

POCOCK AND THE PRESUPPOSITIONS OF THE NEW BRITISH HISTORY*

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ABSTRACT. *This article recovers the rationale behind the project to found a ‘new’ British history undertaken by J. G. A. Pocock in the early 1970s, and contrasts this with the approach adopted in the subsequent historiography. The article argues that British history as conceived by Pocock was intended to transcend the parochialism of national history whilst also rehabilitating the writing of imperial history without succumbing to the temptations of metropolitan whiggism. Pocock’s perspective was constructed against the backdrop of a British withdrawal from empire and led him to a neo-Seeleyan interest in the dynamics of imperial expansion and retrenchment. While this process is best understood through the comparative study of empires, any such undertaking raises complex questions about the ultimate subject of historical inquiry and the nature of historical explanation. In addressing these questions, this article distinguishes the ambition to write the history of a polity from the aim of writing histories of ‘party’ as originally formulated by the historians of the Scottish enlightenment whose work has been among Pocock’s abiding subjects of investigation.*

The question of how best to conceptualize the relationship between Britain and its colonial empire was the central concern of the project to establish a specifically ‘British’ history inaugurated by J. G. A. Pocock in 1973.¹ Since then British history has been widely practised as a distinct branch of academic inquiry, but rarely with sufficient understanding of what the original project set out to achieve. The objective of British history is regularly characterized as an attempt to broaden the canvas of the national past beyond the narrow focus of traditional English history. As such, it is usually seen as aiming to recover social and political relationships in

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¹ J. G. A. Pocock, ‘British history: a plea for a new subject’, *Journal of Modern History*, 47 (1975), pp. 601–24, reprinted with minor modifications in J. G. A. Pocock, *The discovery of islands: essays in British history* (Cambridge, 2005), p. 32. The article originally appeared in the *New Zealand Journal of History*, 8 (1974), having been presented as a lecture in honour of J. C. Beaglehole at Canterbury, New Zealand in May 1973. Analysis of the relationship between Britain and the empire of settlement has to begin with an account of England’s achievement of empire over itself. For an analysis of British history in terms of the complex interrelationship between state and empire, see David Armitage, *The ideological origins of the British empire* (Cambridge, 2000).

all their plurality. In the process, it is expected to trace the genealogy of diverse forms of identity without privileging one form of consciousness over others.² These goals, in turn, are usually employed to serve one of two purposes: either to advance a cosmopolitan ideal of history, or to reinvigorate existing national historiographies.³ This article claims that British history was originally conceived in neither national nor cosmopolitan terms. It was supposed to explore the formation of British political communities in insular, archipelagic and trans-oceanic contexts. It also argues that the underlying commitment of British history was not intended to promote cultural plurality or inclusion. Its focus was on the formation of kinds of political allegiance rather than the celebration of diversity.⁴

Whilst there are inevitably no patented restrictions on how British history ought to be written, this article attempts to show how recovering the content of the original project raises important questions about the relationship between history and politics. The scope of Pocock's understanding of British history looks back to the Greater British perspective identified with J. R. Seeley, but it also shares important affinities with Scottish enlightenment historiography.⁵ Colin Kidd has argued that the Anglo-British historiography of the Scottish enlightenment was designed to subject English historical consciousness to a sceptical assault. In doing this, it not only redefined Scottish history in Anglo-British terms, but also dismantled surviving myths surrounding the ancient English constitution.⁶ Simultaneously subverting English whiggism and Scottish nationalism, it radically reconceptualized the understanding of past politics. Nicholas Phillipson has proposed that the great achievement of Hume's *History of England* (1754–62) lay

² The classic exposition in this style is Hugh Kearney, *The British isles: a history of four nations* (Cambridge, 1989, 2006). Cf. David Eastwood, Laurence Brockliss, and Michael John, 'Conclusion' to Laurence Brockliss and David Eastwood, eds., *A union of multiple identities: the British isles, c. 1750–1850* (Manchester, 1997). For a more sceptical analysis which ultimately subverts the very notion of 'identity', see, however, Colin Kidd, *British identities before nationalism: ethnicity and nationhood in the Atlantic world* (Cambridge, 1999).

³ The cosmopolitan ideal is articulated in defence of British history by Mark Nicholls, *A history of the modern British Isles, 1529–1603* (Oxford, 1999), p. xiv. It is similarly invoked by way of criticizing the enterprise in Nicholas Canny, *Making Ireland British, 1580–1650* (Oxford, 2001), p. vii. For the difficulty in deciding between national and cosmopolitan imperatives, see Glenn Burgess, 'Introduction – the new British history', in Glenn Burgess, ed., *The new British history: founding a modern state, 1603–1715* (London, 1999), p. 8. For British history as national history by other means, see Brendan Bradshaw and Peter Roberts, 'Introduction' to Brendan Bradshaw and Peter Roberts, eds., *British consciousness and identity: the making of Britain, 1533–1707* (Cambridge, 1998). For a conception of British history as the history of state-formation driven by the imperatives of national consolidation, see John Morrill, 'The fashioning of Britain', in Steven G. Ellis and Sarah Barber, eds., *Conquest and union: fashioning a British state, 1485–1725* (London, 1995).

⁴ Of course the terms 'identity', 'plurality', and 'diversity' do pervade Pocock's writing on British history, but their usage is rooted in a civic understanding of political society distinct from the ideals of both liberal 'inclusion' and postmodern 'difference' to which they are usually assimilated. On this, see J. G. A. Pocock, 'Conclusion: history, sovereignty, identity', in *Discovery of islands*, esp. pp. 303–10.

⁵ On Seeley as a key precursor for the idea of British history, see Armitage, *Ideological origins of the British empire*, pp. 16–22.

⁶ Colin Kidd, *Subverting Scotland's past: Scottish whig historians and the creation of an Anglo-British identity, 1689–c. 1830* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 209–80.

in its skill in placing the history of politics at the centre of a theory of civilization.⁷ But politics, for Hume, had a very specific meaning centred on the dynamics of ‘party’ or factional struggle. In this article it will become clear that, for all its resemblance to the historical assumptions of the Scottish enlightenment, Pocock’s scheme diverges from the Humean agenda. Hume’s vision presupposes the ineliminable reality of party strife, whereas Pocock’s perspective is organized around the politics of citizenship.

The subject matter of British history in its Pocockian conception is the global development of British citizenship, although that development is not interpreted in teleological terms.⁸ The idea was to concentrate on the affairs of the colonial empire as distinct from the history of British India or Africa north of Rhodesia.⁹ For this reason, in addition to Ireland, Wales, and Scotland, the American colonies, Canada, and the Antipodes all figured in Pocock’s first manifesto article.¹⁰ In comparative perspective, this tale of British expansion can be usefully distinguished from Roman imperial annexation, under which citizenship was extended on explicitly Roman terms. By contrast, the formation of British citizenship occurred by reciprocal modification. In this way, Pocock saw British history as a story of reactive adaptation, not one of unilateral assimilation. The creation of Greater Britain was often violently transformative, but it was ultimately accompanied by colonial participation in the exercise of imperial sovereignty. British citizenship was a function of participation in this vein.¹¹

To the extent that the growth of Britain and later Greater Britain appeared to have occurred in tandem with colonial participation in imperial sovereignty, Pocock recommended that the process be viewed in terms of the expansion of a *polity*. On this understanding, British history ought to be viewed as a recounting of past politics in which ‘politics’ is taken to mean a shared enterprise in ruling and being ruled. As this enterprise developed, the English polity predominated over but did not finally control the terms of its expansion. Pocock has sought to capture

⁷ Nicholas Phillipson, *Hume* (London, 1989), p. 140. On Hume as an early exemplar of British history, see John Morrill, ‘The war(s) of the three kingdoms’, in Burgess, ed., *New British history*, p. 69.

⁸ I use the word citizenship in the generalized sense of participation in the exercise of sovereignty. On British history as ‘social’ history in the Roman sense of a struggle between allies disputing the terms of their citizenship, see J. G. A. Pocock, ‘The Atlantic archipelago and the war of the three kingdoms’, in Brendan Bradshaw and John Morrill, eds., *The British problem, c. 1534–1707: state formation in the Atlantic archipelago* (London, 1996), reprinted in *Discovery of islands*, esp. pp. 89–93. For British history as a shared enterprise in the construction of sovereignty, see J. G. A. Pocock, ‘Gaberlunzie’s return’, *New Left Review*, 2nd ser., 5 (2000), pp. 41–52.

⁹ ‘Colonial’ here refers to the empire of British settlement. On this, see James Belich, *Replenishing the earth: the settler revolution and the rise of the angloworld, 1783–1939* (Oxford, 2006).

¹⁰ Pocock, ‘British history: a plea’, pp. 29, 41, 42.

¹¹ See J. G. A. Pocock, ‘Preface and acknowledgements’, in *Discovery of islands*, pp. ix–x; J. G. A. Pocock, ‘The Antipodean perspective’, in *ibid.*, pp. 20–1. For an examination of English and British history by means of a genealogy of sovereignty, and of colonial history in terms of a partnership between ‘layers’ of sovereignty, see J. G. A. Pocock, ‘A discourse of sovereignty: observations on the work in progress’, in Nicholas Phillipson and Quentin Skinner, eds., *Political discourse in early modern Britain* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 377–8, 417.

this reciprocal dynamic in terms of a process of politicization in which England, and later Britain, was continually challenged by the existence of an unsettled, pre-political form of society along its frontiers. The expanding polity was partly defined by this frustrated attempt to manage militant clashes along its borders. British history thus assumed the form of both an assertion and modification of sovereignty determined by the encounter between a political society and its militarized frontier.

In its earliest incarnation between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries, English politics was counterposed to the society of rebellious borderlands, or the 'march'.¹² But the pacification of the march, as presented by Pocock, entailed absorption of the frontier into *politics*, in an idealized Aristotelian sense of that term. Since the operative understanding of politics was informed by an Arendtian commitment to the ideal of active participation in sovereignty, Pocock's conception might more accurately be seen as neo-Aristotelian in character.¹³ However, the argument presented in this article develops a view of political society as an affair of party or factional struggle, rather than in terms of the transactions of a polity as depicted by Pocock.

The article is divided into three main sections. The first section contrasts the idea of a Greater British history with the process of Europeanization as understood by Pocock. Here the aim is to explore the relationship between sovereignty and history as represented by British history in Pocock's sense. The following section examines the process of what I term 'Ulsterization' in British history. Pocock once testified to the truth of the Seeleyan quip that the empire had been acquired in a 'fit of absence of mind', in the limited sense that the core British polity repeatedly demonstrated its preparedness to sacrifice colonial acquisitions to the maintenance of its own political stability.¹⁴ Beginning with the completion of the American Revolution against parliament in 1783, British history exhibited a willingness to 'Ulsterize' the empire of settlement by liberating itself from its own imperial loyalists.¹⁵ Accordingly, the second section analyses the implications of this process. In the final section, the relationship between party strife and historical impartiality is explored, by examining the centrality of party to the Scottish enlightenment's approach to political history. I focus on Adam Smith's account of the history of historiography to explain how political history can be impartially recounted. The article concludes by arguing for the importance of the

¹² Pocock, 'British history: a plea', p. 32.

¹³ J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian moment: Florentine political thought and the Atlantic republican tradition* (Princeton, NJ, 1975, 2003), pp. 550, 573.

¹⁴ J. G. A. Pocock, '1776: the revolution against parliament', in *Virtue, commerce, and history: essays on political thought and history, chiefly in the eighteenth century* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 86. For Seeley's remark, see J. R. Seeley, *The expansion of England: two courses of lectures* (London, 1883), p. 8.

¹⁵ On the long-term impact of the secession of the American colonies on British attitudes to imperial consolidation and integrity, see Eliga H. Gould, 'A virtual nation: Greater Britain and the imperial legacy of the American revolution', *American Historical Review*, 104 (1999), pp. 476–89. On this interpretation, the origins of Ulsterization are to be found in the British experience of the American Revolution.

Smithian spirit of philosophical scepticism for securing historical study from partisanship.

I

It has often been observed that Pocock's project to establish a distinct field of British history was inaugurated against the background of the Europeanization of British sovereignty during the aftermath of the loss of global empire.¹⁶ In Pocock's eyes, the construction of Europe was re-defining the relationship between neo-Britons and English history. In response, Pocock's scheme located British peoples in an oceanic perspective as 'Greater Britons' with a view to restoring residual colonial experience to a history that seemed threatened with extinction. In replying to A. J. P. Taylor's response to his original programmatic essay on 'British history: a plea for a new subject', Pocock explicitly described the idea of British history as 'neo-Seeleyan' in character.¹⁷ The choice of phrase implied a commitment to an endangered past facing challenges to its survival stretching into the future. The past in question comprised the history of an imperial people distributed in political societies across the globe. The problem was that this inheritance was now on the brink of terminal crisis as it confronted the final acts of the metropolis's withdrawal from empire accompanied by the incorporation of the United Kingdom into the European Community and the reduction of erstwhile imperial and commonwealth Britons to the status of 'non-historical' peoples.

The point is therefore that British history included, as part of its agenda, an inquiry into what we mean when we say a people has a history. The inquiry was launched in the face of a reorientation in British diplomatic and imperial policy represented by the parliamentary bid in October 1971 to enter into an enlarged European Community, leading to the accession of the United Kingdom to the EEC on 1 January 1973. In Pocock's vision, this reorientation had two dimensions. Most immediately, the new departure appeared as a concluding instalment of an established English tendency to sacrifice the maintenance of Greater British sovereignty to the continuation of domestic peace and prosperity.¹⁸ We shall see how this willing sacrifice is the engine of Ulsterization. In any case, it was, as Pocock thought of it, a *kleinenglisch* (Little English) consummation of a strictly

¹⁶ David Armitage, 'Greater Britain: a useful category of historical analysis?', *The American Historical Review*, 104 (1999), pp. 427–45, p. 431; reprinted in David Armitage, *Greater Britain, 1516–1776: essays in Atlantic history* (Aldershot, 2004); Colin Kidd, 'Europe, what Europe?', *London Review of Books* (6 Nov. 2008), pp. 16–17.

¹⁷ J. G. A. Pocock, 'British history: a plea for a new subject: reply', *Journal of Modern History*, 47 (1975), pp. 626–8, at p. 627.

¹⁸ On this pattern in British history, see Antoine Mioche, 'Union and partition: the uses of union in the British empire', in Isabelle Bour and Antoine Mioche, eds., *Bonds of union: practices and representations of political union in the United Kingdom* (Tours, 2005), pp. 147–78.

großbritannisch (Greater British) story.¹⁹ But in due course, the European project was to assume the form in Pocock's mind of an assault on British autonomy altogether. The first *kleinenglisch* dimension to the reorientation of British policy involved the appropriation of English history as a defensive weapon; but the second aspect, amounting to what seemed a spurious project of 'Europeanization', risked terminating both British and European history completely.

Seventeen years after his earliest programmatic statement about British history appeared in print, Pocock gave vent to a dystopian vision of the end of history brought about by a complete transition to what was labelled *Europeanization*. In this grim scenario, 'Europe' was made to stand for a condition of postmodern anti-sociality in which human relations were overtaken by utilitarian exploitation – all society reduced to a zero-sum trade, and all critical discourse to a form of vengeance. According to this picture, a mystique of newfangled Europeaness signalled the joint collapse of civility and community under cover of an unrealizable promise to rejuvenate both on a new footing.²⁰ The claim that this superficially alluring future obscured a fundamentally empty promise was based on the following enlightenment assumptions as Pocock had come to understand them: first, that civility depended on the survival of political community; next, that political community required the retention of sovereignty; and finally, that any durable form of sovereignty had to be founded on civic involvement in its exercise. Pocock identified the European project with the extension of consumer culture at the expense of political agency or sovereignty. The demise of sovereignty, in this view, entailed the end of self-determination; and with this, the end of the capacity to make history.²¹

It is necessary here to tease out the implications of Pocock's understanding of the interdependence between sovereignty and history. According to this understanding, having a history involves participating in the sovereignty over one's past. Since participation of this kind is political by its very nature, it cannot be cosmopolitan or universalist in orientation. The central significance of this fact has eluded many adherents to the idea of British history, giving rise to a situation in which its practitioners are in danger of contradicting the basic tenets of the original programme. British history is usually seen as a procedure informed by

¹⁹ Pocock, 'British history: reply', p. 627. The phraseology is a deliberate play on *kleindeutsch* and *großdeutsch* strategies pursued in Germany in the nineteenth century, as examined in A. J. P. Taylor, *The course of German history: a survey of the development of Germany since 1815* (London, 1945).

²⁰ J. G. A. Pocock, 'Deconstructing Europe', *London Review of Books* (19 Dec. 1991), reprinted in Pocock, *Discovery of islands*, esp. pp. 270, 274.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 278–82. See also J. G. A. Pocock, 'History and sovereignty: the historiographical response to Europeanization in two British cultures', *Journal of British Studies*, 31 (1992), pp. 358–89. Cf. Pocock, 'The Antipodean perspective' (2003), in Pocock, *Discovery of islands*, esp. pp. 8–9; J. G. A. Pocock, 'Sovereignty and history in the late twentieth century' (2003), in *ibid.*, esp. p. 261; J. G. A. Pocock, 'Conclusion: history, sovereignty, identity' (2004), in *ibid.*, esp. p. 303; and J. G. A. Pocock, 'Some Europes and their history', in Anthony Pagden, ed., *The idea of Europe: from antiquity to the European union* (Cambridge, 2002), esp. p. 70.

a principle. The principle is mistakenly understood as one of ‘inclusiveness’ or multiplicity; and the procedure is assumed to be a matter of seeking ‘connections’ or contingent relations.²² Yet, at best, inclusiveness gives rise to the unhistorical aspiration to give each voice its moral due in the chorus of the past, while discovering connections is an indeterminate activity servicing the truism that contingencies can be seen to be related.

The observation that, from the perspective of universal history, all connections are ultimately related is as old as Polybius. British history is by definition not a universal history, however, and was in fact conceived of as a revisionist approach to imperial and commonwealth history at a point when the British Empire was in its last stage of being undone. As seen, in Pocock’s hands its key concern has been with sovereignty, not multiplicity; and it has been guided less by a determination to expand the horizon of contingencies for its own sake than by the question of the historiographical principles that should inform how the formation of British citizenship might be better understood. Its purpose was never to generate a chain of connections, but to investigate the terms on which historical connections ought to be made. In its original conception, British history was not intended as a means of merely recounting the flow of ‘process’, but as an attempt to understand the relationship between historical events and political consciousness within a particular national and imperial tradition.²³ Pocock has tended to describe this undertaking as a non-whiggish endeavour to reconstruct the trajectory of British sovereignty in history. The avoidance of whiggism was a means of resisting the twin temptations of nationalism and teleology, which in practice meant discarding the notion of a predetermined relationship between contingent historical process and specific forms of political consciousness.²⁴

²² For the assumption that an ethos of ‘mutuality’ ought to underpin the writing of British history, see Burgess, ‘Introduction – the new British history’, p. 8. In the absence of agreed criteria by which to limit and define the appropriate objects of historical study, there has arisen a contest between ‘European’ and ‘national’ interpretations of British history. See Jonathan Scott, *England’s troubles: seventeenth-century English political instability in European context* (Cambridge, 2000); Jane Ohlmeyer, *Civil war and restoration in the three Stuart kingdoms: the career of Randal MacDonnell, Marquis of Antrim, 1609–1683* (Cambridge, 1993), ch. 7. Cf. the idea of relevant historical ‘connections’, in Jim Smyth, *The making of the United Kingdom, 1660–1800* (Harlow, 2001), pp. xii, 233; John Morrill, ‘The British problem, c. 1534–1707’, in Bradshaw and Morrill, eds., *The British problem*, p. 2.

²³ See J. G. A. Pocock, ‘England’, in Orest Ranum, ed., *National consciousness, history, and political culture in early-modern Europe* (Baltimore, MD, and London, 1975).

²⁴ Pocock’s response to ‘whig’ historiography has been complex and protracted. See, in particular, J. G. A. Pocock, *The ancient constitution and the feudal law: a study of English historical thought in the seventeenth century* (Cambridge, 1957, 1987); J. G. A. Pocock, ‘Burke and the ancient constitution: a problem in the history of ideas’, in J. G. A. Pocock, *Politics, language, and time: essays on political thought and history* (Chicago, IL, and London, 1960, 1989); J. G. A. Pocock, ‘The varieties of whiggism: a history of ideology and discourse’, in Pocock, *Virtue, commerce, and history*. For Pocock’s early work as in part an attempt to make sense of the anti-whiggish whiggism of Herbert Butterfield – specifically, the relationship between the latter’s *The whig interpretation of history* (1931) and his *The Englishman and his history* (1944) – see Pocock, ‘Preface’ to the 1987 edition of the *Ancient constitution*, pp. viii–ix. For his opposition to ‘vulgar whiggism’, in particular, see ‘The ancient constitution revisited: a retrospect from 1986’, in *ibid.*, esp. p. 257. For comparative remarks on the difference between Burke’s reaffirmation of ‘English

It would be mistaken to claim that the commitment underlying the project to inaugurate a new genre of specifically British history predetermined how that history came to be written. Such a claim would in fact be tantamount to convicting Pocock of having succumbed to what he himself described as the ‘disastrous German idealist’ assumption that history is the servant of an ethical vocation embodied in a determinate national teleology.²⁵ Nonetheless, a specific set of commitments does underpin the original idea for a British history. One such commitment is to a mode of democratic sovereignty that, for Pocock, is an expression of an ideal of equality. The commonwealth experience of global Britishness is held to approximate that ideal. As Pocock articulated this perception in 2003, the Greater British settlements stretching from North America to New Zealand comprised a form of association within which membership implied entitlement to ‘certain kinds of equality’.²⁶

This article builds on the assumption that the ideal of equality is disposed as much to factious struggle as to collaboration. If the ideal of equality in British history has inspired commitment and allegiance, it has also occasioned divisiveness and hostility. The article concludes by describing the kind of hostility envisaged, but, in the interim, I explore a paradigmatic process in British history that has been accompanied by a recurrent pattern of asymmetrical allegiance. As outlined at the beginning, this process is encapsulated by the concept of Ulsterization. As will become clear, what I am calling ‘Ulsterization’ is a generic feature of British imperial history whose significance can be brought to light through the comparative study of empires. The term is simply intended as a convenient tag of identification. The challenging part is to uncover the historical process that the tag picks out.

Ulsterization concerns the fate of allegiance under conditions of imperial retrenchment. It points to a situation of unreciprocated commitment. The situation has arisen among settler societies from North America in the eighteenth century to Northern Ireland and New Zealand in the twentieth.²⁷ It gives rise to a

traditionalism’, in the 1790s and German historicism, see J. G. A. Pocock, ‘The origins of the study of the past: a comparative approach’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 4 (1962), pp. 209–46, reprinted in J. G. A. Pocock, *Political thought and history: essays on theory and method* (Cambridge, 2009), p. 175.

²⁵ J. G. A. Pocock, ‘Law, sovereignty and history in a divided culture: the case of New Zealand and the treaty of Waitangi’ (1992), in *Discovery of islands*, p. 254. Pocock does not specify any of the protagonists of this assumption, but Treitschke is one obvious possible candidate. See Heinrich von Treitschke, *Politik: Vorlesungen gehalten an der Universität zu Berlin*, ed. Max Cornicelius (Leipzig, 1897).

²⁶ Pocock, ‘The Antipodean perspective’, *Discovery of islands*, p. 20. Cf. J. G. A. Pocock, ‘Removal from the wings’, *London Review of Books* (20 Mar. 1997), p. 12.

²⁷ For the recurrent motifs that have attended the besieged allegiance of Irish loyalism, see Ian McBride, *The siege of Derry in Ulster Protestant mythology* (Dublin, 1997). For British loyalism in America after 1776, see Maya Jasanoff, ‘The other side of revolution: loyalists in the British empire’, *William and Mary Quarterly*, 65 (2008), pp. 205–32. For an account of the New Zealand experience, see J. G. A. Pocock, ‘The treaty between histories’, in Andrew Sharp and Paul McHugh, eds., *Histories, power and loss: uses of the past – a New Zealand commentary* (Wellington, 2001), p. 82. Cf. J. G. A. Pocock, ‘The four seas and the four oceans’, in Gordon Lucy and Elaine McClure, eds., *Cool Britannia: what Britishness means to me* (Lurgan, Co. Armagh, 1999).

relationship that is under-theorized in the history of political experience for the reason that it cannot be conceptualized in terms of the standard preoccupations of contractual theories of government.²⁸ The common concern of contractual theories is with the conditions of allegiance. However, Ulsterization is based on an asymmetrical relationship in which allegiance is staked in the absence of a final assurance of protection. This kind of loyalism amounts to a unilateral pact of submission. In practice this entails an intrinsically weak bargaining position. The outlines of its role in British history are investigated in the next section.

II

When Herbert Butterfield set out to expose the religious and political bias that still animated British historical writing at the start of the 1930s, he settled on the term ‘whig’ as the most fitting epithet to describe the summary verdicts on the national past that it tended to produce. Fastening on to a redundant party label, and fingering Lord Acton as a principal target for criticism, Butterfield softened the contemporary impact of his indictment of British historiography as a vehicle for national self-regard.²⁹ The reigning nationalism of historians was tactfully identified with the past so as to distract from its implied existence in the present.³⁰ This delicate operation committed Butterfield to building his case by resort to generalization. Focusing on the teleology and moralism guiding the whig interpreter of history, he declined to name any particular culprits. The task of identifying the principal whig historians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had already been assumed by H. A. L. Fisher in his Raleigh Lecture of 1928. But for Fisher the whig historians stood for a party above faction.³¹ Mackintosh, Macaulay, Hallam, and Trevelyan, as Fisher saw them, were committed to a party without betraying partisanship. Butterfield’s point was that their principles were better suited to political conduct than to impartial reconstruction of the past.³²

²⁸ My argument here departs from the premises contained in the classic study by David W. Miller, *Queen’s rebels: Ulster loyalism in historical perspective* (Dublin, 1978). For a response to the asymmetrical relationship that underpins Ulsterization, see Ian McBride, ‘Ulster and the British problem’, in Richard English and Graham Walker, eds., *Unionism in modern Ireland: new perspectives in politics and culture* (Basingstoke, 1996), p. 14. For British unionism before the onset of crisis, see John Bew, *The glory of being Britons: civic unionism in nineteenth-century Belfast* (Dublin, 2009).

²⁹ Herbert Butterfield, *The whig interpretation of history* (1931) (London, 1973). The final chapter of the work, ‘Moral judgements in history’, focuses on the moralism of Acton. On the patriotism underlying historiographical whiggism, see John Burrow, *A history of histories: epics, chronicles, romances and inquiries from Herodotus and Thucydides to the twentieth century* (London, 2007), pp. 473–4.

³⁰ The contemporary target (secular liberalism) is brought out in Michael Bentley, *Modernizing England’s past: English historiography in the age of modernism, 1870–1970* (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 188–9. ‘Paganisation’ had contributed to the dedication of the modern state, in Butterfield’s view, and so inadvertently to totalitarianism. ³¹ H. A. L. Fisher, *The whig historians* (London, 1928), p. 21.

³² The point is applicable to F. S. Oliver’s *The endless adventure: personalities and practical politics in eighteenth-century England* (Boston, MA, and New York, NY, 1931), which offers a celebration of whig politics in the form of unapologetically whiggish history.

Fisher represented whig historians like Macaulay as somehow immune to ‘the infirmities of the sectary’. He was a patriot, but of an ethical kind; he was devoted to his principles, but remained liberal in outlook. The same qualities which had contributed to British statesmanship, above all the capacity for benevolent empire, had ‘strengthened the integrity of English historical writing’.³³ The aptitude for accommodation by which populations as diverse as South Asian Hindus and the peasants of Connaught were seemingly reconciled to British power had equally enabled Macaulay in his historical writing to ‘enter into’ the spirit of Londonderry Protestants just as much as he could identify with the Catholics of Ireland.³⁴ Butterfield’s aim was to challenge the idea that this aptitude for impartiality had been transferred from whig politics to whig historians. Whig politics had indeed exhibited a superior capacity for ‘adjustment’ and ‘compromise’, but the historians of that process had been blinkered and partisan. English politics, as Butterfield saw it, had slowly managed to turn its back on ‘the evils of party cleavage’ after the 1660s by committing itself to a more ‘politic’ management of affairs. It was the whig historians who falsely identified this national achievement with a single party.³⁵

Whig politics had involved transcending the intensity of irate political passion that Butterfield associated with the sectarianism of the 1640s. This pragmatic sense of politics was at the same time counter-posed to modern fractiousness attributable to the anti-historical principles of French revolutionary thought and action. Through the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, this anti-political spirit of insurrection, as Butterfield presented it, degenerated into a parody of its original self, culminating in a kind of ‘perverted romanticism’: ‘*vide*’, Butterfield concluded, ‘the I. R. A.’.³⁶ But, in due course, Butterfield would characterize the transcendence of party passion as a capacity that connected the English nation to the British empire. In this mood, Butterfield commented that it was only during the ‘shock’ of national emergency in 1940 that Englishmen had been brought to recognize that the whig ideal of liberty had managed to spawn traditions of global reach.³⁷ Pocock’s plea for a new British history in 1973 was a way of registering that the recognition did not last long. Instead, English awareness of the national past had promptly reverted to the insular perspective against which imperial federalists from Alfred Milner to L. S. Amery and F. S. Oliver had long complained.³⁸ Above all, even the feeling of shared purpose and allegiance with the empire produced by so significant a national emergency as the Battle of Britain left little post-War appetite for exploring the actual process by which English whiggism had become a colonial inheritance of trans-oceanic extent.

³³ Fisher, *Whig historians*, pp. 21, 30.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 29, 31.

³⁵ H. Butterfield, *The Englishman and his history* (Cambridge, 1944), pp. vii, 84, 85, 101.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 104–6.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 82.

³⁸ L. S. Amery, *My political life: England before the storm, 1896–1914* (London, 1953), p. 466; F. S. Oliver, *Alexander Hamilton: an essay on the American union* (London, 1907), p. 457; for Milner’s inspiration, see L. S. Amery, *Thoughts on the constitution* (New York, NY, 1947), p. 111.

From Pocock's viewpoint, this insular blindness impoverished national awareness of significant aspects of its own historical experience, reducing whole societies of settlement to the status of 'non-historical peoples'. The blindness was symptomatic of a pathologically introverted sense of English history that distorted the dialectical process characteristic of the British past.³⁹ The British past had to be seen as dialectical because the imperial advance of English attitudes and institutions had been perpetually modified and reshaped by colonial reaction and redefinition. Pocock recognized that 'anglicization' had played a predominant role in British history, but it still only represented a part of the larger story. The larger story included the actions of British settlements extending globally from the archipelagic nucleus of islands off north-west Europe to distant regions in the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Greater British action, along with English reaction, had constituted a pattern of historical reciprocity. But English historiography was inclined to forget this reciprocity in the same spirit in which national policy favoured the secession of British peoples over the appearance of any threat to the national sovereignty of parliament. Ulsterization was one recurrent effect of this dialectical pattern of interaction.⁴⁰

Pocock originally launched the project to establish British history at a point when Ulsterization was in crisis in Northern Ireland. This was immediately after the fall of the Stormont government in March 1972, when sectarian animosity had reached the point of militant conflict. After the imposition of direct rule from Westminster, Irish nationalism continued to battle with what Pocock described at the time as 'the desire of one of the "British" peoples to remain "British" as they understood the term'.⁴¹ The collision was partly a consequence of the long-term impact of Ulsterization in its generic sense. The character of the relationship between Northern Ireland and the British government had exposed the province to existential challenges since the summer of 1969. The reasons for its vulnerability can be gleaned from a remark made by the home secretary after the deployment of British troops in August 1969. The army was no longer 'emotionally involved' in the plight of Ulster, James Callaghan commented, and the Tories had likewise lost their commitment to saving the 'Protestant North'.⁴² Ulster's allegiance to British sovereignty elicited only conditional Westminster support. Provincial loyalty was no longer matched by the commitment of the metropolitan power. As a result of this asymmetry, the cultural allegiance of Irish unionism had been cultivated at the expense of the means of

³⁹ On the use of 'unhistorical' or 'non-historic' peoples as a political and polemical weapon, see Pocock, *Discovery of islands*, pp. 41, 278. On dialectical process in British history, see Pocock, 'British history: reply', p. 627.

⁴⁰ Pocock has traced this pattern back to 1783. See J. G. A. Pocock, 'The new British history in Atlantic perspective: an Antipodean commentary', *American Historical Review*, 102 (1999), pp. 490–500, at p. 491: 'Parliament was unwilling as ever to compromise its sovereignty in the archipelago by remodelling it around the government of an empire.'
⁴¹ Pocock, *Discovery of islands*, p. 26.

⁴² The National Archives (UK), CAB, 128/46, Conclusions, 4 Sept. 1969, Confidential Annex.

self-determination. With unionist allegiance now besieged by hostile forces, the lack of self-determination plunged Protestant loyalty into crisis.

The experience of Ulsterization in the case of Northern Ireland illustrates what, to Pocock, appeared a recurrent pattern in British history distinct from the dominant narratives framing the history of Rome. The British interest in Northern Ireland was dedicated to ensuring that domestic politics be radically insulated from outlying provincial upheaval. After 1974 this would lead to a self-declared policy of 'Ulsterization' designed to minimize the impact of the Northern Irish Troubles on the conduct of routine politics on the British mainland.⁴³ The policy was a consequence of a longstanding preparedness to sacrifice colonial empire to domestic constitutional order. The American revolution was an early example of this priority, demonstrating, as Pocock phrased it, Britain's 'capacity for losing an empire without caring very deeply'.⁴⁴ In contrast to the Roman experience of expansion and decline, the affairs of the British empire never seriously threatened the imperial centre with civil discord or constitutional subversion. The events surrounding agitation for home rule are the sole exception.

Nearly a century before Pocock arrived at this conclusion, J. R. Seeley set about convicting this same 'capacity' for metropolitan indifference with having compromised the international effectiveness and prestige of British power. 'When we have accustomed ourselves to contemplate the whole empire together and call it all England, we shall see that here too is a United States', Seeley declared.⁴⁵ But he also believed that two obstacles under the old colonial system had inhibited progress towards this Greater British Union. The first was the constitutional system of dependencies that disposed the seat of empire to treat its colonies as possessions. The second derived from the spirit animating the colonial 'exodus' into the new world. The 'old emigration', as Seeley put it, 'was a real exodus'. Dissenting Protestant colonists of the early seventeenth century settled as religious communities in the American territories. Religion, Seeley held, is the 'great state-building principle', and since the old colonists had been guided under the influence of this principle, they were more prone to push for independence than modern settlements founded on war or commerce. The Americans 'could create a new state because they were already a church'.⁴⁶

Seeley claimed that it was the loss of the old empire, together with the neglect of the new, that left British power exposed between the rise of American and

⁴³ On some of the practical details, see Michael Cunningham, *British government policy in Northern Ireland, 1969–2000* (Manchester, 2001), pp. 20–30; on the origins of the policy in December 1974, see Richard Bourke, 'Wilson clearly wanted to disengage from the North', Report on UK State Papers for 1974, *Irish Times*, 1 Jan. 2005; idem, 'Digging in for long haul of direct rule: London overview 1974', Report on UK State Papers for 1974, *Irish Times*, 4 Jan. 2005.

⁴⁴ Pocock, 'British history: reply', p. 627. ⁴⁵ Seeley, *Expansion of England*, pp. 158–9.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 154. On the broad church origins of Seeley's religious thought, see Richard Shannon, 'John Robert Seeley and the idea of a national church', in Robert Robson, ed., *Ideas and institutions of Victorian Britain* (London, 1967).

Russian greatness. If the West Indies and Canada were to be absorbed into the American Union, passing out of British control whilst retaining some of their old allegiance, the United Kingdom might come to fulfil a role in international politics comparable to that of Germany or France. Yet to encourage this, Seeley concluded, was not in the national style. Throughout its history, England supposedly exhibited a ‘profound, persistent, [and] necessary’ tendency to extend itself across the globe.⁴⁷ What was now needed to facilitate this calling was a deeper understanding of how to promote the fusion of British peoples into a durable union. This would require a better sense of how parties formed in politics leading to secessionist pressures and factional schisms in the empire.

In Seeley’s mind, it was India that presented the classic case of an imperial possession incapable of sustaining an allegiance to the metropolitan power, or to the empire of colonial settlement more generally. The modern inhabitants of British colonies had carried abroad an ideal of the national culture into the wilderness. For them, the ‘gods’ of that ideal would forever reside in the imperial homeland presiding over the settler imagination as a source of inspiration and attraction.⁴⁸ Indian culture had, however, been thrown into the most ‘fabulous ambiguity’ before it petrified into foreignness and stagnation. Above all, there was no principle of cohesion with British people – ‘No community of blood; no community of religion ... And lastly no community of interest.’⁴⁹ Blood, religion, and interest formed the bases of ‘party’ affiliation. At their most expansive, these forms of affiliation concerted in support of national allegiance. For Seeley, the secret of modern politics lay in harnessing that allegiance to state power. Hence he concluded that Britain’s task, since the Napoleonic wars, had been to convert colonial affection into a form of national sentiment capable of supporting a world empire.

In an historical study of the aftermath of the French Revolution focused on of the reforming Prussian statesman, Baron vom Stein, published in 1878 as the *Life and times of Stein*, Seeley had pointed to the Napoleonic era as marking the approach of a period in which the old states system of Europe would yield to a modern contest of ‘great Empires’.⁵⁰ England had originally established the pattern for the future by identifying the national interest with imperial power. As a result, Napoleon was obliged to mobilize his strength against ‘England as a World Empire’ rather than ‘England as a European State’.⁵¹ The acquisition of Spain was the most immediately available means of extending the European conflict into a contest of new world empires. But it was in the process of embarking on this strategic objective that Napoleon encountered a form of resistance without

⁴⁷ Seeley, *Expansion of England*, pp. 15–16.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 185. For the wider post-1857 context for British responses to India, see Karuna Mantena, *Alibis of empire: Henry Maine and the ends of liberal imperialism* (Princeton, NJ, 2010). For discussion of the relationship between principles of association and ‘civic’ attachment in Seeley’s thought, see Duncan Bell, *The idea of greater Britain: empire and the future of world order, 1860–1900* (Princeton, NJ, 2007), chs. 3–6.

⁵⁰ J. R. Seeley, *Life and times of Stein, or Germany and Prussia in the Napoleonic age* (3 vols., Cambridge, 1878), 1, p. 5.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 1, p. 6.

precedent in European history. Further acts of resistance on the Spanish model were successively sparked across the continent. Afflicted by fatal military and political disorganization, Spain had confronted the Napoleonic onslaught with a matchless 'vigour and vitality' provided by the principle of 'nationality'. It was this same principle – as Seeley saw it – that soon roused Austria, then Russia, and finally Prussia against France.⁵²

In his Cambridge lectures on the expansion of England, Seeley tried to capture the idea of nationality with the resonant phrase 'community of blood'. Five years earlier, he had striven to represent the idea with more analytical precision. In the midst of his account of Stein's life, he likened national identification to 'feelings of kinship or clanship'. The kind of patriotism that Seeley identified with the civic communities of Athens and Rome had been capable of generating powerful political allegiance. For Seeley, however, it was nationality, based on 'family likeness', that stood unsurpassed as an associative principle in political life.⁵³ In England, it formed the solvent attaching the population to the state, and could be expected to weld Greater Britons to the empire. But its foremost theorist, Seeley proposed, was J. G. Fichte, whose *Addresses to the German nation* of 1807–8 exemplified in theory what the Spanish would demonstrate in practice one year later in the Peninsular struggle against Napoleon.

At its most basic, nationality seemed an almost 'animal' attachment, an instinctive affiliation based on kinship. For this reason, Seeley distinguished it from a community of interest which depended on a rational calculation of benefit. But it was also distinct from religious allegiance, because religion transcended the appeal to human appetite. For Seeley, Fichte's achievement was to elevate nationality to a higher level of spiritual idealism: 'Fichte proclaims the nation not only to be different from the state, but to be higher and greater.'⁵⁴ The awakening of the principle of nationality had marked a great transition in modern Europe. The alliance between this instinctive drive and the 'civic' principle of the state provided a model for future political mobilization. But Fichte's illustration that the kinship instinct of nationality could be elevated to a higher cultural plane supplied a precedent for providing national allegiance with ideal content. The Fichtean thesis was therefore relevant not only to domestic politics in England, but also to the longer-term coherence of its colonial empire.

In its original Pocockian conception, British history was not Seeleyan, but 'neo-Seeleyan'. It was sceptical about the transmutation of tribal feeling into national sentiment. It made no use of the anthropological assumptions at the root of Seeley's 'nationality', least of all the persistent equivocation about its underlying principle: at one point explicitly conflating the nation with the 'large clan', at another depicting it more loosely as 'analogous to the clan', Seeley's metaphorical kinship relation was to reappear in subsequent theories of ethnic and cultural nationalism, but shares no common ground with the preoccupations of

⁵² Seeley, *Life and times of Stein*, 1, pp. 19, 24.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 1, p. 19.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 1, p. 34.

British history.⁵⁵ While the distinction found in Seeley between ‘the national tie’ and ‘the civic tie’ does play a subterranean role in understanding civic consciousness as frequently recounted in British history, the ‘civic tie’ thus conceptualized is still not Pocock’s ‘civic virtue’.⁵⁶ Where the Seeleyan dimension to British history can be found is in their common juxtaposition of English and imperial history. Yet, the approaches once again diverge in their understanding of the causal significance of that juxtaposition.

Seeley’s narrative of expansion largely told the story of progressive anglicization based on the ‘diffusion of our race and the expansion of our state’.⁵⁷ The process had only been hampered by a major reversal and a single mistake. The reversal concerned the secession of the American colonies in 1776, while the mistake referred to the inclusion of the Indian empire among Britain’s possessions. Otherwise, expansion exported allegiance along with the English name and institutions supported by that allegiance. From the beginning, British history has, however, been telling a different story: ‘At no point’, Pocock insisted in 1975, ‘has the process of anglicisation been ... [a] simple one-way success-story... All across the spectrum from the American and Irish revolutions, societies have increasingly become reactive rather than submissive as the process of anglicisation has intensified.’⁵⁸ The task of British history has been to recount this interactive movement of hegemonic assertion and provincial reaction as played out first in an archipelagic and later in a trans-oceanic context.

For Pocock, the relevant narrative began with the extension of Anglo-Norman power into Irish territories governed by brehon law, culminating in the early seventeenth-century attempt to complete the replacement of existing patterns of land holding with English common-law tenures. This protracted struggle, extending from the twelfth century to James VI’s accession as James I in 1603, found classic expression in John Davies’s *Discoverie of the true causes why Ireland was never entirely subdued* (1612).⁵⁹ It was Davies’s *Discoverie* that stood as a model for British history in Pocock’s sense since it contained the germ of a dialectical account of the history of English conquest. Davies’s narrative was intended to serve the goal of complete assimilation, but the story itself recorded a pattern of reciprocal

⁵⁵ The switch from ‘large clan’ to ‘analogous to the clan’ appears in *ibid.*, I, p. 34.

⁵⁶ Reference to ‘the civic tie’ can be found in *ibid.*, I, 32. For Pocock’s understanding of ‘civic virtue’ originating in the ‘Aristotelian analysis’ of citizenship, see Pocock, *Machiavellian moment*, p. 76.

⁵⁷ Seeley, *Expansion of England*, p. 8.

⁵⁸ Pocock, ‘British history: reply’, pp. 626–7. Cf. J. G. A. Pocock, ‘The limits and divisions of British history: in search of the unknown subject’, *American Historical Review*, 87 (1982), pp. 311–36, at p. 317.

⁵⁹ John Davies, *A discoverie of the true causes why Ireland was never entirely subdued, nor brought under obedience of the crowne of England, untill the beginning of his majesties happie raigne* (London, 1612). For the centrality of this text to the theorization of British history, see Pocock, ‘British history: a plea’, pp. 27–8. For discussion of Davies’s argument more generally, see Pocock, *Ancient constitution*, pp. 59–63, 263; Hans S. Pawlisch, *Sir John Davies and the conquest of Ireland: a study in legal imperialism* (Cambridge, 1985); Richard Bourke, ‘Edmund Burke and the politics of conquest’, *Modern Intellectual History*, 4 (2007), pp. 403–32, at pp. 415–20.

exchange among Irish septs, Anglo-Irish settlers, and English policy ambitions. This reciprocity took the form of a dynamic process of interaction in which the projection of English power encountered militant resistance leading ultimately to compromise or stalemate, but never arriving at the condition of coalescence or assimilation.

The failure of comprehensive imperial assimilation proved significant for both the metropole and its provinces. On the one hand, it spawned the development of quasi-autonomous political cultures scattered throughout the British *oikoumene*. The resulting societies were free to cultivate independent systems of expectation that generated resistance whenever they were thwarted. But it simultaneously left the imperial government open to retrenchment since withdrawal could be accomplished without civil implosion. This resource reveals the *arcanum* of British imperial power. It also meant that Ulsterization remained a latent possibility among settler populations within the empire, since England stood prepared to cut its losses. Colonial unionism was therefore continually exposed to the possibility of extreme reversals: settler loyalism tended to gamble on a price the British government would not pay. This reality was made evident by the bottom-line position defended by imperial unionists like A. V. Dicey during the home rule crisis between 1886 and 1912: full Irish autonomy was preferable to a federated union that would compromise the integrity of Westminster sovereignty.⁶⁰

The British 'imperial secret' finds its counterpoint in the *arcanum* of Roman history. The dissolution of the Roman empire involved an interrelated crisis of both the city and its provinces. A 'moment' of crisis arrives when a polity finds itself in contradiction with the historical conditions of its possibility. The Machiavellian analysis of that moment focused its attention on the crisis of Rome.⁶¹ Machiavelli's account was enriched by a powerful tradition of historiographical exploration centred on the topos of 'decline and fall'. The topos structured historical debate about the decadence of Roman power from Tacitus to Appian, surviving as a principle of narrative organization down to Montesquieu, Gibbon, and beyond.⁶² Whether the poison of destruction was traced to the end of the Julio-Claudian dynasty or further back to the reforms of Tiberius Gracchus, it was associated with the descent of constitutional politics into civil dissension accompanied by an open appeal to arms. What the passage from legitimate political process to organized violence revealed was that the republic's fate was inextricably bound to the fortunes of the empire as a whole. The security of the imperial government could not be disengaged from the affairs of the provinces, with the result that Ulsterization did not arise.

⁶⁰ A. V. Dicey, *England's case against home rule* (London, 1886), p. 197; A. V. Dicey, *A leap in the dark: a criticism of the principles of home rule as illustrated by the bill of 1893* (2nd edn, London, 1911), p. 118; A. V. Dicey, *A fool's paradise, being a constitutionalist's criticism on the home rule bill of 1912* (London, 1913), p. viii. For discussion, see Richard Bourke, *Peace in Ireland: the war of ideas* (London, 2003), pp. 252–72.

⁶¹ Pocock, 'Afterword' (2003), in *Machiavellian moment*, p. 554.

⁶² J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and religion*, III: *the first decline and fall* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 7–60, 419–47.

Back in 1776, Adam Smith had claimed that it was sheer folly to believe that the same fate awaited modern Britain and its empire. If the metropolitan system of government could not be reconstructed in such a way as to pacify and accommodate the rebellious American colonies, disengagement was the responsible solution. The imagination of imperial grandeur in the shape of a Greater Britain was a counterproductive patriotic delusion. As with Hume, however, the philosophical spirit employed by Smith to expose the ‘splendid and showy equipage’ of empire as a dangerous fantasy informed a more general aversion to a patriotic conception of politics.⁶³ As soon as one abandoned prevailing patriotic norms, British history appeared as a contingent succession of unintended consequences driven by the dynamics of party strife.⁶⁴ Such an understanding of history was ‘philosophical’ in the sense that it was informed by a sceptical theory of human nature which assumed that political actors were more credibly seen as knaves than virtuous citizens. In this model, past politics looked less like the ordeal of a polity than a process of contingent factional struggle. It remains unclear, however, how such an inquiry into the drama of political conflict can be made compatible with the demand for impartiality. The next section contrasts the notion of philosophical detachment developed by Smith with more recent ideas of historical disinterestedness.

III

Historical inquiry has been described as investigating the provenance of survivals from the past whose meaning in the present has yet to be determined. A survival is an apparently significant remnant: an artefact, a practice, a document, or an argument. Recovering the meaning of past residues of this kind will never succeed by means of trying to make sense of their present use; it is the character of their past use that has to be uncovered by critically reconstructing the milieu of the relevant usage on the basis of the evidence available.⁶⁵ In further explicating this injunction, Michael Oakeshott distinguished between the invocation of a ‘practical’ past and the investigation of the past for its own sake. Reaching into a bygone era with a view to dispassionate reconstruction entails locating past performances in the various contexts that occasioned them. This type of activity is

⁶³ For Smith’s comments on the imaginary ‘project’ of empire, see Adam Smith, *An inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations* (1776) (2 vols., Indianapolis, 1981), II, pp. 946–7. For Hume’s nonchalant response to the American crisis, see his letter to Adam Smith, 8 Feb. 1776, in *Correspondence of Adam Smith*, ed. Ernest Campbell Mossner and Ian Simpson Ross (Indianapolis, IN, 1987), p. 186. For the relationship between Scottish enlightenment criticism of British patriotic politics and political scepticism more generally, see Kidd, *Subverting Scotland’s past*, p. 211.

⁶⁴ This vision is exemplified in David Hume, *History of England* (1754–62) (6 vols., Indianapolis, 1983), V, p. 96. See J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and religion*, II: *Narratives of civil government* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 199–221. For an analysis of ‘party spirit’ on an imperial scale, see Smith, *Wealth of nations*, II, p. 945.

⁶⁵ Michael Oakeshott, ‘Three essays on history’, in *On history and other essays* (Oxford, 1983, 1985), p. 35. For discussion of the role of historical inquiry in Oakeshott’s thinking more generally, see Luke O’Sullivan, *Oakeshott on history* (Charlottesville, VA, 2003).

intrinsically different from purposeful engagement with the historical record whereby the past is enlisted as a ‘storehouse’ of pliable traditions and emblematic exploits.⁶⁶ The historian’s task from this viewpoint is not instruction: it is the disinterested retrieval of how certain outcomes came to pass.

At first glance, these strictures might be expected to command general agreement to the extent that they discriminate between historical writing proper and such literary instruction as the *legenda* of the Old Testament. Oakeshott, in fact, mentioned the Old Testament in this connection, but he also mentioned both Livy and Machiavelli. For Oakeshott, to scrutinize Livy’s writings in search of practical advice is to betray his work as a form of historical study. Hence Machiavellian humanism, in trawling Livy for *exempla*, displayed a spirit of didacticism, rather than an historical sensibility.⁶⁷ The problem is that if Oakeshott’s stipulations are correct, Thucydides himself failed to qualify as an historian, and the recovery of past performances becomes an antiquarian business divorced from human concern with how current arrangements are likely to develop.

A sceptic might view this attitude as one of antiquarian fetishism, but Oakeshott was careful to supply it with a Rankean gloss: historical study examines how a given conjunction of circumstances *eigentlich* (essentially) came to pass.⁶⁸ Practical engagement with what the evidence delivers – as properly befits a publicist, a courtier, or a lawyer – undermines the obligation to accept its import come what may. Oakeshott fastened on to the example of the practising lawyer to make his point: the advocate is not charged to discover how previous circumstances actually came about, but is concerned with precedent only to the extent that it authorizes a preferred conclusion.⁶⁹ When Ranke, for his part, set out his criterion for cultivating the appropriate historical attitude, it was with a view to rejecting what he regarded as an infectious Hegelian habit of ‘judging’ (*richten*) the past.⁷⁰ Later observing that Machiavelli was the standard target for condemnation, however, Ranke’s point was not that Machiavellism had to be accepted, but that its justification was to be found in a larger theodicy.⁷¹ Meanwhile, as

⁶⁶ Oakeshott, *On history*, p. 41. Cf. Michael Oakeshott, *Experience and its modes* (Cambridge, 1933, 1978), pp. 157–8, for comments on Burke, Droysen, and Troeltsch as exemplifying the ‘practical’ standpoint.

⁶⁷ Oakeshott, *On history*, p. 39. For an earlier assertion of the same priorities, see Michael Oakeshott, ‘The whig interpretation of history’ (1951), in Luke O’Sullivan, ed., *What is history? and other essays* (Charlottesville, VA, 2004).

⁶⁸ Oakeshott, *On history*, p. 66n. Oakeshott misquotes Ranke’s famous formulation – *zeigen, wie es eigentlich gewesen* (to show how it really came to pass) – by substituting the phrase ‘wie es eigentlich gewesen ist’. But he correctly interprets his misquotation by rendering it in turn as: ‘Zeigen wie es eigentlich zustande gekommen ist’ (to show how it really came to occur).

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 42–3. Cf. Michael Oakeshott, ‘The activity of being an historian’, in Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in politics and other essays* (1962) (Indianapolis, 1991), p. 162.

⁷⁰ Leopold von Ranke, *Geschichte der romanischen und germanischen Völker von 1494 bis 1535* (1824), in *Sämtliche Werke* (54 vols., Leipzig, 1867–1890), xxiii/xxiv, p. vii.

⁷¹ Leopold von Ranke, *Zur Kritik neuerer Geschichtsschreiber: eine Beylage zu desselben romanischen und germanischen Geschichten* (3rd edn, 1824, 1885), in *Sämtliche Werke*, xxiii/xxiv, Appendix. On the religious

regards the historian, the emergence of *raison d'état* demanded to be explored and understood. And yet understanding it remains relevant to the practical present and the future. The Rankean historian certainly strove to achieve impartiality (*Überparteilichkeit*) – literally struggling to inhabit the role of a figure above party. But this did not imply an absence of interest in Oakeshott's sense: it assumed neither practical detachment nor disengagement.

Reflecting on the idea of historical detachment in the late 1960s, Pocock detected a certain 'cosiness' in Oakeshott's relationship to the past. He further claimed that disinterested historiography 'is possible only in stable societies', and he might have added that the level of stability required for a society to facilitate this degree of freedom from practical investment in the past is scarcely achievable.⁷² Any relationship to the past on the part of participants in a given community inevitably occurs in the midst of various alternative relationships. Except under the most unimaginable conditions of perfect harmony, diverse relationships will involve competing historical investments, with an attendant possibility of conflict. Opposing investments culminating in conflict will then open a new chapter in a continuing history. The historian of the ensuing transactions will aim for impartiality between the parties, but not indifference to the fact of conflict having occurred. In this sense, history establishes a value-relation with the past: inquiry begins when a historian is interested or affected, but the resulting engagement is distinct from partisanship.

Sophisticated versions of this conclusion had already been formulated in the eighteenth century. In the surviving manuscript account of his lectures on rhetoric and belles lettres delivered at Glasgow University in 1762, Adam Smith is reported to have observed that it is the task of history to record what affects the human species. An endeavour of this kind readily distinguishes itself in the field of discourse from attempts at demonstration or persuasion: history seeks neither to prove nor convince an audience of a proposition – its primary goal is to relate matters of fact connected to areas of human concern. More accurately still, it narrates facts, or relays the character of the relationships among them. Narration, however, must first begin with description since relations of fact presuppose that facts can be depicted. Description therefore appears as a basic resource of literary activity, but the art of description lies in the capacity to render particularly striking facts – striking in the sense of being either awesome or peculiarly agreeable.⁷³ Accordingly, the most rudimentary narrative of facts in literary history is

context of Ranke's historiographical project, see J. D. Braw, 'Vision as revision: Ranke and the beginning of modern history', *History and Theory*, 46 (2007), pp. 45–60.

⁷² J. G. A. Pocock, 'Time, institutions and action: an essay on traditions and their understanding', in Preston King and B. C. Parekh, eds. *Politics and experience: essays presented to Michael Oakeshott* (Cambridge, 1968), reprinted in J. G. A. Pocock, *Politics, language and time*, pp. 271–2. For a subsequent re-statement of the position, see J. G. A. Pocock, 'Review of *On history*', *Times Literary Supplement* (21 Oct. 1983), p. 1155.

⁷³ Adam Smith, *Lectures on rhetoric and belles lettres*, ed. J. C. Bryce (Indianapolis, IN, 1983), pp. 62–4, 85.

likely to be devoted to relating remarkable events in a setting of more quotidian occurrences. At any rate, this is what Smith himself conjectured: 'The poets were the first historians of any', and their ambition was to record affairs that would 'strike the imagination'.⁷⁴

Smith viewed the development of historical sensibility as a product of social and anthropological refinement. When human faculties and the use of letters had improved to the point of seeking to account for significant revolutions and alterations in affairs, notable advances had already been made in the art of depicting the marvellous, the terrible, and the beautiful through the media of epic, tragedy, and lyric respectively.⁷⁵ It was during the fifth century BC that narrative progressed beyond an early heroic phase with the re-location of elements of the philosophical culture of the Greek colonies at Athens after the Persian expedition. The cultivation of eloquence was added to the traditional Athenian pedagogical diet of music and martial exercises, as evidenced by the appearance of Herodotus at the Panathenaic games.⁷⁶ Given this context, Herodotus was obliged to cater to the tastes of his Greek audience with the result that the objective of entertainment remains evident in his work. As Smith observed, Herodotus neglected the study of domestic government and he reported on remarkable customs at the expense of anatomizing decisive 'causes'. Consequently, the 'proper design of historical writing' can be said to have emerged with Thucydides.⁷⁷

Whereas, in Smith's opinion, Thucydides excelled all other historians in his ability to explain the distinct causation of external events, Tacitus was unsurpassed as an analyst of internal causes, particularly of the way in which they impact upon affairs. By 'external events' is meant political and military developments, while 'internal causes' refers to mental states and designs. It was during the first great age of politeness in the Roman empire under Trajan that Tacitus was moved to examine psychological motives and effects. Smith recapitulated the process whereby Roman luxury fostered refinement which duly supported manners, giving rise in turn to the literary taste for tracing the vicissitudes of psychology and emotion.⁷⁸ Amidst this general interest in the life of sentiment and the mind, Tacitus devoted his attention to mental machinations – to the association of ideas and the progress of the passions – in a way that enabled historiography to uncover previously hidden causes governing the train of political events. This development exactly mirrors the pattern of scientific discovery as Smith understood it. Historical analysis shifted its focus from recounting arresting external events to an examination of less tangible yet more important internal events. The turn to mental events as an explanatory device able to account for the progress of affairs entailed a passage from simple evidence to conjecture. The shift

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁷⁶ The tradition holding that Herodotus performed recitals at an assortment of Greek festivals and Games is indebted to Plutarch, Dio Chrysostom, and Lucian, but is also implicit in Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian war*, book I, chs. 21–2, pp. 221–22.

⁷⁷ Smith, *Lectures on rhetoric*, pp. 138–9, 105–6.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 111–12.

involved extrapolating from the raw appearance of things to more significant if less immediately striking causes.⁷⁹

It was the fate of this innovation to be radically misconstrued as the contrivance of a ‘party’ politician. Tacitus’s concern with the psychology of intrigue came to be seen as the ploy of an inveterate intriguer. Boccalini, Smith recalled, was the great purveyor of this distortion at a time when ‘Machiavellian politicks’ were ‘in fashion’.⁸⁰ As Smith recognized, however, what really motivated Tacitus, much like Machiavelli himself, was a genuine desire to explain ‘the causes of events’ without becoming ‘a party to either side’.⁸¹ Modern historiography was to inherit that ambition amidst an intensification of party factiousness. Smith observed that the divisiveness of party affiliation – or sectarianism, in contemporary parlance – imperilled the vocation of historical explanation as the partisans of religious and political disputes sought to justify themselves by resort to historical accounting whilst importing explicit didacticism into their narratives of events.⁸²

Whig interpretation is a notorious example of partisan allegiance in this vein. As seen, Butterfield characterized the whig mentality as a fundamental aspect of English ‘political consciousness’, identifying it as an expression of national partisanship.⁸³ It was in the nature of the whig commitment that, despite accompanying the expansion of England into Greater Britain, it could reconcile itself to the loss of empire. Whiggism therefore culminated in Ulsterization, whereby provincial whigs were condemned to unrequited loyalty. In Pocock’s hands, British history has been an instrument of redress such that the English past is contextualized within a Greater British framework. But there is a price attached to this strategy of redress. In re-telling the story of a polity as a shared enterprise in sovereignty, we lose the means of analysing the extremes of disaffection. Writing of the potential break-up of Britain in 1973, Pocock declared his aversion to

⁷⁹ See *ibid.*, p. 93, on Sallust’s avoidance of infinite regress in historical explanation by uncovering causes sufficient to human interest; see *ibid.*, pp. 1011–12, for discussion of Tacitus’s discovery of a new field of interest, namely ‘the effects the events related produced on the minds of the actors or spectators’. On scientific advance as sparked by stimulating interest in newly important but less impressive causes, see Adam Smith, ‘The history of astronomy’, in *Essays on philosophical subjects*, ed. W. D. Wightman and J. C. Bryce (Indianapolis, IN, 1980), p. 93: new hypotheses provoke curiosity under conditions of civilization just as marvellous phenomena did under more primitive circumstances, as illustrated by the emergence of psychological explanation: ‘we have naturally a greater curiosity to examine the Causes and Relations of those things which pass without us than of those which pass within us, the latter naturally making very little impression. The associations of our Ideas, the progress and origin of our Passions, are what very few think of enquiring into. But when one has turned his thoughts that way and made some enquiries he begins to think these matters to be of importance and is therefore interested in them’.

⁸⁰ Smith, *Lectures on rhetoric*, p. 95. The reference is to Traiano Boccalini, *Commentarii sopra Cornelio Tacito* (Amsterdam, 1677).

⁸¹ Smith, *Lectures on rhetoric*, pp. 114–15.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 102: ‘Historical truths are now in much greater request than they ever were in the ancient times. One thing that has contributed to this curiosity is that there are now severall sects in Religion and political disputes which are greatly dependent on the truth of certain facts.’

⁸³ Butterfield, *The Englishman and his history*, pp. v–vi, 1–2.

one such extreme. The United Kingdom, he recognized, was threatened with the possibility of general ‘balkanization’, beginning with the ‘dark and bloody rump’ of the island of Ireland.⁸⁴ Since British history has focused its attention on the story of the British polity, it cannot easily account for the rationale of revolutionary secession, tending to depict separatism as a Romantic revolt from politics.⁸⁵

A history of the growth of a polity will be inclined to treat a revolt from the political community as an exercise in anti-political insurgency. I suggest that we might better draw on the philosophical scepticism of Smith and think of it as exemplifying an extreme of party antagonism. For Pocock, politics is an egalitarian enterprise charged with distributing the activities of ruling and being ruled. From this angle, balkanization is a consummation of revolutionary anti-politics characterized by violence instead of the art of rule. But the angle is unavoidably partial: on its own terms, secession is also an assertion of egalitarian entitlement. Pocock chose Arthur Griffith, the founder of Sinn Féin, as an exemplar of revolutionary nationalism whose egalitarian pretensions masked supremacist ambitions.⁸⁶ Implicit in this claim is a more general observation that a bid for political equality is based on a claim to relative equality. Since it is in the nature of equality only to be realizable in relative rather than absolute terms, however, it follows that equality is an object of contestation as much as a recipe for political collaboration.

IV

This article has been concerned with processes of association and disassociation in British history, and the principles in terms of which they have been described in historical writing. Its underlying themes are those of civil allegiance and political conflict. Focusing on the meaning of Ulsterization, the aim has been to isolate a characteristic process in British history as a way of extending our understanding of the dynamics of affiliation. Ulsterization, like balkanization, is part of the drama of politics. The political character of these processes derives from the fact that association and disassociation are not conceived in terms of anthropological principles of attraction and repulsion, but rather in terms of forms of allegiance in combination with systems of rule. This perspective depends on a definite understanding of ‘political’ relationships as such, so I conclude with an overarching claim about the role of politics in British history.

In 1982, Pocock posed the question whether it might be possible to compose a British history on purely *annaliste* principles, concentrating on demography, society, and economy without reference to the pressures of political struggle. The aim of such an undertaking would be to isolate the phenomenon of a British

⁸⁴ Pocock, ‘British History: a plea’, pp. 26, 24.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 38–9.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 40–1. For an alternative treatment of Griffith, see Bourke, *Peace in Ireland*, pp. 118–46.

‘culture’ or ‘civilization’.⁸⁷ But Pocock soon concluded that the pursuit of a project of cultural analysis shorn of any concern with the politicization of society was bound to fall short of delivering a sufficient account of its subject matter. The process of politicization had played such a fundamental role in the formation of Western consciousness that a history of society that failed to recount its significance would inevitably be found to be lacking in crucial respects. This deficiency would certainly be evident in any ‘depoliticized’ version of Britain’s past since British history encompassed precisely the formation of a polity and then of ‘counterpolities’ in response.⁸⁸ In developing an approach to British history, everything therefore hangs on how the term ‘politics’ is understood.

About twenty years after making his remarks on the prospects for a Braudelian British history, Pocock came close to presenting Tacitus as the closest thing to a classical representative of the *métier annaliste*. Tacitus, it was explained, examined ‘behaviour’, rather than politics, since the object of his study was less the political process as such than its disintegration in the face of violence and corruption.⁸⁹ Underlying this suggestion can be found an idealized conception of politics which Pocock spent much of his career tracing through ancient and early modern history. It has often been observed that, in *The Machiavellian Moment*, this conception is identified with a ‘republican’ tradition that variously interpreted and absorbed the fundamental principles of Aristotle’s *Politics*. It is also commonly recognized that Pocock understood this republican or constitutional legacy to have bequeathed a determinate ideal of liberty to early modern European and Anglo-American history. But the most important point has always been that this particular brand of liberty depends on a prior commitment to equality. The equality in question involves ‘equal’ participation in rule, meaning a proportionate, but not an identical, share in the conduct of public business. The republic (or *politeia*) is founded on a principle of proportionality in terms of which inequalities of merit are accommodated.⁹⁰ But if this is how Pocock understands the significance of ‘polity’ in Aristotle, it is not the only way in which the Aristotelian conception of politics can be plausibly interpreted.

In this context it is worth briefly recalling that while Aristotle’s ‘political animal’ is a creature capable of collaboration under a system of proportionate equality, he is also given to disputatiousness on account of his capacity for argument (*logos*) based on divergent standards of excellence (*areté*).⁹¹ This disposition towards divisiveness is often channelled into political hostility, ultimately triggering a politics of dissension fit to rock the state. Therefore politics, as Smith and Hume insisted, is as much an affair of party strife as it is of just proportionality in

⁸⁷ On these historical categories as enabling an approach to the study of the past that transcends merely *événementiel* political narrative, see Fernand Braudel, ‘The history of civilizations: the past explains the present’, in *On history* (Chicago, 1980). For Pocock’s response to Braudel, see Pocock, ‘Limits and divisions of British history’, pp. 316–17.

⁸⁹ Pocock, *Barbarism and religion*, III, p. 20.

⁹⁰ Pocock, *Machiavellian moment*, pp. 66–74, 557, 561–2.

⁹¹ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a5–1253b1. Cf. Aristotle, *Ars rhetorica*, 1382b5–10.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 317, 334.

respect of ruling and being ruled.⁹² The commitment of British history to the study of politicization needs to attend to political struggle in both senses – to the means by which an agreed political order is acquired on the one hand, and to the intensification of political hostilities on the other. Certainly, Pocock realizes that insurrectionary and secessionist movements depend on political mobilization directed against an established polity. Nonetheless, British history has fallen short of inquiring into the content of counter-politicization. We need to develop an appropriate vocabulary for conducting an inquiry of that kind.

The making and unmaking of polities involve conflicts that risk a descent into armed rivalry and violence. The process of Ulsterization began as a product of a longstanding British ambivalence about empire, but it survived into the age of democracy beset by the polarities of party. The problem of party was most scrupulously analysed in the middle of the eighteenth century, but the phenomenon intensified and proliferated during the century that followed.⁹³ This intensification occurred under the impact of revolution and reaction; but ironically it diminished our appreciation of the nature of the process itself. The result has been a weakening of our grasp of the fractious potential unleashed by the modern commitment to equality. It is this fractiousness that needs to be understood if we are to hope impartially to tackle allegiance and dissent in the history of British politics.

⁹² Aristotle, *Politics*, 1301a25–1301a40.

⁹³ The *locus classicus* of eighteenth-century analysis appears in David Hume, 'Of parties in general' (1741), in *Essays moral, political and literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis, IN, 1987).