2016 and all that : medievalism and exceptionalism in Brexit Britain

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2016 and All That: Medievalism and Exceptionalism in Brexit Britain[1]

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Since the turn of the century, national exceptionalism narratives underpinned by medieval history have staged a comeback in numerous European countries. Such discursive use of the Middle Ages – so-called medievalism – often operates at the interface of politics and culture. In Britain, national medievalism played a notable role in preparing the ground for the 2016 Brexit vote. Leavers insisted on the obligating nature of constitutional 'precedents' in the deep past. Many of these medievalisms transport notions of an insular exceptionalism that are rooted in the earliest 'English nation' and stress – often to breaking point – the relevance of medieval versions of self-determination and statehood for the present-day polity. This essay explores a set of emotive Brexiteer medievalisms which appeal to a past that makes strong demands on the present. These examples throw into relief the symbolic attractiveness, but also the practical difficulty, of making a medievalist case for a transhistorical Britishness conceived in opposition to the European mainland. For in lionizing overwhelmingly *English* history while purporting to speak for all the United Kingdom, key Brexiteers signal their frivolous attitude towards British cohesion.

Keywords: Medievalism, Brexit, Euroscepticism, English nationalism, St George, Daniel Hannan, Whig history, Norman Yoke, Anglo-Saxonism, politics of autochthony

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Before and since the Brexit vote, Eurosceptics have invoked the medieval past with a frequency that may baffle the casual observer. Such medievalism – the term refers to the highly diverse ways in which the postmedieval world has reconstructed and reimagined the Middle Ages – played a notable role in preparing the ideological ground for Brexit. Simply put, the Middle Ages have been made to conjure both powerful visions of national greatness and the spectre of humiliation by foreign invasion. More specifically, the referendum and the Eurosceptic currents from which the Brexit vote flowed have insisted on a constitutional heritage of obligating 'precedents' in the deep past and the need to stave off a supranational integration that threatens that heritage.

Far from innovating the connection between the Middle Ages and insular nationalism, Brexiteers infuse well-established *lieux de mémoire* or "memory sites" – abstract focal points of cultural memory that co-create the national community (Nora; see also Boer) – with a new militancy. Nor is British medievalism *sui generis*. Medievalism has had a long and colourful history of appropriation by nationalism throughout Europe. The connection between nationalism and medievalism first became salient with the Romantic movement. In Romantic nationalism, the Middle Ages came to be validated as the cultural origin of the modern national self: the foundation, root, or wellspring of a recognizable and distinct body of people. Medievalism carried connotations of the vernacular and 'homegrown'; the Middle Ages were, as Louise D'Arcens and Andrew Lynch put it, "conceptually *local*" (xii). Though internally diverse as a movement, medievalism thus generally stood in contradistinction to the 'universal,' elite, and cosmopolitan cultural model of neoclassicism.

The imagined relationship of deep continuity between the medieval and the modern nation explicitly extended to the realm of politics. Medievalism legitimized the self-determination of existing and emerging nation-*states* (e.g., Evans and Marchal). Philology and the gradually institutionalized study of the Middle Ages acted as a hotbed for political nationalism in many European countries. After its heyday in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, such legitimation by medieval lineage became all but impracticable following the violent excesses of political nationalism in the two world wars. During the wars, medieval history had often been used for propaganda purposes (Wood). Valentin Groebner notes that as a result, the Middle Ages ended up almost completely forfeiting their usability for identity politics of all stripes between the 1960s and 1995 (125).

More recently, the nexus between the nation and the Middle Ages has become productive once more in a number of Western countries (see for instance Geary; Carpegna Falconieri; Elliott, *Medievalism*). In certain political varieties of such medievalism, constitutional distinctiveness is traced back to some point in the Middle Ages to make the case for a modern-day arrangement that entails, usually, less close involvement with superordinate political bodies. Nationalists in such European countries as France, Switzerland, Italy, and Scotland cultivate medievalist rhetoric and imagery in addressing questions of sovereignty, independence, separatism, and isolationism.

The Brexit process has been punctuated by distinctive forms of national medievalism. As I will show, Brexit medievalism tends to refer overwhelmingly to the *English* Middle Ages. This is revealing because leading Brexiteers have been keen to portray Brexit as a pan-British liberation movement, whereas I see Brexit primarily as a project of an unspoken English nationalism working in tandem with predominantly English ideological traditions of Euroscepticism (see Winder; Cockburn; Williamson).[2] Brexit medievalism thus expresses what many proponents of Brexit cannot, or will not, articulate directly: the desire to liberate an England which is supposedly being oppressed (see O'Toole xvii).

A first, widely publicized pre-referendum example is that of the *Daily Express* crusader figure.[3] Previously confined to the paper's masthead, the crusader became yoked to its campaign for the UK to leave the EU in November 2010 – almost three years, that is, before David Cameron would commit to calling an in/out referendum on the "fundamental reform" he hoped to procure from the EU (Shipman xiv). The *Express* article in question, "Get Britain Out of Europe," explicitly makes the crusader a symbol of an anti-EU campaign that is intended to put pressure on the Prime Minister: "The famous and symbolic Crusader who adorns our masthead will become the figurehead of the struggle to repatriate British sovereignty from a political project that has comprehensively failed." On 8 January 2011, a special edition of the newspaper featured a blown-up version of the crusader standing

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[2] Fintan O'Toole likewise argues that English nationalism is at the core of Brexit (166). He discusses in passing pro-Brexit invocations of the Middle Ages as part of what he calls "English Dreamtime," a mythical past that serves to resolve the "compromises, complexities and contradictions" (153) that threaten to discredit the young nationalist project.

[3] I would like to thank Andrew Elliott for first drawing my attention to the *Express* campaign. For Elliott's own reading of it, see his "Medievalism, Brexit, and the Myth of Nations" (35f).

watchful on the white cliffs of Dover, saying "[w]e *demand* our country back," beneath the all-caps headline "GET BRITAIN OUT OF THE EU."[4]

In the picture included in the special edition, there is a slippage between referent identities. It turns out that the "we" in the quotation is far from stable. The headline refers to "Britain" and the figure is called an unspecific "crusader," but thanks to a quirk of history, his coat of arms depicting a red cross on white can be read – and indeed is more likely to be read – as belonging to St George, the patron saint of the English. I read this as a visual variant of the still-common conflation of 'British' and 'English.' The tension between the two need not be resolved. They collapse into the 'happy clarity' of myth once described by Roland Barthes that would suggest, in this case, an Englishness that self-evidently merges into the larger collective of Britain (Barthes 252). The *Express* thus lights on the combination of symbolic notoriety and strange invisibility which characterizes the English constituency that would later vote for Brexit.

A post-Brexit example of the slippage between English and British is provided by Jacob Rees-Mogg, the then chairman of the hardline pro-Brexit European Research Group and incumbent Leader of the House of Commons. In this case, a potted constitutional history openly flirts with jingoism. At the Tory Party conference in October 2017, he recited the following best-of listicle of 'British' success stories to rapt supporters. Rees-Mogg's inspirational pre-modern moments turn out to be a familiar litany of English nationalist touchstones passed off as standing for all Britain:

> We need to be reiterating the benefits of Brexit, because this is […] so important in the history of our country. I mean, this is Magna Carta, it's the burgesses coming at Parliament, it's the great Reform Bill, it's the Bill of Rights. […] It's Waterloo, it's Agincourt, it's Crécy – we win all these things. [*As a member in the crowd prompts him:*] And Trafalgar, absolutely. […] This is such a positive thing for our country. It frees us from a failing economic model. This is a liberation, it is a freedom, it is an inspiration. (Channel 4 News)

English constitutional medievalism – Magna Carta of 1215 and Simon de Montfort's Parliament of 1265 – sits side by side with a post-medieval, British, constitutional landmark, just as the English victories in the Hundred Years' War seamlessly merge with the later, British or

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[4] The front page of the special edition is reproduced in Chapman.

British-led, victories against Napoleonic France. And loosely connecting them all, as well as facilitating the link to Brexit, is again a sketchy notion of 'freedom.'

One of the most substantial constitutional medievalisms produced prior to the referendum both reproduces the English preponderance and elevates the ideology of freedom to the highest rank. This is Brexiteer and Conservative Member of the European Parliament Daniel Hannan's book-length polemic *How We Invented Freedom & Why It Matters* from 2013.[5] Hannan is arguably Brexit's ideologue-in-chief. (Sam Knight refers to him as "The Man Who Brought You Brexit.") A right-wing libertarian, Hannan has been described by some fellow Conservatives as being part of a set of "'grammar-school imperialists'" whose quest is "to reassert what they regard as Britain's lost place in the world" (Knight). He has benefitted from a reputation as the 'thinking man's Brexiteer' while contributing to the infusion of reactionary ideas about historiography, language, culture, and international relations into the political mainstream.

How We Invented Freedom is a cross between a wide-ranging overview of political, legal, and intellectual history and a broadly Thatcherite polemic. For Hannan, "the story of freedom" *is* "the story of the Anglosphere" (12). 'Freedom' here means the rule of law, personal and economic liberty, and representative government (4). The 'Anglosphere' is conceived as those countries with an English-speaking history committed to these freedoms (in Hannan's generous reading, this includes Singapore as much as it does India). The premise of the book, however, is that the Anglosphere has lately disastrously neglected its heritage. Hannan calls on his Anglosphere readers to remember its history, and to take political action against its Europeanization. His remedies include embracing patriotism, especially on the national curriculum; strengthening democracy, the rule of law, and tax-cutting capitalism (322); and curbing the regulatory and welfare state. In the case of Britain, he recommends quitting the EU and instigating an Anglosphere-wide free-trade zone instead (372).

To advocate a libertarian Anglosphere exceptionalism, Hannan consistently looks to the Middle Ages for precedents. Firstly, he asserts the great seniority of the English nation-state, which he dates to the late Anglo-Saxon period. In his view, this was the basis for all the other unique achievements of the Anglosphere. Secondly, the Anglo-Saxon institution of precedent-based law is just as venerable and survived what

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[5] For a fuller discussion of Hannan's polemic, see my "Roots and Beginnings."

Hannan calls the "calamity of the Norman invasion" (80) at the county-level and its administrative subdivision, "the hundred," only to be codified at the national level by the Normans in the mid-twelfth century (77). Thirdly, he claims that, uniquely, in the absence of a "peasant[ry]," medieval England developed an individualist society (79) that proved singularly predisposed to a capitalist economy (132-35). Finally, Hannan gives ample space to the early "representative institutio[n]" (James Campbell qtd. in *How* 84) of the *witenagemot* (the meetings of the "wise men" who advised the Anglo-Saxon kings [83]), and even more space to the restitution and strengthening of such institutions with the sealing of Magna Carta in 1215 (here presented as leading to a proto-upper house) and Simon de Montfort's parliament in 1265 (as a proto-lower house) (121-22).

All this is strongly based on so-called Whig history, a strand of historiography that was very successful mainly in the second half of the nineteenth century. In broad strokes, the traditional Whig master narrative envisions a linear historical trajectory for England – and its ideological successor, Britain – towards a liberal parliamentary and capitalist democracy. What Mary Spongberg and Clara Tuite call the "'forging' of Britain" in Whig historiography involved weaving into a national destiny such cornerstones of English cultural memory as "the 'ancient constitution' of the Saxons, the unbroken continuity of limited monarchy, the providential role of the Church of England, parliament and the rule of Common Law (and the extension of these institutions into Empire)" (673). Furthermore, as Andrew James Johnston points out, "the rise of the gentry in the later Middle Ages and in the Early Modern Period and that of the bourgeoisie in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries" have frequently been argued to constitute "the social side of this ideological construct" (37). A distinguishing feature of the Whig narrative is the premium it puts on genealogy, continuity, and, above all, the notion of progress. The Whig historian, as Herbert Butterfield conceived him in an influential critique, studies "the past with one eye, so to speak, upon the present" (31ff.). The past amounts, in teleological fashion, to "the ratification if not the glorification of the present" (v). The main charge later levelled against Whig history was thus that of practicing immoderate, complacent presentism.

Several characteristics of *How We Invented Freedom* stand out and highlight Hannan's indebtedness to Whig history. Firstly, he engages in bald historical revisionism. He reactivates an outdated grand narrative of the nation to interpret earlier events in light of later ones – that is, teleologically. This is a conscious reactivation: according to Hannan, the current

historical profession is either cowed or taken in by a strident anti-colonialism and multiculturalism.[6] For much of the second half of the twentieth century, Hannan asserts, historians "flinched" from the "truths" of an English exceptionalism with "roots in pre-Modern England" (15). Hannan therefore explicitly emulates the Whig historians because they had no difficulty in seeing this exceptionalism (84, 117). He combines this historiographical atavism with an attack on the national curriculum, which he faults for failing to instil proper patriotic virtue (17). These attacks are, in turn, part of a wider populist, anti-elite rhetoric that anticipates more recent examples witnessed in political insurgencies and 'establishment' defeats in the Western world and beyond.[7]

Very obviously, Hannan sees one long constitutional continuity from medieval England to the modern Anglosphere. In a typical example, he describes the overthrow of James II in 1688 as the assertion of a parliamentary self-government ultimately derived from "the folkright of Anglo-Saxon freedoms" (238); he also sees William of Orange's accession "foreshadow[ed]" in 1014, when Æthelred was "invited conditionally to the throne" (87). Such vague analogizing converts contingency and historical specificity into 'timeless' principles. In a related rhetorical move, Hannan argues in terms of historical "implications" (e.g., 42) being worked out: for example, he claims an *unaltered* continuity for the common law, which he suggests the "pragmatic [...] Anglosphere peoples" more actually "discovered" than "made" (78). This is very much the old claim of a 'unique continuity' of laws and liberties from medieval England to modern Britain – in contrast, that is, to the rupture-ridden Con-

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[6] On the subject of slavery, for example, Hannan argues that postcolonialist critics should stop blaming Britain and the US: "Of course, if your starting point is that Britain and the United States were evil and oppressive colonial powers, you will find something or other to complain about. The absurdity of the whole debate, though, is that we are all descended from slaves; from slave owners too, come to that. It could hardly be otherwise, human history being what it is. [...] We are, in other words, all in this together. Everyone on the planet is descended from the exploiters and the exploited" (287). Hannan's facile comment thoroughly naturalizes, and hence comes close to exculpating, *very specific* instances of slavery by explaining them away as part of a more general "human history." In the historiographical equivalent of privatizing profits and socializing losses, the Anglosphere can be credited with having invented freedom, but it cannot be held to account for having robbed others of theirs.

[7] Hannan seems personally to have participated in the disparagement of an opposition declared elitist during the European Union membership referendum campaign: according to Knight, Hannan was behind the prominent Leave campaigner Michael Gove's infamous claim that people were "fed up with experts."

tinent (Utz 105). And since this early English history holds 'lessons,' 'truths,' and 'precedents,' for Hannan it determines what is politically possible and desirable in the present.

Closely linked to this are Hannan's assertions of transhistorical national identity. Although he dissociates these from racial definitions, he claims cultural filiation from decidedly homogeneous medieval origins (the Anglo-Saxons), and even postulates consistent character traits. Hannan indulges in some striking linguistic essentialism and determinism, claiming English has been a "guarantor of liberty down the centuries" (33) and has the "intrinsic propert[y]" of "favour[ing] the expression of empirical, down-to-earth, practical ideas" (29). He contrasts this latter aspect with the pretentious, "stodgy" (29) continental language of a "Hegel or Marx, Derrida, or Sartre" (30). Without irony, Hannan quotes the "intellectually dazzling" (122) nationalist Enoch Powell's description of English as "'the tongue made for telling truth in'" (qtd. 124).[8]

The claim to continuities of both constitution and character are of a piece with Hannan's organic and procreative diction. He refers to the "germs" of liberties brought over the Channel by the Germanic settlers (57), to parliamentary democracy "pulsing in the womb" in the tenth century (75), and to the common law growing "like a coral" over the centuries (30). The coronation oath sworn by King Edgar upon his consecration in 973, Hannan tells us, contained the idea of government by contract "in foetal form" (85). With some ingenuity, Hannan even detects the "roots of [continental European] statism claw[ing] their way deep into the cold soil of the Middle Ages" (141). It is in such rhetorical devices that the idea of 'homegrown' political culture is at its most apparent. I propose to call this a form of the politics of autochthony. A brand of identity politics, the politics of autochthony works to dignify a highly contingent series of events as the 'natural growth' of the nation, which is here very much conceived as an organic *body* politic.

Hannan's Euroscepticism is rooted in precisely this politics of autochthony. In *How We Invented Freedom*, the EU poses a threat to homegrown liberties not just in its current incarnation. Rather, European integration is contrary to the very nature of Britain in the light of normative ancient origins, unbroken continuity, and timeless national identi-

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[8] This quotation is from a 1961 speech by Powell that Hannan describes as seeking to articulate no less than "the essence of Englishness" (123) – and not, it goes without saying, Britishness.

ties.[9] Furthermore, Hannan supplements the British/European dichotomy with a familiar populist one that pits a patriotic 'people' against EU-friendly domestic 'elites.' Hannan repeatedly criticizes Britain's "multiculturalist establishment" and "intellectual elites" (17) and imputes to Europhilia "connotations [...] of snobbery, of contempt for majority opinion, of the smugness of a remote political caste" (93). Forgetful of their roots, they are, in a word, un-British.

While Hannan's elaborate medievalism is not, at present, representative of a sizeable political movement, there was a notable pre-Brexit parallel to his essentialist neo-Whig version of history. The right-wing "Historians for Britain" pressure group around Cambridge historian David Abulafia and including a handful of high-profile historians and journalists such as David Starkey and Andrew Roberts pushed a similar Eurosceptic agenda.[10] They banded together to make their case for a Britain outside the EU, again based on an exceptionalist reading of English and British history.

The Historians for Britain made their first appearance in a letter to *The Times* in 2013, then went on to set up a website sporting a blown-up image of the 'original Brexiteer,' Henry VIII, and in 2015, Abulafia issued a "manifesto-style proclamation" in *History Today* (Gregor).[11] They were linked to the Eurosceptic think-tank Business for Britain and readily admitted their "ties to businesspeople with similar agendas" (Gregor; see also Mammone). Incongruously, they also claimed to be "independent and nonpartisan" (as per their homepage). Andrew Knapp points out that, tellingly, the Historians for Britain shared their Westminster address with "the Thatcherite Centre for Policy Studies,

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[9] Likewise, whereas Hannan champions the homegrown "folkright of Anglo-Saxon freedoms" (238) as expressed, for example, in the American Bill of Rights, he has little time for international, universalist human rights charters (117ff., 359). These appeal, as Jonathan Sumption points out, to natural rights "anterior to society itself" (2) and therefore are ill-suited to valorize one particular society or one particular legal system.

[10] Evidence of the Historians moving in the same intellectual orbit as Hannan is provided by the fact that Roberts is quoted as endorsing *How We Invented Freedom* on the publisher's website: "This is a brilliant book [...]. Daniel Hannan has found the key to the success of the English-speaking peoples: the unique political and legal institutions that make us what we are" ("Polemic of the Year").

[11] The website has been given a complete makeover since 2017. Everything points to a domain abandoned and repurposed: the self-description as a "campaign" has been changed to "an independent and non-partisan academic organization," its manifesto-like profile discarded in favour of a handful of soft-focus articles with such titles as "12 United Kingdom Facts That You Should Know" (all apparently authored by one "Brian"), and all references to the Historians for Britain's original leading lights removed.

the Taxpayers' Alliance (opposed to taxes) and the Global Warming Policy Foundation (opposed to tackling climate change)." Although they purported to be constituted of "dozens of Britain's leading historians" (*Historians for Britain*), Gregor noted that their ranks thinned significantly if one sifted out "the journalists and the purveyors of coffee-table history-as-entertainment."

In occupying the conveniently unaccountable twilight zone between academia and journalism, the Historians for Britain bear a remarkable similarity to Hannan. *How We Invented Freedom* too inhabits a curious discursive grey area. While offering no scholarly apparatus whatsoever, Hannan keeps up a pretence of scholarly decorum for much of the book and in his acknowledgements reflects on his status as a trained historian-turned-politician: "It was only several years after being elected to political office that I finally admitted to myself that I would never be a full-time historian" (n.p.). Adopting the popularizing approach of a part-time historian, Hannan strikes the pose of a worldly outsider to, and ostensibly impartial critic of, today's misguided, unpatriotic academic discipline of history. The similarities between Hannan and the Historians for Britain do not end there. The Historians for Britain too were clearly inspired by the old Whig narrative of unique continuity and so told a very similar story of ancient English (then British) exceptionalism as Hannan had. Like Hannan, Abulafia's *History Today* piece skates over anything that could endanger that positive exceptionalism, including the history of British imperialism and colonialism.

It would be adventurous to claim that there is a direct line leading from the endeavours of these politicians, historians, and journalists to the democratic renunciation of EU membership. Neither Hannan nor the Historians for Britain managed to do much more than preach to the converted: Hannan's book was largely ignored by academia and received only scant attention by non-partisan and left-of-centre media outlets, and a number of public rebuttals showed that the Historians for Britain's history of British exceptionalism were up against some robust opposition among fellow historians.[12] And yet, it is conceivable, even likely, that the kind of historically grounded sense of English-British exceptionalism formulated in detail by these parties is shared, in a more diffuse form, by a great many of their compatriots.

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[12] An open letter entitled "Fog in Channel, Historians Isolated," challenging the interpretation of British history of the Historians for Britain, was signed by roughly three hundred academics.

If the immemorial 'freedom' of England-Britain is rooted in the Middle Ages, the fear of *unfreedom* too finds a ready home in them, specifically in cultural memories of the Norman Conquest of 1066. The idea that Anglo-Saxon freedoms were lost under a hated 'Norman Yoke,' a yoke only gradually shaken off over subsequent centuries, historically has been a powerful myth (e.g., Brownlie). Continuing this tradition, Brexiteer discourse has readily linked the British relationship with the EU to the Conquest. Predictably, the Bayeux Tapestry can be relied upon as a shorthand for this idea. This ready-to-use link led the *Sun* to publish a gleeful "Bye-EU Tapestry" artwork early in 2018, showing Theresa May's anticipated triumph in the Brexit negotiations – represented by a heap of decapitated European leaders – and a Britain freed from "continental shackles" ("Tapestry Is EU-rs"). Nigel Farage, erstwhile UKIP leader and relentless Eurosceptic agitator since the 1990s, made a political fashion statement already in 2014 by sporting a tie depicting the Tapestry in order to recall, he announced, "the last time we were invaded and taken over" (qtd. in Sutherland). In a 2016 campaign sound bite, hard-Brexit frontman Boris Johnson used the (pre-existing) phrase "the biggest stitch-up since the Bayeux Tapestry" to disparage the Remain campaign (qtd. in Chambre). In these examples, the iconic tapestry is interpreted as a monument to foreign oppression.

The language of feudalism serves a closely related function. In December 2017, Johnson, by now Foreign Secretary, worried that Britain might end up adopting EU regulations without having a say in them after exiting. He was quoted as saying that there was a danger of Britain going "from a member state to a vassal state" (qtd. in Stewart). In early 2018, Rees-Mogg repeated the phrase "vassal state" to refer to the prospect of a transitional period between the UK's exit and the negotiation of a new settlement with the EU. Later that year, he condemned the government's strategy White Paper as "the greatest vassalage since King John paid homage to Philip II at Le Goulet in 1200." Johnson, when resigning from the cabinet, spoke of the prospect of "economic vassalage" (both qtd. in O'Toole 157). These post-Brexit statements were echoes of the Leave campaign's pledge to 'take back control' for Britain. That scenario always assumed that a malignant external force was withholding freedom and sovereignty from Britain, whose natural greatness was thus impeded. The language of feudalism is particularly charged in the English context because a common myth has it that this form of imported 'continental' tyranny supplanted an autochthonous, free English social and political order (Leerssen 48).

Notions of ancestral freedom and foreign oppression, then, are two sides of the same coin. Cultural memories of (to borrow Sellar and Yeatman's phrase) "1066 and All That" – specifically, cultural memories of the Anglo-Saxons, the Norman Conquest, and the subsequent forced transformation of English society – are the most powerful vehicle for these twin notions currently at the Brexiteers' disposal. True to his pre-dilection for vague historical analogies, Hannan too is much exercised by the danger that the Norman Yoke is being repeated in the twenty-first century, reincarnated as the British loss of sovereignty under an overreaching, unaccountable EU. Besides *How We Invented Freedom*, jour-nalistic pieces by Hannan highlight the depth of his concern with Nor-man-style subjugation ("We"; "Norman Conquest").[13]

As these examples suggest, political medievalism has been catapulted to a place of relative prominence in Brexit Britain. In a sense, however, Hannan and his partners in medievalism may have got more than they bargained for. The language of sovereignty inherited from the national-isms of the last two centuries may have made the Middle Ages an attrac-tive benchmark for the politics of autochthony once again. In the case of Brexit Britain, however, continuity medievalism is full of pitfalls pre-cisely because the 'home' in its 'homegrown history' is so lopsidedly English.

Fintan O'Toole remarks that the "most dramatic evolution of na-tional identity in Britain in the last two decades is the resurfacing of the idea of England as a distinct political community" (185). Yet before the Brexit vote, that resurgence had no national arena. This is an older problem made acute by the increasing strength of English nationalism. As Krishan Kumar suggests, English national identity has for centuries tended to reach outwards to encompass larger, British, Commonwealth, and Anglosphere identities – that is to say, it has latched on to the am-bivalent results of former imperial projects (x). Even after Brexit, O'Toole observes, the increasingly powerful English nationalism is a force "that its leaders [...] refuse to articulate" (193). In a 2012 blog post for the *Telegraph*, Hannan himself argued that not Scottish, but ra-ther "English separatism [is] the chief threat to the Union" ("Greater

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[13] The medievalizing language of foreign conquest and domination comes easily to to-day's purveyors of 'sovereignty' not just in Britain but across Europe. In Switzerland, for instance, national-conservative political forces warn that sinister "foreign judges" will undermine Swiss autonomy. The phrase harks back to the core Swiss mythical complex of the medievalist liberation tradition and has become a Eurosceptic watchword since the national decision to join the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) in 1969 (Kreis 21).

Threat"). In *How We Invented Freedom*, he consequently rejects the idea that his Anglosphere "is somehow just an amplification of England" (244). Yet I would suggest that Brexit medievalism habitually demonstrates where its allegiances truly lie: with a time-honoured English nation, with former English military glory, and even more with former English constitutional achievements. Precisely this kind of lionizing of English history – to the point of eclipsing all but the most recent histories of Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland – may yet become a problem for another union, this time closer to home.

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