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Wider Still and Wider by Ben Wellings
Manchester University Press, Manchester 2019

Mahnoush Sadat Moossavi*

**English Nationalism,
Brexit and the Anglosphere:
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Introduction

For centuries, England's identity lay submerged beneath the strata of Britishness – a deliberate elision that served imperial cohesion and political unity. This historical invisibility, however, unraveled dramatically with Brexit, a seismic event that thrust English nationalism into the spotlight. Ben Wellings' "English Nationalism, Brexit and the Anglosphere" interrogates this resurgence, positioning Brexit not merely as a rejection of EU bureaucracy but as the culmination of a centuries-old struggle to reconcile England's imperial past with its postcolonial present. Ben Wellings' "English Nationalism, Brexit and the Anglosphere" is a book in a world of its own. It masterfully dissects England's existential reckoning: a nation long obscured by the cloak of Britishness now clawing its way into political consciousness through the rupture of Brexit. With the rigor of a historian and the urgency of a polemicist, Wellings unearths the paradoxes of a nationalism forged in the fires of empire, sovereignty myths, and wartime nostalgia. Wellings presents us with a mirror held to England's fractured soul, reflecting its unresolved past and precarious future. But what is the crisis here?

The book's significance lies in its challenge to conventional narratives of British decline. While scholars such as Linda Colley and Tom Nairn have framed British identity as a product of impe-

The Crisis of Identity

rial and Protestant unity, Wellings argues that Brexit marks the “return of England,” a nation long obscured by the “triple effacement”¹ of its own identity beneath British institutions. By tracing the interplay between Euroscepticism, devolution, and imperial nostalgia, Wellings reveals how English nationalism emerged not as a coherent ideology but as a “defense of British sovereignty,”² paradoxically merging English identity with the very institutions it sought to redefine.

Wellings frames England’s historical invisibility as a “triple effacement”³ – a process that marginalized Northern Ireland, peripheralized Scotland and Wales, and obscured England itself. This elision allowed England to conflate its interests with Britain’s, masking growing dissonance. Devolution exacerbated tensions, rendering England “a de facto political community”⁴ without institutional recognition. The 2016 referendum laid this fissure bare: while Scotland and Northern Ireland voted to remain in the EU, England and Wales opted out, exposing a nationalist fault line.

Brexit, Wellings argues, was therefore less about rejecting Brussels than about reclaiming English sovereignty – a nationalism “defined by a political desire to separate the UK from the EU.”⁵ This irony – a former imperial power casting itself as an underdog – underscores his central thesis: English nationalism is a “defense of British sovereignty,”⁶ paradoxically merging English identity with British institutions while resisting supranational integration.

One key concept Wellings focuses on is the “Anglosphere,” which consists of English-speaking nations such as Australia, Canada, the United States, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom – nations with a shared cultural heritage and values. Here, he explores how the notion of the Anglosphere revives and promotes the nostalgic idea of England as an imperial, leading global power in contemporary politics, offering the idea of what it means to be English. Thus, the term English nationalism comes to signify more than isolation when linked to the Anglosphere, representing instead a multifaceted response to the pressures of globalization and multiculturalism – now, in the recent past, in times long gone, as well as the promise of things to come.

Moreover, Wellings presents such nostalgia as more than a mere longing for the past. Instead, he posits that it should be understood as a strategic narrative. How so? This narrative is employed to invoke a sense of unity and identity among supporters. The book further examines the implications of such nostalgia, suggesting that appeals to the past can deepen divisions within society, thereby

1. B. Wellings, *English nationalism, Brexit and the Anglosphere: Wider still and wider*, Manchester University Press 2019, p. 46.

2. Ibidem, p. 87.

3. Ibidem, p. 46.

4. Ibidem.

5. Ibidem, p. 15.

6. Ibidem, p. 87.

necessitating an alternative narrative not originally intended. Populism and nostalgia are thus often interlinked, and perspective is vital in understanding the motives behind popular support – in this case, how Brexit was, for many, perceived as a reclamation of lost sovereignty and identity, and the understanding of the ethical dimension of such a narrative.

The Pillars of English Nationalism

Going forward, Wellings anchors his analysis on three historical pillars that shaped England’s nationalist resurgence: constitutional sovereignty as the “gift to the world”; empire and the Anglosphere as a “Greater Britain” reborn; and war memory, with 1940 serving as a national metaphor.

Constitutional Sovereignty

England’s mythos of parliamentary sovereignty – the Glorious Revolution, Magna Carta, and the “Whig interpretation of history” – was used as a rhetorical weapon against EU integration. Here, Eurosceptics framed Brussels as a threat to England’s “genius for government,”⁷ with Boris Johnson invoking “self-government”⁸ as a Brexit rallying cry. This narrative, Wellings notes, was part of a “three-level game”⁹ to reconcile England’s place in a devolved UK, disentangle from the EU, and reorient towards the Anglosphere.

Yet this constitutional nostalgia masks contradictions. While Wellings emphasizes the role of historical memory, critics might argue that he underplays economic drivers. For instance, neoliberal globalization – embraced by Eurosceptics who subscribed to Margaret Thatcher’s philosophy – arguably eroded the very sovereignty Brexiteers claimed to defend. Wellings acknowledges this tension as an awkward alliance between disaffected voters and elites seeking to expose Britain to greater globalization,¹⁰ leaving room for a deeper exploration of how austerity and deindustrialization fueled resentment.

Empire and the Anglosphere

The specter of empire looms large. Contra Krishan Kumar, who argues that empire “inhibited” English identity,¹¹ Wellings posits that empire merged with it, creating a nationalism “blurred” by its imperial legacy.¹² Post-Brexit visions of “Global Britain” tapped into this notion, imagining the UK as a “world island”¹³ trading freely with Anglosphere nations, with the hope that the sun might never set, as in times past. Yet Wellings dissects this romanticism, pointing out that the Anglosphere represents a selective memory of empire – a neocolonial fantasy that ignores economic realities and the

7. Ibidem, p. 39.

8. Ibidem, p. 98.

9. Ibidem, p. 15.

10. Ibidem, p. 18.

11. Ibidem, p. 25.

12. Ibidem, p. 90.

13. Ibidem, p. 20.



contemporary geopolitical landscape. He notes that “the Anglosphere contains hierarchies as well as commonalities,”¹⁴ with Australia and Canada prioritizing regional ties over nostalgic alliances.

War Memory

The “finest hour” of 1940 – Churchill’s Britain standing alone – became a lodestar for Eurosceptics to rally around. Brexit campaigns weaponized this memory, casting the EU as a surrender akin to appeasement. The Anglosphere, by contrast, was framed as the wartime alliance: NATO, the Five Eyes intelligence network, and the special relationship. Yet Wellings cautions that such nostalgia risks “myopia,”¹⁵ obscuring the EU’s role in post-war stability.

Going forward, Wellings argues that Brexit was a “contingent alliance”¹⁶ between elite strategists and disaffected voters. On one hand, there was the Anglosphere project, in which Tory Eurosceptics framed Brexit as a gateway to “muscular liberalism”¹⁷ – an idealized global trading utopia. Yet Wellings exposes the hypocrisy here, noting that “explicit mentions of (the Anglosphere) diminished the closer these figures got to government.”¹⁸

On the other hand, there were the “left-behind” working-class voters, alienated by globalization and immigration, who channeled their frustration into defending sovereignty. The “Take Back Control” slogan fused nativist anxieties with democratic idealism. Wellings’ exploration of this group is compelling but could benefit from deeper socio-economic analysis. For instance, the decline of manufacturing hubs such as the Midlands – “a white van parked outside a house draped with three English flags”¹⁹ – symbolizes how deindustrialization and austerity bred resentment.

Unresolved Dilemmas

In the long run, Brexit, far from resolving England’s identity crisis, deepened it, failing to realize the potential it promised. The introduction of English Votes for English Laws (EVEL) underscored England’s nebulous place in a fracturing Union. As Wellings notes, EVEL reconceptualized England’s constitutional position as a source of insecurity. The UK’s postBrexit isolation thus contrasts sharply with the “actually existing Anglosphere”²⁰ of intelligence networks, which cannot compensate for the loss of EU markets. From the foregoing, Wellings concludes starkly that the Anglosphere is an insufficient solution, as it cannot conceal the erosion of British influence.

14. Ibidem, p. 36.

15. Ibidem.

16. Ibidem, p. 18.

17. Ibidem, p. 41.

18. Ibidem, p. 34.

19. Ibidem, p. 49.

20. Ibidem, p. 92.



Conclusion

From beginning to end, Wellings' work is a cautionary tale of nationalism's duality – radical and regressive, progressive and parochial. Brexit, he argues, was a “moment”²¹ in the long arc of English nationalism, a fleeting convergence of elite ambition and popular grievance. Yet its legacy is a nation adrift, torn between imperial nostalgia and global irrelevance.

The book's strength lies in its unflinching dissection of England's unresolved past. However, it leaves unanswered whether English nationalism can evolve beyond defensive sovereignty into a constructive political force. In the end, one asks: is England building a future, or merely resurrecting ghosts? For scholars of nationalism and Brexit, this remains the defining question for a nation haunted by itself – forced to forget its past, called upon to reimagine its present standing, while anticipating a future in which it seeks once again to stand on the side of power. Yet, as is often said in our corners of the earth – though the earth, we are told, is an oblate spheroid – the things we most wish to forget are often the very things we remember.

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21. Ibidem, p. 42.