

# Book Review: English Nationalism: A Short History by Jeremy Black

*In English Nationalism: A Short History, Jeremy Black offers a new history of English nationalism, exploring the distinctive aspects of England's legal, institutional and religious structures and how these have shaped its national self-conception. While the work is an admirably thorough history, its neglect of the relationship between Brexit and Englishness makes it less convincing as a commentary on the role of English nationalism in contemporary debates surrounding identity, race, ethnicity, the Constitution and Europe, finds Ben Margulies.*

**English Nationalism: A Short History. Jeremy Black. Hurst. 2018.**

Find this book: 

If there is one unifying theme in British politics in the 2010s, it well might be 'identity'. Within this multi-faceted debate, there is a strand that focuses on the identity of its largest single component: the nation of England. Scholars [began noting the divergence](#) of English and British identities in the 1970s, partly as a reaction to the arrival of Scottish and Welsh nationalists in the UK Parliament. English identity was slow to become politicised, but under David Cameron, the Conservatives began appealing to England as a political actor – for example, Cameron promised 'English votes for English laws' after the Scottish referendum in 2014.

In the last two years, it has become impossible to discuss English nationalism or English identity without reference to Brexit. [Several studies have found](#) that those who show more [affiliation with an English identity than a British one](#) are also more likely to be hostile to the European Union. England (outside London) carried Brexit to fruition. The contemporary content of Englishness seems inseparable from Brexit, and understanding this connection is one of the primary reasons that English identity appeals as a topic of study.

This, perhaps, is why Jeremy Black's survey of the history of English nationalism is somewhat disappointing. His book, [English Nationalism: A Short History](#), is a fascinating history of the English state and England's conception of itself. But in failing to engage with Brexit and how 'England' brought it about, the book lacks the timeliness of Linda Colley's 2014 work, [Acts of Union and Disunion](#). Colley more forthrightly addressed the pillars of 'Britishness' and how these had eroded to create space for a Scottish nationalist identity. Black fails to fully explain how this same erosion has affected English identity.

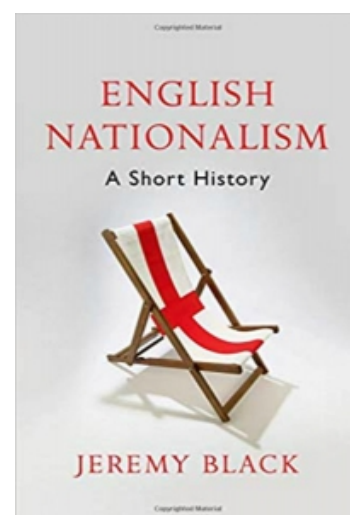


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Black, Professor of History at the University of Exeter, has written an admirable introduction to England's history, and to the history of its national self-conception. Black describes the origins of the English state in the kingdom forged by the House of Wessex from the late ninth century; takes us through the formation of Parliament and the extension of the common law; and details the importance of the Reformation, Act of Union 1707 and the British Empire. He emphasises an essentially political and civic conception of 'Englishness', tied to the country's unique legal traditions, Parliament and the rule of law. Like Colley, he also refers to the key role of Protestantism and antipathy towards Catholic or Continental powers.

Black provides a very thorough account of the role of religion in the construction of English identity. He recounts how the Anglo-Saxon church had pronounced its own synodical canons as early as 672, while Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* dates to 731. He describes how Englishness to a great extent developed and was performed through the Reformation church – 'Identity, English nationalism, was enacted every Sunday in churches around the country [...] inculcated in the young with their catechism' (64). He stresses the role of the English-language Bible (which Henry VIII ordered every parish to procure) and Thomas Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* (1563).

Black is also careful to discuss how English identity is not monolithic, and how it competes with regional cleavages and strong localised identities, adding an amusing story of how his mother assumed Durham was in the South, since all the cathedral towns she knew of were southern. His brief treatment of the Blair-era plans for regional assemblies (150-52) is especially interesting.

Where Black's work falters is in its failure to distinguish Englishness from Britishness, and from his unwillingness to link English identity to the great contemporary issue of our time: Brexit. Black mentions that the English have tended to conflate ancient England and more recent Britain, noting that eighteenth-century London elites imagined that 'Britain was essentially an extension of England' (84), and that among their Victorian successors, 'a reading of Britain as England was commonplace, a situation that has lasted to the present in England' (115). But it is unclear when these two identities began to diverge, and how.

Why is [English identity](#) associated with support for Brexit? Black hints at reasons why this might be so, contrasting Europe's Roman-derived legal traditions – embodied by the EU – with English common law. He also makes much of an English attachment to sovereignty, encompassing thirteenth-century revolts against foreign favourites in the court of Henry III, and Parliament's claim in the Act in Restraint of Appeals 1533 ('it is manifestly declared and expressed that this realm of England is an empire').

England's legal, institutional and religious history are indeed distinctive and unusually lengthy by European standards. However, that alone doesn't explain why England, and not Scotland, chose to abandon the EU, or why Englishness seemed to correlate to that choice. Why, [to borrow from John Denham](#), does English identity attach to a narrative of decline and dispossession, while Britishness seems to express cosmopolitanism? Why does Denham say that there a minority hostile to English identity, and why does this 'anti-English fragment of Britishness seems to be highly educated, found more in cities and university towns, and much more likely to identify strongly as European than the general population'? The relationship between Englishness and Brexit is one of the key reasons we care about English nationalism, and Black's reluctance to tie the two issues together – even to contest whether Englishness and Brexit should be tied together – is frustrating.

Black's discussion of populism is also somewhat unsatisfying, especially from the standpoint of my discipline, political science. Black complains that 'discussion of populism is moreover marred by a lack of precision' (168), and that the term is often used as a lazy pejorative (171). Admittedly, there is a lot of truth in this, at least at the level of the media. But Black works in the social sciences, where there certainly are workably precise definitions of populism: Cas Mudde's [definition](#) has been in wide use for about a decade now. Black himself tends to confuse 'populism' with any form of mass politics, including the extension of the vote and the development of the welfare state. If you are going to have a relevant discussion linking English identity to populism, then you need to determine whether Englishness and its advocates call the English 'the people', and then arrange themselves against an elite. Black doesn't engage with that debate very much. He does devote a few pages to 'critics' who claim that English nationalism might be 'a product of perceived failure, social exclusion, mass migration, ignorance and anger' (146), and comments that 'British nationalism is widely treated as good, and English nationalism as bad' (147), but this thread of argument peters out.

Strangely, Black himself hints at an anti-elitist position with which many 'populists', not to mention conservatives, might identify. He complains that EU membership, EU law 'and a lack of trust in the individual' have transformed England's culture (16). He laments the 'overly critical and somewhat ahistorical account of Empire', which he credits as morally superior to its enemies – 'rival empires, notably Nazi Germany' – and which 'gave Britain the strength to win' (18). He condemns the '*soi-disant* elites' who 'appear to have thought it desirable to make progress on agendas that irritate large parts of the electorate' (170) – agendas he does not further describe (though authors often use [phrasing like](#) this to refer to causes dear to social liberals like abortion reform, gay marriage or immigration). He even manages a couple of paragraphs on the tendency of the American film industry to give villains upper-class English accents (18-19).

Black is free to associate English nationalism with a narrative of the dispossessed, the neglected or a worthy past that has been lost to social change. That is indeed the form nationalism usually takes. The problem is that he doesn't make that association clearly. He has produced a fine introduction to English nationalism, but a poorer commentary on its contemporary role in debates about identity, race, ethnicity, the constitution and Europe.

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**Ben Margulies** is a Visiting Research Fellow at the University of Warwick. Ben's research background is primarily in comparative and European politics, especially the quantitative analysis of trends across countries. He is also interested in the ways that nations and party systems respond to migration and globalisation. He obtained his PhD from the University of Essex in 2014, and has published articles in *Comparative European Politics*, the *Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica* and the *Australian Journal of Political Science*. Ben earned a master's in comparative politics at the London School of Economics in 2007, and did his undergraduate work at New York University. He is originally from Dallas, Texas. [Read more by Ben Margulies.](#)

*Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.*