2 Vanishing Primordialism

Literature, History and the Public

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A Nation is moral – virtuous – vigorous – while it is engaged in realizing its grand objects, and defends its work against external violence during the process of giving to its purposes an objective existence. The contradiction between its potential, subjective being – its inner aim and life – and its actual being is removed; it has attained full reality, has itself objectively present to it. But this having been attained, the activity displayed by the Spirit of the people in question is no longer needed; is has its desire. The Nation can still accomplish much in war and peace at home and abroad; but the living substantial soul itself may be said to have ceased its activity. The essential, supreme interest has consequently vanished from its life, for interest is present only where there is opposition. The nation lives the same kind of life as the individual when passing from maturity to old age – in the enjoyment of itself – in the satisfaction of being exactly what it desired and was able to attain ... In order that a truly universal interest may arise, the Spirit of a People must advance to the adoption of some new purpose; but whence can this new purpose originate? It would be a higher, more comprehensive conception of itself – a transcending of its principle – but this very act would involve a principle of a new order, a new National Spirit.¹

Nations are central to Hegel’s understanding of history. For Hegel, writing in 1821-31, in the wake of the Napoleonic wars, nations are individual and distinct entities expressing the particular spirit of a particular people. This spirit needs to be realised so a people will struggle to activate their spirit and to manifest it in a concrete manner. For Hegel it is the process that matters: the nation is at its most vigorous and distinct when it is working to establish its true identity. Once the nation has come into existence it starts to grow, wane and even die. Of course, established nations still have much to offer and do not just disappear once they have appeared. They can, as Hegel’s argument continues, still accomplish much in war and peace, conflict and resolution, through their interaction with other nations.

It is easy to see why Hegel’s philosophy appealed to the idea of youth, real and abstract, and why it had such a decisive influence on the formation of
nations in the first half of the nineteenth century, in particular those that wanted to throw off the shackles of the past and liberate themselves from oppression and so recast their national spirit in terms of Hegel's ideals of ever greater freedom. Nations expressed the spirit of their people when they were establishing themselves, when they were struggling to appear in their ideal form. Hegel is clear that nations need opposition and that they cannot and do not exist as isolated entities. Therefore there will be a second phase of nation-building once the nation has come into being and liberated itself from older political and social formations, the advancement to a new spirit of nationhood at a higher level when nations express a more comprehensive conception of themselves.

Hegel never really explains how this second phase might take place, as his subject is the history of nations up to the time that he was writing and the ways in which they have developed so far. It is important for us to note that he sees national histories as matters of endless process, that a nation can never really come to rest. Once it has obtained its spirit it needs to move on to another more complete manifestation of its identity. Put another way, we must surely assume that for Hegel the nation never really obtains a complete identity, for once it achieves this, it starts to die unless it moves on to a higher state and a more complete version of itself. Therefore, the nation never really exists, certainly not as a complete form: as soon as that final state threatens to appear the nation starts to die and needs to change.

The concomitant aspect of Hegel’s philosophical assumptions about the nature and history of nations is that nations have always existed. Nations which do not exist yet are waiting to appear and to be activated by the spirit of their people. For Hegel there are four particular manifestations of nations and identities: the Oriental World; the Greek World; the Roman World; and the German World, i.e. the three most significant national identities of the ancient world and the pre-eminent one of the modern world. The point is important and will assume a greater significance if we think about the distinction between nations and nationalism. Nationalism postdates the existence of the nation in an obviously logical manner, as nationalism can only exist as a phenomenon when there is the model of the nation to copy.

Debates

Studies of nationalism have been dominated by modernism, the argument that nations emerged with the birth of modernity. Nations are a post-Enlightenment development according to this argument, requiring
secularism, industrialisation, mass communications and popular politics in order to appear.\(^3\) In the past decade this argument has come ever more heavily under fire from a series of studies that have argued that nations have a much longer history than has invariably been assumed, claiming that many of the features that are thought to be unique to modern nations can be found in much earlier socio-political formations.\(^4\) In particular such studies have claimed that modernist conceptions of the nation and nationalism have underplayed the significance of ethnicity in constructing national forms, which has led to a distorted belief that political factors matter more than notions of shared identity and common kinship. Equally, if not more, importantly, they have claimed that factors which unite modern people within nations – shared rituals, public symbols, common interests – can be found in many premodern states. For Caspar Hirschi it was the attempt of the Holy Roman Empire to impose order on Europe that led to the possibility of nationalism in the wake of the Council of Constance (1414-18). The failure of the council led to the growth of ideas of nationhood based on a shared conception of national honour: ‘Now, \textit{natio} came to mean a political, cultural and linguistic community, inhabiting a territory of its own and sharing an exclusive honour among its members.’\(^5\) For Azar Gat there is often little point in separating ethnic and national identity because ‘shared ethnicity is the substratum of nations’.\(^6\) Such corrections are important, although there is a risk – more apparent with Gat’s analysis than Hirschi’s – that distinctions between nations, nationalism and ethnicity will collapse.

It is obvious that nations have not existed in the same form throughout their histories: they have not always had the same boundaries or the same inhabitants and it surely has not escaped anyone’s attention that some boundaries look rather odd and unnatural on the map, especially those of nations that used to be colonies. It is obvious that we need a historicised understanding of nations, which is why virtually all historians of national identity and nationalism see themselves as historicists. If the dominant school of the study of nationalism has been that of the modernists, it needs to be acknowledged that many are perennialists who argue that nations may have existed for a long time but not always in the same form. Primordialists, who argue that nations are ‘timeless phenomena’, usually fall into the category of nationalists proper rather than students of nationalism.\(^7\)

It is a useful exercise to turn the basic question on its head. Instead of asking when nations appear, should we not ask: can we imagine a time when nations did not exist? Were people ever able to think in a way that has no relationship to national identity? What would it mean not to have a national identity? It is one of the great clichés of modern history that internationalist
and socialist thought has invariably been defeated by national sentiment and that, in the end, the imagined community of the nation is more powerful than that of a united class or transnational group, as the history of the First World War demonstrates: ‘A Frenchman or a German was prepared to kill or be killed for Alsace-Lorraine, whose possession appeared to have no practical bearing on his daily life.’ Was there a time when this was not the case? Did people once imagine themselves in ways that were not based on a collective national identity or something like it? In the Middle Ages did people think of themselves as members of a Latin Christendom, a united church? Or did they imagine that dynastic allegiance was more significant in constructing identity than being part of a national group?

However far back we wish to push notions of national identity it is clear that the modernist argument has to be revised, certainly with regard to Europe. In addition to Hirschi’s study of the Holy Roman Empire we need to consider the important work by Ardis Butterfield on Anglo-French identity during the Hundred Years War (1337-1453), which concludes that there was indeed a clear understanding of national identity in Europe in this period. Ideas of identity in the later Middle Ages were not exactly the same as ours and an understanding of the self depended on ideas of the nation as race as much as territory, so overlapping and intertwined were the people, dynasties and territories of the English and the French, a conclusion that supports Gat’s argument that thinking about nations involves balancing ethnic, dynastic and political factors. But, however we read the evidence, there was never a doubt that England and France, and the English and the French, existed and were different and that these distinctions could be identified and understood and that people belonged somewhere on one side or the other.

It is hard to imagine a life without national identity and this understanding should be fundamental to our discussion of nations and nationalism. Hegel realised this, which is why his analysis is so fraught and qualified, and why he can only ever envisage nations existing in relation to other nations. At no point does his history imagine a time in which nations did not exist. It is therefore problematic to pit historicists who are basically right against perennialists (and even primordialists), who naively deny the contingent and complicated nature of historical progress. On the contrary, it is the historicists who can seem, paradoxically, ahistorical, in imagining that most history is the history before the history of nations and nationalism, and who therefore want to place an undue emphasis on a short period leading up to the present. Accepting that we have always had a sense of national identity enables us to write a much more flexible and unburdened history.
of nations because we then liberate ourselves from a commitment to the Scylla and Charybdis of assuming either that nations remain the same or that they are a modern invention, the latter being a circular argument which assumes that nations are modern because they define modernity. The key point is not the precise nature of one's national identity, but the fact that one has one in the first place. Nations are defined and imagined, then redefined and reimagined and they are not always the same nation at the beginning or the end of that process or for everyone doing the imagining. This does not make them any less real, only more contested. As soon as a nation is established alongside other nations against which it is defined the possibility of opposition and argument has to exist, a reality that is implicit in Hegel's analysis of the history of nations, which can never be static.

If certain groups wish to define the nation's character in terms of its indigenous history isolated from the rest of the world, others will seek to think of its debt to other nations, or its need to be indebted to other nations if it is to advance. Virgil's description of the Britons 'toto divisos orbe Britannos' ('wholly sundered from the world') can be read in terms of national identities. The Britons are at the furthest reaches of the Roman Empire, barbarians who are in urgent need of Roman civilisation. Exile for Tityrus and Meliboeus is a reminder too that in order to progress Rome had to expand and change, however painful that might seem at the time. A division exists between wanting to remain in the environs of Rome and supporting the protection and expansion of the eternal city. After the Reformation the lines were read as an affirmation of British purity free from the tyrannical influence of Rome, and a sign of translatio imperii, the transfer of power from the Catholic south to the Protestant north. Equally importantly they opened up a space so that two forms of British identity could be seen to exist in conflict: those who wanted a nation free from the civilising influence of Rome and those who felt that the nation had to learn from the imperial centre.

Nations and Nationalism

If national identity has a long history, does it follow that nationalism, the belief that attachment to and identification with a nation is a good thing that needs to be encouraged, has too? Must national identity and nationalism go hand in hand? What links the two is, as Hirschi suggests, a series of symbols, tokens and manifestations of a shared identity: coins, images, flags, banners, objects, and so on. Equally significant is the existence of
institutions which serve to connect the disparate elements of the nation: the monarchy, political fora, law courts, schools and universities, and the church. It is possible – but difficult – to have a nation that does not have a public sphere. Even the most authoritarian of nations have an opposition, although it may not be obvious or visible; more democratic countries and states make that opposition part of their existence and character through the encouragement or toleration of a public culture. Once a nation exists in the imagination it can be represented, copied and its character and nature disputed: the nation, debate and contested identity are intimately linked.

There has been vigorous debate about the nature and character of the public sphere – when it first appeared, what exactly it is and how far it has reached and can reach. Jürgen Habermas argued that the public sphere appeared in the eighteenth century with the development of a public culture based on newspapers, coffee houses and far greater participation by a large section of the public in the political and intellectual life of the European nation in question. For Habermas, the crucial point is that the public sphere creates the possibility of rational and reasoned debate, of ideas being tested, challenged, refuted, accepted and refined through open debate, an ideal form of communicative action even if breached more than honoured. The idea of the public sphere is surely central to our understanding of the emergence of the nation as a model of existence that can be defined and copied to establish the basic unit of human society. As with a historicist understanding of the emergence of modernity and the nation, the public sphere, according to Habermas, first appears in the eighteenth century, providing us with a neat and satisfying model of the establishment of the modern world. The Enlightenment ushers in reason and modernity, clearing the way for the world we recognise. While one might have a nation without a public sphere – although examples are surely rare (contemporary North Korea? Thirteenth-century Mongolia?) – it is not easy to imagine a public sphere that does not belong to a nation.

However, even gentle intellectual pressure causes this neat model of nations, public and modernity, to fall apart at the seams. Just as the modern emergence of the nation has been challenged by a variety of thinkers, so has Habermas’s assumption that the public sphere first appeared in the eighteenth century. Peter Lake and Michael Questier have argued that the vigorously contested debates over religion in England in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century constitute rational, public exchanges of exactly the sort that Habermas argued appeared rather later. Laudians adopted an Armenian understanding of the primacy of free will and an emphasis on ceremony and spectacle in church services to counter the
prevailing Calvinist culture of their opponents who were held together as much by their anti-Catholicism as more positive modes of belief. Their arguments before war between crown and people erupted in 1642 were carried out in print as well as in person and played a significant role in defining the nature of England’s political identity. Such analysis surely makes sense. Then we have to ask: was England a unique nation in Europe, a model that established itself for others to copy later, with its relatively strong parliament, independent judiciary, centralised bureaucracy and infrastructure of local government, enabling a public sphere to develop? Or was its development part of a more general process of change? Either way, we are disrupting the neat model of nation/public/modernity and showing that ideas of the public and the nation predate the Enlightenment.

But we can put even more pressure on the assumed timescale of progress. If debates about religion in print define the nature of the public sphere, as Lake and Questier suggest, then shouldn’t we be looking more closely at the emergence of the printing press as a significant development in defining nation and public? After all, there is a long-established but now somewhat obscured tradition of thinking about national identity, perhaps most obviously associated with Hans Kohn (1891-1971) in his book *The Idea of Nationalism* (1944). Kohn’s role in thinking about national identity and nationalism was largely obscured by the modernists but he has recently been paid more of his dues with the return of arguments that date the nation is a pre-Enlightenment phenomenon.14

Kohn places great emphasis on the development of vernacular traditions in defining national identities, particularly in the wake of the Reformation with the need to translate the Bible into different languages.15 Kohn shows how the acquisition of the printing press and the possibility of debates taking place in public through books which, written in a particular language, facilitate the development of a public sphere and a national identity. With the emergence of the possibility of texts circulating around an anonymous series of readers who identify with the debates taking place among a nebulously defined group of people who have access to these texts we have an understanding of a public and, perhaps, a nation.16 Reading the Bible in English outside the control of the church clearly had far-reaching effects that could not be confined to confessional allegiance alone.

The impact of the development of the printing press as a means of producing cheap, easily reproducible texts that could then reach a wide audience has long been recognised. The technological determinist assumptions of Walter Ong led to his argument that a healthy culture of lively oral debate had been replaced by a more limiting culture based on the visual which demanded an
individual response from an isolated reader. The international Latin culture of the late Middle Ages gave way to the particular culture of specific nations with their own languages, making international discourse and interaction much more difficult. Ong’s argument is a reversal of the familiar assumption that modernity equals progress, but it shares an identical teleology. Ong’s mentor and friend, Marshall McLuhan, was perhaps even more far-reaching in his analysis of the impact of print as a fundamentally transformational moment in world history, with the claim that the Guttenberg Galaxy inaugurated a technological change that revolutionised modes of perception and cognition. If the possibility of rational argument and debate is intimately linked to the rise of the public and the nation then we need to think more about the nature of communication, the mediums in which communication takes place and the cognitive effects of a transformation of communicative systems. Furthermore, if print is a crucial factor in the development or transformation of the nation then we need to look more closely at the variety of print culture and its potential significance. Before widespread emancipation and suffrage – even at the restricted levels of the eighteenth century – political debate took place in a variety of forms other than the most obvious channels. We need to look at literature, religious writing, art, popular culture, and so on, and not just the most obvious places, political and philosophical writing. Put another way, we will not understand the history of political ideas if we simply concentrate on political writing and few cases demonstrate this truth more forcefully than the history of nations and nationalism.

Literature does not reflect debates about the nation and national identity: it invariably predicts and establishes them in periods before the creation of political institutions that have defined the contours of nations. Literature and literary traditions exist alongside the symbolic forms and objects that define a nation: literary texts establish the possibility of a nation through the debates they articulate. In creating the imagined political form they pave the way for nationalism. There are surely different ages of nationalism and the central problem with the modernist argument is not that it does not describe a significant phenomenon – it would be hard to dispute that many modern nations exist in the form that they do because they were created by the wave of nation-building in the wake of the French Revolution, copying the model of the French Republic, as David Bell has argued. The problem is that the modernist argument is invariably exclusive: but, as with so many phenomena, the history of nationalism is uneven. Not only are there various waves of nation-building and nationalism, so that there is no reason why Hirschi and Bell cannot be both right in outlining very different histories of nations and nationalism.
The history of English identity and English nationalism can be variously dated. For Krishan Kumar Englishness is a relatively recent phenomenon created by the expansion of the British Empire and the need for the English to define themselves in terms of their spectacular success in establishing overseas territories and dominating the rest of the British Isles. Although there was an English national identity before the end of the nineteenth century there was no English nationalism ‘because there was no need for it’.20 It is an ingenious and persuasive argument in many ways but it assumes a monolithic history that does not accurately describe the complex and uneven history of nations and nationalism. For Azar Gat the issue is even more straightforward. The success of the Anglo-Saxons in establishing a united kingdom with a spoken and written language relatively soon after they arrived in the Britain created England and Englishness.21

English National Identity and Literature in the Seventeenth Century

In the rest of this chapter I want to look at a particular moment in the history of English writing in order to test my understanding of the relationship between the nation, nationalism, literature and the public sphere. I will explore two major early-seventeenth-century literary texts that seek to establish an understanding of the relationship between land and people that define a nation: Michael Drayton's *Poly-Olbion* and Sir John Denham's *Cooper's Hill*, poems that can be defined as chorographical, as they use the newly developed techniques of accurate mapping and printed reproduction to represent England and establish a voice that speaks for the nation. In doing so they articulate and assume a public readership that they can address which, whether they are persuaded by the arguments of the text, or agree with its sentiments, constitute the nation. Both poems demonstrate a desire to address a wider national public and articulate an understanding of the nation as a geographical entity in which there is an intimate relationship between the land and the people who inhabit it. The enterprise cannot be seen as an epistemological break with the past, but it does depend on the advent of new technologies that made it possible, works of art in an age of mechanical reproduction. Once again, the history of a nation can be seen to exist in terms of particular developments that change what it is – new technologies, institutions, external relations – not an epistemic transformation that signals its origin.
Michael Drayton’s monumental *Poly-Olbion* (1612, 1622) is finally enjoying something of a revival as a work that foresees subsequent interest in nature poetry and ecology. Drayton’s intemperate outburst at his ungrateful readers for not buying enough copies of the first edition of his poem in the preface to the second edition represents his understanding that his relationship with his readers was in printed form, and, significantly, that they had failed in their social responsibility by not seeing the importance of his work. Drayton addresses his rather sulky preface ‘To any that will read it’ and complains that his poem has been met with ‘barbarous Ignorance’ by non-readers who are letting themselves and future generations down by not reading his work with the care and attention it deserves:

And some of outlandish, unnaturall English, (I know not how otherwise to expresse them) sticke not to say, that there is nothing in this Island worthy studying for, and take a great pride to bee ignorant in any thing thereof, for these, since they delight in their folly, I wish it may be hereditary from them to their posteritie, that their children may bee beg’d for Fooles to the fift Generation, until it may be beyond the memory of man to know that there was ever any other of their Families.

Drayton’s anger points backwards and forwards, at the foolish readers who are neglecting the past; failing to understand the present; and not taking proper care of the future because they believe that there is nothing worth knowing about the island in which they live. In keeping their eyes shut they are severing their relationship to their nation, which is why they are cursed. Drayton’s fury is not simply that of a writer whose nose is put out of joint because his *magnum opus* has not been properly appreciated. It is also that of a man who believes that he is witnessing a catastrophic failure to understand an urgent and pressing problem, a myopia that severs the people from the land.

Jean Brink has suggested that ‘the title Poly-Olbion puns on “Poly” (very or much) and “Olbion” as Albion (England) and Greek (happy or fortunate)’. Drayton probably imagined his work as an Anglocentric enterprise, never seriously intending to carry out his stated plan of describing Scotland (Wales was included but then it had been annexed by England in 1535). The poem with the songs each representing a separate English county, accompanied by learned notes by the historian John Selden (1584-1654) – often at odds with the poems – seeks to provide a comprehensive survey of the topographical features of rural England. The poem idealises
England, but uses the harmonious relationship between land and people that it represents as a means of criticising the failings of the present and warning that if such comments are ignored the consequences will be disastrous.

Drayton fashions himself as an oppositional poet, using his survey of the land to criticise the central authority of the monarch, imagining his poem as an alternative to a royal progress. The twenty-second song follows the progress of the Great River Ouse from Bedford to the Wash. The argument heading the song warns readers that ‘she the Civil Wars should chant’, and towards the end of the song there is a list of the bitter rebellions that the river has witnessed:

As for the *Black-Smith’s* Rout, who did together rise,
Encamping on *Blackheath*, t’annul the subsidies
By Parliament then given, or that of *Cornwall* call’d
Inclosures to cast down, which overmuch enthralld
The subject: or proud *Kets*, who with the same pretence
In *Norfolke* rais’d such stirs, as but with great expense
Of blood was not appeas’d; or that begun in *Lent*
By *Wyat* and his friends, the marriage to prevent,
That *Mary* did intend with *Philip King of Spain*[,]26

The narrator dismisses these rebellions as ‘riots’ (line 1600), but it is clear from the song that they were far too important to caricature in such a cavalier manner and that Drayton realised their significance. We have in rapid succession reminders of the Cornish Prayer Book Rebellion (1549); Kett’s Rebellion (1549); and Wyatt’s Rebellion (1554), a reminder that England in the aftermath of the Reformation was a divided and dangerous land.27

For Drayton the natural features of the landscape if read carefully and correctly will tell this history, one of the principal functions of his long chorographic work.

Drayton shows how rivers tell stories, good and bad, having a solitary weeping nymph lamenting the sad fate of England:

*Waybridge* a neighbouring Nymph, the only remnant left
Of all that Forest-kind, by Time’s injurious theft
Of all that tract destroy’d, with wood which did abound
And former times had seen the goodliest Forest-ground,
This Island ever had: but she so left alone,
The ruin of her kind, and no man to bemoan (lines 1602-8).
And notes the destruction of the ancient English forests:

O Flood [i.e. river] in happy plight, which to this time remain'st,
As still along in state to Neptune's Court thou strain'st,
Revive thee with the thought of those forepasséd hours,
When the rough Wood-gods kept, in their delightful bowers,
On thy embroidered banks, when now this Country fill'd,
With villages, and by the labouring plowman till'd,
Was Forest, where the fir, arid spreading poplar grew.
O let me yet the thought of those past times renew,
When as that woody kind, in our umbrageous wild,
Whence every living thing save only they exil'd,
In this world of waste, the sovereign empire sway'd (lines 1611-21).

The nymph shows us that the advent of civilisation exacts a heavy price. The river remains the same – telling its tales of human conflict and fickleness – but the forest is cut down to make way for agriculture and human inhabitation and the ‘rough Wood-gods’ disappear. What might seem like progress is not an unqualified good as the trees are felled and nature is forced to retreat. Bringing everything into the light and removing the dark forest spaces means that we lose things too, the creatures inhabiting the ‘umbrageous wild’ who are now forced away or killed off. The word ‘waste’ has a heavy significance in this context, invariably referring to land that was not properly used. For the nymph, it is civilisation that is guilty of wasting the land, destroying natural resources such as forests in order to establish ploughed fields. Furthermore, the ambiguous and complicated last sentence can be read to mean that she desires a return to a state in which the wood creatures the ‘sovereign empire sway’d’. We do not have to accept the wood-nymph’s voice and might regard her as a deluded and nostalgic reactionary. However we read her sentiments we have to acknowledge that England contains diverse and often conflicting voices. Just as the river flows eternally but reminds the literate observer of the changes that it has witnessed and sometimes helped cause, so does the wood-nymph show us that there are those eager to resist the march of progress and preserve the ancient ways that are in danger of being lost.

Drayton’s landscape tells different, conflicting stories, reminding observers of the diverse nature of English history and the long-standing conflict between monarch, the political institutions and the people they represented, as well as the clash of nature and civilisation. The poem explicitly acknowledges that a nation is never simply unified and that a complicated political entity with a public sphere will contain different voices, competing,
conflicting and overlapping, just as it contains different histories that specific interest groups will elaborate and defend. The land will speak to its inhabitants if they listen to it but will not always tell the same story.29

After Poly-Olbion came Sir John Denham’s Cooper’s Hill, first published in 1642 and famous as the originator of ‘local poetry’.30 Denham (1614/5-1669) represents himself looking out from his estates at Cooper’s Hill, Egham, in Surrey and surveying the English landscape on the eve of the English Civil War. Denham looks East to Windsor and London, then over the Thames Valley, contrasting the bustle of the city to life in the countryside. Denham’s first glance towards London suggests that he is suspicious of the powerful growth of the capital:

I see the City in a thicker cloud
Of businesse, then of smoake, where Men like Ants
Toyle to prevent imaginarie wants;
Yet all in vaine, increasing with their store,
Their vast desires, but make their wants the more.31

London, unlike the ideal of balanced life on a country estate, is trapped in a destructive cycle of appetites that require satisfying. Men and women work ever harder to slake their desires not realising that the real solution is equilibrium rather than endless work. The comparison between men and ants is deliberately misleading. Ants, like the ant in the fable of the ant and the grasshopper, work to ensure a secure future not to indulge their vices, a significant detail in a poem which makes a number of references to Aesop’s fables. Here, people work hard but only to produce things that no one really needs. This unstable situation is yet another cause of the present crisis and has fuelled the dissatisfaction that leaves the country on the verge of civil war.

Just as the people lack a sense of proportion, so it seems does the seat of kings. Denham’s narrator looks over to Windsor Castle, where balance seems rather precarious and what sounds like praise of regal approachability can either seem ironic – given Charles’s famous aloofness – or a worried acknowledgement that the monarchy is under threat:

With such an easie, and unforc’d Ascent,
Windsor her gentle bosome doth present,
Where no stupendous Cliffe, no threatening heights
Accesse deny, no horrid steepe affreights,
But such a Rise, as doth at once invite
A pleasure, and a reverence from the sight (lines 55-60).
A monarch with the human touch is to be welcomed in most circumstances but here we have one whose accessibility suggests a lack of planning, a pointed contrast to the overly industrious ants. The enjoyment that a viewer might take from the prospect of the castle is not without its pain. Windsor invites pleasure, which suggests that it is not properly protected and so does not actually seem to be a castle which might be required in the event of civil war. The lines also hint that those who enter the castle may be rather overly dedicated to the pleasures which it invites, enjoying themselves when they should be working hard on behalf of the nation. The balance of the city and the monarchy reads more like a parody of good order than proper, stable equilibrium, an impression reinforced by the subsequent lines on the castle’s appearance:

So Windsor, humble in it selfe, seems proud,
To be the Base of that Majesticke load,
Than which no hill a nobler burthen beares,
But Atlas onely, that supports the spheres,
Nature this mount so fitly did advance,
We might conclude, that nothing is by chance
So plac’t, as if she did on purpose raise
The Hill, to rob the builder of his praise (lines 65-72).

These lines are laden with ambiguities and ironies. Windsor seems humble to be the bearer of the seat of kings, something which does not necessarily reflect well on the town and the castle. If it is too humble then it ought to be made more regal or surrender its position: majesty should inspire awe and reverence if it is to function properly, not seem ordinary and limited, which undermines the status and nature of monarchs. The hill that bears the castle seems like Atlas, supporting the world on his shoulders. Again, such words look like praise but can also be read as a reflection on the burdens that monarchy will have to bear in the near future as the country’s order and infrastructure dissolve. Nature did not, of course, ‘advance’ the mount for the castle but it was chosen by English monarchs and, if a reader might conclude that nothing is left to chance they might also conclude that it has been, or if it is a plan, then it does not look like a sensible one in 1642. And who should we think of as the builder, another crucially ambiguous term? The architect? Or the monarch? If the castle is badly designed and in an inappropriate place is that the fault of the person who designed the castle or the person who commissioned it? However we read this description, Denham suggests that the crown needs to think more carefully about its
role and position. Like Drayton’s rivers Denham’s buildings tell a story. Asking who can be seen as the castle’s designer, Denham’s narrator wonders

To whom this Ile
Must owe the glory of so brave a Pile,
Whether to Caesar, Albanact, or Brute,
The British Arthur, or the Danish Knute (lines 81-4).

The five rulers cited here include three invaders; Julius Caesar, Brutus (the legendary founder of Britain) and Cnut; one monarch who killed himself as a result of invasion, Albanactus, Brutus’s son; and one king, Arthur, who rose to prominence fighting off invaders, but whose glorious empire ended with bloody civil war. The lessons are all there for Charles to read.

As the narrator surveys the Thames Valley we are then given more potent examples of bad, overreaching kingship. Spying a ruined chapel on a hill, he condemns Henry VIII’s behaviour in suppressing the monasteries, relating the disasters of the past to his fears for England’s future:

Till in the common fate,
The neighbouring Abbey fell, (may no such storme
Fall on our times, where ruine must reforme)
Tell me (my Muse) what monstrous dire offence?
What crime could any Christian King incense
To such a rage? wast Luxurie or Lust?
Was he so temperate, so chast, so just?
Were these their crimes; they were his owne, much more
But they (alas) were rich, and he was poore;
And having spent the treasures of his Crowne,
Condemns their Luxurie, to feed his owne (lines 148-58).

The condemnation of Henry VIII’s motives for inaugurating the English Reformation are explicit: he is represented as a tyrant who was inspired by the basest desires, lust for Anne Boleyn and greed, having squandered his funds (presumably Denham is referring to Henry’s gargantuan spending on foreign wars). The ruin serves as a reminder of Henry’s crimes inscribed in the landscape, and, even though we cannot see Chertsey Abbey, the narrator knows enough from what he sees and has read of English history to be reminded of its fate. Charles is reminded of the terrible destruction that his predecessor caused, the effects of which can be still be seen well over a hundred years later, and implicitly advised to seek a compromise that
will preserve the nation’s traditions. Denham is not necessarily declaring an allegiance to Catholicism in lamenting the overthrow of the medieval church. Rather, he is surveying the landscape to advise a ruler how best to govern his nation and reminding him what can happen if compromise is not reached. The monarch should know that he must not ‘spoyle, / The Mowers hopes, nor mocke the Plough-mans toyle’ (lines 199-200), and that ‘a wise King first settles fruitfull peace / In his owne Realmes’ (lines 205-6) before embarking on expansionist wars to enrich his subjects.

*Cooper’s Hill* ends with a long description of a stag hunt which the speaker has seen, concluding with Charles slaying the noble beast ‘glad, and proud to dye’ (line 298). We are immediately reminded that the hunt took place in Runymede water-meadow where King John was forced to sign the Magna Carta and so reluctantly ensure the liberty of his subjects. Charles, in the narrator’s eyes, is surely a more suitable monarch than John or Henry VIII, or the poem could not have any serious purpose with its hope for compromise to ensure continuity. Even so, he needs to know that his rights as a monarch have to be limited and circumscribed, just as the demands of his subjects need to be kept within reasonable grounds. The poem ends with a plea that the rule of law will prevail: ‘And may that Law, which teaches Kings to sway / Their Scepters, teach their Subjects to obey’ (lines 353-4). In making this moderate – but eventually futile – request, Denham is seeking to preserve the delicate balance of people and the environment, recognising that this can only be achieved through compromise and political engagement.

**Concluding Remarks**

Both poems seek to articulate an understanding of the nation. Each author is acutely aware of the contentious and confrontational nature of his writing, not simply because not every reader will agree with their analysis and diagnosis of the ills of the nation and the possibilities for their remedy, but because each poem acknowledges, represents and foregrounds conflict and argument. How, then, should we read them? They are both works made possible by the rise of technological changes, printing which enabled Drayton and Denham to write for wide publics which could be thought to constitute the nation, and the developments in surveying and mapping which brought an understanding of the nation into sharper focus. They were both writing at a moment of acute awareness of the nation: Drayton lived through the transformation of the monarchy which saw James VI of Scotland reign as
King of Britain after Elizabeth, the last queen of England, and Denham was acutely conscious that civil war was imminent.

Drayton and Denham had a clear understanding that England was a nation that could be mapped, circumscribed, represented and reproduced, its local features combining to produce a whole. They also realised that the identities of English people differed and conflicted and that, if the English had a Hegelian national spirit, it was not really clear what it was. Furthermore, they understood that in representing a nation one participated in the production of a public sphere through that very act and that an argument was likely to result. Neither is confident that their understanding of what the nation is or should be will survive the changes that are about to happen. Are such works nationalistic? On the one hand it would be stretching a definition to breaking point to claim that they are; on the other hand, if we ignore what such literary works do, conscious of their role in a national tradition and eager to represent the nation and its people using the latest means, from a discourse of nationalism we remove one of the central elements of nationalist thinking and risk imagining a tradition emerging out of nothing.

Notes

1. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover, 2004), 74-5. Originally published in 1837. This essay was written while I was a visiting fellow at All Souls College, Oxford (Hilary term, 2015). I am grateful to the warden and the fellows for electing me and for their intellectual generosity while I was at the college.


