Bate, Jonathan. "The Use and Abuse of National History and the National Poet." *The Public Value of the Humanities*. Ed. Jonathan Bate. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011. 56–67. The WISH List. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781849662451.ch-004>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 15:25 UTC.

Copyright © Jonathan Bate and contributors 2011. You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

4. The Use and Abuse of National History and the National Poet

Jonathan Bate (University of Warwick)

To be sure, we need history. But we need it in a manner different from the way in which the spoilt idler in the garden of knowledge uses it, no matter how elegantly he may look down on our coarse and graceless needs and distresses. That is, we need it for life and for action, not for a comfortable turning away from life and from action or for merely glossing over the egotistical life and the cowardly bad act. We wish to serve history only insofar as it serves living. (Nietzsche 2010)

Essentially British?

On 20 February 2008, Prime Minister Gordon Brown said in a speech on 'Managed Migration and Earned Citizenship' that:

Citizenship is not an abstract concept, or just access to a passport. I believe it is – and must be seen as – founded on shared values that define the character of our country. Indeed, building our secure and prosperous future as a nation will benefit from not just common values we share but a strong sense of national purpose. And for that to happen we need to be forthright – and yes confident – about what brings us together not only as inhabitants of these islands but as citizens of this society. Indeed there is a real danger that while other countries gain from having a clear definition of their destiny in a fast changing global economy, we may lose out if we prove slow to express and live up to the British values that can move us to act together. So the surest foundation upon which we can advance socially, culturally and economically in this century is to be far more explicit about the ties – indeed the shared values – that make us more than a collection of people but a country. This is not jingoism, but practical, rational and purposeful – and therefore, I would argue, an essentially British form of patriotism.¹

Brown's rhetoric was symptomatic of a series of anxieties about cultural identity, immigration, and notions of belonging in a multicultural and globalized society that were highly characteristic of Britain in the early twenty-first century. This essay will suggest that humanities research alone has the capacity to test the meaning and validity of claims about what is or is not 'essentially British'.

Without knowledge of history, the phrase 'essentially British' is essentially meaningless. Is there, has there even been, could there be an essentially British form of patriotism? Both 'Britain' and 'patriotism' are ideas with complicated histories. Recent research in the humanities has done much to untangle those histories and to reveal the complicated intertwining of the terms. A kneejerk patriot wrapped in the Union Jack might be surprised to learn that when the word 'patriot' entered the English language during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, the nation of Great Britain – let alone the United Kingdom – did not exist. By the time the conceptual term 'patriotism' emerged in the eighteenth century, 'Britain' had come into being. But for much of that century, 'patriot' was a term associated with oppositional politics, not support for the government. And at the end of the eighteenth century, to be a 'patriot' sometimes meant to be a supporter of the French Revolution, which was little short of treasonable.

Before we talk about certain values being 'essentially British', we need to remember that these islands are not essentially British. We might begin with the national poet. William Shakespeare is a regular fixture in lists of national icons, Great Britons and the like. But was he an English dramatist or a British one? The answer to this question is surprisingly simple but all too often neglected. It is that during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I Shakespeare considered himself English, and indeed devoted a large portion of his writing time to plays that dramatized the history of England, but in the early years of the reign of James VI of Scotland as James I of England he began writing about 'British' matter (notably in *King Lear* and *Cymbeline*) because James had hopes of creating a British state. Those hopes were dashed by the parliaments in both London and Edinburgh. The British state did not come into being until 1707 (except, briefly and somewhat theoretically, in republican form between 1654 and 1660).

Storytelling has always played an important part in the shaping of national identity. The Victorians believed in a seamless bond between 'our English Literature' – that great body of national self-expression with Shakespeare and John Milton at the centre – and 'our island story' (Brooke 1877: 1). But, as modern historians have frequently emphasized, the forms of nationhood within these islands have been highly varied. Every different 'state' formation has had its own narratives of identity and belonging (see Davies 1999).

There were High Kings in Ireland until the year 1169. Before the Romans came, the larger of the two big islands was divided among many different tribal principalities. The name 'Britannia' was imposed by the Roman invaders, who never colonized 'Hibernia', which we call Ireland, and who built a wall to protect themselves from the Picts, whom we call Scots, in the north. After the Roman retreat in the fifth century, the country was again divided, this time among Anglo-Saxon principalities and independent Celtic domains such as Cornwall and Cumbria.

There was an independent kingdom of the Scots from the ninth century to 1651, and again from 1660 to 1707. Between the tenth century and 1536, the kingdom of England, together with its dependencies including the Channel Islands, the Isle of Man, the Welsh March, and English-occupied Wales and Ireland, went through several changes of dynasty – Norman, Angevin, Lancastrian, Yorkist and Tudor. There were times when politically England was in effect part of what we now call France and others when much of what we now call France was in effect part of England.

From 1536 to 1649 and again from 1660 to 1707, England and Wales formed a single kingdom, with a change of dynasty bringing a new king and queen from the Netherlands, and a shift in the balance of power between monarchy and Parliament, at the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688. The Kingdom of Ireland was ruled by England from 1541 to 1649 and again from 1660 to 1800. In 1649 Parliament declared and enacted:

That the People of England and of all the Dominions and Territories thereunto belonging [including Wales and Ireland] are, and shall be, and are hereby Constituted, Made, Established, and Confirmed to be a Commonwealth and Free State; and shall henceforward be Governed as a Commonwealth and Free State by the Supreme Authority of this Nation, the Representatives of the People in Parliament, and by such as they shall appoint and constitute as Officers and Ministers for the good of the People, and that without any King or House of Lords. (Adams and Stephens 1930)

In 1654 the name was changed from the Commonwealth and Free State of England to the Commonwealth of Great Britain and, though the state continued to be a republic by virtue of the absence of a monarch, the Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell governed very much in the style of a king. At the end of the decade, the Commonwealth was briefly re-established before the Restoration of the monarchy.

The United Kingdom of Great Britain came into being in 1707, following the Act of Union with Scotland, and with a new succession of kings from Hanover taking the throne with effect from 1714. The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland came into being on 1 January 1801, following the previous year's Acts of Union with Ireland. It endured until 1922, when the Irish Free State (later Éire, then the Republic of Ireland) was born. The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland came into being in 1922. It endures at the time of writing, though since 1998 with varying degrees of devolved powers for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

For several centuries, the English/British were part of a theological entity called 'Christendom', which was often assumed (incorrectly) to overlap with a geographical entity called 'Europe'. English members of the original diasporic nation, the Jews, have long been considered 'outsiders' because they do not

belong to 'Christendom': this is a key point in several major nineteenth-century novels, most notably *Daniel Deronda* (1876) by George Eliot and *The Wondrous Tale of Alroy* (1833), *Coningsby* (1844) and *Tancred* (1847) by Benjamin Disraeli, himself a Jew by birth (though baptized a Christian in his teens).

Following UK entry into the 'European Economic Community' or 'Common Market' in 1973 and the transformation of that alliance of preferentially trading states into a more legally homogenized 'European Union' at Maastricht in 1993, the British are part of Europe once more. There is, however, markedly less enthusiasm for this secular union than there was for the old spiritual idea of Christendom, and no major work of English-language literature or drama has yet been written from the distinctive standpoint of the European Union.

The earning of citizenship and the right to pronounce about national identity really should be dependent, at the very least, on an outline knowledge of this extraordinarily complicated story, which can only be unpacked and interpreted by means of the research of our historians.

The invention of Britannia

The Reformation in religion, and more particularly Henry VIII's break from Rome, was decisive in shaping the modern English, and then British, state and, at the same time, the idea of love of one's country ('patriotism'). The culture of England was until the early sixteenth century always implicitly part of something larger: the culture of Catholic Europe. After 1536–39, when Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries and proclaimed the supremacy of the English crown and the independence of the English church, it became necessary to forge a new kind of national culture.

A key work in this project was a huge book called *Britannia*, by William Camden, antiquarian and second master at Westminster School. Published in Latin in 1586, it went through six editions by 1607, and was translated into English by Philemon Holland in 1610.

Dedicated to William Cecil, Baron Burghley, Lord Treasurer and chief minister to Queen Elizabeth, Camden's weighty book began with a history of early Britain, then proceeded to a county-by-county guide to the topography, history and antiquities of the nation. *Britannia* was an attempt to write the nation into being. Britain is proclaimed as a chosen land, symbolically set apart from the European mainland.

The opening of Camden's text implies that Britain is one nation, if with several names, played off against 'the continent of Europe'. But his title page presents a more complicated picture. Holland translated it as follows: *Britain, or a Chorographical Description of the most flourishing Kingdomes, England, Scotland, and Ireland, and the ilands adjoyning, out of the depth of Antiquitie* ('chorographical' means 'the writing of regions', as opposed to 'geography', the writing of the whole earth). The county-by-county survey

begins with Cornwall in the extreme south-west, goes across to Kent in the extreme south-east, then criss-crosses northward until it reaches Cheshire, at which point Camden writes, 'I Thinke it now my best way, before I treat of the other parts of England, to digresse a while and turne a little aside toward Wales, called in Latin *Cambria*, or *Wallia*, where the ancient Britans have yet their seat and abode' (Camden 1637: 615). Wales is thus subsumed into England, though with the recognition on the one hand that it is marginal – you must turn a little aside to acknowledge it – and on the other hand that it is special, since the Celtic or ancient British heritage remains unusually alive there. The latter acknowledgment might look to a Welshman like condescension masked as flattery.

From Wales, Camden proceeds through the northernmost counties of England and into Scotland, which he says that he will willingly enter into, 'but withall lightly passe over', since he does not know its customs well and will not presume to trespass upon them. His text passes it over in a score of leaves, whereas it has dwelt in England for hundreds of pages. Camden quotes an apt Greek proverb, 'Art thou a stranger? Be no Medler'. One senses that Camden is a little uneasy about subsuming the Scots into his treatment of England-as-implicitly-Britain, as he had subsumed the Welsh. His task became much easier after King James united the thrones of Scotland and England in 1603. Holland's 1610 translation proceeds with a passage that Camden added to his 1607 edition:

Certes, I assure my selfe that I shall bee easily pardoned in this point, the people them selves are so courtuous and well meaning, and the happinesse of these daies so rare and admirable, since that by a divine and heavenly opportunity is now fallen into our laps, which wee hardly ever hoped, and our Ancestours so often and so earnestly wished: Namely, that Britaine so many ages disjoined in it selfe and unsociable, should all throughout like one uniforme City, under one most sacred and happie Monarch, the founder of perpetuall peace, by a blessed Union bee conjoynd in one entire bodie. (Camden 1637: 3 in separately paginated section on Scotland)

Because Scotland has a court, unlike Wales, it is thought of as a place of courtesy. The joining of the two courts is conceived as a knitting together of the body politic. King James is then praised for bringing a long history of 'dismale DISCORD', which has set the two 'otherwise invincible' nations at long debate, to 'sweet CONCORD', so that '*Wee all one nation are this day*'.

The lifetime of Queen Elizabeth was a unique period for England, lying between the schism from Rome and the union with Scotland. The special conditions of the period 1533–1603 gave birth to a recognizably modern sense of the nation. It is no coincidence that in the late sixteenth century the

term 'the nation' took on the meaning of 'the collectivity of the people' and the word 'national' enters the language, as did the grammatically absolute usage of 'country' as a personification of the native land – as in Shakespeare's 'Forgive me, country, and sweet countrymen' in *Henry VI Part One*. In 1615, Camden dedicated his *Annals* of Queen Elizabeth's reign to 'God, my country, and posterity' ('DEO, PATRIAE, ET POSTERIS'). Such a trinity would have been inconceivable a century earlier.

Nor is it coincidental that in the 1560s Laurence Nowell applied to William Cecil for aid in mapping the entire realm, county-by-county; in the next decade Christopher Saxton completed the first comprehensive *Atlas* of England and Wales. The Elizabethans did not only 'discover' new worlds across the ocean: they also discovered England. And, despite – or because of – a succession of rebellions and the constant persecution of Roman Catholic recusants, they unified England. By the end of the sixteenth century, the government's administrative machinery had put in place a nationwide network of civic and legal officers ultimately answerable to the crown, while the ecclesiastical settlement had established the supremacy of Anglicanism. Most importantly for our purposes, a national culture had come to full flower, thanks in large measure to the educational advances effected by the grammar schools, the translation into English of the foundation texts of Western culture (the Bible, Homer and the major authors of classical Rome), the writing of national history, the increased availability of books of all kinds and, for Londoners at least, the completely new cultural arena of the public playhouse. Anticipations of some of these individual factors may be found in earlier periods, but it is their concatenation in the aftermath of the break from Rome that marks the distinctively Elizabethan image of the nation.

Wales was absent from Camden's title page because it was regarded as part of England; in 1536 Henry VIII had given royal assent to a bill formally uniting the two countries. Scotland, as we have seen, was deferred to as a separate nation. Ireland represented more of a problem. It had its distinctive topography and its independent history, which Camden duly and indeed respectfully recorded, but since Henry II's conquest in 1172 it had been under the rule and power of England. Camden, with his immense reverence for Christian learning, was fascinated by the figure of St Patrick and the Irish monastic tradition that extended back to the fifth century. He even suggested that the English Saxons learned literacy from the Irish. This led him, in a fascinating sentence added to *Britannia's* sixth edition, to formulate and resolve a paradox:

And no cause have we to mervaille, that Ireland which now for the most part is rude, half-barbarous, and altogether voide of any polite and exquisite literature, was full of so devout, godly and good wits in that age, wherein good letters throughout all Christiendome lay neglected and half buried; seeing, that the Divine providence of that most gracious and almighty ruler of the world, soweth the seeds and bringeth forth the plantes of

Sanctity and good arts, one whiles in one nation and other whiles in another, as it were in garden beds and borders, and that in sundry ages: which being removed and translated hither and thither, may by a new growth come up one under another, prosper, and be preserved to his owne glory, and the good of mankind. (Camden 1637: 68 in separately paginated section on Ireland)

Camden's expectation was clearly that a reader might well marvel at the transformation of Ireland from centre of erudition and holiness to cultural and moral desert. His explanation for the change relied on a providential and cyclical view of history, in thorough accordance with the Elizabethan theory of the translation of empire and learning (*translatio imperii et studii*) in which England was regarded as the nation chosen by God to succeed Greece and Rome as the pre-eminent home of world power and high culture – and indeed to exceed the ancients, since imperial glory and 'good arts' were combined with Christian 'Sanctity'. The providential explanation diverts the reader from another possibility: namely that all traces of high culture have been extinguished from Ireland because it has been so long subjugated to England, that it is the English who have made the Irish 'rude' and 'half-barbarous'. Between 1586, when *Britannia* was first published, and 1607, when this passage was added, Tyrone's rebellions had been suppressed and the English crown's stranglehold on Ireland tightened. Though strangers in Ireland, the English did not hesitate to meddle. You can only invent a nation by positing its other, by creating an outside, by denominating and demonizing aliens. Ireland, Catholic Spain, the Ottoman Empire, Italy – paradoxically regarded as the source of both artistic sophistication and Machiavellian decadence – and the New World served the Elizabethans well in this respect.

At first sight, the above piece of research may appear antiquarian, parochial, even pedantic. An examination of the textual changes between the Elizabethan and Jacobean versions of Camden's *Britannia* does not sound like the kind of thing that has 'relevance' to the early twenty-first-century debate about 'earned citizenship' and 'national identity'. But it is precisely in Camden's negotiations of the relationship between 'England' and 'Britain', between service to God and love of 'patria', that modern notions of citizenship, patriotism and national identity begin to emerge.

The 'British question', as historians call it, has been the focus of much of the most innovative and provocative historical and literary-historical research in the last twenty years – the line of distinguished work extends from Hugh Kearney's *The British Isles: A History of Four Nations* (1989) to John Kerrigan's *Archipelagic English* (2008). The fostering and dissemination of that research, through teaching, through books aimed at a wide intelligent readership, through broadcasting and – why not? – even through seminars for the education of politicians and civil servants can play a major role in raising the level of debate about nation and devolution, arrival and belonging.

Shakespeare raises an army

Samuel Taylor Coleridge once remarked that the English get their history from Shakespeare, just as they get their theology from Milton. Research in recent decades has indeed done much to show how the creation of national identity is as much a cultural – a literary and theatrical – phenomenon as an historical and political one. It was in the eighteenth century, following the 1707 Acts of Union between England and Scotland, that politicians, polemicists and writers forged a sense of ‘Britishness’ (see Colley 1992; Weinbrot 1993). It was also in the eighteenth century, and by a parallel process, that Shakespeare was elevated to the role of national poet (see Bate 1989; Dobson 1992). His history plays are central to English conceptions of their past. Whether it is the left-wing theatre director Michael Bogdanov bringing on to the stage of his English Shakespeare Company in the 1980s a group of squaddies carrying a banner proclaiming ‘F--- the Argies’ or the BBC broadcasting a Royal Shakespeare Company actor reciting ‘God for Harry, England, and St George’ in the build-up to a World Cup rugby match, the reanimation of Shakespeare’s history plays offers a prime example of what Friedrich Nietzsche in his essay ‘The Use and Abuse of History for Life’ calls ‘history for life and for action’ (Nietzsche 2010).

Shakespeare excelled in every available genre of Elizabethan drama, but in the two parts of his *King Henry IV* he achieved his generic full house, hitting the jackpot identified by Polonius in *Hamlet*: ‘tragical-comical-historical-pastoral’ are rolled into one. As history, the plays paint a panorama of England, embracing a wider social range than any previous historical drama, as the action moves from court to tavern, council-chamber to battlefield, city to country, Archbishop and Lord Chief Justice to whore and thief. As comedy, they tell the story of a prodigal son’s journey from youth to maturity and an old rogue’s art of surviving by means of jokes, tall tales and the art of being not only witty in himself but the cause that wit is in other men. As tragedy, they reveal the slow decline of a king who cannot escape his past, along with the precipitate demise of an impetuous young warrior (the hotly named Hotspur) who embodies both the glory and the futility of military heroism, and finally the heart-stopping dismissal of a substitute father.

The action of *The First Part of Henry the Fourth* (as *Part One* was known) begins some time after the events that ended Shakespeare’s earlier play, *The Tragedy of Richard the Second*. Henry Bullingbrook has usurped the throne of King Richard, but now the rebels who helped him to the throne have turned against him. Whereas *Richard the Second* conformed to the traditional structure of tragedy – the story of the fall of a powerful man – the *Henry the Fourth* plays adopt a wider perspective. *Richard the Second* had been written entirely in measured iambic verse, the medium of royal and aristocratic characters, whereas long stretches of the *Henry the Fourth* plays are in supple and inventive prose, the medium of the common people.

The scenes in *The Second Part* with Justice Shallow in his Gloucestershire orchard are the closest that Shakespeare ever came to a stage representation of the rural England of his own early life in Stratford-upon-Avon.

Part One has a good claim to be regarded as Shakespeare's most popular play in his own time. In the absence of box office numbers, such a claim has to be measured by a variety of inferential indicators. It wins on all of them: number of times the published script was reprinted before the works were collected in the First Folio (six, more than any other Shakespeare play); frequency of quotations, allusions and imitations in works by others (on this count, Falstaff is up there with Hamlet); demand for sequels (*Part Two* and then *The Merry Wives of Windsor* to give audiences another dose of Falstaff, and *Henry V* to follow through the story of Prince Hal).

It sustained its position in the ratings long after Shakespeare's death. Most of his plays had to be heavily rewritten in order to keep their place in the repertoire after the reopening of the theatres with the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660, and through the eighteenth century: so as to conform to the theatrical taste of the age, *King Lear* was decked out with a happy ending and *Macbeth* with all-singing, all-dancing witches. But *Henry IV Part One* held the stage, and was revived almost as frequently as *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet*, with only the most minor alterations.

In the twentieth century, Orson Welles stitched the two parts together, threw in a chunk of *Henry V* for good measure, and created *Chimes at Midnight*, one of the all-time great Shakespeare movies. In his *Henry V* film Kenneth Branagh used flashbacks to key moments in each part, illuminating King Harry's back story. And in *My Own Private Idaho* (1991) Gus Van Sant quirkily but brilliantly updated the script into a world of gay street hustlers and rich boys on the run from their origins. Through such adaptations, Shakespeare has offered living history for four centuries.

The sheer richness and variety of the *Henry IV* plays is such that they continue to offer historical lessons in an extraordinary variety of ways. So it is that one finds the character of Sir John Falstaff evoked in the most unlikely places: for instance, an article on the history of military contracting in the *Journal of International Peace Operations*. This is not, as the title might suggest, the august organ of a think-tank for NGOs in the aid trade, but rather the house magazine of the International Peace Operations Association, the trade organization of the burgeoning private military industry. Its operatives do not, of course, call themselves 'private armies', but rather 'the Stability Operations Industry'.

The article in question is entitled 'Shakespeare on Military Contracting: Lessons from History about Private Contracting'. Its author is Gary Sturgess, formerly head of the New South Wales Cabinet Office, 'during which time,' Wikipedia tells us, 'he introduced a number of major policy initiatives including the Independent Commission Against Corruption'. Sturgess is now executive

director of the Serco Institute, 'a research facility studying competition and contracting in public services'. A 2006 article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* credited him as a key figure in the move towards the contracting out of state functions in Australia. The Serco Group now runs everything from prisons to railways in over thirty countries, combining, in the words of its website, 'a deep public service ethos with the commercial know-how that gives us the ability to deliver'.

Sturgess turns out to be extremely well informed about the tricky issue of the resemblances and differences between the character of Sir John Falstaff in *Henry IV* and Sir John Fastolf in *Henry VI*. He is also aware of the complicated history whereby Falstaff's original name was Sir John Oldcastle, but this had to be changed because his drunkenness, sloth, gluttony and cowardice traduced the historical figure of that name, who was a revered Lollard (proto-Protestant) martyr. It was unfortunate for Shakespeare and his acting company that the office of Lord Chamberlain, the man in charge of censoring plays, passed to a descendant of Oldcastle just as *Henry IV* was entering the repertoire.

But where Sturgess has really done his homework is with regard to the finances of raising an army in the early modern period, when there was no state standing army. He offers a crisp introduction to the intriguing subject of Falstaff's role as a military entrepreneur:

Under the proprietary system that prevailed in England and the rest of Europe until the 18th century, regiments were owned by the colonels and the captains who recruited them. Their proprietors usually supplied arms, food and clothing, and their bright livery was a means of distinguishing them from other corps.

Until the middle of the 19th century, the British military also relied on 'touts' or 'crimps,' men who recruited soldiers for a commission. Without close regulation, such a system was open to abuse. Both crimps and recruiting sergeants were widely accused of signing men up under the influence of liquor and holding them against their will.

At the very least, Falstaff is a crimp who fills up his muster book with 'shadows' – men recruited, but never actually supplied – and allows draftees to purchase their release. Until the late 18th century, his admissions about abusing the recruiting system drew bursts of laughter from audiences who were personally aware of the practices he described.

But he is more than that. Shakespeare probably intended audiences to understand Falstaff as a captain – certainly the playwright's historical sources portrayed him that way. And from the late 14th century when the story is set through the early 17th century when the play was written, captains functioned as semi-independent contractors, who brought together companies of men under a colonel, who in turn contracted with a supreme commander.

In Shakespeare's dramas, Falstaff pays for his company's initial costs out of his own pocket and then tries to raise a loan to finance his venture on the eve of battle. (Sturgess 2010)

Is this analysis a use or an abuse of Shakespeare? It certainly provides illumination of the great recruiting scene in *Part Two*, which comes complete with muster book and a character called 'Shadow'. Sturgess is right about the continuance of this recruiting system until the late eighteenth century, though in terms of theatrical representation, the story is slightly more complicated: *Part Two*, in sharp contrast to *Part One*, was not staged at all frequently, not least because its comic centrepiece, the recruitment scene, kept being appropriated and reworked in popular new plays – first George Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer*, then Isaac Bickerstaff's *The Recruiting Serjeant* – which displaced their Shakespearean original.

Sturgess is delighted to report that the original Sir John Fastolf 'was said to have left a fortune worth \$18 billion in today's values, and has been described as the 51st wealthiest individual in British history ... he is a reminder that for hundreds of years, governments did find a way of contracting with private individuals for the delivery of military services, services that would today be regarded as "inherently governmental"'. At this point, Sturgess' agenda becomes apparent: he is stating the case for the privatization of military procurement. 'He may be a figure of fun, but Falstaff shows us that incentives matter': that is one way of reading the play. An alternative conclusion might have been 'state provision is burdened by inefficiency, but reliance on the private sector is liable to be tarnished by corruption and inevitably leads to the exploitation of the poor'. Still, as the new age of austerity forces government to ask what are the services that must be provided by the state and what are those that can be contracted out in the name of 'efficiency savings', there is grist in the lesson from history that a state-run as opposed to an entrepreneurially led army is a relatively new phenomenon in Britain.

Humanities research is a kaleidoscope through which we rearrange the fragments of our collective experience. An attentive, critical reading of a single document – whether Holland's 1610 translation of Camden's *Britannia* or Sturgess' 2010 essay on Falstaff and military recruiting – can throw fresh light on old and new questions. By reading Shakespeare's dramaturgy and researching the historical framework of his plays, we use the past to frame the debates of the present.

Note

- 1 The speech was published on <http://www.number10.gov.uk> but removed with the change of government in 2010. It remains available, as of the time of writing, at http://www.martinfrost.ws/htmlfiles/feb2008/brown_migration.html [accessed 12 July 2010].

Bibliography

- Adams, G.B. and Stephens, H.M. (1930), 'Act declaring England to be a Commonwealth', *Select Documents of English Constitutional History*, London: Macmillan, <http://home.freeuk.net/don-aitken/ast/cp.html> [accessed 11 July 2010].
- Bate, J. (1989), *Shakespearean Constitutions: Politics, Theatre, Criticism 1730–1830*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Brooke, S.A. (1877), *English Literature*, London: Macmillan.
- Camden, W. (1637), *Britain, or A chorographically description of the most flourishing kingdoms, England, Scotland, and Ireland, and the ilands adjoyning, out of the depth of antiquitie beautified vvith mappes of the severall shires of England: vvritten first in Latine by William Camden Clarenceux K. of A. Translated newly into English by Philémon Holland Doctour in Physick: finally, revised, amended, and enlarged with sundry additions by the said author*, London: George Latham.
- Colley, L. (1992), *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837*, London and New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Davies, N. (1999), *The Isles: A History*, London: Macmillan.
- Dobson, M. (1992), *The Making of the National Poet*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Kearney, H. (1989), *The British Isles: A History of Four Nation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kerrigan, J. (2008), *Archipelagic English: Literature, History, and Politics 1603–1707*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nietzsche, F. (2010), *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life*, trans. Ian Johnston, Nanaimo, BC, Canada: Vancouver Island University, <http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/Nietzsche/history.htm> [accessed 11 July 2010].
- Sturgess, G. (2010), 'Shakespeare on Military Contracting: Lessons from History about Private Contracting', *Journal of International Peace Operations*, 5: 5, <http://web.peaceops.com/archives/423> [accessed 11 July 2010].
- Weinbrot, H. (1993), *Britannia's Issue: The Rise of British Literature from Dryden to Ossian*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.