

Tim Oliver

Book review: Britain's Europe: a thousand years of conflict and cooperation. By Brendan Simms

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Britain's Europe: A thousand years of conflict and cooperation. Brendan Simms.

Britain's EU referendum was never going to answer what David Cameron termed Britain's 'European question'. Instead, as Simms sets out, it was the latest episode in a thousand year history of conflict and cooperation between Britain – and before it England – and the rest of Europe. As Simms makes clear from the start, it matters how that history is told. Taking the approach of 'our island story', one that sets Britain apart from the rest of Europe, fails to adequately grasp how Europe made Britain and Britain made Europe. With Brexit now unfolding, the need is more urgent than ever for the British to appreciate the flaws of believing they can turn their backs to the continent to which they forever form a key part of.

Simms offers a chronological history of British-European relations, successfully setting out his case for viewing developments from the Vikings to David Cameron in a joined up way. He is unapologetically 'Whiggish' in his approach, seeing a clear line that joins together that long history. His focus is foreign policy and constitutional matters, leaving aside economics, society and culture which can make for a book many in international relations will be comfortable with but which neglects the role of domestic factors in the development and politics of Britain. Nevertheless, throughout the importance of viewing Britain's history with a European lens is hammered home again and again. Whether it is the military campaigns of King Henry V, the acts of union between England and Scotland, the acquisition and dissolution of the British Empire, the development of the British state's institutions, all are explained in part by Britain's strategic focus on the politics of Europe. This focus, Simms argues, has been as much ideological as security focused. In the last few hundred years the defence of liberty and the defence of the European balance of power were often linked in British thinking.

Appearing throughout is the debate as to whether there should be a continental or maritime focus British foreign policy. 'They talk as if England were not in Europe,' was Edmund Burke's retort to those who believed that being an island was sufficient security against the chaos from the French Revolution. Europe is, as Churchill said before World War One, 'where the weather came from'. Such quotes are found throughout as Simms critiques the desire to turn away from Europe and think only of the wider world. Such an approach has sometimes paid off, but often only when non-European efforts were designed to serve Britain's interests in Europe. British imperial hubris sometimes led Britain to turn away from the continent, leaving continental politics to change in ways that did not suit Britain. Britain gained an empire, but sometimes forgot about its role as a European power. On occasion that left Britain unprepared for developments elsewhere in Europe that it later found itself scrambling to reshape.

That it has often fallen to Britain to reshape European politics is due, argues Simms, to its exceptional place in Europe. Towards the end the book moves from history to something of a political manifesto as Simms sets out his case for the future of British-European relations. A chapter is dedicated to rejecting the declinist thesis of British power, instead making the case that Britain's exceptionalism makes it the last European great power. That doesn't mean Britain can lead Europe or the EU in the way Germany can by stumping up the cash to keep the Eurozone afloat. Instead Britain is a security provider and a political model the EU needs. The EU, Simms argues, needs to follow the example of the UK, and its imitator the USA, in making the step to a United States of Europe an event (the acts of union or the declaration of independence) followed by a process, rather than an interminable process (i.e. European integration so far) that works

towards some distant undefined event ('ever closer union'). Europe needs Britain, but more importantly Europe as a whole and the West need this British style birth for a United States of Europe.

Whether Britain is so exceptional will be the first point of contention many outside Britain (and some within it) will take up with the book. The EU might indeed need an event, but the processes by which Britain is governed – and the 23rd June referendum itself – have left few elsewhere confident in Britain's ability to lead or set an example. Britain's indifference over Ukraine means doubts abound as to whether Britain could provide for the security of places such as Eastern Europe. The referendum result to leave the EU might not have been won wholly on an isolationist ticket, but such voices were heard. Victorious leave voices also included those who supported the maritime strategy Simms dismisses as a strategic dead-end unless it works towards some end in wider European politics. A central warning from 'Britain's Europe' is that the British should not enter another period where they forget that their country's primary reference point in international relations is Europe and that all else is secondary.

Tim Oliver, London School of Economics