Inventing Britain

Holinshed and Hakluyt's Hidden Epics

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During the fourth scene of the first act of William Shakespeare's now comparatively rarely performed *Henry VIII*, the script calls for the firing of a cannon at the moment that a group of masquers is to arrive at the residence of Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, whereby the stage direction reads "Drum and trumpet; chargers discharged." The first recorded performance of the play, though most likely this was the third or four time it was staged, was on June 29th, 1613, at the Globe Theatre in Bankside, across the Thames from the City of London proper. Originally known as *All is True*, and cowritten with the 49-year-old Shakespeare's late-career literary partner John Fletcher, the play dramatized the divorce of its titular king and Queen Catharine of Aragon, the catalyst for England's reformation and a touchstone for narratives of national independence and greatness. Pleasing the audience with pyrotechnics, an actual cannon was fired during that particular scene, and a piece of errant flammable wadding landed amidst the dry water reeds of the thatched roof. "Heat not a furnace for your foe so hot/ That it'll do singe yourself," says Norfolk presciently in the first scene of the play, for it was only shortly thereafter that the great Globe itself would go up in conflagration.

According to accounts, the entire theater was immolated in under an hour, depriving the audience (all of whom, amazingly, survived) of the christening of young Elizabeth. If eyewitnesses are to be trusted, it took a few scenes for the attendees to even notice that the roof was burning, so engrossed were they in Shakespeare's play. "The fearful fire began above, / A wonder stage and true, / And to the stage-house did remove, / As round a tailor's clew," reads an anonymous broadsheet ballad printed a few months after the conflagration, while a prominent theatergoer—Henry Wotton, a poet and diplomat—wrote in a letter that he had witnessed one unlucky patron with "breeches set on fire, that would perhaps have broiled him, if he had not by the benefit of a provident wit, put it out with a bottle of ale." A year later the Globe would be rebuilt, though this time with a tile roof. Shakespeare wasn't at the premiere, as he'd sold his shares in the King's Men and moved back to Stratford. He'd been burned once already. When it comes to the stage, history—it would seem—is combustible.

Other than by specialists, *Henry VIII* is largely forgotten today, though despite its vaguely cursed associations it did enjoy a comparatively prodigious production history during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. "For some scholars the fact of collaborative authorship… devalued the play, since it rendered more difficult, indeed impossible, the identification of 'Shakespeare's philosophy and beliefs' or 'Shakespeare's intention,'" writes Marjorie Garber in *Shakespeare After All*, "challenging the notion that literary texts should put us in touch with the minds that made them." Garber makes the salient point that such collective writing was common during the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods; that it was indeed not dissimilar to how screenplays are written in Hollywood today. But if it's fair to add Fletcher as Shakespeare's cowriter to *Henry VIII*, then one might also consider the influence of an author then long dead as well, with an influence on far more popular plays such as *Macbeth* and *King Lear*. A voracious consumer of the written word capable of synthesizing casual learning into sublime drama, Shakespeare was massively indebted in his historical knowledge to one particular work, a massive and shaggy, encyclopedic and mythic book (also of collaborative authorship) entitled *The Chronicles of England, Scottland, and Ireland*, but more popularly known after the name of its main compiler as *Holinshed's Chronicles*. Ranging from three to six volumes, and in some editions (the only contemporary version is a digital edition from Oxford) stretching to an astounding eight-thousand pages, a work which the Shakespearean scholar Stephen Boothe quipped that all of his colleagues had heard of, but that nobody had read. Despite its paucity of readers today, *Holinshed's Chronicles* married localism with universalism, and a mythographer's attraction to legend with a humanist's attention to empirical detail, so as to produce, create, and even invent the very idea of a Great Britain.

When the first edition of *Holinshed's Chronicles* was released from the workshop of Reginald Wolfe in 1577 (the Dutch-born printer himself having died five years before he saw the project publish its first volume), the "British Isles" were an inchoate collection of islands more than a nation. More than 80,000 square miles, extending from the white cliffs of Dover to the rocky shoals of Orkney, Queen Elizabeth's domains were more theory than reality. "Britain" itself wasn't a country but a mythic concept, the word conjuring Boudica and Arthur more than the realities of an emerging nation. Irish political scientist Benedict Anderson, in his 1983 classic *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, writes that the "members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion," so that a nation—any nation—isn't a *thing* so much as it is an *idea*.

Nationality is a language, of a sort. Most Englishmen (not to mention Scotsmen, Irishmen, or the Welsh) would have never visited distant London. England and Scotland had yet to unify (though by the time Shakespeare's play premiered they'd have the same monarch), and Ireland was continually in various degrees of colonial (not to mention often genocidal) subjugation. Celtic languages endured not just in Wales, Scotland, and obviously Ireland, but in Wales and the Isle of Man as well, while Norman was still spoken in many of the Channel Islands. Religious uniformity remained elusive to Elizabeth, despite her attempts at charting a reasonable middle path between Catholicism and Protestantism, with adherents to the Church of Rome having proliferated in Cornwall and the north of England, and on the other side of the sectarian divide, Calvinist Puritans demanding a more austere and reformed national church. "Britain" was, as Anderson might put it, an "imagined political community," but by the time the printer Wolfe commissioned his "Universal Cosmography of the whole world, and therewith also particular histories of every known nation," this Britain had yet to really be imagined. Holinshed would then become the first to dream of it.

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For being the compiler of the most extant history of the British Isles up until that moment, written with the intent of providing a complete and comprehensive account of those countries, there is an irony in how little is known about Holinshed himself. Indeed, Holinshed's bibliography contains no other works. The self is absent in *Holinshed's Chronicles*—the assistant to Wolfe, born in 1525, nine years before Henry VIII would ratify the Acts of Supremacy that would effectively inaugurate the idea of an English nation as separate from the continent, and most likely educated at Cambridge. Holinshed's relative absence from the chronicles that bear his name is in part due to the fact that the book itself was as collaborative an effort as Shakespeare's play was. More so, for Holinshed was joined in compiling such a history by other antiquaries, humanists, and scholars such as clergyman and author of *A Description of England* William Harrison (himself drawing from the earlier research of the poet John Leland), the alchemist Richard Stanyhurst, the renegade Jesuit priest and eventual martyr Edmund Campion, and the solicitor John Hooker, all of whom contributed to the final project. An encyclopedia, like a kingdom, is an effort of many subjects.

"As few or no nations can justly boast themselves to have continued hence their countries were first replenished, without any mixture, more or less of foreign inhabitants," wrote Holinshed and his colleagues, "no more can this our land." Britain, as with the project itself, was a manifold

project, a rambling house with additions of varied provenance continually added onto the structure. What Wolfe intended, and by extension Holinshed and his fellow writers, as well as the Stationer's Company who underwrote the project, was a cohesive narrative to emerge from all of this diversity, to impose on the randomness and chaos of history (for history is always random and chaotic) an identifiable teleology. Reading *Holinshed's Chronicles* today is an incongruous experience, mostly accomplished by Shakespeare scholars interested in the manner by which the playwright (and many other writers) was so obviously influenced by these "histories." The incongruity comes from the same reason as that of presenting the genre in scare quotes: Holinshed is not penning historiography in any contemporary sense. This chimeric work built in part on myth—of the legendary King Brutus of Troy fleeing that city for Hesperian Isles where he would establish the lineage of an imagined Britain, or of green-hued magic children appearing in the medieval hamlet of Woolpit. Yet at the same time, as evidenced by the keen observational eye of a Harrison or Leland, this work was not without some concern for empirical rigor, as accounts and records from regional administrators and parishes were collected and referenced within *Holinshed's Chronicles*, in attempting to "write the history" of actual events from the War of the Roses to the English Reformation.

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The result is a maximalist enterprise that is partially ancient and partially contemporary, a fusion of the medieval and modern, fully in keeping with the emerging epistemologies of that gloaming period that was the Renaissance. More importantly than any sop to accuracy, what *Holinshed's Chronicles* provided was a particular vision of "Britain," of a country that had yet to exist legally but that was in the process of being conjured into reality by historians and later writers such as Shakespeare. "Holinshed and his associates could not have known (though I suspect they prayed) that their history of the 'nations'… would have a profound cultural role," writes Igor Djordjevic in *Holinshed's Nation: Ideals, Memory, and Practical Policy in the Chronicles*. "But it is a fact that we cannot ignore because so many of their readers went on to retell (and further refract) the stories they learned from the chronicles to their own audience.… Converting them into components of the revised (or newly conceived?) national self in later times." Which is to say that a central function, or at least a result, of *Holinshed's Chronicle* is that it provided cohesion, however complicated, to a collection of disparate lands and cultures, forging them intellectually—if not actually, at first—into a country.

Consider Shakespeare's *Henry IV: Part 1* and *Part 2*, which like *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, *Cymbeline*, *King John*, and so on, was heavily indebted to Holinshed, who wrote of this king that "did much hurt in the countries with fire and sword, slaying diverse that with weapon in hand came forth resist him, and so with a great booty of beasts and cattle he returned" triumphant monarch of a unified realm. Because profligate Prince Hal and Falstaff, his mentor in debauchery, along with the denizens of the Boars-Head Tavern in Eastcheap, are such beguiling figures, it's easy to read the Henriad as a character study as much as a meditation on political power. In both of those senses, however, it's a story about the forging of a novel identity out of the varied ones which would come to constitute an idea of Britishness. Prince Hal is strung between his father and Falstaff, the former representative of the commands of a burgeoning efficient state and the later of a boozy, quasi-pagan Merry Old England. There is depiction of figures from the Celtic periphery like the druid Owen Glyndwr, who must be repressed in the construction of a modern country, while the fraternity of soldiers such as the Welsh Fluellen, the Scottish Captain Jamy, and the Irish Captain Macmorris who are fighting for "Harry, England, and Saint George" embody the unification of the British Isles, defining them by what they are not (in this case, namely, French). Whatever the complexities of the reality of emerging British cohesion, always mandated from the metropole more than something which organically arose in the hinterlands (just ask the Irish how British they felt, or feel), Holinshed penned a script which could be adapted by subsequent writers. "Shakespeare may be the catalyst for our postmodern, post-national, meditation," writes Djordjevic, but "the original question of fluid and evolving national identity came to him from Holinshed's narrative of English medieval history that he used as his immediate source." Fluid because it was a construction; narrative because it was a fiction; "national identity" because it worked.

Before there was an England, there were the various Anglo-Saxon kingdoms: Northumbria, Essex, Mercia, Wessex, Anglia, Sussex, and Kent. The Anglo-Saxons themselves were a motley bunch, a collection of Angles and Saxons, Frisians and Jutes, with uniformity only imposed later on. Before the Anglo-Saxons, there were the original Latinized Britons, to whom the vaguely Arthurian mythography was projected, but during Holinshed's day there remained Welsh, Scotts, Manx, Cornish, and Irish, none of whom were speaking a Germanic language. On top of all that there was the residual Gallic affectations of the aristocracy descended from the Norman French, who themselves had Nordic Scandinavian origins. In short, as with any other nation, England was as much a fantasy as anything else, the idea that this

inchoate collection shared a common story a profound act of imagination, to borrow Anderson's phrase. And England—as any subject of the United Kingdom will remind you—is supposedly only a constituent part of Great Britain, including Scotland and Wales (though not Northern Ireland), which is what makes Holinshed's history all the more integral, since it defined the Atlantic Archipelago as somehow united in a manufactured *Britishness* three decades before James I was crowned "King of Great Brittaine," and a century before the 1707 ratification of the Act of Union that merged England and Scotland into this newly confirmed, but long dreamt about, imagined community.

Holinshed's mode was the temporal—the chronicles were, after all, a history. And the medium of history is time, of justifying the present by recourse to the past and of demanding a particular future by reference to the present. Temporality was not the only mode that the inventors of England operated in, however. For only five years after the publication of *Holinshed's Chronicles*, another book appeared, that gave space its due as much as the former traded in time. A Hertfordshire geographer by the name of Richard Hakluyt, who never set foot on an English ship which circumnavigated the globe, passed by the Cape of Good Hope, or was bound for the nascent Western colonies, nonetheless produced the most important work of England's colonial yearnings in his 1589 *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffics and Discoveries of the English Nation*. Motivated by the same burgeoning empiricism that had inspired Wolfe to assemble his crack team of historians, the land-bound Hakluyt gathered materials from the English privateers such as Walter Raleigh and Francis Drake, to will into existence an English colonial project when it didn't quite yet exist, at least not to the level implied by the book itself. As with Holinshed, Hakluyt's massive achievement was a collaborative enterprise, though less in the composition of *Principal Navigations* than in the assemblage of its sources. The entirety of this Oxford-trained geographer's foreign experience was a stint in the Paris household of the English ambassador Sir Francis Walshingham, and yet it was accounts of men such as Raleigh that would be central to his work that would function as a brief for colonial ambitions, of the rhetoric "concerning the great necessity and manifold commodities that are like to grow to this Realm of England by the Western discoveries lately attempted," as he wrote in a 1584 letter to Queen Elizabeth advocating for the establishment of an American empire.

When England's New World colonies were composed of only a few square miles of coastal Virginia, Hakluyt wrote of English explorers and colonials that "it can not be denied, but as in all former ages, they have been men full of activity, stirrers abroad, and searchers for the most remote parts of the world… in searching the most opposite corners and quarters of the world… in compassing the vast globe of the earth… have excelled all the nations and people of the earth." When that was written, the population of England's sole Roanoke Colony was around 120 souls, most of whom had disappeared two years before the release of Hakluyt's triumphalist compendium. By contrast, the new Hapsburg capital of Madrid reigned over more than five million square miles of earth, the first empire of which it was said that the sun never set, with nine million people living in the vanquished lands of the Taino, the Aztec, and the Inca. Nonetheless, *Principal Navigations* was crucial in providing the propagandistic element required to conceptualize an English empire; it was central to Anderson's process of imagining a community. Jeffrey Knapp, in his 1992 study *An Empire Nowhere: England, America, and Literature from* Utopia *to the* Tempest, argued that the entire English literary Renaissance—Wyatt and Surrey, Sidney and Spenser, Marlowe and Shakespeare—was the result of anxiety over England's belated colonial ambitions (tellingly many of those aforementioned were keen readers of Holinshed, and at times Hakluyt). What also must be suggested is something related to Knapp's argument, which is an earlier claim of the Victorian critic James Froude who argued that *Principal Navigations* (and I'd claim by extension *Holinshed's Chronicles*) are the "Prose Epic of the modern English nation," and its great fantasy was this mythic idea of Britain, a fantasy that is still apparent today in the nostalgia of Englishmen pining for the age before the post-colonial.

As collaborative epics, Holinshed and Hakluyt fuse the temporal and the spatial, time and space, to concoct a mythic land of Britain.

The Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin, in his 1930s essays collected as *The Dialogic Imagination*, formulates a rhetorical unit that he claims explains the "intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are expressed in literature," calling this unit a "chronotope." Read together, I would argue that Holinshed and Hakluyt are not only hidden epics of English Renaissance literature, bolstering the more conventionally literary works of figures like Shakespeare and Marlowe, but that both *Holinshed's Chronicles* and *Principle Navigations* function together as a chronotope. "In the literary artistic chronotope," writes Bakhtin, "spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole." Holinshed and Hakluyt, those contemporaneous writers, must be read together, for as collaborative epics they fuse the temporal and the spatial, time and space, to concoct a mythic land of Britain. What's most remarkable is that they in some sense willed this nation into existence, that by collecting histories and travelogues they gave shape to a dream of imperial ambition. Christopher Hodgkins, in *Reforming Empire: Protestant Colonialism and Conscience in British Literature*, describes how the "archival

enterprise of Hakluyt… revised and reformed an ancient British identity, and how it began to bind together a newly imagined Protestant 'Britain' for the territorial recovery—and expansion—of a lost 'Brytish Empire.'" Indeed, that's what makes the work of Holinshed and Hakluyt so fascinating, for at the time they both began to write, "Britain" wasn't to be found anywhere. There was England and Wales, Scotland and Ireland, even America, but no *Britain* per se. Latin Brittania and the ancient Britons were long gone, relegated to an antique past druidical and enchanted, erased by the wave of Teutonic invasion that had constituted the eventual English state. But in resurrecting this imagined "Britain," inventing it if you will, Holinshed and Hakluyt posed a counter-myth to the powerful tales of Spanish and Portuguese Catholic imperialism than ascendant in the Western hemisphere.

Anderson points out that Britain has the "rare distinction of refusing nationality in its naming," for (contrary to all evidence) British imperial ambition wasn't supposed to be English, but something else, and the state wasn't supposed to be reducible to ethnicity (again contrary to all evidence) but transcendent of local differences. To imagine such a state is an act of conjuration, which makes it appropriate enough that the first person to use the term "British Empire" wasn't Holinshed or Hakluyt, an antiquary or geographer, but rather John Dee, the Elizabethan court astrologer and alchemist, in a 1577 tract in which he justified colonialism by recourse to King Arthur. Holinshed, Hakluyt, Dee, along with Raleigh, Drake, John Smith, Thomas Harriot—magicians all, conjuring an empire in words before it existed in reality. A year before Dee would die in 1608, the Virginian colony of Jamestown was established on filched land, dedicated to the production of tobacco. Four years after Hakluyt would die in 1616, some 32 enslaved Africans would disembark at Jamestown, the first held in bondage in the English colonies. Rather than romantic Arthuriana, the legacy of Dee's British Empire was expressed in this settlement built on ethnic cleansing and slavery dedicated to the cultivation of an addictive and deadly narcotic. A thousand other travesties would follow. To dream an empire into existence may be an act of magic, but occultism has its infernal effects, as always, with words as dangerous as errant flammable waddling floating upwards towards a burning roof. A