

Introduction: Understanding nationalism through biographies

This issue on biographical approaches to the study of nationalism emerged from an international symposium ('European Nationalism and Biography') held in December 2011 at the Centre for European Studies of The Australian National University in Canberra. The aim of the symposium was an initial exploration, across disciplinary boundaries, of the issues involved in using biography as a lens for understanding nationalism. With this issue we have tried to be true to the spirit of the symposium, preserving various ambiguities and unresolved theoretical issues. We invite the reader into an open-ended discussion, and do not attempt to stake out a unified theoretical position.

We are primarily interested in how the study of certain individual persons can contribute to our broader understanding of nationalism. How can the lives of concrete individuals shed light on the vast abstractions of nationalism? How do the imagining of the self and of the nation¹ interact and interpenetrate? We have not tried on this occasion to contribute to the growing theorisation of biography as a genre or medium of social research. Instead our more modest aim and interest have been in making some actual biographical explorations speak to the wider question of Nationalism Studies, to how the unique identities of persons become invested in the collective identities of nations, in highly variable ways. Following the format of the symposium, the issue begins and ends with theoretical and conceptual provocations and reflections on the nature of nationalism and identity. In between is a series of biographical case studies all derived from the European context. The subjects of these studies—the historian G. M. Trevelyan (Britain), the politicians Enoch Powell (Britain), Helmut Kohl (Germany) and Richard Sulík (Slovakia), and the 'Celtic' warrior queen Boudicca (Roman Britain)—provide diverse routes into our topic.

As one of the leaders of the study of nationalism in Scotland at the School of Social and Political Science at the University of Edinburgh, Jonathan Hearn was invited to give a keynote talk at the symposium to raise key issues and provide a framework and starting point for discussion. He does this by reflecting on a decade of his own research on nationalism and national identity. Out of this he suggests that to pose effective questions about how identification works as a process, national and otherwise, we need to make clear distinctions between the unique identities of selves and the identity categories that are applied to larger collectivities. Only by making such distinctions can we explore the relationship

¹ Anderson, B. 1991, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, [Second edn], Verso, London.

between these distinct processes. He further highlights two factors in this relationship. On the one hand, the self's relationship with broader categories of national identity is mediated by specific organisational and institutional contexts that affect the salience of the category for the person, and how they relate themselves to it. People's lives are organisationally embedded, and this has consequences for how they identify. On the other hand, the act of relating the self to the category of the national often involves a kind of paralleling of personal life narratives with the larger imagined narrative of the nation, as a kind of collective subject. People invest their personal narratives in larger narratives. Altogether, the study of identity is not the study of a unitary phenomenon, but rather of a complex 'ecology' of interactions, between selves, the forms of social organisation they are embedded in and the repertoire of identity categories available to them. The contributors were asked to engage with these ideas where appropriate in their revisions to their papers, in order to enhance the dialogue between them.

Alastair MacLachlan's study of the British historian G. M. Trevelyan kicks off our series of biographical studies. He highlights the tensions in Trevelyan's work between his liberalism, internationalism, anti-imperialism and British nationalism. This is evident in Trevelyan's romantic identification with the figure of Garibaldi in his historical studies of Italian nation formation—studies that tend to fall silent in regard to the later nineteenth century when the story becomes more complex and compromised, and less romantic. By the first decade of the twentieth century, Trevelyan was becoming a champion of Serbian nationalism, understood as liberation from Austrian imperial domination, but again with limited grasp of the complexities of inter-ethnic politics in the region. One sees Trevelyan struggling to project his idealised liberal nationalism onto an intractable world and history.

Next, Ben Wellings gives us a careful diagnosis of Enoch Powell, the 'lonesome leader'. In this study, the interactions between inevitably flawed personality and political aspiration are strongly evident. Wellings explores Powell's peculiar capacity to appeal across class boundaries, while simultaneously alienating natural political allies in the Conservative Party. This seems to hinge on his ability to present himself as, and believe himself to be, a martyr to his own principles, thus creating a persona of a recalcitrant 'everyman', brave enough to 'speak truth to power' about the dangers of racial mixing for the integrity of the nation. In this way he created a kind of resonance between his own embattled identity and the embattled identity of a racially conceived Britishness. And this is in spite of his rather lofty intellectualism, which also informed his nationalism.

Christian Wicke examines the ways that the former German chancellor Helmut Kohl used his own biography to enable him to personify the project of normalising German national identity in the wake of World War II and the tragedies of

Nazism, and in the context of the Cold War. He did this by emphasising his Catholic background, supposedly less culpable than the Prussian/Lutheran core for Germany's disastrous anti-Western *Sonderweg*; also by managing to fuse a kind of conservative liberalism that identified Germany with traditions of civic Western European rule, with an appeal to particular notions of *Heimat* and ethnic conceptions of nationhood, which nonetheless were meant to be detoxified from their former extremes as associated with the road to 1945. Kohl's PhD in history at Heidelberg sought to reconnect a restored German identity with its pre-Nazi history, rendering that episode an aberration rather than destiny. In these various ways he came to embody a new normality, the 'all clear' signal after the dangers of the Third Reich had been, at least wishfully, escaped.

Stephan Auer brings us up to the present with his study of the controversial Slovak politician Richard Sulík. A successful businessman who spent several of his formative years in Germany, Sulík manages to embody many of the contradictions of post-1989 Slovak nationalism and its ambivalent relationship with the European Union. An advocate of economic liberalism (he played a leading role in developing a 'flat tax' policy in Slovakia) committed to 'Western' European ideals of a liberalised, rule-governed economy, he nonetheless has parlayed this into a kind of political populism in Slovakia. This has been done partly by taking a hardline stance against European bailouts for Greece in order to help keep it in the eurozone despite its sovereign debt crisis. Sulík has managed to identify his policies with Slovak national identity as good, economically disciplined Europeans, in contrast with the spendthrift Greeks.

Up to this point, our biographic studies follow a loose logic of chronology, from the late-Victorian Trevelyan to the contemporary politician Sulík, and of geography from the west of Europe in Britain, eastwards through Germany to Slovakia. Next we take a long leap back to Iron-Age Britain in the first century AD. On the one hand, Stephanie Lawson's study of the historical figure of Boudicca, and how she has been interpreted as a symbol of a national identity in subsequent centuries, is sharply different from the preceding studies. Whereas those dealt with recent and contemporary lives about which we have various sources of information, Boudicca is known only through classical sources. We are forced to view her primarily as a cipher for the concerns of later interpreters. On the other hand, it would be a mistake to view this study as concerned with pre-modern nationalism (if that is not an oxymoron), because it is precisely from the early modern period on, in various guises, that Boudicca's story becomes meaningful for those trying to tell an emerging story about the British nation. Lawson's study fits here as a kind of limiting case, where 'biography' is about the

act of symbolically representing a life, and only minimally about an engagement with an actual person and how they make sense of themselves in relation to the social context they live in.

Chris Bishop from The Australian National University contributed to the symposium with an innovative study entitled 'Bowker's *Alfred The Great: Reimagining an Anglo-Saxon king*'. Bishop's unpublished paper examined primarily the way the author and Mayor of Winchester Alfred Bowker historicised King Alfred of Wessex on the occasion of the thousandth anniversary of his death at the beginning of the twentieth century. Bishop argued that the biographical transition from an obscure West-Saxon warlord to an ancestral 'King of Britain' was due, in large part, to the efforts of Bowker, who then organised a nationwide commemoration of Alfred the Great and edited several books detailing the national achievements of the king. By using this teleological relation between two biographies, between Alfred Bowker and Alfred the Great, Bishop highlighted complex interconnections of nationalism, medievalism and imperialism in Britain before World War I.

Paul James's reflections on the preceding contributions provide a bookend to Hearn's opening suggestions for conceptual framing. In this afterword, James approaches the essays in this volume and Bishop's unpublished paper through his long-established interest in the idea of nations as specifically modern forms of 'abstract community'.² Also drawing lightly on the biography of Tom Nairn, a leading theorist of nationalism with whom he has collaborated, he is particularly concerned to argue that we need to specify the modern frame of reference through which biography is being conceived in these studies. James argues that what Benedict Anderson called with reference to Walter Benjamin modern 'abstract, empty time'³ is a precondition for the mapping of personal biography onto national biography and the multiple contradictions that this entails. He concludes by observing the particular complexities that arise when we engage the biographies of theorists of nationalism, attempting to situate their national identities both within their theories and within their national contexts.

We address these studies and theoretical reflections to anyone interested in the complex relationships between biography and nationalism. We offer them as one way in to a rich and developing field of study, which could be approached in many different ways. Our hope is not to resolve, but to stimulate new questions and inquiries.

Jonathan Hearn and Christian Wicke

2 James, P. 1996, *Nation Formation: Towards a theory of abstract community*, Sage, London.

3 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.