



THE COMMON ROOM

Celtic Nationalisms and the Global Break-up of Britain

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Abstract

This response to Stuart Ward's *Untied Kingdom* examines his treatment of Scottish and Welsh nationalisms. This is a crucial part of the book because it is here that Ward completes his narrative arc, which depicts the loss of empire as a fundamentally destabilising force for the UK state and its basis in a shared British identity. So how should we think about the pressure that decolonisation places on British identity within Britain? While admiring much of Ward's treatment of this question, this response suggests that he underestimates the importance of post-war social democracy as a possible alternative basis for British identity and the decay of that social democracy as a causal factor in the rise of Scottish and Welsh nationalisms.

Keywords: British Empire; Scottish nationalism; Welsh nationalism; social democracy

Untied Kingdom is a truly panoramic work. Stuart Ward has given us a new perspective on twentieth-century Britain by placing the regular fare of domestic political and social history in conversation with the history of the British Empire and in particular its settler colonies. He has written an account of global Britain that follows the trajectory of Britishness from its zenith across the world in the early twentieth century to its late twentieth-century retreat, as the British imperial project broke up and British national identity began to seem thinner and less compelling within the UK itself. The crucial innovation in Ward's approach is that he connects late twentieth-century political turmoil within Britain – perceptions of national economic decline; tensions over race and immigration; the Northern Irish troubles; the rise of Scottish and Welsh nationalisms – to the global break-up of the British Empire and the rise of distinct national identities in states such as Australia, Canada and New Zealand, which

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had formerly seen themselves as fundamentally British. The book is a magnificent achievement, the fruit of massive research across five continents, full of fascinating details and perceptive judgements that cumulatively build into a compelling overall case. Given such a vast canvas, it feels rather parochial to focus on the final chapters of the book and on the question of how Scottish and Welsh nationalisms fit into Ward's argument. Yet this part of *Untied Kingdom* is crucial because it is here that Ward completes his narrative arc, which depicts the loss of empire as a fundamentally destabilising force for the UK state and its basis in a shared British identity.

In this response to the book, I want to press on the question of precisely how Ward thinks that this instability within the UK relates to the wider process of decolonisation. As he frankly states, 'making sense of the interconnections between the course of events unfolding overseas and the decades-long push for the dissolution of the United Kingdom cannot be a straightforward matter of cause and effect'.¹ That gives a flavour of the subtle, multifaceted approach taken by the book, and the nuanced position that Ward outlines on the rise of Scottish and Welsh nationalisms in the UK after the 1960s. So how should we think about the pressure that decolonisation placed on British identity within Britain?

The overall thrust of Ward's argument is put most clearly in the conclusion of the book, which disarmingly starts, 'being British was always something of a stretch'.² Ward acknowledges here that the four nations inhabiting the British Isles do represent a different case from the other territories of the British world, since their 'geographic proximity' means that they will always have to collaborate in some way. But Ward argues that while something that looks like a 'British state' may therefore persist in some form in the future, it also means that the rationale for such a state will ultimately be 'a matter of political expediency' rather than 'anything more' and that 'centrifugal pressures' will continue to impress themselves on that political structure.³ Implicit within *Untied Kingdom* is the assumption that British identity was inextricably bound up with the imperial project and that no plausible alternative basis for that identity could be found once decolonisation was underway. In my view, this leaves out of the picture one important alternative candidate for revitalising Britishness: the project of building a social democratic British state that bound together citizens across England, Scotland and Wales through an activist industrial policy, nationalisation of key industries, and of course the creation of the welfare state (the case of Northern Ireland I put to one side here since it raises a much more complicated set of issues). This new model of Britishness was certainly limited and compromised in various ways and, as Ward shows, was itself implicated in imperialism, but it did provide a new rationale for the state that was more domestic than international in orientation

¹ S. Ward, *Untied Kingdom: A Global History of the End of Britain* (Cambridge, 2023), 487.

² *Ibid.*, 480.

³ *Ibid.*, 488.

and which foregrounded a more egalitarian and inclusive politics than had been evident before the 1940s.⁴

There is a telling comparison to be made between *Untied Kingdom* and David Edgerton's *Rise and Fall of the British Nation* (2018). Ward positions himself against Edgerton's book, but the two deserve to be read together for years to come on undergraduate and graduate syllabi as titanic contrasting accounts of twentieth-century British history. Edgerton regards the mid-twentieth century as the period in which a novel British project of national economic development rose to prominence, with the state newly committed to industrial and technological modernisation, protectionism and (eventually) social welfare (although Edgerton is less convinced than other historians that the welfare state was the key state innovation of this era). For Edgerton, the British nation was in fact invented after the 1930s, as the UK shed its global pretensions and became, briefly, an autarkic developmental state.⁵ So Edgerton and Ward agree that the mid-twentieth century saw a fundamental reorientation in British state practices and cultural attitudes. But they disagree over whether anything coherent emerged out of that reorientation. For Ward, Britishness then suffered a slow puncture, as it started to deflate internally as well as externally. For Edgerton, in contrast, a new Britain was forged out of industrial and social modernisation that was in many respects successful. In Edgerton's view, it took the shock of Thatcherism and economic globalisation to smash apart this British nation. I don't agree with everything Edgerton says, but in this respect I am more sympathetic to his position than Ward's. I do think that an imperfect but recognisable form of social democracy emerged in Britain in this period, although I would be more inclined to connect this to the institutions of the welfare state and a new idea of shared social citizenship rather than Edgerton's focus on industrial modernisation (and hence to deploy the descriptor 'social democracy', a term that Edgerton himself is reluctant to use).⁶

What does all of this have to do with Scottish and Welsh nationalism? One powerful explanation for the rise of these nationalisms in the late twentieth century has been precisely that they were borne out of the 1970s and 1980s crisis of social democracy. As structural economic change and government strategy converged on a deindustrialised and more economically unequal Britain, the left in Scotland and Wales (whether formally aligned with nationalist parties or not) increasingly turned to Scottish and Welsh national identity to mobilise support against an apparently distant, uncaring UK state.⁷ We don't hear a lot about this interpretation in Ward's book, partly because his chronological focus ends more or less in the 1970s, so the ructions of the

⁴ The classic statement of this case with respect to Scotland is T. Devine, 'The Break-up of Britain? Scotland and the End of Empire', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 16 (2006), 163–80.

⁵ D. Edgerton, *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation* (2018).

⁶ D. Edgerton, 'What Came between New Liberalism and Neoliberalism? Rethinking Keynesianism, the Welfare State and Social Democracy', in *The Neoliberal Age? Britain since the 1970s*, ed. A. Davies, B. Jackson and F. Sutcliffe-Braithwaite (2021), 30–51.

⁷ R. Finlay, 'Thatcherism, Unionism and Nationalism: A Comparative Study of Scotland and Wales', in *Making Thatcher's Britain*, ed. B. Jackson and R. Saunders (Cambridge, 2012), 165–80.

Thatcher era remain distant echoes. But this is also partly because his attention to the discourse of Plaid Cymru and the Scottish National Party (SNP) in the 1960s and 1970s leads him to emphasise instead a rhetoric of post-imperial crisis as the dominant ideological note of Scottish and Welsh nationalisms. As Ward shows, the point of this rhetoric was largely not to suggest that Scotland and Wales were *de facto* colonies of England, as deserving of emancipation as those other colonies enjoying their new-found independence, though of course this point was made in the more demotic variants of nationalism.⁸ Although it offered an irresistible rhetorical charge, the question of whether Scotland and Wales were colonies faced serious objections, not least the inconvenient fact that the Scots and the Welsh had systematically benefited from, and participated in, British imperialism. The more sophisticated nationalist argument, Ward notes, was that Britain was an intrinsically imperial state that had been denuded of all meaning and purpose by the loss of empire. In a sense, then, the leaders of Plaid Cymru and the SNP agreed with Ward *avant la lettre*: for them there was no rationale for the British state beyond imperial plunder and paternalism. This was also the case that Tom Nairn elevated to a new intellectual level in his influential essays for *New Left Review*, eventually collected in his 1977 book, *The Break-up of Britain*.⁹

But this raises an important point about the politics of Scottish and Welsh nationalism before the 1980s. Nairn's critique of the imperial British state was ultimately aimed at pushing beyond what he saw as the watered-down 'labourism' that held back a more authentic socialism from breaking through at a British level. But unlike Nairn, and unlike the predominantly working-class supporters of the Labour Party who lived in industrial conurbations, nationalist voters and activists of the 1960s and 1970s were often ambivalent or hostile towards socialism and were drawn much more heavily from rural and small-town Scotland and Wales. As Malcolm Petrie has recently argued with respect to Scotland, they held political views that were in fact antagonistic to the centralised economic planning that had emerged from the war.¹⁰ Tom Nairn had not yet become the guiding star of a left-wing nationalism in the period Ward writes about.

In other words, the politics of left and right are a necessary component of a full account of the trajectory of Scottish and Welsh nationalisms. Nationalists aligned themselves against the big UK state and against European integration in the 1960s and 1970s as a protest against centralising social democracy. In the

⁸ A helpful survey of this theme with respect to the SNP, published too late for Ward to take account of, is S. Mullen and E. Gibbs, 'Scotland, Atlantic Slavery and the Scottish National Party: From Colonised to Coloniser in the Political Imagination', *Nations and Nationalism*, 29 (2023), 922–38. The debate in Wales is discussed in M. Johnes, *Wales: England's Colony?* (Cardigan, 2019).

⁹ T. Nairn, *The Break-up of Britain* (1977); B. Jackson, *The Case for Scottish Independence: A History of Nationalist Political Thought in Modern Scotland* (Cambridge, 2020), 61–89.

¹⁰ M. Petrie, *Politics and the People: Scotland 1945–79* (Edinburgh, 2022), 52–131. On Wales, see A. Edwards, *Labour's Crisis: Plaid Cymru, the Conservatives and the Challenge to Labour Dominance in North-West Wales, 1960–74* (Cardiff, 2011), 109–52; L. McAllister, *Plaid Cymru: The Emergence of a Political Party* (Bridgend, 2001), 37–72.

1980s and 1990s they presented themselves as against the big UK state and for European integration as a protest against Thatcherism. It is the latter formulation of Scottish nationalist ideology that has proved to be durable and ultimately helped the party to its greatest-ever victories after winning the Scottish Parliament from Labour in 2007.¹¹ Yet this also shows that the crisis of Britishness that Ward details is tied up with the seismic changes in British political economy after the 1970s. My impression is that Ward is less invested in the salience of the domestic left–right party divide within the UK because, in many of the case studies that he investigates, it is all too evident that Labour governments have been as complicit as Conservative governments in pursuing, say, a racialised immigration policy or a quasi-colonial foreign policy. Ward's account of Harold Wilson's governments will make difficult reading for those commentators and politicians who have become preoccupied with rehabilitating Labour's time in office in the 1960s and 1970s. Nonetheless, if we want to understand the rise and fall and rise of challenges to Britishness from Scottish and Welsh nationalisms after the 1960s, we do also need to follow David Edgerton in paying careful attention to the creation and then decay of the Britain of the National Health Service, the National Coal Board and the National Union of Mineworkers.

None of this is intended to detract from the importance and interest of Ward's book. Indeed, a more ecumenical way to read his argument would be that, by placing these domestic disputes in a wider global frame, he is entering a plea for greater balance between the domestic and the global in how we talk about the rise of Scottish and Welsh nationalisms and about the fortunes of British national identity in the late twentieth century. If that is his intent, then he is surely right to direct our attention to the wider global context in which the internal critique of Britain took shape. The parallels he explores between nation-building in Australia, Canada and New Zealand and the resurgence of nationalist sentiment within Scotland and Wales are illuminating. He also convincingly documents the saturation of that nationalist political discourse with references to postcolonial state-building. While the historiographies of Scotland and Wales are increasingly engaged by the relationship between those nations and empire, the reverberations of decolonisation have been largely left out of the study of late twentieth-century Scottish and Welsh nationalisms. Among the many other accomplishments of *Untied Kingdom*, Stuart Ward has performed an invaluable service in forcing historians of these movements to take their international context more seriously and to connect them to a much larger crisis of global Britishness after the Second World War.

¹¹ I have discussed this in greater detail in Jackson, *Case for Scottish Independence*, especially 90–127.