

# When was Britain? Answers from Scotland and England

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**Abstract:** The term 'Britain' refers to both an island with a continuous history stretching back to the last Ice Age and a more recent constitutional arrangement. Given these meanings – and the context of Brexit and Scottish independence movements – the use of the word 'Britain' in curriculum documents is never neutral. This article examines the pre-university history examination syllabuses in England and Scotland and finds 'Britain' used differently in each: geographically in Scotland and constitutionally in England. The paper explores these uses and the implicit narratives they create.

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Languages: English

English

*What do we mean when we say 'Britain'? Is Britain an island formed 8000 years ago by rising sea levels in the English Channel? Or is 'Britain' a multi-national state united by a single government in London? The answer is, of course, both – although the latter is too simple, since there are governments at least three of the UK's four component jurisdictions.[1] Nevertheless, the contexts in which the term 'Britain' is favoured over, say, 'England', 'Scotland' or 'the UK' reveals much about the assumptions underlying this use. In this article, we explore this use in the context of the examination syllabuses of England and Scotland and find that the concept 'Britain' is called-up in different times in different places.*

## **Different Britains**

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The United Kingdom is a multi-national state made up of four jurisdictions, which have their own histories and educational authorities.[2] In their history curricula, each component jurisdiction must manage two levels of identity – identity at the level of the UK as a whole and identity at the local level. In this short article, we explore these issues through the prism of two of the component education systems of the UK – the Scottish and the English – and through the prism of pre-university national examinations in both contexts.

Our analysis shows that ‘Britain’ is conceived differently in English and Scottish curricula. In England, ‘Britain’ is understood constitutionally as coterminous with ‘the United Kingdom’, the nation created in 1707 by the union of Scotland and England. In this framing, ‘Britain’ (the UK) simply supersedes ‘England’ as the nation where English people live. This approach – which we term ‘the continuity narrative’ pays little attention to Scotland either before or after the 1707 union.

The Scottish curriculum, meanwhile, understands the word ‘Britain’ geographically to refer to the island of Great Britain. In this framing, the Scottish nation both existed before the formation of the UK in 1707 and persists after its formation, meaning that the curriculum tells two simultaneous stories, that of Scotland and that of Britain. We refer to this approach as a ‘split screen narrative’, and suggest that it creates no fewer tensions and contradictions than its English alternative.

## **Nation-state / Nation-place: When was Britain?**

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Great Britain is an island – the largest in its archipelago. The island Great Britain was separated from Europe 8000 years ago by rising sea levels. The political entity the United Kingdom was formed in 1707 with the Treaty of Union uniting England and Scotland, modified in 1801 by the incorporation of the Island and Ireland, reduced, in 1922, to the six counties of Ireland not included in what is now the Republic of Ireland. Given these facts, and the desire of national educational jurisdictions within the United Kingdom (UK) to maintain national histories, questions of terminology become vital, are never neutral and are rarely straightforward.

The island of Britain has been inhabited for thousands of years and so its ‘history’ clearly precedes those of the nations which comprise it. But nations in this island – Wales, Scotland and England – all have national histories which deserve attention. However, these nations all subsequently lost their independence – is the independent Scotland of 1500 the ‘same thing’ as the Scotland which part-comprises the UK? Opinions on this matter are passionate and divisive. For some, the ‘British state’ is an imposition on Welsh, English or Scottish national identities which should be preserved in defiance of single homogeneous ‘British identity.’ For others, the creation of the UK forged a single new identity which rendered previous national identities obsolete.[3]

## Education in the UK

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A comparison of the school curricula of the countries of the United Kingdom is a useful lens to explore these contested identities. The UK has never had a shared educational system and significant differences are apparent between the Scottish and English approaches to education.

In Scotland, pre-university qualifications (known as Highers) emphasise breadth of study. Higher courses are just one year long, but students are expected to study these in at least five subjects. In England, meanwhile, the emphasis is on depth of study – prospective university students study just three A-Level subjects for two years. Both countries have highly centralised qualifications system in which students take examinations in specific subjects. These examinations are devised and assessed by external bodies operated under government licence. In Scotland just one organisation (the Scottish Qualifications Authority) holds this licence, while in England four ‘examination boards’ are licenced, with schools empowered to choose between these.

Our research uses a surface-level analysis of the overall structure of the SQA Higher Syllabus and the OCR A-Level Syllabus to explore the way in which ‘Britain’ is understood. The history syllabuses of the two countries are structurally similar with schools able to choose which topics to teach from a menu of options. In neither country, however, do schools have complete freedom of choice, rather the syllabus steers students to ensure a ‘balance’ in what is studied.

<b><u>Scottish Higher</u></b> <b>Schools must study one topic from each list</b>	<b><u>OCR A-Level</u></b> <b>Schools must study one topic from each list</b>
British History	A British Period Study
European and World History	A non-British Period Study
Scottish History	Thematic Study and Historical Interpretations

**Table 1.** Curriculum Architecture in England and Scotland[4]

A difference is immediately apparent. In England, historical topics are divided simply into ‘British History’ and ‘non-British History’; while in Scotland, a third category – ‘Scottish History’ is identified. The remainder of the paper looks at the implications of these two approaches.

## The 'Split-Screen' and the 'Continuity State'

The table below shows the 'British' and 'Scottish' unit titles arranged chronologically. As discussed above, the Scottish curriculum identifies both 'Scottish History' topics and 'British History' topics, while the English syllabus identifies just 'British topics' (OCR, 2021).

Time	English Syllabus options for 'British' Units (OCR)	Scottish Syllabus (SQA)	
		Options for 'Scottish' Unit	Options for 'British' Unit
1000	Anglo-Saxon England and the Norman Conquest, 1035-1107		Church, State and Feudal Society, 1066-1406
1100			
1200	England 1199-1272	The Wars of Independence, 1249-1328	
1300	England 1377-1455		
1400	England 1445-1509		
1500	England 1445-1558 England 1547-1603	Age of Reformation, 1542-1603	
1600	The Early Starts and the Origins of the Civil War 1603-1660		The Century of Revolutions, 1603-1702
1700	The Making of Georgian Britain, 1678-1760	The Treaty of Union, 1689-1740	The Atlantic Slave Trade (18th Century to 1807)
1800	From Pitt to Peel: Britain 1783-1853		

		Migration and Empire, 1830-1939	Britain, 1851- 1951	
1900	Liberals, Conservatives, and the Rise of Labour, 1846-1918			Britain and Ireland, 1900-1985
	Britain 1900-1951			
	Britain 1930-1997			

**Table 2:** Pre-University Curricula in England and Scotland[5]

Table 2 reveals some striking contrasts between the English and the Scottish curricular approaches, the English curriculum presenting what we have called a ‘Continuity State’ narrative and the Scottish curriculum presenting what we have called a ‘Split-Screen Approach’.[6]

We call the English approach a ‘continuity’ approach because it presents one continuous development over time, covering almost all of the thousand-year period covered in Table 2 without interruption. There is ontological as well as temporal continuity – before 1603, almost all the unit titles refer to ‘England’ and after 1603 almost all the unit titles refer to ‘Britain’ – an English line of development merges into a British one that, in effect, an approach that creates the impression of a continuous story. England simply morphs into Britain. Meanwhile, Scotland is not explicitly mentioned before England becomes Britain, through the Act of Union (1707), after which point neither ‘England’ nor ‘Scotland’ are mentioned in unit headings.

We call the Scottish approach a ‘split-screen’ approach, by contrast, for the reasons that the columns suggest. Scottish and British history are posited as discrete and distinct things and they continuously remain so, before and after the Treaty of Union.

There are perplexing features in both approaches. We have already mentioned the absence of Scotland in the English unit titles in Table 2. Given this absence, what it is that causes England to morph into Britain remains opaque – it is as if there were only one English dimension involved.

The Scottish case raises two perplexities also – on the one hand, the question of change and on the other a principle of allocation. What did the Act of Union change, one might ask, if the screen remains resolutely split after it? It is as if nothing changed in the ontological status of Scotland, even though the Scottish Parliament went into abeyance in 1707, returning only in the 1990s (not covered here) after devolution. In terms of allocation, one might ask, what makes the Union only a Scottish topic (since Britain is

created through it and a union must merge at least two entities)? Other questions similarly arise – why, for example, is the Slave Trade – vital to the fortunes of cities like Glasgow – solely British and not Scottish and global?

## Explanations for Perplexities

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We can only expect so much from history curricula. One cannot expect those who devise outline contents for schools to teach – at least not in democratic contexts where difficulties have to be negotiated and compromises reached – to resolve conceptual challenges and complex questions that the polities and societies they are in have not managed to clarify and solve.

We have to distinguish between two planes of reality, perhaps – what we have called ‘curriculum neatness’ (an ideal to aspire to a requirement of curriculum architecture) and ‘political messiness’ (a fact of life in any complex context). As any observer of politics in the United Kingdom since the second half of the twentieth century will have noticed, the ‘national’ question is a very live one – as works such as Nairn’s *Breakup of Britain*[7] have demonstrated and as recent events such as the 2014 Referendum on Scottish Independence and the differential voting in Scotland and England in the Brexit Referendum underlined.[8]

At least two possible explanations for perplexities that we have mentioned. We have called these ‘accidental’ imprecision’ and ‘intentional equivocation.’[9] Both these explanations must remain speculative, since we are working back solely from curriculum texts to what may explain their features in their contexts of production. Accidental imprecision may explain these perplexities simply as a function of the general lack of clarity about terminology in social, cultural, and political discourse in the United Kingdom. Equivocation relates to deliberate ambiguity.

It is entirely possible that those who create public examinations find the vagueness and imprecision about nations and nationalities within the UK useful, since it absolves them of a controversy-provoking task of appearing to arbitrate about where Scotland, England and Britain begin and end.

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## Further Reading

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- Chapman, A. and Smith, J.. ‘Narration and Equivocation: Locating State, Nation and Empire in the Pre-university History Examination Syllabuses of England and Scotland’ forthcoming in Piero S. Colla and Andrea Di Michele (Eds.) *History Education at the Edge of the Nation: Political Autonomy, Educational Reforms, and Memory-shaping in European Periphery*. London: Palgrave 2023.
- Smith, J.. Identity and Instrumentality: History in the Scottish School Curriculum, 1992-2017. *Historical Encounters: A journal of historical consciousness, historical cultures, and history education*, 5(1) 2018, 31-45.

- McCrone, D.. *Understanding Scotland: the sociology of a stateless nation*. London: Routledge 1992.

## Web Resources

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- OCR's A Level History Curriculum: <https://www.ocr.org.uk/Images/170128-specification-accredited-a-level-gce-history-a-h505.pdf> (last accessed 12 June 2023).
  - The Scottish Higher Curriculum for History: [https://www.sqa.org.uk/files\\_ccc/HigherCourseSpecHistory.pdf](https://www.sqa.org.uk/files_ccc/HigherCourseSpecHistory.pdf) (last accessed 12 June 2023).
  - The Encyclopaedia Britannica's entry on The United Kingdom: <https://www.britannica.com/place/United-Kingdom/Plant-and-animal-life> (last accessed 12 June 2023).
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[1] We say 'at least three' since there is a Scottish government in Scotland, a Welsh government in Wales and a Northern Irish government in Northern Ireland but there is only a British government in London, not an English one.

[2] This article draws heavily on, and partially reproduces, the analysis reported in our paper 'Narration and Equivocation: Locating State, Nation and Empire in the Pre-university History Examination Syllabuses of England and Scotland' forthcoming in Piero S. Colla and Andrea Di Michele (Eds.) *History Education at the Edge of the Nation: Political Autonomy, Educational Reforms, and Memory-shaping in European Periphery*, to be published by Palgrave in June 2023.

[3] A dramatic example of the latter position was provided in comments by former 'Brexit' negotiator Lord Frost in August 2022. <https://nation.cymru/news/wales-and-scotland-not-nations-and-independence-should-be-made-impossible-says-lord-frost/>

[4] There are three bodies offering equivalent public examinations in England and one such body in Scotland. In addition, English schools can follow a syllabus created by the Welsh exam board. In this table, therefore, we select one representative English case to compare with the Scottish case.

[5] Chapman, A. and Smith, J. 'Narration and Equivocation: Locating State, Nation and Empire in the Pre-university History Examination Syllabuses of England and Scotland' forthcoming in Piero S. Colla and Andrea Di Michele (Eds.) *History Education at the Edge of the Nation: Political Autonomy, Educational Reforms, and Memory-shaping in European Periphery*, to be published by Palgrave in June 2023.

[6] Ibid

[7] Tom Nairn, *The Break-up of Britain*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso Books, 1981).

[8] The Electoral Commission's Report on the Scottish Independence Referendum can be read here – <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/who-we-are-and-what-we-do/elections-and-referendums/past-elections-and-referendums/scottish-independence-referendum/report-scottish-independence-referendum>. Maps showing the national distribution of the 'Leave' and 'Remain' votes in the Brexit Referendum can be viewed here: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-36616028>.

[9] Chapman and Smith, op cit.

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## Editorial Responsibility

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