

## Book Reviews

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***The Return of England in English Literature,*  
by Michael Gardiner. Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.  
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The central argument presented by this book is that representations of England and the English people have been largely absent from the canon of English Literature because that canon was constructed on behalf of the British state and its empire during the imperial period so that forms of English expression were subsumed within the wider, imperialist category of British from which they have only recently started to emerge. In order to understand this provocative argument it is necessary to contextualise Gardiner's prior research before this publication.

In his earlier *Cultural Roots of British Devolution* (2004), Gardiner had explored connections between the ideology of imperialism, the formation of the British state and the cultural vehicles through which the former was expressed on behalf of the latter. This in turn drew on much research into the history of Britain's national culture over the previous three decades, which also happen to have been a period when the unity of the United Kingdom itself has come into significant question, specifically from within Scotland and to a lesser extent from Wales. For example, Robert Crawford's *Devolving English Literature* (1992) had argued that the formation of both the United Kingdom's state structure and the category we now refer to as English Literature were created as a result of the Act of Union between England and Scotland of 1707. The newly developed state apparatus, Crawford argued, created opportunities for upward social mobility among Scotland's minor aristocracy and bourgeois middle class in the eighteenth century, but only provided they moved to London to take up such opportunities. It therefore illustrates perfectly Benedict Anderson's thesis—applied separately to the nationalisms of North and South America in the eighteenth century—that the frustrated career ambitions and aspiration for advancement among creole nationalists provided the main galvanising impulse towards nationalist movements as such.

So far so good. In the specifically Scottish and British case, however, there was the troubling problem of accent: when those Scottish pioneers of United Kingdom

statehood moved South to London to take up the opportunities available to them, it seems no one could understand their dialect. Naturally this presented a considerable barrier to advancement. The Scottish universities then started teaching rhetoric and elocution to address this specific challenge. Crawford sees it as the forerunner of the modern discipline of English. Gardiner's *Cultural Roots of British Devolution* goes further again, looking at how many of the classic works of English Literature date from the period immediately after this key development, so that the canon of English Literature can be seen as having been constructed as a fit vehicle for the dissemination of a specifically British ruling class—as opposed to distinctly English, Scottish or even Irish—sensibility. Works by authors such as Goldsmith, Defoe, Swift, Scott, Stevenson and Oscar Wilde appear to exemplify this argument to a greater or lesser degree.

This history matters to Gardiner because in our own period, when the structure of the United Kingdom has been questioned by Scottish and Welsh intellectuals, the creation of new forms of counter-British representation have not been available to the same extent in England. As a dialectical materialist, his interest in forms of *representation* naturally encompasses both the political and the artistic sense of the term. It is one of the major tenets of cultural theory that how decisions are reached in the political institutions of representative democracy have an important aesthetic underpinning that is in part produced through the ways the world is represented in art and culture—and vice versa. Thus in Gardiner's account the subsuming of England's literary culture within the canon of English Literature on behalf of a pan-British ideology during the imperial period was accompanied by a corresponding eclipsing of England itself within Britain during the same period. Over the past three decades, Scotland and Wales have increasingly sought to assert their own political autonomy alongside the distinctiveness of their own cultures. A similar assertion has been more difficult in England because it was widely seen as the main driver of British imperialism—so there appears to be nothing to assert.

This is the position that Gardiner challenges in his more recent study, *The Return of England in English Literature*. Directing attention to how the British state existed on behalf of its empire to serve the interests of a ruling elite, he starts off by suggesting that the way in which that elite has imagined itself tends to be both reactionary and ahistorical. This time he situates Edmund Burke's anti-revolutionary *Reflections of the Revolution in France* (1790) as a foundational text for both the state structure and the forms of culture appropriate to that state. Since Burke was keen to ward off a British equivalent to the French revolution, he presented the culture of Britain's elite class as timeless, unchanging and based on the harmonious handing down of values from one generation to another according to a hereditary principle that was literally embodied in the persons of the ruling aristocracy. Burke advocated the practice of a civilising discourse that

would undermine and limit potentially transgressive or rebellious elements. Gardiner thus suggests that the *Reflections* “embedded a state-national culture of values which had always already been there, values of *pure* precedent, never needing to have existed in any present” (115). In his account, this timeless discourse of civility is related to the conscious creation of English Literature as a discipline intended to bolster the imperial ideology: “*Reflections*, that is, denies any violence embedded in continuant systems of heredity—and through a long pamphlet battle, makes this distinction foundational for English Literature and for British life” (115-16). As a result, the whole state structure of the United Kingdom took on from its origin a fundamentally anti-revolutionary character, as did its official forms of culture as expressed in the canon of English Literature up to that point. Thus Gardiner reasons the “civilising mission of an anti-national English which goes right back to Burke’s *Reflections* has in this sense been institutionalised for the purposes of the Establishment vested in the state” (84).

If the state was created to rule an empire in the interests of a social elite on the one hand; and English Literature was a discipline constructed to drive the ideological definition of that state on the other, it seems logical to assume that with the period of decolonisation the story would start to change. In fact, that is what happened. Thus Gardiner identifies two key periods during which—partly following in the wake of Scottish nationalists—English cultural leaders started to question and unpick the conflation of *English Literature* with *Britain* in order to allow the voice of Britain’s myriad working and marginalised people to be heard. These two periods are from 1956-62; and again from 1976-85. In the former, Gardiner finds that a “widespread scepticism towards the inherited state can be read across fiction, drama, film and television, whether in critical realist, neo-realist or satirical modes, as well as its uncompromising diagnoses of a loss of ‘British national’ power in a sub-genre of non-fiction sometimes known as ‘declinism’” (80). Meanwhile the latter, that is the period of Thatcherism, was a period that Gardiner characterises as neo-Burkean because it was again typified by a rhetoric of harmonious, unchanging national culture which was nevertheless accompanied by a strengthening of the state apparatus through the practice of state-authorized policing, militarism and violence of all kinds which were at odds with that harmonious rhetoric.

Nevertheless, 1976-85 also emerged as a period that “actually triggered new possibilities for national belonging, since civic England was now able to start outflanking a British state struggling to hold on to imperial greatness” (116-117). The new “national belonging” to which Gardiner refers is all about finding new opportunities for the ordinary working people of Britain to participate in the structures and processes of democracy in a newly re-nascent England, as distinct from the British imperial structure which had governed the empire on behalf only of an elite.

Overall, the main argument of the text is about unpicking the concatenation of *English* with *British* in democratic terms, while also unpicking the association of *literature* with *empire*. To create alternative forms of artistic representation, Gardiner argues, is to challenge these two degrees of imbrication and thus to confront also the democratic deficit implicit in the earlier constructions of Britishness. He finds new kinds of popular fiction, new cultural practices and new aesthetic forms emerging all to challenge this relationship between canonical literature and British imperialism in a way that would free the English people from the ideological shackles of the British imperial state. Above all, he finds this unsettling and transgressive capacity at work in the new forms of gothic writing that emerged in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s, especially in the work of Angela Carter and J.G. Ballard. It must be noted that he also emphasises that the English neo-Gothic of this period is indebted to a long-term historical tradition of anti-statist gothic writing from Scotland, including Walter Scott, James Hogg, Robert Louis Stevenson, Hugh MacDiarmid and others, in whose works a haunting, spectral unsettling quality with regard to official forms of culture can be perceived, and which later English writers were attracted to for the same reason. Thus Gardiner concludes: "This late 1970s to early 1980s moment was a deeply troubling one for 'British culture'. It demanded a new national civicism of a kind which would be foregrounded in Scotland from around the same time, but which would also rise slowly but forcefully in England. Where the Burkean remit could no longer be held together, the disciplinarity of English Literature also began to vaporise, along with its ahistorical civility" (136).

This last point about the capacity of the gothic to unsettle the ideology of Britain's state, its empire and its ruling elite bears heavily on the question of multicultural society in Britain. If a national culture is seen as ahistorical, unchanging and based on inheritance as per Burke's reactionary account, the nation itself emerges as a static object based on ethnocentricity and forms of racial exclusivity that cannot be changed. The gothic is attractive to Gardiner because it inserts into the narrative ghosts, phantoms, monsters and various figures of the walking dead all of which in diverse ways disrupt the idea of a simple, unchanging ethnically defined national culture and allow alternative genealogies, histories, cultures and narratives to enter the record.

However, his enthusiasm for Scottish and English gothic as forms of counter-British hegemonic ideology leads to a certain short-sightedness in Gardiner's thinking about Britain as a whole. The fact that he has little to say about the role of Wales in either the questioning of the British state structure, or the category of English Literature, is somewhat frustrating. Moreover, there is a danger that his overall argument lends itself to a certain practice of deniability vis-à-vis Britain's role as an imperial power—which is surely the opposite of what he intends. Gardiner wants to say that the English were never the colonisers; the British were.

Exactly the same could be said of the Scottish and the Welsh: that *as* Scottish and Welsh, they were not colonisers. But while this is semantically true, the reality is that from India to Nigeria and from Australia to St Lucia colonisation occurred. Postcolonial historians, intellectuals and writers are unlikely to forget this, for all the emphasis placed on the subsuming of England within Britain during the colonial era. Gardiner is therefore on safer ground when he draws attention to the spectral, haunting aspect of the gothic and its capacity to challenge historical narratives and imagine change. This matters not least because one of the major changes to have come over English Literature in the period he discusses is the increasing cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism it expresses and includes.