MIDLANDS HISTORICAL REVIEW

Book Review: B. Simms, *Britain's Europe: A Thousand Years of Conflict and Cooperation* (London, 2016)

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By suggesting that the history of England, and later that of the United Kingdom, has been one predominantly determined by its relationship with neighbouring Europe, as opposed to its geographical separation as an island, Brendan Simms propounds a subtle not entirely original, but stimulating paradigm shift in how British history should be viewed, though by no means one without problems. *Britain's Europe* offers a longue durée of over one-thousand years of political history, which covers both Britain's international relations and its own constitutional development. Simms has two central arguments. First, British foreign policy has consistently been based on a grand strategy of preventing continental Europe from being dominated by a single power, especially in the Low Countries, though later moving east to an obsession with Halford Mackinder's heartland theory. This was achieved time and again by the country building coalitions to oppose an expansionist power, whether King Phillip II's Spain or Napoleon's France. Second, the form of the United Kingdom's own political geography has been primarily forged in response to its engagement with Europe. Simms traces the emergence of the English nation-state to Alfred the Great's opposition to the Danes and interprets the Union of the Crowns and the Acts of Union as efforts to expand the resources of England and prevent encirclement by France. By contrast, the British Empire is portrayed solely as a means to increase Britain's standing in Europe rather than as a legitimate enterprise in its own right. Simms also challenges other quasi-isolationist approaches, in particular the 'Our island story' narrative, as particularly grotesque distortions of a reality in which Britain has far more often than not been part of a cross-channel state in some form.[1] Though these ideas do not totally convince, they parallel other authors' attempts at provincialisation. Simms' lineage includes Hugh Kearney's call for a four-nation 'Britannic' alternative to 'self-contained' histories of England, an approach widened again by Norman Davies' efforts to set the whole of the British Isles in its European context, which is ultimately Simms' starting-point.[2] Perhaps the ultimate provincialisation was Brotton's consideration of Elizabethan England/ Britain in its relation with the

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[1] B. Simms, *Britain's Europe: A Thousand Years of Conflict and Cooperation* (London, 2016), p. xiii; Simms is particularly critical of Arthur Bryant for giving this narrative credibility, in his work such as *Set in a Silver Sea*.
[2] H. Kearney, *The British Isles: A History of Four Nations* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 1; N. Davies, *The Isles: A History* (London, 1999).

geographically-proximate Islamic world, though like Simms, he summarises his approach as being to enrich British history rather than diminish it.[3]

   Britain's Europe consists of ten chapters, which are evenly-spaced chronologically after a brief account of the medieval period. Four-fifths of these offer a chronological narrative of Britain's history, with interactions with Europe given the centre stage. 'The Bonds of Christendom' recounts English/ British-European relations up to the fifteenth century, starting in quite a traditional manner with Alfred's response to Viking raiders leading to the formation of the English nation-state.[4] Simms reinterprets the Cinque Ports as a 'cross-channel ferry service' to link the Anglo-Norman/ French and later Angevin, domains.[5] Simms notes John of Gaunt (Ghent), whose speech is held highly by insular-focused historians such as Christopher Lee, had French origins, as many nobles did, while a common Christian culture provided the basis for crusader alliances.[6] 'A piece of the continent' outlines the origins of the (aforementioned) grand strategy that Simms forwards as taking place during national soul-searching after England's defeat in the Hundred Years' War.[7] The critical importance of the Low Countries, described as the 'counter-scarp' by William Cecil and 'outworks' by others, takes shape in an age of England's navy having neither the technology nor ability to intercept a cross-channel force; the channel could only be a second line of defence.[8] Hence England made common cause with the Dutch early on.[9]

   'The bulwarks of Great Britain' introduces the importance of Germany and its various incarnations, starting with the Holy Roman Empire, as a key counterbalancing power. Simms also argues that the overlooked union of 'Hanover-Britain' was a truly European state.[10] He includes the interesting vignette that before the late eighteenth century, those referring simply to 'The Empire' meant the Holy Roman Empire, but even when the expanding British Empire was in mind it was regarded as valuable only in terms of the increased strength it could bring on Europe, especially in territorial swaps such as after the Seven Years' War.[11] 'The Age of revolution' on the French and American revolutionary wars serves as a warning as to what could happen when Britain sidelined

[3] J. Brotton, *This Orient Isle: Elizabethan England and the Islamic World* (London, 2017), p. 305.
[4] Simms, *Britain's Europe*, pp. 1-3.
[5] Simms, *Britain's Europe*, p. 4.
[6] Simms, *Britain's Europe*, pp. 7-9.
[7] Simms, *Britain's Europe*, pp. 20-22.
[8] Simms, *Britain's Europe*, p. 30.
[9] Simms, *Britain's Europe*, pp. 31-32.
[10] Simms, *Britain's Europe*, p. 55.
[11] Simms, *Britain's Europe*, pp. 52-69.

continental engagement in favour of an imperial 'blue water' approach: the 'first' British Empire was partitioned.[12]

'The age of Napoleon' recounts what may be the best-known pre-twentieth century example of an isolated Britain bringing together a grand coalition and leading it to eventual victory.[13] Simms introduces the 'fiscal-military' state as a key advantage that Britain had over rival states, especially France. By way of an 'implicit contract' that had grown up between political elites and private finance over the preceding century, the country was able to tap into private wealth generated during the Industrial Revolution by way of credit. In turn, parliamentary democracy gave the British state greater legitimacy than others..[14] Simms also finds the threat from revolutionary France to be decisive in leading to the Act of Union with Ireland in 1800.[15] 'Britain and Europe in the age of nationalism' surveys the long nineteenth century, during which Britain was forced to contend with an acquiescent German confederation morphing into a rival German Empire under Bismarck, a transformation which made the self-centred British guarantee of Belgian independent-neutrality from France dangerously anachronistic in 1914.[16]

'Britain and Europe in the age of total war' covers Britain's handling of the 'German Question'; mobilising a global coalition to prevent domination of Europe by Germany in two world wars.[17] As in 1792-1815, Simms holds Britain's parliamentary and 'fiscal-military' state as key, a conclusion also recently reached by Adam Tooze.[18] Irish independence is ignored however. The final chronological chapter is devoted to events since 1945 in which Britain faced a 'negotiated merger' with the European Economic Community and European Union rather than a 'hostile takeover', which, unlike earlier Acts of Union, diluted power in Westminster.[19] Simms is critical of the chances Britain might have had in the nascent European Coal and Steel Community, maintaining that such a move would have been catastrophic for domestic industry and still-strong Commonwealth links.[20]

The final two chapters break the chronological structure to bring in an analysis of present and future trends. The first, referring to Britain as 'the last European great power' provides a welcome critique of the post-war 'declinist' discourse which has

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[12] Simms, *Britain's Europe*, pp. 71-92.
[13] Simms, *Britain's Europe*, p. 114.
[14] Simms, *Britain's Europe*, pp. 98-110.
[15] Simms, *Britain's Europe*, p. 112.
[16] Simms, *Britain's Europe*, pp. 116-142.
[17] Simms, *Britain's Europe*, pp. 143-144.
[18] Simms, *Britain's Europe*, pp. 145-164; A. Tooze, *The Deluge: The Great War and the Remaking of Global Order* (London, 2014), pp. 173-217.
[19] Simms, *Britain's Europe*, p. 170.
[20] Simms, *Britain's Europe*, pp. 177-178.

dominated so much of recent historiography, often closer to ideology than reality.[21] The final chapter differs from previous ones by offering what comes across as an attempt to opt out of expressing a concrete position on the referendum campaign then in its final stages, by offering a quixotic call for a radically-reformed English-speaking federal EU. Simms emphasises the need for this to be created in a sudden 'event' in the manner of Bismarck, as opposed to the ever-closer-union 'process'.[22] In fact, it is an argument that Simms has forwarded on several occasions, both before and after the publication of *Britain's Europe*, most recently presenting Emmanuel Macron as the new Bismarck.[23] It is also a watered-down summary of the manifesto of the *Project for Democratic Union* think tank, though Simms omits any mention of the group and his control of its presidency.[24] Despite this, the call seems cavalier and in conflict with the rest of *Britain's Europe*. Recognising that Britain would not likely join a fully-federal "superstate", even an English-speaking one, he brushes aside concerns of his millennial-length British grand strategy thesis by insisting that relations would be friendly due to mutual self-interest.[25] This has not however, stopped grandstanding during current Brexit negotiations. The idea that a majority of Europeans would vote to relinquish any remaining national sovereignty appears unlikely, especially given the massive opposition to issues such as the proposal to overcome the shortcomings of the Dublin regulations by way of EU-directed settlement of migrants to Hungary and other central/ Eastern European countries. The reader is left puzzled as to why Simms seemingly disowns his own arguments of thousand-year precedent for the future. A comparison with the strong federal nature of Germany also makes the reader wonder whether the apparently hyperdynamic British model is the best option.

   The principal consistent weak point in Simms' argument however, is surely the secondary role he gives to the British Empire. Though Simms mentions kinship links between members of the Medieval English elite and Europe, his primarily political perspective leaves little room for considering that most kinship links in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were imperial due to emigration.[26] There are also more strictly

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[21] Simms, *Britain's Europe*, pp. 206-218; J. Tomlinson, *The Politics of Decline: Understanding Post-war Britain* (Harlow, 2000).
[22] Simms, *Britain's Europe*, pp. 219-227.
[23] B. Simms, 'Towards a mighty union: how to create a democratic European superpower', *International Affairs*, 88/ 1 (2012), pp. 49-62; B. Simms, 'The ghosts of Europe's past', *New York Times*, 10 June 2013, p. 23; B. Simms, 'The storm on fortress Europe: the continent's old crises have not been resolved', *New Statesman*, 24-30 November 2017, p. 29.
[24] Project for Democratic Union < http://www.democraticunion.eu/>, accessed 19.4.2018.
[25] Simms, *Britain's Europe*, pp. 235-236.
[26] W. S. Churchill, *History of the English-Speaking Peoples: The Birth of Britain, Volume 1* (London, 1956), pp. vii-viii.

political shortcomings. The argument that expansion of the British Empire was due to a desire to strengthen Britain's place in Europe overlooks eagerness for colonial plunder. The Scramble for Africa culminating at Fashoda, the acquisition of Cyprus, and the exchange of Helgoland for faraway Zanzibar brought along tense Anglo-French relations, Turkish alignment with the Central Powers and a strengthened Germany.[27] Likewise, Britain's first twentieth-century alliance was with Japan, in part to bolster its interests in China against Germany and Russia. By writing British possessions in the Mediterranean off as imperial, Simms marginalises them in favour of Northern Europe, especially the 'German Question', thus missing the extent to which that sea became a 'British lake' up to the mid-twentieth century, causing Italian hesitation in entering both world wars.[28] The idea that British decolonisation was swift, clean and driven by a desire to keep up appearances in Europe also ignores the renewed enthusiasm for empire after 1945, the drawn-out nature of decolonisation in Kenya and the impact of US pressure.[29]

   Though the abovementioned omissions are serious and provide a somewhat ironic warning over the dangers of excessive Eurocentrism, they should at the same time not mask the common ground between Simms and historians of empire such as Niall Ferguson and John Darwin. Both give Europe a central role, the former in the twentieth century in particular, while the latter goes as far as describing the American War of Independence as 'almost a side-show' next to the Anglophobic League of Armed Neutrality.[30] Also like Darwin, Simms' methodology combines extensive secondary literature with plentiful primary sources (in his case mainly quotations from diplomats and politicians), and reaches a good compromise between breadth and depth, crucial to such a grand survey. One of the key strengths of the book is its treatment of the English Channel being as much a highway as a barrier. That Britain's frontiers lie in the Low Countries is a fascinating concept. Though some of the quotations appear metaphorical, the events that Simms recounts from the Hundred Years' war and Anglo-Dutch wars through to Napoleon and the twentieth century provide a strong argument against the idea that Britain was regarded as detached from Europe by contemporaries. [31] In many

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[27] T. Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa* (London, 1991).

[28] C. Duggan, *A Concise History of Italy* (Cambridge, 1994); R. Holland, *Blue-water Empire: The British in the Mediterranean Since 1800* (London, 2012).

[29] J. Darwin, *Unfinished Empire: The Global Expansion of Britain* (London, 2012).

[30] N. Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (London, 2004); Darwin, *Unfinished Empire, p. 317.*

[31] For instance, Stanley Baldwin's assertion that Britain's frontiers lay on the Rhine or Elbe, in Simms, *Britain's Europe*, p. 157, cannot be taken anywhere near literally, or as something that must be defended, rather they imply that Britain had an interest in Germany. Harold Macmillan took a similar approach to show solidarity with India against communist China by declaring that 'Britain's frontiers are on the Himalayas' in 1965, Darwin, *Unfinished Empire*, p. 378. However Simms does point out that due to NATO

cases of critique, the reader is left wanting more, rather than change. Though Simms includes an incredible twenty pages of maps at the beginning showing Britain's long-standing territorial links with Europe, he leaves many details out. Why certain features, such as the 'British postal intercept station' at Celle, were important is not fully explored.[32] More crucially though, an expanded section on what the union of the crowns with Hanover looked like on the ground would have helped overcome the book's social-cultural shortcomings: the reader is left assuming that since Westminster did not include Hanoverian MPs as Dunkirk once did, the trans-channel state was analogous to Anglo-Scottish relations prior to the Act of Union (1707). Similarly, the ability of the reader to think of several examples that could have been included in *Britain's Europe*, such as the Hanseatic League and Anglo-Portuguese alliance surely strengthens the thesis.

To conclude, Simms' thesis is convincing, with the exception of his marginalisation of the British Empire. Even here however, the reviewer would place this factor as of equal importance to Europe as opposed to greater importance. Although Simms' manifesto seems impractical, it is at least as interesting as it is unorthodox. Overall, *Britain's Europe* provides a welcome revision of Britain's place in relation to the continent, highlighting an obsession with cooperation to win conflict on the continent at a time when many apparently believe that Britain can leave Europe altogether.

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commitments, 'the United Kingdom's eastern defence perimeter now effectively ran and runs along the eastern flank of the European Union', Simms, *Britain's Europe*, p. 197.
[32] Simms, *Britain's Europe*, pp. xxvii.

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