

Review

Linda E. Connors and Mary Lu MacDonald, *National Identity in Great Britain and British North America, 1815-1851: The Role of Nineteenth-Century Periodicals*. Farnham, Surrey / Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2011. 234 pp. ISBN: 97814094 (hardback), 9781409427711 (ebook). €64,99 (hardback).

This study is one of a number whose approach to traditional topics has been enriched and problematized through the application of evidence from the periodical press. The argument of the book is straightforward: the authors suggest that messages about national identity are both contained and questioned in periodicals, and that these messages are a rich source of information about the change and development of ideas of collective identity in both British North America (Canada) and in Britain itself. The historical parameters chosen are logical: between the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 and the Great Exhibition in 1851, and the spread allows the authors great latitude in terms of the variety of titles chosen for examination. A period of peace and relative prosperity on both sides of the Atlantic permitted new reflection on nationhood, and the contention is that the press had more in-

fluence than is generally thought in terms of the formation of collective notions of self.

The authors rightly point out that the period (at least its early years) has been neglected, dismissed as unimportant in terms of the number of titles produced – especially in British North America – and they are concerned with the recovery of early and relevant debates, though they acknowledge that there is relatively little in the way of an established press in BNA prior to the middle of the century.

The introduction forms a literature survey of the most significant works on the ideology surrounding the topic, and the ingredients essential to identity-formation are rehearsed: a shared, or shareable past, a transcendent ideology, and an Other against which to contend. The emphasis on the content of articles in the press (ultimately the main focus of the book) over their material formation means that a similarly rigorous survey of the most significant theoretical studies of the periodical press itself is wanting. This is a missed opportunity, I think. A more or less equal selection of titles is chosen, from both sides of the Atlantic, and on both conservative and radical sides of the political/cultural divide. The authors, in order to make their points, must assume

that the titles remain stable in terms of editorial stance, circulation, perceived influence, etc. While that may be the case for the vast majority, it cannot be assumed of all. The great discrepancy in number between titles published in British North America and titles published (and exported from) Britain, is acknowledged, as a balance is sought between the two. How far this balance is achieved is debatable; one assumes that slightly different conclusions would have been reached had different periodicals been sampled.

The chapters are thematic: ‘Political and Economic Life,’ ‘Faith, Religion and the Modern World,’ ‘Women and Children: Prescribed Identity,’ ‘Progress of the Nation,’ ‘Kingdoms and Colonies,’ ‘Lands of Hope and Glory.’ The material gathered is of great importance in trying to reconstruct an idea of the range of positions discernible in the press on any of these topics. Indeed, the authors are to be congratulated in the herculean task of sifting through the fifty or so titles chosen for the study.

Some decisions regarding the titles are problematic. For instance, the *Dublin University Magazine* is chosen, largely because it had already been chosen by the editors of the Wellesley Index as an example of a long-running conservative periodical. Connors and MacDonald note that it was published outside London, but seem to assume that this makes no difference to its pro-British Union stance. I think this is to over-simplify the case – certainly in terms of the *DUM* – and possibly in terms of other periodicals originating outside London but used as source material for British identity formation. For example, the Other, in the

view of the *DUM*, is certainly Catholic, but it can also be the absentee landlord or the representatives of a parliament that consistently failed to protect the interests of the Anglo-Irish in Ireland. In other words, it is a mistake to assume that the *DUM* uncritically accepts and parrots the views of London, and that those views are consistent over its thirty-three year publication run. If this is the case for an Irish periodical, it might also be the case for those titles originating in Wales or Scotland.

Again, consider the use of an article from the *DUM* about the Great Exhibition: the authors quote from the piece and note the effusion with which the periodical speaks of the ‘honest peace-offering from England to the whole world.’ The article certainly valorizes England, but the editorial stance of the *DUM* must be problematized when one considers the volatile state of the country just prior to 1850 and the motivation that would be clear to an Anglo-Irish audience nervous about the possibility of Irish rebellion. In other words, to use information from the periodical in an uncritical way is to ignore aspects of its production that have a bearing on its ‘message.’

The Appendix provides as much information as it was possible to recover regarding the publication details of each title, as well as evaluative comments on intended audience and general religious/political colour. Much of the information about well-known British journals comes from Wellesley or from Sullivan’s *British Literary Magazines*. Less familiar are the Canadian journals listed, and the Appendix goes some way towards filling in gaps regarding information on the colonial press.

The study is a valuable one, not least in terms of the foregrounding of periodicals in the debate about the development of national identities, but it would have been enriched through a more thorough examination of the material reality of the periodicals themselves. Perhaps this is too much for one volume to have undertaken, but the fact remains that studies that use periodicals as source

documents must acknowledge the instability of those documents over time and space.

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