award
of the degree of Ancient History and Heritage

University of Wales Trinity Saint David

2021

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Quentin Drew, whose entrancing lecturing stoked my imagination.
Special thanks [REDACTED] who has loved and supported me over these stressful months,
and to Katherine, who started this journey with me in the same dreary Access course.

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Abstract

This work seeks to come to an understanding of the ways that nationalist heritage – that is, heritage that is involved in specifically the formation or propagation of national identity – is utilised by politicians and others in the United Kingdom in the years around and following the 2016 Brexit referendum, in which the UK voted to leave the EU. The approach to the discussion is twofold – for first a discussion of what exactly the ‘nation’ is must be started. Once the definition of the nation is made, and the argument for the ethereality of the concept of nationhood is put forward, then the focus shifts to specific avenues of nationalist heritage mobilisation within Brexit era Britain. These focus on war-time memory, especially that of Winston Churchill, and the imperialist tendencies of the UK – particularly how they manifest both outwards in the UK’s historical imperialism, but also inwards in English imperialism towards the Celtic nations, revealing a drastic imbalance of power that damages and works to disunify the ‘United’ Kingdom. The point is then raised of the usage of language – specific phrases and terms that promote Britain as superior to both the EU and to the possibility of independent states of its constituent nations. The conclusion made is that ultimately the weaponization of Brexit Era nationalist heritage is inherently damaging to the UK, but also that the ethereality of nationalism as a whole means that the individual heritage practitioner essentially gains the ability to choose to engage or not with nationalism, or with systems that rank in size and scale above or below.

Introduction

2020 and 2021 have been tumultuous years for our little blue sphere. The novel coronavirus Covid 19 has changed the way in which life has operated over the past months, and its effects on society in the long term are yet to be truly understood. However, as much as it may have felt like time itself has stood still for most of us, the world has continued to turn – and in our little corner of the world, the United Kingdom, the turning has led to a unique set of interesting circumstances. For the start of 2021 saw the UK stride headlong into a future outside of the European Union, a union which the UK had been a part of for 47 years. Finally, a full five years after David Cameron’s 2016 Referendum on the question of EU membership which resulted in a ‘decisive’ 52-48 vote for leaving, these green isles gained control of their own destiny, and with the reins in her hands, Perfidious Albion would achieve the glory she was always capable of before the shackling of European law. Or so the ‘Leave’ supporters (or ‘Brexiters’) would have you think. However, the golden future presented to us by the likes of the current Prime Minister Boris Johnson, and his promise of £350 million a week changing course from the EU to the NHS,¹ has yet to materialise. Of course, these are early days, but the damage has already started.² The UK leaving the European Union is not, however, the only thing happening in the interplay of nations. So too sound the horns of independence from within – for even as the UK moves further from Europe, fractures are growing in the nations that are perhaps becoming less and less ‘united’. Polls for the upcoming Scottish elections may point towards a pro-independence

¹ Payne, A. (2018).

² Toynbee, P. (2021).

‘supermajority’,³ and support for Welsh independence has risen from 10% to a historical high of 40%.⁴

Heritage has an inarguable role in these machinations of nation-states. And while in these strange times heritage has had some amusing showings⁵, it has become unavoidably apparent that the national heritage of the UK has been weaponised by the powers that be for their own purposes. One could argue that this was always the case – that Heritage as a field is deeply rooted in the nationalist system – and that would not be incorrect, but such a preposition misses the point; in this age of damaging change for the UK, the use of national heritage as fuel for such change is both dangerous to the people it affects and to the concept of the nation as a whole.

³ Davidson, G. (2021)

⁴ Silva, C. (2021)

⁵ Referring to the Welsh town of Llandudno and its natural heritage – curious goats visiting from the nearby mountains during the first Covid lockdown have put the town on the map for many people. See BBC News. (2020) *Coronavirus: Goats take over deserted Llandudno*

Defining the Nation

To understand the vectors of power in National Heritage, we must first understand what the 'nation' in 'national' means. It seems an easy task – the UK is a nation, and the heritage of the UK thus is national heritage. But wait – if the UK is a nation, then what of England, Scotland, or Wales? Does Owain Glyndŵr belong to Wales, or to the UK – or both, or neither? The seminal work on the definition of the nation is Anderson's *Imagined Communities* – Anderson's precise musings on the origins of the nation may be outdated, but his "...idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogenous, empty time...which is also conceived as a solid community moving steadily down (or up) time."⁶ Is an incredibly important one. As Anderson puts it, "An American will never meet more than a handful of his 240,000,000-odd fellow Americans...But he has complete confidence in their steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity." This is the greatest criticism of the national system and applies readily to the United Kingdom – one is ought to believe that the life and activity of, for example, the average resident of rural Ceredigion is closely affiliated to the urban population of Cardiff, Edinburgh, or London. More importantly, this supposed affiliation is oppositional to other nations – Anderson says that "No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind."⁷ Our rural Ceredigion resident in all likelihood shares more lifestyle with the residents of Mayenne or other quiet areas of France than they do the urban UK, but the existence of the two nations of the UK and France raises a barrier to commonality. The UK however is almost a contradiction in these terms – there is an

⁶ Anderson, B. (1983), pp.26.

⁷ Anderson, B. (1983), pp.7.

understanding that the UK is not coterminous with outside nations, but also that the constituent countries within can exist within the same space (both physical and political) without hinderance⁸. Anderson's "imagined political community"⁹ is reflected in this contradiction. Of course, we must be careful - "It is not enough to say that a nation is in some way invalid because forgery and fiction have gone into the imagining of its community and the invention of its past...", says Ascherson, "and the archaeologist's job...is to accept them as artefacts while constantly drawing attention to the process of fabrication."¹⁰ We must be careful that even if we describe the nation as ethereal – a mere image projected onto a time and a space – that we do not deny the existence of the image at all, nor the mechanisms which allow it to function.

⁸ It is here that red flags regarding the UK's relationship with the EU should start to become clear, if they weren't already.

⁹ Anderson, B. (1983), pp.6

¹⁰ Ascherson, N., in Atkinson, A., Banks, I., and O'Sullivan, J. (1996), pp.viii.

Borders, Language and Culture

So, what are the features of this projection? For one, we have borders. Essentially the limits at which the rulers of nation states can project total control, one only has to look to Donald Trump and his wall between the US and Mexico¹¹ to see the importance of the border for the nationalist – for without the border, the nation and thus the people of the nation are no longer unique, and the nation becomes fatally “coterminous with mankind”. Additionally, the border becomes a symbol of power, where the nation defines its extent of dominance – on this side of the line is ‘our’ domain, and the other side is not. The UK’s border is *somewhat* real as an island nation, but the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland remains important. Echoes of The Troubles continue to haunt this space, and the line between the two nations has complex implications now that both halves of the island sit opposite each other within the EU and the UK. There is currently no hard border between them,¹² yet the Irish army spent the effort identifying nearly 300 points on the imaginary border which could prove problematic in future¹³. Consider the border between England and Wales, denoted in part by waterways but largely by no significant barrier – the two nations, which are understood as distinct entities, are often joined by indistinct grassland which would not look out of place in your back garden. Is this border imaginary?

¹¹ Anderson, S. (2019).

¹² John Campbell (2019) points out that the Belfast Agreement does not actually commit to no hard border, but it does involve demilitarisation – removal of barracks, police stations, watchtowers etc. that existed along the border at the time.

¹³ Sheehan, M. (2018).

It's certainly imagined, but it exists as a construct of laws and bylaws – a projection of reality, if nothing else.

Should we look to language? Tierney puts forth Fichte's argument that "the nation...was a linguistically defined unit of social organisation. In effect, language, state and nation become co-extensive".¹⁴ Indeed, Anderson argues much the same – that the nation state could only be imagined once "the idea that a particular script-language offered privileged access to ontological truth, precisely because it was an inseparable part of the truth"¹⁵ had lost its grip – that once a language such as Latin or French had lost its stranglehold on religion or law (the so called ontological truths), national identities could arise in the wake of common languages having the same access. While language may or may not be intrinsic to the conceptual rise of the nation state, does it have any real bearing on the identities of modern nations? English in the UK (or Welsh in Wales)¹⁶ was the primary language for 92% of the population in 2011,¹⁷ which would be tempting to take as evidence in favour of linguistic definition, but this temptation falls apart with any examination. Firstly, English is not unique to the UK. *Ethnologue* ranks English as the most spoken language in the world, with 1,348,000,000 people being able to speak some amount of it,¹⁸ and Crystal calls it the first "genuine world language".¹⁹ Secondly, English is not the only language in the UK. While any country with any amount of immigration would expect some amount of imported language, the UK is also home to several different indigenous languages. Wales is home to

¹⁴ Tierney, M., in Atkinson, A., Banks, I., and O'Sullivan, J. (1996) pp.13-14.

¹⁵ Anderson, B. (1983) pp.36.

¹⁶ It is interesting to note the relative importance of these two languages on the website. Welsh appears to be considered so unimportant that it doesn't even receive a spot in the title, and the small, bracketed clause could easily be missed.

¹⁷ Office for National Statistics, 2013.

¹⁸ *Ethnologue* (2021).

¹⁹ Crystal, D. (2004), pp.13.

883,600 Welsh speakers,²⁰ and a not-insignificant part of Scotland speaks Scottish Gaelic.²¹ Scots, Irish, Cornish and Angloromani also call the UK their home, as well as three different sign languages. The UK is certainly not linguistically homogenous or unanimous, so one cannot identify it as a linguistically distinct entity. One cannot even claim we are sole inheritors to English as a first language – the USA, Australia and New Zealand all have English as a *de facto* official, primary language. Then should we stop identifying the UK as a nation and start identifying along linguistic borders? Of course not – ‘borders’ of language are as imaginary as any other. People move, and bring with them their languages, dialects, and accents,²² and muddy the waters of any attempt at raising a barrier between them. And what of the Cornish? The Cornish language, of Celtic roots and much closer to Welsh than it is English, would cut them off from the English mainland²³. And what indeed of the English mainland itself? With increasing Americanisation of the English language, do the English become a people adrift in a sea of ‘nationlessness’?

Perhaps the nation should be understood in the cultural sense – that Anderson’s sociological organism exists as an expression of shared culture²⁴ of a group of people. The average English person may consider themselves inheritors of a uniquely English heritage – Anglo-Saxon settlements in distant past to gathering around the TV on Christmas day to watch the queen’s speech. The problem here is the ‘problem’ of the postmodern world. We must

²⁰ StatsWales (2020).

²¹ Around 65,000 people in 2001, according to Directgov (2012). Interesting again to note that on this page Welsh, Scottish Gaelic and Cornish all have subheadings under the larger heading of ‘English Language’. This page clearly promotes English above these other languages.

²² And what of dialects and accents? Someone familiar with the Dorset accent may be able to identify a native Bristolian from other Dorset residents from their accent and from dialectal cues, but those unfamiliar may just hear a constant west country drawl.

²³ This isn’t a new idea, and Cornish separatism is an ongoing point of discussion, though it lacks widespread support. George Eustice (2011) writes in support for separating Cornish heritage from English heritage bodies, stating that it should belong solely to Cornwall.

²⁴ Language (discussed before) should not be understood as separate from culture, but is important enough to be considered more closely outside of it.

approach the nation and, indeed, the world with what Lyotard calls ‘incredulity towards metanarratives’.²⁵ The world moves ever toward post-modernity, and with it the metanarrative of the nation state shrivels, and the space in which two people of the same nation share the same cultural colours shrinks more and more. In the past it would have been reasonable to assume that two residents of the same village would have shared a vast amount of culture – they would have shopped in the same shops, drank in the same pubs, and supported the same football teams. The internet however has brought the beginning of the end for this certainty. A person in their house can order all of their shopping online to be delivered straight to their door. They no longer need the pub as a social space – a hundred thousand different online social spaces supporting a hundred thousand different hobbies that are no longer restricted to those that you can walk or drive to. More and more, the steady march of technology has meant that one’s culture is chosen, and not limited to random happenstance of place of birth.²⁶ It seems logical that in these circumstances the ‘national culture’ retreats into something barely more than aesthetic. It is here that Efraim’s “idea of common identity on the basis of a shared high culture [as] a persistent phenomenon with enormous power”²⁷ reveals itself as nothing more than that – an idea. The shared culture between the resident of York and the resident of Truro exists in a much declined state – an awareness that they share the same political entity, and a vague understanding of the same cultural space, but greater links are either directly geographical or chosen at will.

²⁵ Storey, J. (2011) pp.205.

²⁶ Of course people have always been able to travel, but the internet essentially brings the space of travel to the people, rather than people having to move through space – and even moving through space has become easier and easier.

²⁷ Efraim, P. (2017).

The Ghost of Nationalism

So what remains of the nation? Obviously, there is such a thing – the UK still exists, as do England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland within it. However weak the national projection is if you examine the threads holding it together, the projection is still there – the nation is both imaginary and completely real. It may seem odd to highlight the ethereality of the nation before discussing the specific national heritage situation of the UK, but doing so asks an important question – why is nation-ness still portrayed as “the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time”?²⁸ Tierney establishes that “these ideologies have been resurrected and deployed by ruling rival elites in an attempt to maintain or extend their control over particular national territories”.²⁹ This evidently applies to Brexit era Britain, as the politicians of the day continue to mobilise and weaponise nationalist heritage narratives to steer the UK from the EU, while also attempting to strengthen the bonds between the UK’s constituent nations. It is also evident that the concept of ‘national’ heritage is essentially imposed top-down – governments and royalty must have a nation to govern, for without the nation they are powerless. Ultimately, it is Smith who offers the cleanest eidolon for the concept of the nation – that it “fuses three ideals: collective self-determination of the people. The expression of national character and individuality, and finally, the vertical division of the world into unique nations”.³⁰ As we have seen, each of

²⁸ Anderson, B. (1983), pp.3.

²⁹ Tierney, M., in Atkinson, A., Banks, I., and O’Sullivan, J. (1996) pp.13.

³⁰ Smith, A.D. (1971).

these individual facets are essentially ethereal – socially constructed artefacts that evaporate with any real scrutiny.

Lenin, in Tierney, makes the argument which must be the basis of understanding the complex web of UK nationalist heritage. He says that “...two general types of nationalism existed. The first was the ‘great power’ of ‘big state’ nationalism...[and] the second type was ‘oppressed nation’ nationalism...struggling against the...dominance of an imperial oppressor”.³¹ The power dynamics of so-called Big State nationalism and Small State nationalism are the key to the larger part of the heritage situation of the past few years. Leave supporting Westminster politicians call attention to the power relationship between the UK and the EU, and claim that despite the UK’s power, it is restricted and restrained under the yoke of the EU. The UK, as a Small State, must fight back and struggle against the dominance of the Big State European Empire – an Empire so powerful that the UK could not help but willingly join.³² However, this Big/Small struggle also exists within the UK itself – England as a Big State trying desperately to maintain unity with the Small States of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. It is here that the powers that be try to maintain the same message, where the wonders of the United Kingdom and her heritage make it favourable for all members within the UK to extract themselves as one cohesive unit from the EU.

³¹ Tierney, M., in Atkinson, A., Banks, I., and O’Sullivan, J. (1996) pp.18.

³² UK Parliament (2021).

A Brief Introduction to Brexit, Poppies, and Churchill

Brexit is by no means the only issue of nationalist heritage, but it is inarguably the largest and most relevant to the everyday reality of the UK. A look at the website for Vote Leave gives us a brief outline for some of the given reasons for separating from the EU.³³ In the event of leaving the EU (an event that has become reality since), it is said that we will save money,³⁴ control our own borders, control immigration³⁵, be free to trade with the world and be able to make our own laws. In contrast, were the UK to remain in the EU, it would have to deal with EU expansion,³⁶ pay ever increasing costs, struggle with out-of-control immigration, continue to bail out the Euro, and still have the European Court in control of our laws. It seems that there are two main threads of thought here – economic benefits in saving money and trade, and issues of ‘sovereignty’ in control of borders and law.³⁷

Economics, as complex a maelstrom as they are, are not the focus of this essay.³⁸

Sovereignty however is vitally important – for as Lenin described, a nation imagines itself as either sovereign or struggling for sovereignty.

³³ Vote Leave (2016).

³⁴ A claim that, as previously mentioned, was mirrored directly by Boris Johnson on the side of a campaigning bus.

³⁵ What exactly Vote Leave intended to communicate by separating border control and immigration control is up to the reader to guess.

³⁶ This expansion includes an alarmist graphic of Turkey, and a magnifying glass zooming in on people within Turkey and an arrow pointing towards England. The strange implication of uniquely negative Turkish immigration becomes even more strange when considering Boris Johnson and his repeated declarations of support for Turkey’s drive to join the EU. See Kroet, C. (2016).

³⁷ Immigration is not trivial to place into the umbrella of sovereignty, but it will be put here for its parallels to ‘invasion’ of the sovereign nation, which will be discussed shortly.

³⁸ It is however interesting to note that even amongst those who support Leave there is disagreement on the economic benefits. Jacob Rees-Mogg claimed that “We won’t know the full economic consequences for a very long time...The overwhelming opportunity for Brexit is over the next 50 years.”, while Nigel Farage is even less optimistic – Saner scathingly remarks ““I never said it would be a beneficial thing to leave and everyone would be better off,” said Farage – who has repeatedly said we would be better off – “just that we would be self-governing.” “. Scaner (2018).

For analysis on just how the Leave ‘faction’³⁹ weaponised concepts of nationalist heritage, we can take inspiration from Hassan and Wright who discuss Wright’s work *On Living in an Old Country* (1985). In this, Wright “sought to understand how a selective idea of national tradition had been mobilised by Thatcher for a disruptive political project that was fundamentally destructive of tradition.”⁴⁰ The ‘selective idea of national tradition’ that Wright refers to, which he later clarifies and names as the *Revivalist Fable*, is the “remobilisation of the memory of the Second World War”. It is no secret that the UK is obsessed with the narrative of Great Albion, standing bravely alone against the monster of mainland European ‘nationalist socialism’, and arising victorious. This takes many different forms – from the wearing of a poppy, symbolising originally the fallen of the first World War, to voting the wartime prime minister Winston Churchill as the Greatest Briton of all time in 2002.⁴¹ These ‘celebrations’ however do not exist in a vacuum, and they remain contentious. Newsreader Jon Snow caused a controversy in 2006 after not wearing a remembrance poppy on air, and labelled critics as promoters of ‘poppy fascism’.⁴² Churchill was also a complex figure, whose views on race, role in the Bengal famine, and advocacy for poison gas,⁴³ should certainly at least knock him from the top spot. Still, these problems persist. The twitter profile @giantpoppywatch continues to lambast the national attitude

³⁹ In truth, there is no singular ‘Leave faction’, so this should be understood as shorthand for ‘some amount of those who publicly supported Leave’.

⁴⁰ Hassan, G. and Wright, P. (2020).

⁴¹ Parliament.uk (2014).

⁴² Bell, D. (2006). A veteran made comments that can only be paralleled to the supposed inalienability and unquestioned authenticity of the nation state, saying "The red poppy has been a symbol for so many years and he should not be interfering with it. Any questioning of the poppy can only cause anguish to the people that have worn it with pride over the years, the families of those who gave their lives and those people who are still doing so."

⁴³ Heyden, T. (2015).

towards the poppy,⁴⁴ and police are still deployed to protect statues of Churchill during protests.⁴⁵

The memory of Churchill is very potent, and especially important to the conversation. Boris Johnson, who is the prime minister of the United Kingdom and an active supporter of Leave,⁴⁶ was criticised by many in the media for trying to draw parallels between himself and Churchill after writing *The Churchill Factor: How One Man Made History*. Kampfner claims that “The reader is invited to see the two men as supreme orators, literary masters and slayers of spineless Conservatives and perfidious foreigners.”⁴⁷ Kampfner also makes note of the quote “there would have been no liberation of the continent. The country would not have been a haven of resistance, but a gloomy client state of an infernal Nazi EU.”⁴⁸ and says that “Johnson equates the European Union, time and again, with the crushing of the British spirit.”⁴⁹ This is exactly the tool that Wright refers to – the mobilisation of ‘selective ideas of national tradition’ that crushes the tradition of the ‘British Spirit’ that survived the Blitz. Wright describes the process – “First there was this great and noble victory achieved at considerable sacrifice; then there was the supposedly degenerate peace in which that national sacrifice was so grievously betrayed in diverse fields of post-war development. The third term in the fable was always the promised and, thanks to the heroic endurance of its champions, no longer impossible moment of recovery in which the nation would return to

⁴⁴ <https://twitter.com/giantpoppywatch>.

⁴⁵ Sinclair, L. (2021). It is claimed that legal observers overheard a commanding officer order to “protect Churchill at all costs” – particularly distasteful in the context of a march for women’s safety after Sarah Everard was murdered by a police officer.

⁴⁶ The Conservative party under Johnson achieved a landslide victory in the 2019 election, with 364 seats total after his ‘Get Brexit Done’ campaigning – See Henley, J. (2019).

⁴⁷ Kampfner, J. (2014).

⁴⁸ Johnson, B. (2014), pp.23.

⁴⁹ Kampfner, J. (2014).

its true path.”⁵⁰ Here, Johnson’s scheme is laid bare – the great and noble Winston Churchill (of whom Johnson is a spiritual successor) is betrayed by the ‘degenerate peace’ (The EU which Johnson compares directly and explicitly to a Nazi controlled Europe), but the spirit of Churchill and the sacrifices of the war-dead will power the UK and steer her towards her destiny of self-determination.

⁵⁰ Hassan, G. and Wright, P. (2020).

English Imperialism

The mobilisation of the memory of Churchill brings us to another interesting point. It is no secret that the UK is an imperialist state – the British Empire spanned the globe, and the British were proud of it. As Jackson says, “Until the 1950s the hackneyed sun-never-set phrase [the sun never sets on the British empire] was a commonplace of boys’ adventure comics and advertisements for products as diverse as Bird’s custard powder and Craven tobacco, illustrating the manner in which themes relating to empire and the non-European world, and Britain’s exulted place within it, penetrated British culture and contributed to the formation of an inchoate but powerful imperial mind-set and a sense of British superiority and fitness to rule other peoples.”.⁵¹ This outlines the relevance and importance of the imperialist past to Britain’s modern nationalist heritage narratives – in which Churchill plays the dual role of both proponent of contemporary empire AND as weaponised heritage - but we must look inward to see the most important point – that not only is the UK a historically imperialist state, but *England* is an imperial overlord of the Celtic nations, too. Herein is laid bare the most glaring contradiction of modern British politics – that self determination and preservation of national identity is only an important issue in the context of the nation of the UK fighting the supranational state of the EU, and not in the context of the Celtic nations fighting the state of the UK.⁵²

⁵¹ Jackson, A. (2013), pp.4.

⁵² In the context of inter-UK politics, the UK itself should also be understood as a supranational state, just as the EU is.

English imperialism is not a new fad by any means. Dennell describes Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*.⁵³ In this origin myth, the divinely descended Brutus came to Albion, renamed the island Britain after himself, and founded the city of New Troy which would later come to be known as London. His three sons would go on to reign over England, Scotland, and Wales after his death. Though the modern English state likes to imagine itself in terms of both quaint nostalgia (drinking tea and watching Sunday cricket) and ferocious fighting spirit (such as in the Battle of Britain), echoes of this origin myth still reverberate in the political world – though instead of the sons of Brutus, it is Westminster that rules the corners reaches of Albion. To see the extent of the disconnect between England and the Celtic nations, we can look to two things – Brexit voting, and independence movements.

The BBC breaks down the numbers for Leave and Remain in the referendum.⁵⁴ In this report, England and Wales are shown to have voted 53.4% and 52.5% for Leave respectively, while Scotland and Northern Ireland voted only 37% and 44.2%. On first glance, it would seem that Brexit is an English and Welsh endeavour. However – Dorling in Perraudin points out that the majority of the Leave votes in Wales came from regions bordering England which have larger English populations,⁵⁵ and that it was these English populations that tilted the vote to Leave. If this is true,⁵⁶ then it only furthers the point that England wields the power in the UK and is able to make self-serving decisions that damage the Celtic nations.⁵⁷

⁵³ Dennel, R., in Atkinson, A., Banks, I., and O'Sullivan, J. (1996) pp.22-33.

⁵⁴ BBC News (2016).

⁵⁵ Perraudin, F. (2019).

⁵⁶ Dorling states that 650,000 of the Welsh population were born in England, with nearly a quarter aged over 65, and compares this to the majority of 82,000 that the Leave vote achieved.

⁵⁷ If they don't also damage England – and it seems to be the case that Brexit has and will continue to.

While Brexit is certainly not the only factor,⁵⁸ it certainly seems like a major factor for changing attitudes to Celtic independence. Support for Welsh independence has increased from around ten percent to over forty – politician Peter Hain said that the prime minister has “single-handedly transformed derisory levels of independence support into a threatening one”,⁵⁹ placing the blame solely at the foot of Boris Johnson. Silva postulates the changing attitude could be attributed to a “deepening sense of Welsh identity” or the Covid 19 pandemic,⁶⁰ but it is most likely a combination of these. In the same survey, 53% of Scots supported leaving the UK. The Institute of Government⁶¹ outlines some important statistics. It would be remiss to not address the previous independence referendum in 2014, which resulted in a 55-45 against vote. The key point here was Scotland’s Brexit vote – 62% to remain – which has led to a materially different environment for a new vote. Polling data collated by Ballot Box Scotland currently predicts a majority for the Scottish Nationalist Party, who orchestrated the first Scottish independence vote and are running on a platform of a second vote, for the coming Scottish elections in early May. It would seem that Brexit is in fact a strictly English endeavour – one that isn’t supported by the other members of the UK and may be the key contributor to a United Kingdom more disunited than ever. This sentiment appears to be a known worry - Reform UK, formed by Nigel Farage,⁶² believes that Britain is “much stronger united together; financially, culturally, militarily”.⁶³ This is another reason that the mobilisation of nationalist heritage has increased so dramatically over the past few years – the powers that be believe that, by reiterating the strength and

⁵⁸ Any events during 2020 and 2021 are done so under the spectre of Covid 19, and it would be foolish to assume that any events within these years are solely due to Brexit – though as much as we may accidentally assign effects of Covid to Brexit, it is also the case that we may assign effects of Brexit to Covid.

⁵⁹ In Silva, C. (2021).

⁶⁰ Silva, C. (2021).

⁶¹ Paun, A. and Sargeant, J. (2021).

⁶² A key supporter of the Leave campaign, and ex-leader of the United Kingdom Independence Party

⁶³ Reformuk.scot (2021).

power of the United Kingdom, with emphasis on the 'united', the fate of disunity and the breakup of the UK can be avoided. One only needs to look at a recent press release from the Culture Secretary Oliver Dowden,⁶⁴ regarding the legislation of the obligatory flying of the Union Jack flag on government buildings, to see how concerned they are. On any day, obligatory display of nationalist iconography is cause for alarm, but special attention should be directed to the language used in the document. Dowden says that "The Union flag unites us as a nation...a proud reminder of our history and the ties that bind us.", while Robert Jenrick calls the flag "a symbol of liberty, unity and freedom that creates a shared sense of civic pride...a sign of our local and national identity". Look at the emphasis – union, union, and union. As we have discussed, 2021 may be the year in which the UK is the least united, so such an emphasis should not be understood as regular patriotism but very deliberate, pointed reiteration of nationalist pride with the aim of trying to hold the UK together.

⁶⁴ Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (2021).

Things are better British

There is no greater sign of the times than a quote from Conservative MP Jacob Rees-Mogg. In response to criticism of Brexit's impact on the Scottish fishing industry, Rees-Mogg said that "the key thing is we've got our fish back. They're now British fish and better and happier for it."⁶⁵ This quote is a perfect replica of the structure of British nationalist heritage in the Brexit era, and from it we can extract a step-by-step guide of how it is formed. Firstly, the implication of '*our British* fish' – fish being a natural resource that autonomously travels across imaginary human borders without respect to nationhood – is a laughable one. Not only that, but until Brexit the fish were not British – just by EU membership, the fish had their Britishness taken away, and it was only leaving the EU that would allow the fish to reclaim their apparent birth right. Secondly, the comment on fish being 'happier' for being British operates the two different vectors of power that have already been discussed. The fish aren't 'European' fish, but British fish – obviously a great joy to them. Also, however, the fish are unified British – not the Scottish fish that the Scottish fishing industry is no doubt most concerned with, but fish that all residents of the British Isles can lay some sort of claim to. This, as much as Scotland or Wales remaining in the UK and not become independent, is also announced as a source of joy for the fish. Rees-Mogg notes the key point that '*we* got our fish back', and this leads us to a smaller but still important aspect of Brexit heritage – the appropriated of microheritages.

⁶⁵ Osborne, S. (2021).

Harper says that “The fishing industry remains a potent symbol of many Brit’s ire with the EU.”⁶⁶, and there can be no doubt that the symbolism therein was regularly weaponised. Boris Johnson held a smoked kipper aloft and used it as the basis for commentary on EU bureaucracy (with questionable verifiability).⁶⁷ Nigel Farage burned EU flags (and a wooden fishing boat named the *Thereason May*)⁶⁸ at a protest in Whitstable by the group Fishing for Leave⁶⁹. The fishing industry is a tiny percentage of the economy of the UK, producing 0.12% of GDP and involving less than 0.1% of the workforce. Before Brexit, the UK imported the majority of the fish that found its way onto national dinner plates and exported even more. A great deal of effort was expended in pushing the plight of the fishing industry to the forefront of the national consciousness – but why? There can be no doubt that fish is a UK favourite,⁷⁰ but economically the fishing industry is a drop in the water. One could argue that matters of culture should take priority over economics, but there’s more to the story than that. Fisherman, and the fishing industry, seem to have taken on a semi-legendary role in the Brexit years – brave working-class men continuing to work long standing traditional industries, much in the same way that Britain bravely stands up against the EU in defiance. But their defiance appears to have been in vain – despite over 90% of fisherman voting to Leave, the industry has been decimated, especially Scotland’s creel fisherman who

⁶⁶ Harper, J. (2019).

⁶⁷ Connor, R. (2019). Johnson’s comments were rejected by Anca Paduraru, the EU Commission’s spokesperson for health and food safety. She said that the strict rules Johnson described applied only to fresh fish, not the smoked fish that Johnson had brandished, and that the packaging rules that applied were used for preventing common listeria infections. Furthermore, the anecdote of the angry fisherman was apparently sourced from a fisherman on the Isle of Man – which is a crown dependency and not a member of the UK, and thus would be unaffected by any changes in the UK.

⁶⁸ Note how a difference in political opinion – and only a minor one, given that both Farage and ex-prime minister May worked towards the ends of Leave – makes her not just a political opponent but an enemy of the nation. This tactic was also used by the Daily Mail when naming three judges ‘Enemies of the people’ – see Phipps, C. (2016) .

⁶⁹ Schopen, F. (2018).

⁷⁰ National Federation of Fish Friers (2021). The NFFF claim over ten thousand fish and chips shops in the UK, with 382 million meals consumed each year at a cost of £1.2 billion.

previously sold around 90% of their catch to mainland Europe and for whom delays for shipping on the border have proven fatal for both the langoustines and for the fishing industry's way of life.⁷¹ In an unfortunate sense, these fishermen have transformed into metaphors for England's Brexit – voting against their own interests after being misled or lied to by the politicians they thought they could trust, and dragging down the rest of the nation with them.⁷² Moreover, this shows exactly the potency of the symbolism of fishing as a heritage, but also highlights the preposterous nature of its usage. Even though the industry represents a vanishingly small percentage of the population and a fraction of the nation's GDP, it became the forerunner for an issue the nation never really knew it had, as an industry that had been left behind by time.

A final note should be made on the more absurd side of the usage of nationalist heritage. A twitter thread⁷³ points out that several products have recently changed their names or descriptions to more closely associate with Britain. These changes include ice cubes with half of a Union Jack on the bag being made with British water, the 'Brussels' in 'Brussels Sprouts' dropped for 'British Sprouts', and the comical change from 'Petit Pois' to 'British Fancy Peas'.⁷⁴ Additionally, the packaging of a Haggis denotes it as the 'Great British Haggis', and also includes a particularly fancy Union Jack design. Obviously, one should not suggest that supermarkets are trying to use food packaging as a vector for imparting nationalist ideals, but that they are simply riding a rising tide for financial purposes. In a similar vein,

⁷¹ Barry, O. (2021). Jimmy Buchan, who is the CEO of the Scottish Seafood Association, voted for Brexit and has expressed his regret in doing so.

⁷² It is important to place the blame solely on those who mislead, rather than the misled.

⁷³ <https://twitter.com/nicktolhurst/status/1364917215649280001>.

⁷⁴ A change that would be utterly laughable if it wasn't such a tragic reminder of the strangeness of current times.

and in a manner very reminiscent of Rees-Mogg's previous statement, Conservative MP Paul Scully made a very strange comment in an interview that new offshore power projects would be powered by none other than British wind.⁷⁵ Obviously, the idea that wind has national identifiers is utterly deranged, but it goes to show the ever-present desire to compare the good and pure 'British' with the presumably inferior European wind. Of course, both of these instances are not particularly important in of themselves, but they are somewhat absurd or amusing symptoms of the larger and more important issues of the day.

⁷⁵ Goodwin, H. (2021).

Conclusion

The heritage field is left in an unfortunate and difficult place in Brexit era Britain. To a very large extent, the exploitation of heritage goes far ‘over our heads’ so to speak – it is not the museums and country houses that are the primary vectors of damage in contemporary times, but the politically involved who mobilise and weaponize concepts of national identity to pursue their own goals – in this case, the goal of the UK leaving the EU has been achieved. But the heritage field must ask of itself – could it have done anything differently to have avoided its contributions to this (if indeed it ever wanted to), and can it do anything to help in future? Heritage is linked somewhat intrinsically to the idea of nationalism – Scouten claims that heritage is history processed through, amongst other things, nationalism⁷⁶ - and this has only been amplified by the past few years. As a field, however, heritage should not take this as an opportunity to denounce the concept of the nation. As imaginary as we know it to be, it is still invariably a concept that people connect to. To look at, for example, English imperialist tendencies and use those as a basis to tell people that they should not or are not allowed to celebrate and connect with their Englishness would be self-defeating – not only would people understandably not listen when you tell them that their identity is invalid, but you would be guilty of exactly the same cultural elitism and ‘imperialism’ that England is accused of in regards to the Celtic identity – or that the EU is accused of in regards to the UK. The question should then be asked of heritages place amongst nations. Ultimately, the individual practitioner has to come to the conclusion that they exist and practice in a heritage space that inevitably touches upon the nation at the very least, and they must

⁷⁶ Schouten, F.F.J. (1995).

decide to accept or reject it. Furthermore, this is not a binary choice but a spectrum – ranging from the smallest of microheritages such as streets or roads (or even smaller!) in their unique microcosms, to the widely accepted national heritage, to the heritage of greater supranational entities such as the EU and even further beyond – world heritages or even the terribly exciting concept of multi-planetary future heritages that seems to be steadily approaching. Ultimately what we must understand is that heritage cannot be neutral, and that while there are those who would seek to twist the narrative of the nation for their own ends – be it rising fascist movements⁷⁷ or just opportunists looking to make a quick bit of cash – then heritage academics must seek to rebut and retort. As we have seen, the UK has utilised both ‘big state’ nationalism to express its power and glorify its past, and ‘small state’ nationalism to convince the population that not only is fighting the EU a necessary strategy for survival as a sovereign entity, but that in doing so the UK is honouring its war dead and re-establishing its legendary blitz spirit. Additionally, we have seen the disunity of the United Kingdom, and how these same machinations of big and small states can reveal vectors of power – England holding the reins to the UK and seemingly choosing its direction entirely to its own desires, without heed or thought of the wishes of the Celtic nations. The ramifications of this are Celtic nations increasingly thrashing at the chains that bind, and a fearful England applying the same ‘glorious UK’ notions downwards – not to free itself from the oppressor, but to justify its own oppressing of the colonised states within. The understanding should be then that UK nationalist heritage has been entirely

⁷⁷ See Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán or ex-US President Donald Trump for examples on how ‘soft’ fascist movements seem to be making a concerted push for power in a large portion of the world. Defining Trump as fascist is somewhat contentious, but a large portion of his efforts as president seem to fall in line with most of Umberto Eco’s definitions – see Berry, L. (2016). Some would argue that Britain is moving further and further towards the right – while fascism is not quite the product here as of yet, one only has to look at the similarities in presentation of the ‘wild blonde haired every-men’ of Trump and Johnson, as well the links between the two men and far-right campaign manager Steve Bannon – Cadwalladr, C. (2019).

weaponised – the banner under which the crusade marches and the sword which it puts to the throats of nay-sayers who would work to ‘undermine’ its righteous purpose – and that when the ends that have been achieved have apparently been universally damaging to the economy and the wellbeing of the UK as a whole, then we must look to the righteous few who pushed Perfidious Albion to war, and hold them accountable for their part in her eventual demise.

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