

# Chapter 1

## *Saxonism*

Every Englishman dislikes being lumped along with Scots, Irish,  
Welsh . . . as British

Ford Madox Ford<sup>1</sup>

Some time ago, my employer asked me to complete an ‘Equal Opportunity Monitoring Form’, based, it was said, on the categories used for the 2001 Census of the United Kingdom. Part of it read as follows:

Please describe your ethnic origin: *(please tick one box only)*  
*(Ethnic origin questions are not about nationality, place of birth, or citizenship. They are about colour and ethnic group. Citizens of any country may belong to any of the groups indicated . . .)*

WHITE

British

Irish

Any other White background

Officially, therefore, ‘White British’ describes your ethnic group if you are . . . white British. Yet who, in Britain, thinks of ‘Britishness’ as an ethnicity? Being ‘British’ is not an ethnicity, it describes citizenship of the United Kingdom, a term cooked up in 1603 by the Scottish King James I, after he had ascended to the English throne on the death of Elizabeth I, as a way of pulling together the parts of his new kingdom of South and North Britain, which together would

### *Saxonism*

make up ‘Great Britain’, or more grandly, as he called it, the ‘British Empire’. As Linda Colley has shown, ‘British’ has always been a particularly Scottish thing, precisely designed to distinguish between citizenship, nationality and ethnicity.<sup>2</sup> Now extended to other ethnicities, the concept ‘Britishness’ has been invented as a cultural identity corresponding to the political identity, British, only fairly recently. The OED records just two uses of the term ‘Britishness’ before 1904. In the nineteenth century, ‘British’ was as likely to be used to describe the ancient Britons who preceded the Saxons as the modern inhabitants of the British Isles – in a time when the English identified strongly with the Saxons, to call themselves British could give out the wrong connotations.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Britain is not and never has been a nation, any more than it is an ethnicity: it is a confederation of nations. ‘Great Britain’ is made up of England, Wales and Scotland. The ‘United Kingdom’ includes one more (or rather part of one more), Northern Ireland. Officially, therefore, the ‘United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland’ is a United Kingdom of three nations plus another bit which seems not to be another nation united with the rest, but one which finds its identity through another nation, which is not (now) part of the United Kingdom.

The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is the only country on earth allowed to field four national teams in international football and rugby (cricket is more complicated: ‘England’ represents England and Wales, ‘Ireland’ a united Ireland, North and South, and Scotland itself). When you go on a plane to the USA, and are told how to fill in your US visa form, when it comes to the line where you have to state your nationality, you are given strict instructions not to say that you are British but to put ‘UK’. The Department of Homeland Security will accept no alternatives – certainly not ‘British’. Which only goes to prove that the term ‘British’ represents many things, often ambiguous, but never an ethnicity – unless, of course, it is attached to an ethnic marker, such as ‘British Asian’. English, Scottish or Welsh are the only categories that white people would apply to themselves in Britain in the context of ethnicity – as is

### *Saxonism*

signalled in the monitoring form by the alternative possibility of being Irish. The Welsh and Scots would doubtless have preferred to have been allowed their own ethnicity and nationality in the census form (Northern Irish Protestants would no doubt tick 'British', Catholics 'Irish'). No doubt the Welsh and Scots were not differentiated because that would have meant offering a separate category for the English. And this poses the important question, can 'English' really be an ethnicity? Yet if being Scots, Welsh or Irish is by common assent regarded as an ethnicity, why should being English not be an ethnicity?

One of the most striking things about all the recent attempts to characterize Englishness is that it is rarely defined as an ethnicity. The English are neither an ethnic minority nor ethnic majority. Yet the attempt to characterize the English as an ethnic or racial group was in many ways the origin of modern accounts of Englishness itself. In today's terms, Englishness may not be an ethnicity, but English was certainly once used to describe a race, and a top one at that by all accounts that you read of 'this island race'. Today, it is customary to portray the racialism of the nineteenth century as 'pseudo-scientific', and to assume that it was mostly designed to denigrate non-European or colonized peoples. While such denigration was clearly central to racial theory, modern readers tend to be so appalled by what was said about Africans and other non-Europeans that they do not notice that much of the research on race, certainly from the 1840s onwards, was devoted to analyses of European ethnicity, the culminating works of which were John Beddoe's *The Races of Britain* (1885) and William Ripley's *The Races of Europe* (1900).<sup>4</sup> Ripley's *Selected Bibliography of the Anthropology and Ethnography of Europe*, published in 1899, runs to 159 pages.<sup>5</sup> The Victorians themselves were in fact far more pre-occupied with a complex elaboration of European racial differences and alliances than with what they perceived to be the relatively straightforward task of distinguishing between European and non-European races. Of this European racial science, only anti-Semitism is widely known, but anti-Semitism was itself the product of a much wider project of analysing European races and scrutinizing European

### *Saxonism*

racial identity, for which anti-Semitism provided a foil. In the nineteenth century, the differences between European races and their national characteristics were increasingly emphasized in response to growing imperial competitiveness.

Charting European ethnicity has recently returned to favour in the realm of anthropology and genetics. In 1994, a book called *The Times Guide to the Peoples of Europe*, which was capitalizing on the re-emergence of ethnic nationalism after the break up of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, offered itself as a piece of anthropology in which sophisticated modern Europe was represented as a collection of ethnic groups.<sup>6</sup> In 2005, David Miles followed this with the *The Tribes of Britain*, while the next year Brian Sykes published the startling results of his archaeological genetics of Britain in *The Blood of the Isles*.<sup>7</sup> This tracing of British and European ethnicity is part of a long tradition.

### **The Racial Past of England**

There are probably few educated Englishmen living who have not in their infancy been taught that the English nation is a nation of almost pure Teutonic blood, that its political constitution, its social customs, its internal prosperity, the success of its arms, and the number of its colonies have all followed necessarily upon the arrival, in three vessels, of certain German warriors under the command of Hengist and Horsa.

### **Luke Owen Pike, *The English and Their Origin* (1866)<sup>8</sup>**

While nineteenth-century anthropologists such as E. B. Tylor and James Frazer became obsessed with the question of how much the primitive past survived in European culture, British historians grew equally preoccupied with the survival of the national past, and the

### *Saxonism*

question of the origin of the English nation (only rarely did they think in terms of the origin of the British nation, still less of the origin of the United Kingdom. How many times do you see the title *History of the United Kingdom* or *Great Britain* compared to *History of England?*)<sup>9</sup>

For the historians, to ask who the English were inevitably moved to the question of where they came from. Broadly speaking, as Hugh MacDougall shows in *Racial Myth in English History* (1982), there have been two myths of racial origin developed for the English, which we may call the myth of Arthur versus the myth of Alfred.<sup>10</sup> To promote Arthur or Alfred in the nineteenth century was a highly political project.<sup>11</sup>

The first historical myth put forward by Geoffrey of Monmouth in the twelfth century, and subsequently elaborated by Malory in the fifteenth, was, as the story is generally told, that Britain had originally been peopled by what are now called Celts, and triumphally led by the heroic King Arthur. Eventually the conquering Arthur came to be seen as the hero of the whole population, uniting the Britons with the Angles and Saxons and drawing them together into a single British nation. The Arthurian myth was used actively by Plantagenet, Tudor and Stuart monarchs, to suggest that they were the legitimate heirs of the early British kings, and to link them to romantic British history. As the process of unifying the country developed after 1603, the Arthurian myth was invoked to symbolize the idea of a composite nation. The new nationality, in this inscription, was fundamentally identified as British (Old English *Bryttisc*), deliberately invoking the pre-Roman ancient Britons. The reference of the term was gradually broadened to include not only Saxons and Normans but any inhabitant of the British Empire, wherever they might be. In the seventeenth century, however, the figure of the inclusive Arthur was unable to resolve the growing religious division between Catholics and Protestants, and the Protestant fear of a Popish conspiracy to return the country to the ecclesiastical rule of Rome.

As religious anxiety increased in the sixteenth century, the power of the Arthurian myth began to wane and was effectively eliminated

### *Saxonism*

in the political sphere by the so-called Glorious Revolution of 1688. With the arrival of the Hanoverian King from Germany, the old Arthurian narrative gave way to an alternative Whig history, which stressed the nation's English and Protestant identity and its Saxon constitutional freedoms. Protestantism was always (ahistorically) Saxon and English. The Arthur who had united the diverse inhabitants of Britain was replaced by an identification with the Saxon, English Alfred, described in the *Proverbs of Alfred* as:

Englene hurde,  
Englene durlyng;  
On Engle-londe he was kyng.

guardian of the English,  
darling of the English,  
he was king in the land of the English.<sup>12</sup>

In the nineteenth century, Alfred effectively became the national patron saint – indeed it was suggested by some that he replace St George. The Victorians celebrated the millennium of the birth and death of ‘England’s darling’ in novels, history books, children’s books, plays, pageants and statues, produced from English-speaking countries all around the globe.<sup>13</sup> If Alfred began life as a Saxon, by 1901 he had become an Anglo-Saxon.<sup>14</sup> The use of the term ‘Anglo-Saxon’ to describe modern Saxons, that is English, rather than the historical Anglo-Saxon people and their language, came into favour in England in the mid-nineteenth century, as will be shown in chapter 6. This usage seems to have been invented around the time of the American Revolution for the (formerly) English colonists who adopted the name of the English ancestors with whom they most identified.

The new myth of English origins appropriate to and appropriated for the aftermath of the Glorious Revolution began by characterizing the English as Saxons, Teutons, Goths or Germans, all of which were in practice more or less synonymous, since the terms could never be defined precisely. This racial identification replaced the earlier

### *Saxonism*

historical myth in which the English had thought of themselves as a mix of Celts, Vikings, Angles, Saxons, Jutes and others. Now the English were Saxons, pure and simple (the various Germanic and northern tribes all being assimilated to this one name, though some preferred more general alternatives, such as Teuton, or, simply, German). It was this ideology of Saxonist purity that prompted Defoe's famous poem 'The True Born Englishman' of 1701, in which he satirized the pretensions of the Englishman to have a pedigree as pure as his horse and cattle:

Thus from a Mixture of all Kinds began,  
That Het'rogeneous Thing, *An Englishman*:  
In eager Rapes, and furious Lust begot,  
Betwixt a Painted *Britton* and a *Scot*:  
Whose gend'ring Offspring quickly learnt to bow,  
And yoke their Heifers to the *Roman* Plough:  
From whence a Mongrel half-bred Race there came,  
With neither Name nor Nation, Speech or Fame.  
In whose hot Veins new Mixtures quickly ran,  
Infus'd betwixt a *Saxon* and a *Dane*.  
While their Rank Daughters, to their Parents just,  
Receiv'd all Nations with Promiscuous Lust.  
This Nauseous Brood directly did contain  
The well-extracted Blood of *Englishmen*.<sup>15</sup>

The effective response to Defoe's argument from the 1840s onwards was to characterize all these groups in terms of 'race' – and according to racial theory, they were either all Teutons anyway (for example, Saxons and Danes), or trivial in terms of their input (Britons, Romans).

When people used the term 'race', however, they could mean a lot of different things. From the seventeenth century onwards, the English (and not just those we would now call English) began thinking of themselves as Saxon in a variety of ways: in terms of the lineage of their King, their church, their language, and in terms of where one particular set of the great variety of their ancestor invaders had come from (interest here focused on the various Saxons,

### *Saxonism*

who were then linked to the Danes, the Vikings, the Belgae, even at times the Normans). The Saxon set, as they might be called, though vaguely defined and linked to a host of successive invasions, could always be anchored in the reign, four centuries later, of King Alfred (c. 870), and before that in the documented arrival of the ‘real’ English with Hengist and Horsa and the Saxon invaders who landed at Ebbsfield, Kent, in 449, a historical narrative of ‘our island story’ that would be parodied mercilessly in Sellar and Yeatman’s *1066 and All That* (1930):

The brutal Saxon invaders drove the Britons westward into Wales and compelled them to become Welsh; it is now considered doubtful whether this was a Good Thing. Memorable among the Saxon warriors were Hengist and his wife (? or horse), Horsa. . . . The country was now almost entirely inhabited by Saxons and was therefore renamed England, and thus (naturally) soon became C. of E. This was a Good Thing.<sup>16</sup>

Saxon identity was fundamentally rooted in the national characteristics attributed to the Germans by Tacitus, and from that basis then demarcated by being contrasted with two other groups, the Celts, described as the ancient native Britons, surviving in the Scottish highlands, Wales, Ireland and parts of France, and associated with Roman Catholicism, and, to a much lesser extent, the Jews, the most substantial other presence throughout most of recorded English history whose identity and religion had remained distinct. Where the native Celtic Britons had not been pushed back to the Celtic fringes of Wales, Scotland and Ireland, they had been exterminated: as David Hume suggested without a trace of scepticism in his *History of England* (1754–62), the English nation was founded on genocide.<sup>17</sup> (Even today, this remains a matter of debate, mysteriously circulating around two absences: the virtual absence of Celtic words in the English language, which seems to prove it, as against the absence of masses of skeletal remains, which seems to disprove it.) Hume’s *History of England*, suitably written by a Scot, was written to counter

### *Saxonism*

the Whig narrative which presented the Stuarts as attacking ancient Saxon freedoms. The Whigs responded to Hume by starting their English history either from the Saxons, or from their modern re-incarnation in seventeenth-century Protestants, as it suited them. The spirit of the narrative remained the same.

With the Celts conveniently exterminated or pushed back to the westerly margins by the Saxons, disaster struck. In 1066, Harold, the hero of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom, was himself killed by victorious Norman invaders, an image of heroic failure that itself presented a form of narrative of which the English would become particularly fond, perversely preferring heroic defeat to success itself – endemic to a whole succession of English heroes – Gordon of Khartoum, Scott of the Antarctic, and a role now frequently taken over by the England team in the European and World Cups. The nation was not born with the arrival of the Normans, but paradoxically it came into being at that moment of defeat, when the first invaders, who were the ‘real’ English, were defeated by the second invaders, the French Normans, who would have to be made English. Notice that the ‘original’ English, the Britons, figure nowhere at all in this narrative. The Saxons, having become English, would then subsequently work to anglicize the Normans in turn. The assimilation of the Normans represents the first instance of the idea that being English is something that you do not have to be born into but that you can become. As the historian E. A. Freeman put it at the beginning of *William the Conqueror* (1888):

Our history has been largely wrought for us by men who have come in from without, sometimes as conquerors, sometimes as the opposite of conquerors; but in whatever character they came, they had to put on the character of Englishmen, and to make their work an English work. From whatever land they came, on whatever mission they came, as statesmen they were English.<sup>18</sup>

The Norman invasion showed that being English is something that you can ‘put on’: it is a perpetual process of becoming, a pursuit of authenticity in which the copy is allowed to be as authentic as any

### *Saxonism*

original. Being English was always about being out of place, about displacement from an earlier point of origin – but its dynamics can only be understood by realizing that there was rarely a prior moment of being in place.<sup>19</sup> From the Normans onwards, to be English was, literally, to be eccentric. Or at least to feel yourself so, which was why the attractions of moving off to the periphery were always a part of being from the centre. So Thomas Lawrence of 2, Polstead Road, Oxford, became Lawrence of Arabia.

Whereas the nation had been founded through its first invasion, the second – the arrival of the Normans under William the Conqueror in 1066 – was widely regarded as an infringement of the true racial and cultural identity of the Saxon English: historians identifying with the Saxons therefore drew on the thesis of ‘the Norman yoke’, which portrayed English history as the story of the struggle against the invaders, who were eventually successfully assimilated: the Saxons eventually conquered their conquerors.<sup>20</sup> The bovine metaphor of the yoke had become popular at the time of the English Revolution in the seventeenth century, during the conflict between the Commons and the King. It remained embodied in popular culture thereafter, the best-known example being the struggle of Robin Hood against the Sheriff of Nottingham. Robin Hood in fact became far more popular than either Alfred or Harold ever managed to be. The significance of Magna Carta was magnified to emphasize the political liberty supposed to be intrinsic to the Saxon race (though it was in fact Edward Coke who, in his reorganization of English common law in the seventeenth century, had extended the basis of Magna Carta beyond the nobility), and celebrated as the beginning of the process of Britons freeing themselves from the shackles of the Norman yoke. In the nineteenth century, the apogee of this view was developed by Freeman, said never to have recovered from the happy accident of his name: it was Freeman who developed most fully the popular ideology that intrinsic to the Saxon character were the qualities of Protestantism, freedom and liberty.<sup>21</sup> Saxon boys’ names such as Alfred, Archibald, Clifford, Dudley, Harold and Winston became popular. Though Queen Victoria is represented

### *Saxonism*

as a Saxon Queen, alongside Prince Albert as a Saxon chief, in William Theed's monument in Windsor Chapel, Saxonism rarely applied to girls. For there was always an implicit gender division in operation: to be Saxon was to be masculine. The feminine was Celtic.

The reasons for this dramatic reorientation of national history were largely religious and political: from the time of the Reformation, when England became Protestant, and even more from the time of the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688 when, under threat from a Catholic-sympathizing King James II, Parliament had brought in the fiercely Protestant German William of Orange as King, the English had identified with the Protestant Germans as opposed to the Catholic Celtic French. The ideological design of this Saxon supremacist myth of English origin was to legitimate not only the Hanoverians, but also the Reformation, and to provide a historical genealogy for its national institution, the Church of England. Saxonism was always closely identified with English Protestant values, which accounts among other things for its popularity among white Protestants in the United States.<sup>22</sup> For the English, the Saxon affiliations with the Teutonic Germans perfectly encapsulated a Protestant solidarity against the wiles of Catholicism and the French. Decades of struggle against the French during the Napoleonic Wars with France only reinforced the desire to assume a Germanic identity, and it was above all from this time that the English increasingly claimed that they were Saxons rather than Celts.

### **'Our English Race is the German Race': Saxonism and 'Stock'**

These two myths, Arthur and Alfred, one dominant, while the other faded away only to re-emerge, circulated in a dialectical economy with each other: the one a story of return to the centre, of origins, the other a tale of dispersal, of scattered peoples girding the country, and then girdling the earth, trying to hold on to a collective identity, even

### *Saxonism*

if in the perpetual return to Camelot, the centre was lost, absent, wounded like Arthur himself, with a lack at the origin. The one ran as the negative inside the other like a mobius strip of alterity, poetry inside prose, prose lurking within poetry, propelling each other in a relay of restless goings forth and returns. Despite their differences, there were similarities. Both told the story of ancient arrivals, subsequent defeats, expulsions, moving onwards, of riding westward. The origin of English origins was never an originary source of nativism – it was always the appearance of those who came from an elsewhere, a beyond to which they would, in time, return. Nothing captures the formation of Englishness better than these restless circuits of arrivals and departures, comings and goings, immigration and emigration, mixtures and dispersals.

How do such myths of origin and identity get created, disseminate, become the object of belief? In particular, how do they become dominant in a culture in the face of alternative narratives and ideologies circulating in the collective memory? In the case of Arthur versus Alfred, in the literary domain the poets stayed largely loyal to Arthur and the Celts, and identified with their exalted bardic provenance. The writers of prose, the historians and historical novelists, essayists and historical philologists, the Cobbetts and Hazlitts of the world, by contrast, identified themselves with the plain-speaking Saxons, and it was they who were largely responsible for developing an exalted identity for the English as Saxon in language, culture and history.<sup>23</sup> While these identifications of the Saxons were always interlinked, they were developed across different disciplines which in certain respects remained relatively discrete from each other. There was nothing that quite brought the different interests together. Until the nineteenth century, when they were all linked up to the new ideas about race.

Although the golden age of Saxonism came in the nineteenth century, it drew on a long history: it was during the political upheavals of the seventeenth century that the radical parliamentarians and levellers first identified Anglo-Saxon culture with institutions of representative government and common law guaranteeing political

### *Saxonism*

freedom, and with a pure primitive form of English Christianity. This was the moment of the first scholarly interest in the Saxons, particularly their institutions and their language. By 1768 Stuart Gilbert, in his *An Historical Dissertation concerning the Antiquity of the English Constitution*, grounded his bald opening assertion that ‘the foundation and principles of the Anglo-Saxon constitution, are to be found . . . in the institutions and manner of the ancient Germans’, with an epigraph from Montesquieu:

Si l'on veut lire l'admirable ouvrage de Tacite sur les moeurs des Germains, on verra que c'est d'eux que les Anglois ont tiré de leur gouvernement politique. Ce beau système a été trouvé dans les bois.<sup>24</sup>

The identification between the English and the qualities of the freedom-loving sylvan Germans, as described by Tacitus, led to many translations and editions of the *Germania* being published from 1755 onwards, including one by the ethnologist R. G. Latham in 1851.<sup>25</sup> Tacitus' brief characterization of the German character was central to Saxonism. By the eighteenth century, the identification had become strong enough for the American Revolutionists to see themselves as reasserting their ancient birthright of Anglo-Saxon freedom when they rebelled against the British King in 1776. Jefferson, who, like many of the founding fathers of the American republic, was particularly fond of the idea that Anglo-Saxon society embodied the original founding principles of American democracy, and even proposed putting Hengist and Horsa on the Great Seal of the United States.<sup>26</sup> None of these forms of identification were racial in the modern or even nineteenth-century sense. The interest was extended to include ancient myths and legends, particularly in the work of the Scottish antiquarian Thomas Percy, who followed his celebrated *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765) with a translation of Paul-Henri Mallet's *Northern Antiquities* (1770), a work which extended the idealization of the Germans to Scandinavians. The antiquarian interest in the Saxons was transformed at the beginning of the nineteenth century by the advent of German

### *Saxonism*

philology, which moved interest to questions of language and its origins. Dr Johnson's *Dictionary* of 1755 had included a chart showing the derivation of English from 'Gothick or Teutonic': it was well known therefore that English and German shared a common 'origin'. There was a tremendous growth in scholarly interest in the philological history of the language and its affiliations to other Northern languages. The discovery of the Indo-European origin of the Anglo-Saxon language led to an interest in the geographical origins of the distant originating fathers of the language – the Aryans, and this would later be linked to racial theory, particularly in Germany. In England, an identification of the linguistic origins of English led to a movement to restore it to its purer and plainer Anglo-Saxon forms, first waywardly proposed in the eccentric work of Horne Tooke, and then vigorously developed by many since, from Hazlitt to Hopkins, from Herbert Spencer to George Orwell. At the same time, this identification led to the establishment of the study of English literature with a strong emphasis on Anglo-Saxon, significantly identified as 'Old English' in order to emphasize that there 'has been but one speech spoken in England by the Teutonic tribes and their descendants from Caedmon to Tennyson'.<sup>27</sup> Only outside England was English Literature ever called 'British Literature'.

The first scholarly work based on Anglo-Saxon manuscripts was Sharon Turner's enormously popular *History of England from the Earliest Period to the Norman Conquest* (1799–1805), a book which gave the first comprehensive account not only of the history but also of the language and literature of the Anglo-Saxons.<sup>28</sup> It was Turner who could be said to have first created the modern myth of King Alfred, to whom he enthusiastically devotes over two hundred pages. Himself inspired by Percy, Turner's work in turn paved the way for more orthodox scholarly work by Benjamin Thorpe and John Mitchell Kemble who studied in Germany with Rasmus Kristian Rask and Jacob Grimm, two of the founders of the new German philology. Between them, Thorpe and Kemble introduced German philology into Britain and integrated British philology with the German school: Thorpe translated Rask's *Anglo-Saxon Grammar* in 1830, and for many years after he

### *Saxonism*

and Kemble prepared scholarly editions, based on manuscripts, and translations of Anglo-Saxon and Old-Norse texts, particularly ‘national’ works such as *Beowulf* and *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.<sup>29</sup> Under their influence the Philological Society of London was formed in 1842; twenty years later its members initiated the greatest monument to English German philology, a record of the complete history of written English, now known as the OED, and recently named as one of the British government’s ‘icons of England’. More than any other element, English would remain thereafter the core component of . . . being English. This is less simple than it might seem. The initial enthusiasm, encouraged by James Cowles Prichard’s linguistically based ethnology, was to identify the language with the people or the race: by the time Ferdinand de Saussure dismissed the idea in 1916, however, this idea had been regularly challenged for nearly fifty years by linguists and anthropologists alike. And yet, as Freeman suggested in 1879, though it might by that time be considered a mistake to identify the one with the other, there still seemed a common-sense link between the two that people found appealing.<sup>30</sup> In general, the English continued to identify the English people with their language. The very reason why language was dissociated from race – anyone can learn another language, whereas biology for the most part prevents racial migration – came to open up a very different avenue for ideas of Englishness. You could always learn to be English, in the same way as you could learn English itself. There was ‘proper’ English, but there were also many Englishes.

### **Teutonism**

For the most part, however, it was the historians and essayists rather than the historical philologists who, from the late 1830s onwards, were the most up-front ideologues of Saxonism. To call Saxonism an ideology, however, should not be taken to imply that it was a single set of ideas. The challenge for anyone writing about it is that each individual writer characterized it according to his own preferences

### *Saxonism*

and preoccupations, within an overall paradigm in which Germanic ideas of 'race' and 'nation' were set against French values of 'civilization'. Overall, what emerges is a cluster of interrelated ideas which succeeded in establishing a range of possibilities that produced the flexibility and contradictory qualities necessary to every successful ideology.

This is clear if we look at one of the first historians who developed the strong identification of the English with the Goths, or as he preferred to say, the Teutons. Thomas Hughes' emphasis on English-as-Saxon which we encountered in *Tom Brown's Schooldays* was itself a reflection of the ideas of the real-life version of the headmaster portrayed in Hughes' book, Thomas Arnold, Matthew Arnold's father, famous founder of Rugby School and Regius Professor of History at Oxford. In his *Inaugural Lecture* delivered at Oxford in December 1841, Arnold made a double argument about Englishness, one that would in a certain sense determine the parameters of the debate thereafter: the English were culturally mixed, but what made them great was their ethnic purity. The variations on this that would follow were that the English were racially mixed, but culturally pure, or that they were both racially and culturally mixed.

Arnold argued that English culture was a synthesis of Roman, Greek and Hebrew, but claimed that its greatness derived from the fact that it was supplemented by something extra. That X factor was the English race, itself derived from German 'stock'. Arnold was not thinking in terms of what we would now call biological or scientific racism, for he was rather drawing on the romantic nationalism of the German historian Barthold Niebuhr. For popular purposes, his romantic notion of race conceived in terms of 'stock' and 'blood' was the more persuasive:

Here then we have, if I may so speak, the ancient world still existing, but with a new element added, the element of our English race. And that this element is an important one, cannot be doubted for an instant. Our English race is the German race; for though our Norman

### *Saxonism*

fathers had learnt to speak a stranger's language, yet in blood, as we know, they were the Saxons' brethren: both alike belong to the Teutonic or German stock. Now the importance of stock is plain from this, that its intermixture with the Keltic and Roman races at the fall of the western empire has changed the whole face of Europe. . . . What was not [in the Ancient world] was simply the German race, and the peculiar qualities which characterize it. This one addition was of such power, that it changed the character of the whole mass. . . . But that element still preserves its force, and is felt for good or for evil in almost every country of the civilized world.

We will pause for a moment to observe over how large a portion of the earth this influence is now extended. It affects more or less the whole west of Europe. . . . I say nothing of the prospects and influence of the German race in Africa and in India: it is enough to say that half of Europe, and all America and Australia, are German more or less completely, in race, in language, or in institutions, or in all.<sup>31</sup>

Arnold's expansive lecture to his appreciative Oxford undergraduate audience, which included the young E. A. Freeman and Goldwin Smith, brings together a number of elements that would be strategically developed over the century: first, that though absorbing the influence of many different cultures, the English, as Saxons, are fundamentally of German stock, which is characterized as the feature that defines modernity against ancient times; and second, that this race, inherently restless and subject to what Charles Kingsley would call 'migratory manias', now girdles the earth – in Africa, India, Europe, America, Australasia.

### **Thomas Carlyle**

In stressing the importance of Germanic or Saxon 'stock', a term which conveniently was also used by historical philologists to describe affiliations within the 'families' of languages, Arnold was in complete accord with the sentiments of his famous contemporary Thomas Carlyle, who also portrayed the English as exclusively

### *Saxonism*

Saxon, and was overtly hostile to the Celts of the British Isles, particularly in Ireland. He dismissed historical accounts sympathetic to the Celts, expelled from their lands in the face of the Saxon invasion, by asserting simply that in such matters, might is right: 'The strong thing is the just thing'.<sup>32</sup> Like Arnold, Carlyle was exclusively interested in promoting a Teutonic identification for the English. By 1841, however, while Arnold was giving his lectures envisioning the spread of emigrating Teutons round the world, a new antithetical political issue had emerged: the 'flooding' of England with destitute immigrant Celtic Irish. It was Carlyle who gave these issues a racialized inflection by invoking an irresolvable dichotomy between Saxons and the 'Celtiberian Irish'.

Carlyle's analysis of the 'condition of England' question in *Chartism* (1839) addressed the issues of unemployment and the new Poor Law legislation. In this context, he raised the fact that at that time, around a third of the working Irish population were unemployed – a situation for which in the first instance he blamed the government:

Has Ireland been governed and guided in a 'wise and loving' manner? A government and guidance of white European men which has issued in perennial hunger of potatoes to the third man extant, – ought to drop a veil over its face, and walk out of court under conduct of proper officers. . . . We English pay, even now, the bitter smart of long centuries of injustice to our neighbour Island. Injustice, doubt it not, abounds; or Ireland would not be miserable. . . . England is guilty towards Ireland; and reaps at last, in full measure, the fruit of fifteen generations of wrong-doing. (16–18)

Even though Carlyle makes a careful declaration of universal humanity between all men – 'The Sanspotatoe [Carlyle's ironic name for the Irish] is of the selfsame stuff as the superfinest Lord Lieutenant' – and begins by blaming the problems of the Irish on oppressive English rule, he soon begins to blame the Irish themselves. It is the defects in their national character that have led them to famine:

### *Saxonism*

the oppression has gone far farther than into the economics of Ireland; inwards to her very heart and soul. The Irish National character is degraded, disordered. . . . Immethodic, headlong, violent, mendacious: what can you make of the wretched Irishman? (17)

While invoking the older discourse of 'National Character', Carlyle constantly augments this with a racial typology (the remark that the Irish are ruled by white European men implies that they do not fall into that category, and this is reinforced in the following passage, which emphasizes their 'wild Milesian features' and 'squalid apehood'). As so often, from that day to this, issues of race go hand in hand together with immigration. The problem, according to Carlyle, is not only that the Irish are destitute, but that the development of steamships means that the passage from Ireland to England has become cheap and easy. As a result, Ireland, he proclaims, is 'pouring daily in on us . . . deluging us down to its own waste confusion, outward and inward' (21):

Crowds of miserable Irish darken all our towns. The wild Milesian features, looking false ingenuity, restlessness, unreason, misery and mockery, salute you on all highways and byways. The English coachman, as he whirls past, lashes the Milesian with his whip, curses him with his tongue; the Milesian is holding out his hat to beg. He is the sorest evil this country has to strive with. In his rags and laughing savagery, he is there to undertake all work that can be done by mere strength of hand and back; for wages that will purchase him potatoes. He needs only salt for condiment; he lodges to his mind in any pighutch or doghutch. . . . The Saxon man if he cannot work on these terms, finds no work. He too may be ignorant; but he has not sunk from decent manhood to squalid apehood: he cannot continue there. American forests lie untilled across the ocean; the uncivilised Irishman, not by strength but by the opposite of strength, drives out the Saxon native, takes possession in his room. There abides he, in his squalor and unreason, in his falsity and drunken violence, as the ready-made nucleus of degradation and disorder. . . . We have quarantines against pestilence; but there is no pestilence like that; and against it what quarantine is possible? (18–19)

### *Saxonism*

According to Carlyle, the Irish are either driving out the Saxon natives, forcing them to emigrate to America, or, as Engels was also to argue five years later in *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1844), they are bringing them down to their own degraded level. Carlyle's solution is a stark alternative:

The time has come when the Irish population must either be improved a little, or else exterminated. . . . In a state of perennial ultra-savage famine, in the midst of civilisation, they cannot continue. (19)

Carlyle's call for extermination of the Irish, on what he presents as the humane grounds that their condition was so terrible, an 'ultra-savage famine' appropriate to their savage state, was to be partly realized during the years of the Great Famine that would shortly follow: during that time the Irish population was reduced by a half, from eight to four million.

For those who assume that Scottish nationalism has always existed in its present form, it might seem surprising that Carlyle, himself a Scot, should take so hard a line on his fellow Celts. In fact, after the 1745 Rebellion, a majority of Scottish Highlanders had themselves been cleared out of the Highlands and forced to emigrate, with scarcely more compassion offered than would be given to the Irish a hundred years later. In Carlyle's time, 'Scotland' was only at that moment being invented in the novels of the appropriately named Sir Walter Scott. After the Act of Union of 1707, and the creation of the 'United Kingdom', Scotland was often referred to as North Britain (the *North British Review* was founded in 1844). At this time many North British (that is, Scottish) intellectuals argued that Lowland Scots, that is those from Edinburgh, Glasgow, and the Lowlands of the South, were Saxons, and that only the Highlanders, whose origins, like the name Scotland itself, lay in Ireland, were Celts. In *The Highlands and Western Isles of Scotland, in Letters to Sir Walter Scott* (1824), the Scottish historian John Macculloch even argued that the Highlanders were not really Celts.<sup>33</sup> It is striking, in fact, how many of those who developed the racial romance of Saxonism were

### *Saxonism*

themselves Scottish – so much so that, taking Scott’s *Ivanhoe* (1819) on board as well, you could plausibly claim not only English Literature but also racialized English Saxonism as a Scottish invention.<sup>34</sup> Though modern Scottish nationalism often presents an unbroken continuity of nationalist sentiment, at this time many Lowlanders did not describe themselves as Scots, identifying themselves rather as English.<sup>35</sup> So we find Carlyle, in his ‘Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question’ (1849), asking: ‘What, then, is practically to be done by us poor English with our Demerara and other blacks?’<sup>36</sup> Carlyle clearly had no difficulty with describing himself as English and identifying himself with them.

As the topic of his essay also indicates (he later deliberately changed ‘negro’ to the more offensive ‘nigger’), it was Carlyle who was among the first to reinterpret contemporary political issues according to the category of race. The new science of race, or ethnology as it was called, was being developed at that time in Edinburgh, the cutting edge of contemporary medical and zoological science (George Eliot’s Lydgate, the new up-to-date doctor in *Middlemarch*, studied there). The new science of race was utilized as an important adjunct to the projection of the already fully formed view of England as culturally Saxon: Saxon in its history (yeoman Saxons throwing off the Norman yoke), Saxon in its language (Anglo-Saxon as the ordinary language and literature of England, the study of which was gradually institutionalized in universities), Saxon in its law (the Anglo-Saxon principle of precedence as opposed to Roman law, with Anglo-Saxon law being originally composed and written in English), and Saxon in its political institutions, which were identified with the idea of freedom (freedom and liberty, but not democracy, for at that time Britain was not a democracy), symbolized in Magna Carta of 1215, by which the King was brought within the rule of law and guaranteed the right of liberty to his subjects.

Saxonism was not invented by racial theorists but by historians: it was they who most comprehensively over many years developed the ideology of the English as Saxons, and of the continuing national Anglo-Saxon legacy.<sup>37</sup> Macaulay’s hugely successful Whig,

### *Saxonism*

Protestant and patriotic *History of England* (1848–61), with its Teutonic hero William of Orange and its Catholic villain James II, constantly analysed relations between England and Ireland in terms of the antipathy of Saxon and Celt. In different ways, Sir Francis Palgrave emphasized the foundational importance of England's Teutonic institutional heritage in his *History of England* (later renamed *History of the Anglo-Saxons*) (1831), *The Rise and Progress of the English Commonwealth: Anglo-Saxon Period* (1832), and *The History of Normandy and of England* (1851, 1857, 1861).<sup>38</sup> Palgrave's stress on the importance of the judicial institutions of the Germanic invaders in preventing constitutional absolutism throughout the history of conquests of England was accompanied by the claim that not only the Saxons but even the Southern Celts were Germanic (Belgic Kymrys) in origin. For him, nations were as individuals, inheriting in a Lamarkian way acquired characteristics that were then transmitted through the blood down the generations. It was for this reason that he was able to argue that 'the continuity of English national life never was broken by the Normans: hence the vigorous and uninterrupted progress of national power'.<sup>39</sup>

### **Saxonism and 1848**

'But England flourishes. Is it what you call civilisation that makes England flourish? Is it the universal development of the faculties of man that has rendered an island, almost unknown to the ancients, the arbiter of the world? Clearly not. It is her inhabitants that have done this; it is an affair of race. A Saxon race, protected by an insular position, has stamped its diligent and methodic character on the century. And when a superior race, with a superior idea to work and order, advances, its state will be progressive, and we shall, perhaps, follow the example of the desolate countries. All is race; there is no other truth'.

'Because it includes all others?' said Lord Henry.

'You have said it.'

Benjamin Disraeli, *Tancred* (1847)<sup>40</sup>

### *Saxonism*

At one level, Saxonism seems to have been precipitated into a full-scale political ideology by the revolutions of 1848. While the foundations of European nations were crumbling all around, the stable Saxon identity of England was increasingly stressed in political and cultural terms. Books on Saxons and Anglo-Saxons abound from this date. 1848 saw the appearance of Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *Harold: The Last of the Saxon Kings*, in which Harold was represented as a staunch Saxon, a native patriot resisting foreign invasion.<sup>41</sup> In 1849, the eminent Anglo-Saxon philologist John Mitchell Kemble published *The Saxons in England*, a work which attributes the political stability of England to the permanence and power of endurance of its Saxon institutions, in particular its system of land laws, as well as its language, and its municipal, religious and social institutions. Like many other Anglo-Saxonists, Kemble justifies the importance of his investigations 'from their bearing upon the times in which we live', far more than from any mere antiquarian value. His dedication to the Queen describes *The Saxons in England* as a 'history of the principles which have given her empire its pre-eminence among the nations of Europe'.<sup>42</sup> The book, like many accounts of Englishness, was written abroad. Composed in Germany at the time of the 1848 revolutions, Kemble consistently suggests that England's present political stability and prosperity are the direct effect of the Teutonic foundations of English society. The Saxon childhood, as described in Tacitus' *Germania*, produced a Saxon manhood in England. Kemble writes in the preface:

The following pages contain an account of the principles upon which the public and political life of our Anglosaxon forefathers was based, and of the institutions in which those principles were most clearly manifested. The subject is a grave and solemn one: it is the history of the childhood of our own age, – the explanation of its manhood.

On every side of us thrones totter, and the deep foundations of society are convulsed. Shot and shell sweep the streets of capitals which have long been pointed out as the chosen abodes of order: cavalry and bayonets cannot control populations whose loyalty has

### *Saxonism*

become a proverb here, whose peace has been made a reproach to our own miscalled disquiet. Yet the exalted Lady who wields the sceptre of these realms, sits safe upon her throne, and fearless in the holy circle of her domestic happiness, secure in the affections of a people whose institutions have given to them all the blessings of an equal law. (v)

Kemble follows Burke in arguing that freedom in England is an inheritance, based on subservience to law rather than democracy or the rights of man. He argues that it was the Germans who developed the institutions that incorporated the essential qualities of individual freedom and equality, and regenerated the degenerate Roman civilization that they found around them:

Throughout the latter day of ethnic civilization, when the idea of *state* had almost ceased to have power, and the idea of *family* did not exist, there was a complete destruction both of public and private morality; and the world, grown to be a sink of filth and vice, was tottering to the fall which Providence in mercy had decreed for its purification. The irruption of the German tribes breathed into the dead bones of heathen cultivation the breath of a new life. (231)

According to Kemble, the two principles on which Saxon society rested were the possession of land and the distinction of rank. Perhaps because of this need for land, Kemble characterizes the Saxons as naturally migratory, beginning with their emigration towards the coasts of Britain, and imagines their householders spreading across the English countryside, like ‘the backwoodsman in America, or the settler in an Australian bush’ who now continue the same process. This preference for the rural and the agricultural meant that after they had left, the old Roman towns became deserted and ‘slowly crumbled to the soil’ while England was transformed into a network of small village communities: ‘the principle of whose being was separation, as regarded each other: the most intimate union, as respected the individual members of each’ (67–70). In its foundation in the possession of land and distinction of rank, Germanic society was thus essentially rural, and antipathetic towards the city:

### *Saxonism*

It is not the city, but the country, that regulates their form of life and social institutions: as Tacitus knew them, they bore in general the character of disliking cities: ‘It is well enough known,’ he says, ‘that none of the German populations dwell in cities; nay that they will not even suffer continuous building, and house joined to house. They live apart, each by himself, as the woodside, the plain or the fresh spring attracted him’. Thus the German community is in some sense *adstricta glebae*, bound to the soil. (89)

The Germans live in detached houses, in a condition of *adstricta glebae*, bonded to the soil – here we find an anticipation of Hughes’ cheerful claim to Anglo-Saxon heritage that would follow eight years later (‘I was born and bred . . . a regular “Angular Saxon”, the very soul of me *adscriptus glebae*’). Kemble and Hughes’ characterization of the essential qualities of the Anglo-Saxon as a country-dweller, living alone with his family, physically apart from his neighbours, goes straight back to Tacitus’ characterization of the Germans. The ideal of the house in the country, standing in its own grounds, remains to this day a constitutive characteristic of every idealized form of what it means to be English. In pursuit of this quintessential dream, the English at the turn of the twenty-first century have spread themselves once more, across the comparatively empty countryside of France, Italy and Spain.

Kemble’s work in establishing the Anglo-Saxon provenance of English culture was subsequently augmented by many other eminent historians – by Bishop Stubbs in his *Constitutional History of England in its Origin and Development* (1874–8); by John Richard Green in his popular *A Short History of the English People* (1874) and *The Making of England* (1881); and above all by Edward Freeman, the most powerful figure in the Oxford school of Germanist historians, who in *The Norman Conquest* (1867) and many other books elaborated unwearingly, in somewhat wearisome Teutonic prose, the thesis of the Germanic character of the nation that could be found embodied and expressed in the events of its history.<sup>43</sup> The Norman Conquest had not, according to Freeman, succeeded in perverting the essentials

### *Saxonism*

of the national character, which demonstrably remained fundamentally Saxon. It was in his researches for a university prize competition in 1845–6 on the effects of the Roman conquest that Freeman first read Amédée Thierry's *L'Histoire des Gaulois*, where Thierry projects a view of French history as the result of a historic struggle between the Gauls and the Cymris, a racial difference now subsumed into one of class.<sup>44</sup> Amédée Thierry's thesis of French history as the product of racial conflict was in turn a reworking of the main part of the thesis of his elder brother Augustin Thierry's influential *Histoire de la conquête de l'Angleterre* (1825, first translated into English in 1841, and retranslated by William Hazlitt in 1847), which portrayed English history as a story above all of colonizers and colonized, the Saxon people's struggle for liberty against the yoke of the aristocratic Norman conquerors. From this, Freeman drew the idea of national history as a struggle between different races, of the Saxon people against the aristocratic Norman conquerors (the Celts were largely ignored). For Freeman, however, the emphasis was always on the success of assimilation rather than continuing conflict. While William the Conqueror is presented as racially distinct from the Saxon people of England – 'William was the greatest of his race, but he was essentially of his race; he was Norman to the backbone' – Freeman presents William's political strategy as one of self-assimilation to the local culture:

It was his policy to disguise the fact of conquest, to cause all the spoils of conquest to be held, in outward form, according to the ancient law of England. The fiction became a fact, and the fact greatly helped in the process of fusion between Normans and English. The conquering race could not keep itself distinct from the conquered, and the form which the fusion took was for the conquerors to be lost in the greater mass of the conquered.<sup>45</sup>

Freeman's emphasis on fusion between the Normans and Saxons represents a characteristic inflection and modification of the Thierry's story of racial and class struggle. The Thierrys themselves derived this idea from Chateaubriand and from Arnold's hero, Barthold Niebuhr;

### *Saxonism*

however, in a circular return of the flows of influence, they had, in turn, also been inspired by Edward Coke, Thomas Hobbes and Sir Walter Scott.

### **Scott**

When Samuel Taylor Coleridge complained on reading (though not finishing) *Ivanhoe* (1819) of 'our utter indifference to the feuds of Normans and Saxons', he was showing how much he belonged to an earlier generation.<sup>46</sup> Scott's importance in the development of contemporary ideas of Saxonism can hardly be underestimated. He himself drew on the work of both Percy and Turner to create his romantic representation of Scottish history, but his imaginative recreations of the medieval past were far more effective in charging the popular imagination than the books of any earlier writers, whether poetic (Percy) or scholarly (Turner). It was above all in *Ivanhoe* that Scott is commonly reckoned to have invented English national cultural identity.<sup>47</sup> It was Scott who brought the idea of the continuing division of England into Saxons and Normans, defined according to their differences of language, class and race, into an imaginative reality. The claim by Michael Banton, the sociologist of race, and John Sutherland, Scott's biographer, that it was Scott above all who was responsible for the popularization of the idea of race as such in England in the nineteenth century is probably a bit over the top.<sup>48</sup> What they are pointing to, however, was that unlike Percy, Turner or Freeman, or any of the contemporary anatomists or anthropologists who were developing ideas of race, Scott's popular novel, centred on the theme of race and racial antagonism, reached a very wide audience, comparable only to Macaulay's *History of England*. Like many writings on race, Scott's portrait of an England fundamentally Saxon in blood, manliness and freedom, ruled over by perfidious Norman aristocrats, allowed for two simultaneous interpretations. On the one hand, he emphasizes how an undying racial antagonism survives like an open wound: 'Four generations had not

### *Saxonism*

sufficed to blend the hostile blood of the Normans and Anglo-Saxons, or to unite, by common language and mutual interests, two hostile races, one of which still felt the elation of triumph, while the other groaned under all the consequences of defeat'. This is brought into the present through the emphasis on the continuing survival of the Jews as a separate race – in fact, as the novel proceeds, Scott naturalizes the Saxon racial identity of the English increasingly less by contrast with the Normans, than with the Jews, whose separate racial identity is emphasized throughout.

On the other hand, while enabling the idea of the English being residual Saxons, with the passing of generations unable to unite the two hostile races, Scott also at the same time allowed for the integration and assimilation of the foreign elements of the conquerors, in the first place through language:

the necessary intercourse between the lords of the soil, and those oppressed inferior beings by whom that soil was cultivated, occasioned the gradual formation of a dialect, compounded betwixt the French and the Anglo-Saxon, in which they could render themselves mutually intelligible to each other; and from this necessity arose by degrees the structure of our present English language, in which the speech of the victors and the vanquished have been so happily blended together.<sup>49</sup>

To this degree, Scott also suggested that in time racial and cultural differences had been resolved and reconciled, and that in the course of this process the hierarchy was gradually reversed, so that England eventually conquered its conquerors. To invoke race while simultaneously arguing for cultural assimilation was to be a widespread English response to racial theories in the nineteenth century.

For his part, Kemble, though stressing the enduring importance of Saxon legal and cultural institutions in English history, strikes a comparable note. Denying the theory that the Celts were exterminated, he freely concedes that the lower orders remained largely Celtic under German rule and suggests a novel sort of proof: 'we may very

### *Saxonism*

safely appeal even to the personal appearance of the peasantry in many parts of England, as evidence [of] how much Keltic blood was permitted to subsist and even to mingle with that of the ruling Germans'.<sup>50</sup> What is noticeable here is that for Kemble in 1849, the arguments about the survival or extermination of the Celts were not to be solved by recourse to the evidence of language, or of history, but to the physiognomy of the English peasant. This marks a decisive moment in the history of the formation of ideas about English identity. The claim for national origins and cultural identity through history, and the uses of historical sources such as Tacitus, were henceforth to be examined not only through the survival of institutions and language, but also through the human body. This possibility was the result not just of the new science of race that was being developed in contemporary anatomy and anthropology, but also of a second filiation which linked zoological ideas about race to human history. This articulation involved the connection between race as lineage over time, and ideas of pedigree and 'stock': concepts that were connected through the idea of 'blood' and the transmission of the 'blood line'. It only required a small conceptual adjustment to link these to the use of 'race' as a characteristic defined in anatomical and bodily terms in zoology – and with it, to produce a new, 'scientific' racialization of the English.