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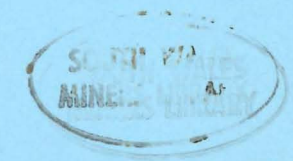
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Ralph A. Griffiths

**"This royal throne of kings, this scept'ed isle":
The English realm and nation in the later middle ages**

ISBN 0 86076 039 1

University College of Swansea



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UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF SWANSEA

'This royal throne of kings, this scept'red isle':
The English realm and nation in the later middle ages

An inaugural lecture delivered at the
University College of Swansea on
November 1, 1983

by

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1002332260



First published 1983 by University College of Swansea

*Obtainable from Registrar's Office, University College of Swansea,
Singleton Park, Swansea, SA2 8PP*

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ISBN 0 86076 039 1

'THIS ROYAL THRONE OF KINGS, THIS SCEPT'RED ISLE':
THE ENGLISH REALM AND NATION IN THE LATER MIDDLE AGES

Mr. Principal, Ladies and Gentlemen,

These are manifestly bizarre occasions. So let me enter into their spirit by inviting you to transport yourselves to India. Picture, early in 1981, a retired British colonel lazing on his verandah in Poona or Lucknow, sipping the gin which over the years has brought his cheeks to a fine, rich purple. Picture, too, his shock on opening the overseas edition of The Times, where he read about the new British Nationality Bill.

The colonel was the son of a tea-planter from Birmingham or Bradford, born in India when it was very heaven to be alive and British. He had served in the Army of India, loved the King-Emperor as a demi-God - and yet he now learnt that he might not be British after all. He might no longer be the proud possessor of that blue, hard-cover passport (and how many countries have hard-cover passports?), which guarantees the protection of Her Britannic Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs - indeed, when visiting England, he might henceforward have to stand in the 'Others' queue at Heathrow. He might not be able to send his son, also born in India, to Oxford or Swansea without paying the exorbitant fees of (dare he contemplate it?) a FOREIGNER. The only course open to him was a letter to The Times, and scores of such letters appeared in the months that followed.

This old colonel found himself faced with fundamental questions: were he and his son British subjects of Queen Elizabeth II after all? Were they of British nationality? Or did they simply have an emotional attachment to the United Kingdom? Such questions are posed in the 1980s because of the enforced retreat of an imperial ambition that was insatiable for well-nigh 400 years. The answers to these questions are not easily found. To judge by the British Nationality Act of 1983, official legal commentaries, and by the reaction of President Mitterrand to black visitors from Brixton and Leicester, no satisfactory answers have been found and no clear conception of British Nationality has been formulated.

Critics of this Act, when they are not denouncing it as ridiculously complex, sexist or racist, maintain that it ends seven centuries of legal tradition of defining the subject, nationality and the nation. Politicians and others, with their customarily witless judgements of things as positively medieval or disgracefully feudal, on this singular occasion approximate to the truth. The twentieth century is not the first time that Westminster has grappled with the implications of conquest, of rule over dominions, and of the ultimate failure to sustain all its ambitions. Nor is it the first time that it has faced the questions of who is a subject and who is not? What is the relationship between realm and dominions? And what is the nature of nation and nationality?

Picture the Channel Islanders receiving news in 1440 that they were to be classed in England as foreigners and required to pay the new aliens tax. Were they not subjects of King Henry VI? Did they not belong to the English nation? Of what nationality were they?

Picture, too, an Englishman in 1437 living in that part of northern France occupied by the English for nearly twenty years; imagine his chagrin on being told that he could not marry his French girlfriend from Paris, which the English had only recently lost, because a change of nationality during wartime was criminal. He was told, in short, that though he lived in France, he was a subject of the English king, he was of the English nation, and his nationality was English.

The precedent, then, for the twentieth century's dilemma lay in the later middle ages, let us say from 1250 to 1500. Attitudes towards these matters - what the French grandly call mentalites - were then formed which enabled Shakespeare, much later in 1595, to compose that memorable description of England and the English in King Richard II:

This royal throne of kings, this scept'ed isle,
 This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
 This other Eden, demi-paradise,
 This fortress built by Nature for herself
 Against infection and the hand of war,
 This happy breed of men, this little world,
 This precious stone set in the silver sea,
 Which serves it in the office of a wall,
 Or as a moat defensive to a house,
 Against the envy of less happier lands;
 This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England.

These concepts of nation, national consciousness and the subject are notoriously elusive, because they change their character and the geographical region to which they refer from one age to another; and these changes proceed at different paces in different places - and still do. These concepts have much to do with a sense of identity, not least in opposition to other groups with different identities; and yet for much of the middle ages the indices of identity were frequently flawed or in conflict with one another. Take geography. It is commonly claimed that between the fall of Rome and the sixteenth century men did not define the frontiers of their lordships and kingdoms with precision, as traceable, measureable lines. Yet, by 1200 the notion of a geographical kingdom of Scotland, a precise territory ruled by the Scots king, was firmly embedded in men's minds. The only part of the Anglo-Scottish borderland still disputed in the later middle ages was a small area designated 'The Debateable Land', to distinguish it from the rest of the frontier which presumably was not debateable. Likewise, towards Wales, thirteenth-century men were well aware of where the English counties ended and the largely autonomous marcher lordships began: they knew what was 'within the county' and what was 'without' it. Hardening claims to jurisdiction led to the delineation of 'metes and bounds', even to the 'beating of bounds', a medieval habit followed by eccentric clergy and their flocks even today.

And yet regional patriotism and antagonisms sometimes shot to the surface, as in 1461, when southern Englishmen learned that a northern force was sweeping south 'like a whirlwind', 'like so many locusts', committing the 'unutterable crimes' for which those living north of Trent were notorious - and which the terrified southern

chronicler could not resist uttering in loving detail. An Italian in England in 1506 noted that Cornwall was treated as a separate division of the kingdom 'like Wales', with its own language and character; there 'no human being ever comes, save the few boors who inhabit it'. And he was simply echoing the reaction, 150 years earlier, of a new bishop of Exeter who lamented: 'Here I am not only at the end of the world but even (if I may say so) at the ends of the very end. For this diocese...is divided from the rest of England.'

Secondly, place of birth and kinship were commonly regarded as qualifications of nationhood in the middle ages; birth within the realm of England, of two English parents, incontestably made 'a pure Englishman'. And yet thousands of children were born of English parents in Wales, Scotland, Ireland and France. And as that embittered cleric from Manorbier in Dyfed, Gerald of Wales, discovered at the end of the twelfth century, those with one parent Anglo-Norman and one Welsh were neither fish nor fowl.

Probably the most compelling expression of identity was language. Gerald himself recorded that famous prophecy with which an old Welshman supposedly taunted King Henry II to his face:

Whatever else may come to pass, I do not think that on the Day of Direst Judgement any race other than the Welsh, or any other language, will give answer to the Supreme Judge of all things for this small corner of the earth.

Yet from the eleventh century to the fifteenth, there were at least three languages spoken in England: French, Cornish and English. Cornish was still spoken in the fifteenth century and the English Establishment was proud of its survival. English too was a markedly diversified tongue. One fourteenth-century chronicler declared that 'all the language north of the Humber, and especially at York, is so sharp, slitting, grating and unshapen, that we southern men may never understand it'. Chaucer himself had misgivings as to whether his books would be understood across England; in relation to one of them, he expressed this hope:

And for there is so great diversity
 in England and in writing of our tongue,
 So pray I God that none miswrite thee,
 Nor thee mismetre for default of tongue.

As to the subject, this was a feudal concept implying above all a man's obligations to his king, but what if the king's realm did not tally with these indices of identity - geography, language, birth and kinship? From the thirteenth century especially, English kings acquired dominions beyond their realm which soon raised the question of their inhabitants' status, both within these territories themselves and within the realm. To what extent were they the king's subjects? With minor exceptions, none of these dominions was incorporated in the kingdom. More usually, they were annexed and united to the kingdom, though the king was not king of them. This was the situation in Ireland where the king was lord; and in Wales, which in 1284 was 'annexed and united to the crown'; and in Calais, which was seized in 1347 and for ecclesiastical purposes later put in the care of

the archbishop of Canterbury. In Scotland, English claims from Edward I's reign were rather different, though no sense of incorporation in England was implied. Although in 1363 Edward III was prepared to renounce his claim to superior lordship over Scotland and return the Stone of Scone, this was only on condition (unfulfilled) that he be acknowledged heir to the Scottish crown itself. As it was, there were echoes to the end of the middle ages of English overlordship which was dated to the legendary days of Brutus. In Gascony the English monarch was lord, sure enough, but in the view of all but the English his overlord was the French monarch, for full sovereignty was never conceded to the English; indeed, the duchy's position remained unclear until the expulsion of the English in 1453. Finally, the Channel Islands are a yet different case. Remnant of the duchy of Normandy lost in 1204, within sight of Normandy, and with a close affinity with its coast, they were ruled by the king as duke of Normandy. Even today the islanders are not represented in the British Parliament and Elizabeth II sports in the islands the chauvinistic title, duke of Normandy. The islanders' ambivalent psychology is reflected in two expressions of sentiment in the sixteenth century: the Jersey men declared that they would 'rather die English than live French', while Guernsey's carrier inhabitants stated that they 'wish to be friends of all rather than subjects of any'. Complicated and confused, therefore, were the king's relations with the inhabitants of his dominions in the later middle ages, though in one fundamental respect he could claim that they were all his subjects and (even the Scots) owed allegiance to him; but these claims were not identical or everywhere enforceable. The confusion is illustrated by a Welsh harpist living in Ireland in 1333, long after Wales's annexation: his right to plead in the

Anglicized courts of Ireland was upheld because 'his grandfather was born in Wales and he is a Welshman and of Welsh lineage'. He therefore enjoyed the freedoms of the king's subjects and in a territory not his own and in which many of the Irish were not so privileged. Yet when he went home to Wales, clutching his harp, there were some courts from which he was barred and certain places - especially towns - in which he could not reside.

Defective, then, are the usual indices of nation, national consciousness and subject-status. It was, rather, the achievement of the late-medieval English state to identify its subjects, focus their patriotism, harness their national consciousness and create a corporate affinity that was nationality. The English representatives at the Council of the Church at Constance in 1414 had become aware of this:

Whether a nation be understood as a people marked off from others by blood relationship and habit of unity, or by peculiarities of language (the most sure and positive sign and essence of a nation in divine and human law)...or whether a nation be understood, as it should be, as a territory equal to that of the French nation, England is a real nation...

The rights and privileges, obligations and duties, embodied in the territorial state brought realm and nation, subject-status, national consciousness and nationality closer together than ever before.

The driving-forces behind this affinity were these: a remembrance of things past, a remembrance of things lost, an impulse to defend things under present threat, hostility to outsiders, and, lastly, a will to do these things corporately - in other words, through the monarchical state.

Despite the Norman political and cultural conquest of England after 1066, nostalgia grew for the England that was past. Although the dominance of France was a mirror of Englishmen's inferiority, Englishness survived and by the thirteenth century its reaction was robust. In any case, by 1204 Normandy was lost to France and in 1259 formally surrendered; henceforward England's ruling elite had only one allegiance, an English allegiance. The growing self-consciousness of the Scots kingdom similarly made it rare for nobles to hold estates on both sides of the Scottish border. Moreover, the dominance of Flemings and then Italians in English overseas trade by the thirteenth century had sharpened men's awareness of foreigners who were beyond the king's allegiance - and fostered resentment of their success. It is no coincidence that Henry III (king from 1216 to 1272) was the first English monarch since 1066 to give his sons English, rather than French, names. He patronised Westminster Abbey as the shrine of English kingship. He reinterred there the body of the saintly Edward the Confessor. And the concentration of its kings on England thereafter produced a closer rapport with their subjects which, under Edward I and especially Edward III, enabled the kingdom to humble its enemies within the British Isles and in France. From a condition of inferiority situated on the edge of the Christian world, with a severely battered national consciousness, in the later middle ages England became an assured

and assertive nation rivalling, ultimately replacing, the French in reputation. And it was its unitary, insular state that enabled it to do so.

By the fifteenth century, after an interval of 200 years, several foreign visitors to England, and others who met Englishmen abroad, were writing informative descriptions of the English and how they now saw themselves. These observers concluded that Englishmen were different from everybody else and England different from every other country. Jean Froissart, the Hainaulter who wormed his way into practically every princely court in western Europe, judged that 'the Englysshemen were so prowde, that they set nothyng by any nacyon but by their owne'. A Spanish diarist on board a ship cruising between Cornwall and Kent in 1406, appreciated that the English 'are folk very diverse in character and different from all other nations; they have no fear of any other nation... and they have a liking for no other nation'. This superiority born of difference struck most observers. A Silesian merchant from Breslau, who knew western and eastern Europe, concluded in 1484 that the English were so self-righteous and self-centred that they thought the world did not exist beyond their shores. A shrewd Venetian a decade later put it urbanely:

The English are great lovers of themselves, and of everything belonging to them; they think that there are no other men than themselves, and no other world but England; and whenever they see a handsome foreigner, they say that 'he looks like an Englishman' and that 'it is

a great pity that he should not be an Englishman'; and when they partake of any delicacy with a foreigner, they ask him 'whether such a thing is made in their country. [And] of men forced into exile they say, 'how can they live so destitute out of England?...they had better have died than go out of the world', as if England were the whole world.

Out of this smugness grew a disdain of foreigners which was - still is - a distinguishing mark of the English. A French herald in the 1450s was made to accuse his English counterpart of despising foreigners; and when two Bohemians came to England in 1466, they recorded that the English were 'treacherous and cunning, plotting against the lives of foreigners and no matter how they bend the knee [in greeting] they are not to be trusted'.

In noting these related feelings of superiority and xenophobia, these foreigners were merely recording what late-medieval Englishmen believed: whether it be the political economist who pronounced that 'all the nations under Heaven need English commodities' (England might not yet be the workshop of the world, but in his view it was already its main supplier); or the political strategist who cautioned that foreigners too often 'wipen our nose with our own sleeve'. Or the lawyers, the most died-in-the-wool Englishmen of all - then as now. A century before Sir Thomas Smith wrote his admiring book, On the English Commonwealth, appropriately in Toulouse in 1565, English legal writers were preaching at foreigners, self-righteously demonstrating the distinctiveness of the English polity, seeking to teach them how to live and govern themselves properly. Sir John

Fortescue, chief justice of King's Bench and councillor of kings, descanted on the superiority of the laws, customs and institutions of England over those of other nations. 'And still I wonder very much why this law of England, so worthy and so excellent, is not common to all the world.' Fortescue set out to prove his point by an analysis that placed law before justice and conviction before prevention - the true marks of a lawyer:

It is not poverty that keeps Frenchmen from rising, but it is cowardice and a lack of heart and courage, which no French man hath like unto an Englishman. It hath been often times seen in England that 3 or 4 thieves for poverty have set upon 6 or 7 true men, and robbed them all. But it hath not been seen in France that 6 or 7 thieves have been heard to rob 3 or 4 true men. Wherefore it is right said that few Frenchmen be hanged for robbery, for they have no heart to do so terrible an act... There is no man hanged in Scotland in seven years together for robbery. And yet they be often times hanged for larceny, and stealing of goods in the absence of the owner thereof. But their heart serves them not to take a man's goods while he is present and will defend it. But the Englishman is of another course. For if he be poor, and see another man having riches which may be taken from him by might, he will not spare to do so. Wherefore it is not poverty but it is lack of heart and cowardice that keepeth the Frenchman from rising.

As to the explanation for these English qualities of superiority and disdain in the later middle ages, contemporaries had no doubt. It was because of the encompassing sea. This was not the view of an earlier period. Writing to a monk of St. Albans in 1178, a French abbot conceded that 'Your island is surrounded by water, and not unnaturally its inhabitants are affected by the nature of the element in which they live'. But his conclusion was very droll: 'I have often noticed that the English are greater dreamers than the French, and the reason is that their brains being moist are easily affected by wind in the stomach'. Even in the later middle ages, traditionalists like the lawyer, Fortescue, thought its seas made England vulnerable. England 'may not lightly get succour of other lands' and might be 'a prey to all other nations that would conquer, rob or devour it'. But since the early fourteenth century a more muscular attitude towards the seas round England was common, and it was this that observers associated with the peculiarity and the superiority of the English nation. After Edward III's naval victory at Sluys in 1340, kings of England were known as 'Kings of the Seas'. On Edward's new gold coinage of 1344, he was shown for the first time crowned and in full armour, standing in a ship. The sea was likened to England's wall, its sure defence and the source of its power which would enable it to impose peace on western nations. And not only the Channel was thought of in this way. The Isle of Man, barely English until the fourteenth century, was known by Englishmen as their 'Kingdom of the Sea'. The special character of late-medieval England, then, sprang from its (if you'll pardon the solecism) almost unique relationship with the sea - 'almost unique' because it is strikingly similar to the relationship cultivated by the contemporaneous myth of Venice's 'marriage of the sea' which conferred on the republic its

right to dominate the Adriatic. Venice, the greatest maritime power in the Mediterranean, was known as 'the state of the sea'. This was the very imagery and language of Shakespeare's Richard II, two centuries later; it seems a stereotype today, but in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries such conceits were the convictions of Englishmen, acutely observed by foreigners.

How did the English demonstrate and justify their difference and superiority to others and themselves? They created a national myth, elements of which are still recognisable today. Well known to the French herald as he threw insults at his English counterpart in the 1450s was the argument that the English state claimed an ancestry at once ancient British and Roman imperial, the two fusing in the Emperor Constantine who, it was believed, had been born at York of a British mother whose own forebears sprang from Brutus, grandson of Aeneas of Troy; from the same line descended the heroic Arthur who had ruled all Britain, including England.

Such fabulous stories were under fire in the later middle ages, but more reliable material to buttress the national myth was available among distinguished Anglo-Saxon ancestors of English kings. By the time of Henry III, Anglo-Saxon saints and rulers were venerated, and Westminster Abbey, the shrine of St. Edward, rivalled the French royal mausoleum at St. Denis, north of Paris. Henry's successors continued to patronise Anglo-Saxons, not least Henry VI who wanted Alfred canonised, not for his gallant culinary efforts but to acknowledge his religious and educational accomplishments. Henry VI

himself had a vigorous posthumous cult, encouraged by Richard III, Henry VII and Henry VIII.

To set off such worthies, many nations need a scape-goat. England's is Richard III. Richard is the most persistently vilified of English kings. He is the only crowned king since William the Conqueror not to have a surviving tomb; he was the first English king since 1066 to be defeated and killed in battle - in itself a sign of God's disfavour. And he is the only English king to cause such delusions as to inspire violent and evil acts.

In January 1835 the first attempt was made to assassinate an American President - Andrew Jackson. As the President prepared to leave the rotunda of the Capitol in Washington, a figure six feet away drew two pistols and fired point-blank. The reports echoed deafeningly in the rotunda, but both pistols had misfired. The would-be assassin, Richard Laurence, was subdued with the help of Davy Crockett. Laurence claimed at his trial that he was Richard III and rightfully king of England. He was declared insane and consigned to an asylum for life. In 1835, Richard III still seemed the embodiment of evil, whose designs were foiled by what newspapers regarded as God's protective hand; this was proved by a small-arms expert who concluded that the odds on two pistols misfiring within seconds of one another was 125,000:1. More tragic was the report a year ago of a young Briton who murdered his fiancée because he, too, thought he was Richard III. This durable myth of Richard, the Royal Beast, was cultivated, as an essential element of the English national myth, by the brutish, quarter-Welsh Tudor monarchs. Their aim was to convince a nation that, after Richard's short reign, the

sunny uplands of Tudor England had been reached and the glorious progress of the ancient English state could resume.

The antique myth of England was pitted directly against similar, long-standing French claims. At the Church Council at Constance in 1414, the English representatives maintained that they were 'not inferior to the realm of France in antiquity or authority'. They insisted on the antiquity of English Christianity, introduced by Joseph of Arimathea, who had taken the crucified Christ from the Cross; if true, the English claim was unassailable beside Frenchmen's veneration of a mere St. Denis. It was stated that England

is superior in the antiquity of its faith, dignity and honour and at least equal in all the divine gifts of regal power and numbers and wealth of clergy and people. During the second age of the world, the excellent royal house of England arose and it continues in real existence to this date. Among many holy palmers whom it has produced and whom none cannot here well enumerate, there are St. Helen and her son, the Emperor Constantine the Great, born in the royal city of York. They rescued many lands from the infidels and brought the Lord's Cross in faith from the country of infidels to Christian lands...

The English, too, were secure in their belief that they had championed the Pope in Rome when most Frenchmen had opted for the rival Pope at Avignon during the previous century:

The most potent royal house of England has never departed from obedience to the Roman Church but has always fought under it in Christian fashion.

An uninterrupted devotion to the faith from its very beginnings was a major justification for English pride and superiority. The fact that at the next Council at Basle in 1436 the bishop of Burgos exploded the myth of Joseph of Arimathea's eccentric travels did not impress Englishmen convinced of their place in the sun.

The enviable quality of their laws, customs and modes of governance verified that this was so. Sir John Fortescue reflected with enthusiasm on English institutions in his book In Praise of the Laws of England. He was the first Englishman to explain England's peculiar legal, constitutional and political character in terms of its economy and society: he declared its institutions to be far superior to all others, especially those of France. 'There is no gainsaying nor legitimate doubt but that the customs of England are not only good but the best'; and, he added in accordance with the English myth, this was partly because they were rooted in antiquity. He went further. He equated English law and government with the law of nature and, more significantly, the law of God, something (he believed) writers on France could not claim. England, therefore, was 'the mightiest and most wealthy realm of the world' - a world which, in the later middle ages, was England's oyster.

England's fortunes in the Hundred Years' War, notably its resounding victories over France and Scotland, seemed to confirm her new-found primacy. The favour of the Almighty, as evidenced by

such successes as Crecy, Poitiers and Agincourt, demonstrated to Englishmen - and others were persuaded - that God was on their side and their triumphs were the triumphs of justice. Nor was this belief confined to the English Establishment. Popular songs and poems made the same point. Christ protected the English in battle, most obviously when, as at Crecy and Agincourt, and at Neville's Cross against the Scots in 1346, the English few were pitted against the many. Even when Edward III suffered embarrassing reverses, the popular mind regarded these as mere temporary setbacks, confident that, like the sinful David, Edward would be punished but not destroyed - in contrast to the French, whose sins were monstrous and their consequent misfortunes crushing. Even the popular English oath, 'God Damn', reflected Englishmen's close personal relationship with God, and with heavy irony Frenchmen acknowledged this in the fourteenth century by coining for an Englishman the colloquial noun Le Goddam.

It has recently been suggested that 'the nationality of God was a touchstone of European nationalism'. If that were so, then in the later middle ages God was an Englishman. The English certainly thought so. This belief sprang initially from royal propaganda aimed at undermining the special claims which French monarchs and people made on God's favour, claims which Popes had supported since 1200. Their political theology embraced sacred kingship and the unique piety of the French people; it seemed proven by the wizardry of their kings in performing miraculous cures, by the sacred oil given to their ancestor Clovis for use in French coronations, and by the sacred insignia of the fleur-de-lys and the war banner of the oriflamme; and it was acknowledged in 1311 when the Pope gave Philip IV the unique

title 'Most Christian King'. The French were then compared to the people of Israel, 'a peculiar people chosen by the Lord to carry out the orders of Heaven'.

This was a political theology late-medieval Englishmen could not abide. English kings sought to match the special qualities of the French: they located venerable figures among the pantheon of Anglo-Saxon and English saints and monarchs; Westminster Abbey became the shrine of English kingship; scrofula, epilepsy and other spasms were cured by the royal touch (Queen Anne was the last to perform this astonishing feat - though the introduction of the royal walk-and-touch-about may mark its revival); and in the early fourteenth century it was discovered that St. Thomas Becket, 150 years before, had acquired a holy oil from the Virgin Mary - a more reliable messenger than Clovis - for use at English coronations. English pretensions to divinity were carefully nurtured and the Hundred Years' War seemed to vindicate them. When Edward III claimed the French crown through his mother in 1337, it was likened to Jesus's descent from the House of David. When he introduced new coins as king of England and France in 1340, the snooty motto read 'Jesus, passing through the midst of them, went his way'. When Parliament met in 1377, the chancellor was explicit:

God would never have honoured this land in the same way as
He did Israel through great victories over their enemies, if
it were not that He had chosen it as His heritage.

During the Great Schism of the Church, it was the English who were authorised to lead crusades against supporters of the anti-Pope in

Avignon to avenge the injuries to Christ's Church. The English were portrayed as the new Israelites and England the new Jerusalem - convictions they have not entirely abandoned.

Henry V's reign confirmed that it was so. In popular propaganda the Great Harry was the 'true elect of God', the celestial warrior. His baby son and successor, Henry VI, was likened to the Christ-child as the saviour of his and God's kingdom; his people were 'that special tribe the English' whose king was 'over all other Christian kings'. Now that Henry V and his successors also claimed to be kings of France, it was logical to adopt the title 'Most Christian King', which brooked no competitor. By 1440, Henry VI was spoken of as 'Most Christian of Christian Kings', even as 'Most Christian and most gracious Prince, our most dread sovereign lord'. Henry VII adopted the same style: when Caxton printed a book for him in 1489 he was addressed as 'the highest and most Christian king and prince of all the world'. What eluded the English was papal approval. Spurred on by the conferral on Spanish kings and queens of the title 'Catholic Majesties', Henry VIII blackmailed the Pope in 1512 to secure the title he wanted, but it was done secretly and not until 1521 did he obtain recognition of the 200-year-old special relationship between God and the English king - the title 'Defender of the Faith', which British monarchs still use. This new mythology gave England parity with, and eventual superiority over, all nations of the west, and it encompassed king and nation indivisibly. A young German student, visiting England in the mid-sixteenth century, noted that good English was spoken only in England, which he described 'God's heavenly realm' and the English as 'the blessed and the chosen' of God. And his implication was that, contrary to present belief,

English, not Welsh, is the language of the angels - unless, of course, they are bilingual.

The corollary of this unique relationship was that England was an independent sovereign nation answerable only to God. It was, in medieval language, an empire, and English publicists insisted that this imperial quality was historic. According to Fortescue, 'from of old English kings have reigned independently, and acknowledged no superior on earth in things temporal'. This was a crucial aspect of the English nation. One should add that there was no question, until Henry VIII's marital adventures in the 1530s, of sovereign authority in spiritual matters, since the Pope was Christ's vicar on earth and the interpreter of God's will even to Englishmen.

England's imperial claims had a mixed ancestry. Based on the precepts of Roman law, they rejected a Holy Roman Empire that was now narrowly German; they rejected the temporal authority of Popes, who were often identifiable with French interests in the later middle ages; and they included an element of jealousy at the assertions of French monarchs from 1200 that they were emperors in their kingdom. Hence, when the Emperor Sigismund arrived in England in 1416, a ritual was observed at Dover whereby Henry V's youngest brother, Humphrey, rode into the surf to escort the Emperor ashore, thereby demonstrating that Sigismund entered the kingdom not by his imperial right but with the permission of the king-emperor, Henry V. Six weeks earlier, Sigismund had blotted his copy-book in Paris, where he was invited to attend the king's court; he promptly sat in the king's chair and ennobled a French litigant, as if he (Sigismund) were as much emperor in France as he was in Germany. Bad news

travelled fast, and at the water's edge Henry V averted a similar demonstration of imperial pretension. As to the Pope, fourteenth-century statutes rejected his temporal authority in England; it was left to Henry VIII to abrogate his spiritual authority much later. And the imperial claims of the French? Their king might be an emperor, but it was the English who were now God's chosen people.

Henry V pre-eminently was regarded as emperor in his kingdom, but his son too was occasionally called 'Most Imperial Majesty' - that is, when he was not 'Most Christian King'. For popular consumption, poems and songs made the point explicit. When Henry V took Rouen in 1419, the celebrations in England were ecstatic, if expressed in execrable verse:

And he is king excellent
 And unto non other obedient
 That liveth here in earth- by right
 But only unto God almight
 Within his own, Emperor
 And also king and conqueror.

This was undiluted temporal sovereignty of an English king in his kingdom acclaimed by a jubilant nation. It appears to have been Henry, too, who was the first English monarch to wear a new imperial crown of state: a closed or arched crown, with four curved hoops meeting in the centre above the diadem itself and surmounted by a cross. It symbolised self-contained sovereignty. May it not have been prompted by the visit of Sigismund, establishing, alongside

Humphrey's wet feet, that Henry V's powers in England were no less than those of the Emperor in his empire. This imperial crown appeared on the great seal of England after 1471, and Henry VII had it engraved on the coinage in 1489. Cuthbert Tunstall, later bishop of London, finally explained its theory to the young Henry VIII in 1517:

One of the chief points in the element of the emperor is that he which shall be elected must be of Germany; whereas your Grace is not, nor since the Christian faith the kings of England were subject to the empire. But the Crown of England is an Empire of itself, much better than now the Empire of Rome; for which cause your Grace weareth a closed crown.

It was a short, but momentous, step for Henry VIII, when he could not get his way with Anne Boleyn, to extend his empire into the spiritual field also.

How convincing were these arguments? Legends of England's heroic and Christian past were doubted by contemporaries. If this was the scepticism of intellectuals, there were more practical embarrassments, often felt by ordinary people. At the Church Councils of the early fifteenth century, the illogicality of English arguments came close to sophistry. In one breath the English representatives proclaimed their nation's peculiarly ancient and divine qualities; in another, they insisted on incorporating Ireland, Wales and Scotland in the English nation. How could the English claim sovereign independence and uniqueness while ruling half-a-dozen

dominions whose inhabitants could be said to be the king's subjects, part of the English nation and English by nationality?

The contradiction could not be resolved in terms of English common law. Much as they disliked it, English kings acknowledged that their lordship encompassed a diversity of laws, and in these formative centuries of the common law it was conceded that customary and provincial laws could intertwine with English law in several parts of the realm and dominions. Even Edward I, the most persistent lawgiver, who was advised that Welsh law breached practically all of the Ten Commandments, did not expunge it from conquered Wales. He had greater distaste for Irish customs, which he regarded as 'detestable to God and so contrary to all law that they ought not to be deemed laws'. But abolition was not practical. Thus, in 1406 the laws and customs of Ireland, Wales, and Calais and Gascony too, were assured to their inhabitants by Henry IV, and no amount of advocacy could induce English kings to eradicate them. This multiplicity of laws made it difficult to define the status of the king's subjects.

The heritage of conquest in the Celtic lands created problems too. The ancient contrast between the civilised and barbarian worlds had been redefined to suit medieval Europe. In the British Isles, it was a commonplace that the civilised English had a duty to subdue the more brutal and unpredictable - indeed immoral - Celtic countries. The long hair of the so-called 'wild' Irish and Welsh seemed a graphic sign of their barbarity, and to be called 'wild Irish' in fourteenth-century England was sufficient grounds for an action of slander. Sketches made in Edward I's reign pictured the Irishman with a savage axe, and the coarse Welshman with a rustic bow and

one shoe. By the sixteenth century, such stereotypes populated works of satire, and the early Tudor collections of 'merry jests' include the gross Irishman and the dim-witted Welshman. The Scots, it need hardly be said, seemed no less 'wild' to Englishmen, and poems from the early fourteenth century harped on their guile. These distinctions went deep. The colonial towns of Wales, founded as bastions of English civilised power, strove to preserve their English character, so that Welshmen were frequently regarded as aliens in parts of their own land. Could such barbarians be regarded as English?

Or take the inhabitants of Calais. After Henry VI also became king of France in 1422, some claimed with justice that Calais was now part of his French realm, not part of England; its inhabitants his subjects as king of France, not of England.

Circumstances dictated that matters could not be left in this confused state. Popular movements in Ireland and Wales pressed the problem on the English Establishment. The Gaelic resurgence in the fourteenth century (or 'degeneracy' as others viewed it) made Ireland, according to an over-excited writer, like 'a woman who has risen again from the horrors of reproach'. The colonial area round Dublin contracted and the loyalty of the Anglicised lordships beyond was eroded. In the unsubdued Gaelic countryside the population did not acknowledge the king as their lord and he did not treat them as anything more than 'mere Irish'. By 1341 it seemed as if 'the land of Ireland was on the point of separation from the lands of the king'. The Welsh revolt of 1400 was an equally potent factor in focussing attention on the problems of subject and nationhood, if only because

for a century Wales has seemed fully conquered and, as the harpist in Ireland discovered in 1333, its inhabitants could be treated as the king's subjects, even outside their land.

The Hundred Years' War also raised uncomfortable issues. Many Englishmen campaigned and settled abroad, taking their wives with them or marrying in France; the birth of children there raised the question of their status and nationality. Parliament was forced to deal with the matter in 1343 and 1351 because of the birth of the king's sons on the continent as well as children of English noblemen. The war, too, created severe financial problems for English kings; when they taxed their non-English-born subjects as aliens the protests immediately posed the question of their nationality. And what about immigrants: those Irish, Welsh and Scots who for long had drifted into English towns and universities, their numbers swollen by Gascons and Normans when English France was lost in the mid-fifteenth century? How were they to be regarded?

When the Great Schism occurred in the Church in 1378, Gaelic Ireland gave its allegiance of the rival French Pope at Avignon. And the Channel Islands were part of a French diocese whose bishop supported the French Pope. Welsh rebels too declared for Avignon, so that for several decades Christendom's divisions ranged subject against subject in England and its dominions.

These circumstances highlighted the inconsistencies in English ideas of nationhood and nationality. The way they were handled lacked continuity but was in general accord with Englishmen's attitudes toward themselves and others. Their reactions veered

across a wide spectrum, from cultural isolation of inferior, troublesome communities, to assimilation and incorporation in the superior English nation. Thus, with the Gaelic resurgence, only Englishmen born in England or Ireland came to be regarded as true subjects in Ireland, and so efforts were made by language, marriage, dress and, of course, hair to isolate them from the 'mere Irish'. Most Irishmen were treated as second-class subjects and frequently forced to leave England. Likewise, when the Welsh rebelled severe restrictions were imposed on them both inside and outside Wales.

More fundamental, however, was the attitude that these British Isles and the lands in France were England's and that their inhabitants should receive the benefits of Englishness - ultimately incorporation in England. In 1331 Edward III offered English law to the colonists in Ireland and the loyal Irish, but to go further proved impractical. In Wales, English law gradually advanced until Henry VII gave charters conferring English law and rights on remaining Welsh communities.

Irishmen were encouraged to adopt English names and some did so to conceal their birth. The Welsh patronymic began to be superseded by English-style surnames about the same time - with all the confusion that results from legions of Williamses, Thomases, even Griffithses. The Welsh genius for exploiting other people's circumstances aided the process, and ordinary Englishmen resented how eagerly the Welsh embraced their ways before Owain Glyndwr was cold.

Discrimination against indigenous languages and suppression of their bardic guardians took place in Ireland, Wales and Calais. But the finest accolade the English could confer on their dominions was to regard their inhabitants as English. Welshmen who penetrated the walls of colonial towns in Wales - even marrying English - were adopted as privileged 'English' townsmen. Channel Islanders, after protesting at being regarded as aliens, secured recognition as 'reputed citizens' of England, and so did the offspring of English settlers in France. If in doubt, there was the royal grant of denizenship or, more secure still, its enrolment in a parliamentary act which made its recipient 'naturally' English. Many cautious folk from the English dominions - and foreigners too - bought these privileges in the later middle ages. Their very number pointed the way to a more systematic solution to the intricate questions of status and nationality.

The first two Tudor kings showed the passion for uniformity and definition of the supremely unoriginal mind. They merely added a coping-stone to late-medieval developments relating to status. Their task was made easier by the loss of all the French lands, except Calais, by 1453. Henry VII transferred the Channel Islands to an English diocese instead of Coutances. Henry VIII, who was also apprehensive about his Reformation changes (rather than moved by vague humanistic notions), 'incorporated' as well as 'united and annexed' Wales with England and created shires throughout the land. He also incorporated Calais in the realm. In distant Ireland his solution was slightly different but with the same effect: he exchanged the title of lord for that of king in 1541, affirming the Irish to be 'true subjects, obedient to his laws, forsaking their Irish laws, habits

and customs'. He brought M.Ps. from Wales and Calais to Westminster, and insisted that in Ireland, Wales and Calais, English law and language should replace local laws and customs.

Justification and vindication were now just as important as they had been in creating the myth of the English nation. The king's independent authority that was the late-medieval 'empire' of England was accordingly regarded as embracing his dominions too. This imperial territorial unity was implicit in the king's right to the allegiance of all born within those dominions, and explicit in the institutions to which they had access. Parliament (though representation was confined to England) had long discussed all the dominions, and its legislation was normally universally applicable. Occasionally M.Ps. had been summoned from the dominions: from Scotland by Edward I, Wales twice by Edward II, Ireland (abortively) by Edward III, and from Calais by Henry VIII. There was uncertainty as to whether cases from Ireland, Wales and the Channel Island should be referred to the common law courts, but things were different with the king's prerogative courts. To Edward I's council came appeals from Ireland; and the chancellor later judged suits from Wales, Ireland, the Channel Islands and Calais.

As to a supporting myth of persuasive force, this was to hand in the legends of a British past, in which Arthur and his predecessors ruled far broader acres than England's. British histories and prophecies made lively reading in Wales and Scotland in the later middle ages, especially when they reproached the English as descendants of invading Saxons. Yet, Edward I, conqueror of the Welsh and 'hammer of the Scots', showed deep interest in Arthur as

king of Britain, and later English kings proclaimed their descent from the self-same British rulers and appropriated their supposed rights in the British Isles. On occasion, Arthur symbolised the English 'empire' and Arthurian romance and Brutus legends were popular long before Caxton printed them in the late-fifteenth century. English and foreign observers referred to 'the island of England', even 'the British island of England', and 'Great Britain' appeared in the official vocabulary of both Edward IV and Richard III, well before England became Shakespeare's 'scept'red isle'. Arthur was the imperial forebear of English emperors and his British realm was now reconstituted as the English 'empire'. Determined to make England the best of European nations, later medieval Englishmen had taken at the same time a significant step towards creating a single British nation with a far more ambitious future.

I have spoken of some of the things that currently inform, exercise and delight my mind as a student of history. I wish finally to comment on my present predicament. It is customary for new professors on occasions such as this to pay tribute to their predecessors - which they do with varying degrees of enthusiasm. There were no Professors of Medieval History at Swansea before 1982, so I am absolved from that particular, and potentially embarrassing, obligation. I do, however, wish to say this.

Medieval history has been in capable - not to say distinguished - hands almost since the College opened: those of Glyn Roberts, later Professor of Welsh History at University College, Bangor; of Marion Gibbs, subsequently of the University of Melbourne; of Rees Davies,

now Professor of History at University College, Aberystwyth; and of my predecessor, William Greenway, who without doubt would have had a fine career as a historian had he not died at the age of 28. And David Walker, a scrupulous scholar and a patient guide to four (if my three present colleagues will allow me to say so) young and 'green' lecturers. And Glanmor Williams, a rarity among modern historians in his understanding of, and sympathy for, the middle ages; for 30 years he has loitered with intent to commit medieval history, and his weightiest book is devoted to the middle ages and would assure him conviction as a medieval historian in any court of law.

Chairs are not particularly difficult to acquire: a convenient retirement here, a strategic resignation there, a broken leg or, as Sydney Anglo revealed on a similar occasion earlier this year, a spot of 'systematic immorality'. It is even easier to collapse into a Chair and never be seen again, at least in scholarly circles. And, as I stand in this intermediate, purgatorial state, I still recall how tiresome to their colleagues professors often are, and the delusions of grandeur that can suddenly overtake new ones. By the nature of their calling, Professors of History are the least likely to fall into such unfortunate ways, and with the wisdom and experience of two millennia to call upon, let me offer some cautionary words of proven value.

To those who suffer professors far from gladly, some comforting words of the Greek historian, Thucydides:

True wisdom is shown by those who make careful use of their advantages in the certain knowledge that things will change.

To those who are seduced into enjoying the comforts and license of professordom, some reflections, Principal, of your disillusioned counterpart in the University of Paris in 1230, as he tried to pull his institution together:

In days of yore lectures and debates were frequent, and all were keen on study. Now...there is little teaching, time is spent on meetings and discussions, and, while the young think only of abominable plots, the old simply devise regulations.

And for the deluded, in their grandeur, some characteristically rumbustious words of the great conductor, Sir Thomas Beecham, seem worth recalling. He was speaking of academic musicians, but he might well have spoken in similar terms of academics generally, and especially of professors:

Doctors of Music! (he snorted) That means they have sat on their bottoms for six hours and done a paper on harmony, but they can't play the National Anthem.

