

Colley, L., 2014, *Acts of Union. Acts of Disunion*, Profile Books Ltd., London, pp. 192.

In 1992 the historian Linda Colley (she is currently Shelby M.C. Davis 1958 Professor of History at Princeton University and a Fellow of the British Academy; in 1999 she described herself as

(...) someone who is part Welsh, part Irish, part English, who has spent 16 years in the States, but who views myself as British alongside other identities

concluded her influential book *Britons. Forging the Nation 1707-1837* with the following words (quoted from p. 375 of the 2003 Pimlico edition):

How all this will resolve itself – whether Great Britain will break down into separate Welsh, Scottish and English states, or whether, as is more likely, a more federal Britain will emerge as part of an increasingly federal Europe – remains to be seen. What seems indisputable is that a substantial rethinking of what it means to be British can no longer be evaded. Even in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, there were those who feared that British identity was too dependent on recurrent Protestant wars, commercial success and imperial conquest, and that more thought and attention should be devoted to consolidating a deeper sense of citizenship on the home front. ‘Foreign commerce is a fine thing, so is my bright India,’ wrote a Scottish pro-consul called Sir John Macpherson in the 1790s: ‘But the world is under the hand of great changes and violent revolutions and the rising genius of other nations and their detestation of our monopolies will divest us some day of these eastern and western wings. We must then look at home, and if we have not turned our commercial and asiatic sovereignty to the real improvement of our own island and to the domestic union of the three kingdoms... we have abused the inheritance which the spirit and minds of our forefathers have acquired for our enjoyment and improvement.’ But Sir John was a well-known eccentric. No one paid any attention (the footnote has been deleted – S.B.).

The topics outlined in the quotation above (centripetal and centrifugal forces intensifying or assuaging tensions within the United Kingdom, the complexities of the UK’s relations with the European

Union; the challenge of renewing an overarching UK-wide identity etc.) have since then been continually present in Colley's intellectual output. They also form the axis of her most recent work, which is under review here (it is based on a series of radio talks written for BBC Radio 4; they were aired in January 2014).

What distinguishes her present considerations, however, is the context in which they were undertaken and published: last year the UK faced probably its greatest challenge hitherto, at least during peace time, as its future continuity was at stake during the Scottish independence referendum. As we know, the Union survived by a reasonably comfortable margin of votes, but events subsequent to this memorable ballot prove that the fissures weakening the British state have not disappeared at all. They not only remain firmly in place, but have probably even been enhanced as the results of 2015 general election – in Scotland especially – prove.

On the one hand Colley's book helps the reader to grasp the nature of the above mentioned fault lines, their historical depth (definitely they are not a new phenomenon; even their current intensity is not without precedents) and intensity, as her approach to the analyzed problems has more in common with the *longue durée* than with the *histoire événementielle*. On the other, she offers a set of insightful clues on how the British state could fend off these present dangers.

In the first part Colley discusses a set of narratives upon which the recently somewhat shaky edifice of Britain's identity had been founded. As she clearly shows, the symbols invoked in such narratives are never as straightforward as they are sometimes argued to be (islands are never exclusively insular; the sea is not only a barrier but a bridge too; Britain's record on freedom is not always exemplary; the monarchy is not as unshakeable as it may seem, etc.).

The following chapter explores the various kinds of difficulties (or divisions in Colley's nomenclature) affecting contemporary Britain, for example: English imbalances illustrated by London's dominant demographic and economic position or the political tensions between the English South (who most vote Conservative) and the North (mostly Labour-voting); the void created by the demise of the symbolic and practical elements cementing Britain in the past, i.e. the empire (serving as, for example, an almost unlimited pool of career opportunities for the members of the various British nations)

or heavy industry (it contributed to the emergence of UK-wide class consciousness) is nowadays occupied by the new, nationalist loyalties in Scotland or Wales.

Finally Colley argues that in order to fully understand Britain's past and present, one has to take a wider context(s) into consideration ("But the ways in which people in these islands have responded to the questions 'Who am I?' 'Who are we?' have been shaped by more than local and domestic circumstances"): transatlantic (the nature of Britain's relationship with the United States is dynamic but it does not cease to be of importance), post-imperial (Britain not only "exported" a set of British values but it also established intricate relationships with non-European peoples) and European (Britain is deeply rooted in Europe).

Such a multi-faceted historical argumentation obviously has a purpose: Britain's future. In Colley's opinion, the open and critical discussion of the above subjects should lead towards a renewal of the British "state-nation." It ought to be federal (in recognition of differences) and founded upon a new set of reconciliatory narratives (recognition of belonging to a larger polity). As Colley puts it, there is a need for a "(...) fresh constitutive stories for a new kind of Union," which should be codified in a written constitution (a student of federal systems might add: they are crucial in order to establish *Loyaute federale* or *Bundestreue*).

As Colley has observed, in the late eighteenth century no one paid any attention to the thoughtful remarks of Sir John Macpherson. If the UK is to survive, this engaging book written by an excellent historian cannot meet the same fate.

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