

Europe and the British geographical imagination, 1760-1830: how the continent was understood in literate British culture



Paul Stock writes that sources which were widely-read by Britons in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries – geographical reference works, textbooks, dictionaries, and encyclopaedias – show how debates about Europe have long been a part of British popular culture.

Controversy about Britain's place in Europe has dominated British politics for the past several decades. But the concerns and passions of the present day are not new; in fact, debates about Britain's relationship with Europe – and about the definition of 'Europe' itself – have been present in British popular culture for a very long time. My recent book [Europe and the British Geographical Imagination, 1760-1830](#) explores the history of those debates in the tumultuous period of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. Many of the questions considered in this period are very familiar. Is Europe unified by a shared culture? Where are the edges of Europe, and how can these be identified? Are Russia and Turkey within Europe or should they be excluded? To what extent is Europe solely a trading network, or are there common political practices too? Is Britain itself a European country or not? By showing how these questions were discussed in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British culture, we can better understand the origins of more recent debates.

Answering these enquiries is the province of intellectual history. Specialists in this area often concentrate on the ideas of so-called great thinkers: prominent intellectuals, powerful politicians and the like. But my book follows a different approach. It draws on popular geographical and historical works from the period: bestselling reference works, school textbooks, geographical dictionaries, and encyclopaedias. These are, if you like, the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century equivalents of Wikipedia: the sources to which most people would instinctively turn if they wanted general information of a geographical nature. They were also widely disseminated throughout society and were read at every social level from literate labourers though to monarchs. And crucially, they seek to collate common knowledge for wide consumption by as many people as possible. Thanks to their popularity and summative nature, these texts can help us to uncover commonplace, 'popular' ideas about Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

The period 1760-1830 is especially significant because the number of geographical texts rose in these decades. This partly results from wider expansions in book production and consumption, but it is also clear that geographical works were an increasingly popular genre among the reading population. Examining this period also allows me to take issue with two common interpretations of British and European history. Some historians consider the late eighteenth century to be formative in the development of nationalism across the continent. Others draw attention to the period's cosmopolitanism, typically epitomised by an international 'republic of letters'. In my opinion, these frequently-employed perspectives offer rather over-simplified interpretations of the period; and neither provides an adequate means to understand popular British thinking about Europe. An emphasis on nationalism typically interprets cultural interactions through the lens of opposition, and cannot always account for exchanges of people, goods and ideas which were not mediated by hostility or competition. Conversely, cosmopolitanism – often pitched as an alternative to 'local loyalties and rivalries' – can too often mistake the sentiments and aspirations of a few intellectuals for universal ideals shared by all people everywhere. Taken at face value, these two interpretative positions would characterise British ideas of Europe in terms of either antagonistic rivalry or celebratory elite connectivity. Instead, the geography books show that ideas about Europe are very much more complex than these two established readings of the period can permit.

Europe and the British Geographical Imagination, 1760-1830 explores eight themes which frame how the continent is understood in literate British culture. A chapter each is devoted to: religion; the natural environment; race and other theories of human difference; the state; borders; the identification of the 'centre' and 'edges' of Europe; commerce and empire; and ideas about the past, progress, and historical change. My purpose is not to identify the factors or qualities which supposedly define Europe in an objective sense. Instead, I explore the rhetorical strategies – narratives, images and vocabularies – with which British geographical texts identify and describe an area called 'Europe'. In doing so, we can understand more fully and more clearly what the concept meant to the ordinary British reading public, and not just to great thinkers or social elites.

A full summary of all these complex themes would be impossible, so instead I will consider very briefly one especially important question. Did people in the eighteenth century consider Britain to be a European country? Many British geography books – perhaps unsurprisingly – insist that Britain is an ideal state. But the terms used to explain Britain's supposed superiority closely parallel the criteria used by the same texts to distinguish general European excellence. For example, some books theorise that British people have a great 'love of liberty', but they also argue that European people more widely are 'liberally-disposed'. There are quite a lot of these parallels – some texts even employ blatantly repetitious language. For instance, one book describes Europe as 'most remarkable for the valour, the learning, and politeness of its inhabitants', and later in the same paragraph declares that 'the inhabitants of Britain' are 'most renowned for their valour and learning'.

Britain and Europe, then, are frequently both praised for broadly similar reasons and sometimes with identical language. What does this mean? Does it suggest Britain's exceptional status, its unique qualities making it fundamentally distinct from other European states? Or do the similar terms suggest Britain's full incorporation within Europe, perhaps as an especially distinguished constituent? In fact, these positions are not mutually exclusive, explaining why they sometimes occur within the same text. In eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century minds, Britain can function as both the heart and the edge of Europe simultaneously. This is not, in other words, a simple either/or situation: it is perfectly possible for Britain to be a special country with unique qualities of its own *and* fully a part of Europe, sharing common distinctive characteristics with it.

As this example shows, British debates about Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century hinge on topics which are still recognisable. There are questions about: religious unity in the continent; the effects of human action on the natural environment; the identification of borders; the role of the state; the effects of commerce; and the legacies of empires. By tracing the histories and popularisations of these questions, we can better understand the contexts, uses and consequences of certain assumptions about Europe which continue to exert influence today. The point here is not to suggest that historical disputes somehow filter down to the present in an unchanged form. Instead it is to observe that the preoccupations of past societies and cultures are often bequeathed to, and adapted by, their successors – something which applies no less to the history of ideas than it does to, say, political or economic legacies. Popular, mass-media controversy in Britain about both the idea of Europe itself, and about Britain's place in the continent, might seem to be a relatively recent phenomenon. But in fact, it has a very much longer history than we might otherwise presume.

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