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Editor's Introduction

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Editor's Introduction

Margot Finn

Whither British studies? In her recent reflection on the prospect facing European studies in the United States, Caroline Walker Bynum urged Western historians to broaden their understanding of the past both by adopting perspectives that display “curiosity about distant continents” and “sensitivity to new groups in our midst” and by employing conceptual tools “such as ‘identity,’ ‘liminality,’ ‘diaspora,’ and ‘boundary,’ borrowed from other humanistic and social science disciplines.” While cautioning against the tendencies that have rendered many world history textbooks “tedious, vacuous, and disorganized . . . smorgasbords of odd facts” and critical of “the trendiness and arrogance sometimes found in postcolonial research,” Bynum called for a greater “globalization” of historical studies, a process of diversification which she argued would strengthen—not supplant—scholarship and teaching on Europe and its past.¹

Bynum’s observations are no less apposite for British studies in particular than they are for European studies more generally. To be sure, as John Gillis noted in response to Bynum’s reflections, British history has, in a negative sense, “been particularly affected” by scholars’ belated recognition that the European past is not “*the* surrogate for world history,” suffering a displacement in recent years from the position of unquestioned topicality which it earlier enjoyed in many North American academic departments.² Yet for all the angst generated among Anglophile teachers and researchers by the increasing globalization of scholarship, there is arguably at least as much cause to locate British studies at the center of emerging trends within the academy as there is reason to lament the field’s impending peripheralization by these developments. The extensive overlap between the lettered and the political classes in Britain ensured a close articulation between history and literature in British studies decades before historians became enamored of the so-called linguistic

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¹ Caroline Walker Bynum, “The Last European Generation,” *Perspectives* 34, no. 2 (February 1996): 4.

² John Gillis, “The Future of European History,” *Perspectives* 34, no. 4 (April 1996): 4.

turn, while the volume and quality of both literary and historical scholarship in the emerging field of British gender studies has long surpassed comparable scholarship on masculinity and femininity in continental Europe. As issues of identity politics associated with nationalism and imperialism have come to supplement more received institutional studies of government, law, religion, and the state, moreover, the enduring relevance of British studies has become increasingly manifest. Composed of a shifting, often embattled array of nations situated within a series of fluctuating political boundaries, Britain and the United Kingdom have for centuries embodied the dilemmas and the contradictions of national identity.³ Bringing, by a conservative estimate, no less than 200 million persons (or roughly a quarter of the world's population) into the ambit of its rule by the early nineteenth century,⁴ the British empire ensured that global concerns and perspectives were integral to English identities long before they were fetishized by postcolonial academic discourse.

Far from inevitably losing relevance as scholarship is swept along by the globalization project, then, British studies potentially occupies a position of considerable privilege within the leading sectors of scholarship today, just as it enjoyed an easy academic eminence in the heyday of constitutional legal history, high politics (and high Protestantism), and canonical literary studies. Although it has become common in the academy to posit an insuperable divide between these received narrative traditions and the more recent conventions of social, cultural, and linguistic analysis,⁵ the articles submitted to the *Journal* in the past several months testify not only to the extent to which the "new" history has staked its claim within British studies but also to the degree to which these new approaches have drawn strength from and melded with the established concerns of the "old history." In this number of the *Journal of British Studies*, articles on the modern period by both Martha Vicinus and Alex Owen explore the issues of identity, liminality, and subjectivity so integral to the new history, issues which Shannon McSheffrey's review article demonstrates are similarly central to the study of medieval history. Articles by Ethan Shagan and Vivien Dietz illustrate the ways in which discourse analysis, archival research, and revisionism can (and should) not only coexist within but also complement the analysis of religious

³ Gerald Newman, "Nationalism Revisited," *Journal of British Studies* 35, no. 1 (January 1996): 118–27; Alexander Grant and Keith J. Stringer, eds., *Uniting the Kingdom? The Making of British History* (London, 1995).

⁴ C. A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World, 1780–1830* (London, 1989), p. 3.

⁵ See esp. Gertrude Himmelfarb, "Some Reflections on the New History," *American Historical Review* 94, no. 3 (June 1989): 661–70.

conflicts, economic structures, political narratives, and state formations. Together these articles, linking England to its Celtic fringes, its Continental neighbors, and its expanding empire, suggest that British studies has far more to contribute than it has to fear from the globalization of research, teaching, and debate within the academy at the turn of the century.