

III.

THE USE OF THE TERM "GREAT BRITAIN" IN
THE MIDDLE AGES.

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On 20th October 1604 King James VI and I proclaimed his assumption of the style "King of Great Britain, France, and Ireland, Defender of the Faith &c." The proclamation stated that the name was not "new-affected." It was "the true and ancient name which God and time have imposed upon this Isle, extant and received in histories, in all maps and cartes wherein this Isle is described, and in ordinary letters to ourselves from divers foreign princes." It was, moreover, "warranted also by authentical charters, exemplifications under seals, and other records of great antiquity giving us precedent for our doing, not borrowed out of foreign nations but from the acts of our progenitors, Kings of this Realm of England, both before and since the conquest." The circumstances of this proclamation have been examined by Professor S. T. Bindoff in a valuable article published in 1945.¹ He shows that the common assumption that the title originates in the Act of Union is thus mistaken, though the new title had a stormy and far from continuous life both in England and Scotland until 1707 and its final acceptance under "Great Anna, whom three Realms obey." Mr Bindoff further demonstrated that the use of Britain and Great Britain, besides "its fifty years' currency for general purposes," was proposed in 1548 as the title for the "empire" to be formed from the marriage planned between the Prince of Wales and the infant Queen Mary.² The purpose of the following pages is the further examination of James's claim that the title was well authenticated.

That James was in the right in supposing the title to be "true and ancient" is, of course, indisputable. The Britain of the Romans became the Britain of the English who succeeded them as masters of the greater part of the island: the British who opposed the English invaders had their name expropriated by kings who claimed to be "Bretwaldas"—"clearly a defiance of British chiefs rather than the assertion of a claim to lordship over them."³ Even more to the point is the use by Aethelbald in 736 of the style "Rex Britanniae."⁴ The style is occasionally found in other pre-conquest kings

¹ "The Stuarts and their style," *E.H.R.*, LX (1945), 192-216.

² *Ibid.*, 200-1.

³ F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 1943), pp. 34-35 and p. 34 n. 1, where it is argued that *Bretwalda* is contracted from *Bretenanwealda*, "sole ruler of Britain."

⁴ *Ibid.*, 202; *id.*, *E.H.R.*, XXXIII (1918), 439-40.

down to the Confessor.¹ It was also used by the Conqueror himself ("tocius Britannie monarches") and by William II ("monarches Britannie") on at least one occasion.² Thus the statement of the proclamation of 1604 that the title was used by James's "progenitors . . . both before and since the conquest" is well-enough based, though I have not identified the source of James's information on the matter.

This early usage is, of course, restricted to "Britain," not "Great Britain." A distinction between the two Britains had not been necessary until the occupation of the Armorican peninsula of Gaul in the 6th century led to the emergence of what was later to be Brittany.³ From at any rate the 11th century and probably much sooner,⁴ "Britannia" was the normal term, "Armorica" an archaic name applied for conscious effect.⁵ Half a century ago, indeed, a violent controversy arose over certain occasions when "Britannia" was used in the 12th century: was it Brittany, or did it represent the British land of Wales? ⁶ Fortunately it does not form part of my task to enter the terrifying field of Arthurian scholarship, and I can only be grateful that one point clearly emerging from the fray is that from the 12th century, though "Britannia" means Brittany and can mean Wales, it frequently also means Britain.⁷

A critical moment in the evolution of the new terminology was the Norman conquest of 1066. The Normans were close neighbours of the Bretons and there were numerous and important Bretons among the knights who accompanied William I and who were rewarded with lands in England. Just as it was necessary to distinguish between the real "Britons" of Wales, Cornwall and Brittany (by calling them the Northern, Western, or Southern Britons—and such expressions are found in Latin and the vernaculars),⁸

¹ T. D. Hardy's introduction to the *Rotuli Chartarum* (1837) seems to be the only attempt (and it is manifestly incomplete and inaccurate) to list the changes in the royal style and title; this was reprinted by Nicholas in his *Chronology* and summarised by Wallis, *English Regnal Years and Titles* (1921).

² Charter of William II, 1088, original at Wells: "ego Willelmus, Willelmi regis filius, Dei dispositione monarches Britannie"; in Hubert Hall, *A Formula Book of English Official Historical Documents*, 2 pts. (1908-9), I, 19.

³ K. Jackson, *Language and History in Early Britain* (Edinburgh, 1953), pp. 12-16.

⁴ The Ravenna geographer, writing in the 7th century, refers to the "Britannia in paludibus" which is Brittany; and to the "Britannia" or "magna insula Britannia," which is Britain: ed. N. Pinder and G. Parthey (Berlin, 1860), 9, 295, etc.—see index, s.v. "Britannia." In Breton and North French sources, from A.D. 460 "Britannia" gradually replaces "Armorica," according to A. Le Moyne de la Borderie, *Historie de Bretagne*, 6 vols. (Rennes, 1896-1914), I, 248.

⁵ J. S. P. Tatlock, *The Scene of the Franklin's Tale Visited* (Chaucer Society, 1914), pp. 17-18; on the early use of "Britannia" and its vernacular forms see also M. Deutschbein, *Studien zur Sagengeschichte Englands*, I (Cöthen, 1906), pp. 139-49. These studies were apparently unknown to W. H. Stevenson, whose essay "Great and Little Britain" (knowledge of which I owe to Mr P. Sawyer) is also very useful: *S.P.E. Tract no. xvi* (Oxford, 1924), pp. 23-32; cf. in the same series H. Bradley and R. Bridges in *Tract no. xiv* (1923), and D. MacRitchie in *Tract no. xvi*.

⁶ Cf. F. Lot, "La patrie des 'lais Bretons,'" *Romania* xxviii (1899), 1-48. Since these pages were written Miss M. D. Legge has drawn my attention to P. Rickard, *Britain in Medieval French Literature*, Cambridge, 1956.

⁷ Tatlock, *op. cit.*, 18 n. 2.

⁸ Deutschbein, *loc. cit.*

so it was necessary to distinguish between Britain when it meant the island as a whole or a large part of it and the other Britain, the duchy in France.

When the distinction between Greater and Smaller Britain was first made cannot be determined with complete accuracy. Probably the first occasion of the use of "Minor Britannia" was in Brittany and in the 10th or 11th century: our evidence is a saint's life which was originally composed about 905 but remodelled later.¹ The same phrase is used in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britonum*, composed in the 1130s.² It was this book which, by diffusing the legendary history of Britain, the stories of Brutus and his descendants, and of Arthur, did more than any other single influence to make men conscious of the term Britain. The Arthurian material in particular forms thereafter the basis of the most important of the literary themes of the middle ages, and in vernacular romances, at first in poetry and later in prose, informed an ever-widening public throughout Christendom of the adventures which had taken place in Britain. French "Bretagne" was here equivocal: it could mean either Britain (that is England) or Brittany; a similar confusion occurred in English and in all the other vernaculars. Hence it is hardly surprising that, though the phrase "Greater Britain" does not occur in Geoffrey of Monmouth himself, it occurs in the poets who vulgarised his work in the next generation: Walter of Arras explains that there are two Britains—"different peoples dwell in them, the English are in the greater but the Normans are lord of it, and in the lesser are the Bretons."³

English versions of Wace's French translation of Geoffrey of Monmouth were soon available. Layamon's "Brutland þat lasse" is equivalent to the "Britannia minor" of Geoffrey and in the 13th century Robert of Gloucester has both "þe lasse Brutayne" and "þe more Brutaine"; at the same time in French, Peter Langtoft uses "Brettayne le Menor" and "la Grande Brettayne." Robert Brunne employs the expressions "þe lesse Bretayne" and "Bretaygne the Grete."⁴ Thus by the end of the 13th century the vernacular writers were at one in accepting the new terminology and it was to have an enormous influence in both translations of the *Historia*

¹ *Vita B. Marcelli*, (wrongly attributed to) Venantius Fortunatus, ed. Bruno Krusch, Mon. Germ. Hist., Auct. IV ii (1885), 93: ". . . divino ductu ad portum oceani maris qui in Britannia manet minori cursu avido pervenerunt. . . ."

² See the excellent account of "Geoffrey's British Geography" in J. S. P. Tatlock, *The Legendary History of Britain* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1950), esp. pp. 7-9; for Brittany, p. 85.

³ "Saciés que ii. Bretagnes sont,
Et gens diverses i estont:
Li Englois sont en le grignor,
Mais li Normant en sont signor:
En la menor sont li Breton."

Ille et Galeron, quoted Stevenson, p. 30. Walter of Arras wrote his romances between 1161 and 1166: R. Boussuat, *Man. Bibl. de la Litt. Française du Moyen Age*, Melun, 1951, p. 109 (no. 1128).

⁴ Stevenson gives references to the vernacular writers; see also E. Ekwall, *Concise Oxford Dict. of Eng. Place Names* (1936), s.v. "Britain."

Regum Britonum and in the Arthurian romances. The phrases thus reached an audience which was, though not scholarly, yet very influential. To the assimilation of Arthurian attitudes among the magnates, for example, must be attributed the growth in the 13th century of the games and tournaments called "Round Tables" which replaced at this time the older and savager *melée* of 12th-century mimic warfare.¹ But the scholars were hard at work assimilating the new names themselves.

The impact of Geoffrey on the historians was immediate and far reaching. "Britannia" was, of course, very familiar to the chroniclers from its employment by Bede; and in this way also Britain is found in some of the earliest Scottish chronicles.² But Bede had dealt with a very limited segment of the island's history and Geoffrey supplied a vast amount of information on the pre- and post-Roman periods which had hitherto not been documented. William of Malmesbury in the first issue of his *Gesta Regum* (about 1125) referred to Brittany as "transmarina Britannia," but in the second version, about ten years later, uses the expression "Britannia minor."³ Even more telling is the employment of the term "maior Britannia" by William of Newburgh,⁴ writing in the 1190s, for he was an avowed critic of the fables of Geoffrey of Monmouth. But William of Newburgh is only one of many writers who use "Greater Britain" in the second half of the 12th and in the 13th centuries: others are John of Salisbury ("maior Britannia") and Gervase of Tilbury ("Britannia major" and "minor Britannia");⁵ while even more writers use the term Britain as equivalent to England.⁶ Arthur and the rest enter the canon of the great St Alban's chronicles at this stage⁷ and in the 14th and 15th centuries the legendary history enjoyed an enormous vogue.⁸ In particular we find it embodied in the two most popular histories of the later middle ages, Higden's *Polychronicon* (which was translated by Trevisa) and in the chronicle called the *Brut*, which also circulated in Latin and English.⁹ It is not surprising that Higden, heavily influenced by Geoffrey, refers to "Greater Britain, now called England."¹⁰ But it is impressive that half a century earlier we find the phrase "England, which of

¹ N. Denholm Young, "The Tournament in the 13th century," *Essays presented to F. M. Powicke* (1948), esp. pp. 453-6; L. Keeler, *Geoffrey of Monmouth and the Late Latin Chroniclers, 1300-1500*. (Univ. of California Pub. in English, vol. xvii, 1946), 131-7.

² See the indexes s.v. "Britain," in the *Chronicle of Holyrood*, ed. Marjorie O. Anderson (*S.H.S.*, 1938) and the *Chronicle of Melrose*, ed. A. O. Anderson, M. O. Anderson and W. Croft Dickinson (London, 1936).

³ Stevenson, p. 29.

⁴ *Historia Rerum Anglicarum*, R.S., I (1884), 165-6. These examples antedate by a century and a half Stevenson's first Latin example, from Higden.

⁵ *Mon. Germ. Hist.*, "Scriptores," xxvii (1885), 49, 377; Coggeshall, Rolls Series (1875), 419.

⁶ Liebermann and Pauli printed a representative selection in the *Mon. Germ. Hist.* volume quoted in the preceding note: see the index, s.v. "Britannia."

⁷ R. H. Fletcher, *The Arthurian Material in the Chronicles* (Boston, 1906), p. 173.

⁸ L. Keeler, *op. cit.*

⁹ For a quotation from the Latin *Brut*, dating from 1290-1, see below p. 59.

¹⁰ Rolls Series, II (1869), 1: "De Britannia maiori, iam Anglia dicta."

old was called Greater Britain" in the chronicle of Walter of Guisborough (formerly called Hemingburgh),¹ for this work is not influenced by the legendary history.² For Walter of Guisborough as for Higden, the old name for Britain was not "Britannia," it was "Maior Britannia." The historians had accepted the language of the romances.

A little later and we encounter a more explicit combination of romance and history, in the pages of Thomas Gray of Heton's *Scalacronica*: the portion of this work which has been printed discusses the chivalrous history in the 14th century of "le isle de Graunt Bretaigne, iadys Albeon, terre de geaunz, ore Engeleter."³ What is more to the point Gray definitely uses the term to describe the contemporary scene: Albion for him is archaic, "Graunde Bretaigne" is not. His phrase has, in short, a political content: "la diversite dez corages dez Engles est le caus qe moue lez chaungementz du siecle entre eaux qe plus est muable en la Grant Bretaigne qen autres pays."⁴ And at another point he refers to a locality which is "la plus perillous place de la Graunt Bretaigne."⁵ It is true that Gray was himself a borderer and that his story was the involved military interrelations of Scotland and England. But if the term Great Britain could be serviceable in discussing the wars and negotiations of the two countries it was very useful indeed: the 14th and 15th centuries provided much for contemporaries to discuss.

In any case another political event had occurred with a direct bearing on the viability of the concept of Britain—Edward I's dealings with Scotland culminating in his formal statement of rights there, in his letter to pope Boniface VIII in 1302. Edward, as is well known, had the chronicles of England searched for evidence of his rights in Scotland. Among the returns⁶ several refer to the legendary history of Britain. Two are especially noteworthy. The first is the extract which reports that the convent at Waltham contained a work called *Brut* in which "a youth of this name had conquered Great Britain"⁷—an example of a 13th-century use of the term in Latin, just prior to its use early in the 14th century by Walter of Guisborough.⁸ The other is the return from Faversham, with its full account of the relevant material in Geoffrey: Brutus, King Marius and Arthur.⁹ This collection of historical material was intended to determine Edward's rights to adjudicate between the claimants to the Scottish throne.¹⁰ Later there was a fresh hunt for precedents in the chronicles and records to enable king and magnates

¹ Camden Series (1957), ed. H. Rothwell: "que olim maior Britannia dicebatur."

² Keeler, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

³ Ed. J. Stevenson, p. 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

⁶ F. Palgrave, *Documents and Records illustrating the History of Scotland*, I (1837, all published), 56-137.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁸ Above n. 1.

⁹ Palgrave, pp. 92-93. The chronicler Otterbourne, writing about 1400, also gives prominence to Marius in the establishment of English claims to Scotland, Keeler, pp. 18-19.

¹⁰ For the background see F. M. Powicke, *The Thirteenth Century 1216-1307*, p. 620 ff.

to present Pope Boniface VIII with a reasoned answer to his command that Edward should abandon Scotland.¹ The document in which Edward stated his rights brings the myths we have mentioned into politics. The royal right to Scotland is traced back to Brutus and to Brutus's sons, the eldest of whom had England but retained an overall superiority over Albanact, who had Albania or Scotland, and Kamber, who had Kambria or Wales.² Later stages in the story are then touched on, culminating in the superiority of King Arthur over King Augustus.

The tales of Brutus and Arthur were already familiar to Scots.³ Edward's use of them precipitated a steady process of demythologising—if that is a fair term to describe the eviction of one set of legends by another. As early as 1324, if we may credit the anonymous author of the *Vita Edwardi Secundi*,⁴ the Scots who demanded the return of the Coronation Stone claimed that long before Brutus had come from Troy, Pharaoh's daughter Scota had come to the land to which she had given her name. This was to be the line adopted by Fordun later in the century; though his main desire was to establish the historical grounds for Scottish autonomy, he was prepared, when it suited him, to accept the authority of Geoffrey of Monmouth.⁵ Hector Boece, early in the 16th century, was to continue the same tradition.

In England the dossier on the *processus Scotiae* was constantly referred to by later kings and their administrators; and by the writers of narrative histories. Henry IV in 1400 prefaced his attack on Scotland with a rehearsal of the very claims made by Edward I.⁶ The chroniclers, their minds refreshed by these transactions, continued to pay attention to the histories of Brut and Arthur, with all their consequences for the history of the island and the rights of English kings. John Hardyng's *Chronicle* (the latest version of which may be dated to 1464)⁷ is a monument to the abiding interest in their claims to overlordship of Henry V and later kings.⁸ Indeed Hardyng's whole life, spying out documents pertaining to English lordship and forging what he could not find, is an interesting comment on the historical preoccupations of the mid 15th century with what the poet calls "Bretayns hole prouince."⁹

In another field altogether, the early 15th century witnessed some

¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 693, 705-6.

² Rymer, *Foedera*, (Record ed.), I, II, 932-3 and in Keeler, *op. cit.*, 130.

³ R. L. Graeme Ritchie, *Chrétien de Troyes and Scotland* (Oxford, 1952), p. 16.

⁴ *Chronicles . . . of Edward I and Edward II*, ed. Stubbs, R.S. II (1883), 276-7.

⁵ Keeler, *op. cit.*, p. 76-80.

⁶ Rymer, VIII, 155; J. H. Wylie, *Hist. of Eng. under Henry IV*, I, 137.

⁷ C. L. Kingsford, *Eng. Hist. Literature in the Fifteenth Century*, (Oxford, 1913), p. 142.

⁸ Ed. H. Ellis (London, 1872).

⁹ C. L. Kingsford discusses the forgeries in *E.H.R.*, xxvii (1912), 467-8 and prints extracts from the first version of the chronicle (Br. Mus. Lansdowne 204), 740-53. The quotation is on p. 750. The documents collected in Br. Mus. Cotton Vespasian C. xvi also witness to 15th- and 16th-century English interest in the Scottish claims of their sovereigns.

discussion which lent further coherence and content to the term "Britain." The Council of Constance, which met from 1414 to 1418 in an attempt to end the schism and reform the church, was divided for deliberative purposes into four "nations" (German, English, French and Italian), on the analogy of the "nations" in the arts faculties of universities. The arrival of a Spanish delegation provoked the French, who were in any case enduring the English invasion of Henry V, to challenge the right of the English to be a nation at all.¹ The depositions of the English and French on this subject contain much bombast and exaggeration.² But two points emerge clearly enough on the English side. The English delegation put it forward in their official memorandum as a plausible point that "England, Scotland and Wales together constitute Greater Britain" ("Anglia, Scotia, Wallia, quae tria majorem integrant Britanniam"),³ and refer repeatedly to the "English or British nation."⁴ Moreover, in their private debates on the question, the English considered advocating the division of the council into nations based on the four cardinal points of the compass: this, it was argued, would produce a "Northern" nation in which the Scots would not mind being placed, though they resented being in the English nation.⁵ Thus we see the English admitting the inadequacy of the name "English" from the point of view of including the Scots in a "nation" so termed; and advocating the term "Great Britain" as an inclusive description of the island as a political unit.

In a sense the transactions at Constance give us the first occasion when the phrase "Great Britain" was officially put forward. But the circumstances are admittedly somewhat exotic. By the end of the 15th century, however, there was a clear cut case when the new (or the old) terminology was to be formally invoked by the English government. This was in 1474 in the instrument drawing up the proposal for a marriage between Cecily, the daughter of Edward IV of England, and James, son of James III of Scotland. Sitting at Edinburgh the commissioners on 26th October of that year declared their purpose to be the advancement of the peace and prosperity of "this Nobill Isle, callit Gret Britanee."⁶ This considerably antedates the use of the term in the not dissimilar marriage negotiations of 1548, hitherto assumed to be the first occasion for its employment.⁷ The aim of 1474 was, in fact, to be intermittently brought forward again and again: that "the difference between an Englishman and a Scot may not henceforward be remembered," as Archibald Whitelaw, archdeacon of

¹ Noël Valois, *La France et le grand schisme* (Paris, 1896-1902) 4 vols., IV, 375-6.

² Mansi, XXVII, 1022-31, 1058-70; Von der Hardt, v, 56-101.

³ Mansi, 1062.

⁴ There are a dozen references to "natio Anglicana sive Britannica"; and the observation is made: "cum nullo modo negare possunt, quin Scotia sit pars Britanniae," *ibid.*, col. 1063.

⁵ Von der Hardt, v, 102-3, prints this tract, which had been published by Sir Robert Wingfield in 1517 and was reprinted (copy in Signet Library) at London in 1690.

⁶ Rymer, xi, 825.

⁷ Bindoff, pp. 200-1; *O.E.D.* s.v. "Britain."

Lothian, said at the outset of the fruitless marriage negotiations of 1484.¹ The marriage of 1502 did not, alas, end hostilities, though it was to culminate in the Union of the Crowns.

At this point we should notice a further factor in the linguistic scene: the influence of humanistic Latin, which is felt on both sides of the Border from the beginning of the 16th century. There can, I consider, be no doubt that, for scholars attuned to the demands of the revived Latin, "Anglia" and "Scotia" had associations with a type of diction which they were anxious to be rid of, and "Britannia," consecrated as it was by impeccable classical usage, was an attractive alternative. Certain it is that we find the word "Britain" cropping up with increasing frequency in the literature of the period. Mr Bindoff has pointed to the titles of John Major's work (*Historia Majoris Britanniae*, 1521) and of John Bale's catalogue of authors (*Illustrium majoris Britanniae scriptorum summarium*, 1548).² But there are many other instances of neo-Latin "Britain." In Dominic Mancini's eyewitness account of the usurpation of Richard III we have several instances of the employment of "Britain" where one would expect "England."³ I suspect a diligent scrutiny of the *opus epistolarum*⁴ of Erasmus would yield many examples: I have noted several in the letters of 1499, at the time of Erasmus's first visit.⁵ It was on this visit that he composed his poem for the young prince Henry in which the praises of king and country are sung by a personified "Greater Britain."⁶ Particularly notable also is the frequency with which the word "Britain" is introduced into those two famous portraits by Erasmus of More and Colet.⁷ This evidence from Erasmus is all the more telling because he was anything but a rigid Ciceronian, and the word "Anglia" crops up frequently in his letters, interchangeable for him, it would seem, with "Britannia."

Erasmus, it must be conceded, was a foreigner. His practice is, however, followed by Thomas More, whose influential position in the royal administration is a warning not to treat the adoption of neo-Latin modes of expression as a mere adventure by the litterateurs of the day. In his poems "British" is the word More prefers to use for "English"—even to the extent of referring to a man's "British accent."⁸ The dictates of scansion are clearly of importance here, though "Angli" figures elsewhere in his verse,⁹ but

¹ Cotton Vesp. C. xvi, in Buck's *Richard III* (Kennet, *Complete History*, I, 572 b); and cf. *Letters and Papers of Richard III and Henry VII*, ed. J. Gairdner, R.S., I, 63.

² *Op. cit.*, 199.

³ *De occupatione regni Anglie*, ed. C. A. J. Armstrong (Oxford, 1936), pp. 68, 70, 96, 108.

⁴ Ed. P. S. Allen and others, 11 volumes, 1906-47.

⁵ I, 238, 241. In the last of the three cases on these two pages, Skelton is described as "unum Britannicarum litterarum lumen et decus."

⁶ *Prosopopoeia Britanniae majoris*: see Preserved Smith, *Erasmus* (New York, 1923), p. 61.

⁷ *Op. ep.*, IV, 12-23 (More, 1519), 507-27 (Colet, 1521).

⁸ *Latin Epigrams*, ed. L. Bradner and L. A. Lynch (Chicago, 1953), pp. 43-45: "Nam Gallicam solam sonat Britannice."
⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 117-18.

scansion does not account for the title page of the first edition of 1518 where More is described as "Britannus."¹ Was this designation chosen by the Basle publisher Froben? If it was, More did not object, for it appears also in the 1520 edition which is known to have been corrected by him. A most curious example of the new terminology is Sir Thomas Elyot's description of himself as "Anglobritannus eques,"² which, I suppose might be translated "an English knight from Britain," or "a British knight from England": "Anglo-British" and "Scoto-British" might still have their uses. George Buchanan, writing in the second half of the 16th century, complains that many foreigners and Englishmen use "Britain" both as a name for the Roman province and also for the whole island.³ But not only did Englishmen do this, we must note. The fullest defence of using "Briton" for any inhabitant of the island comes from the pen of John Major, writing fifty years before Buchanan:

At the present day there are, and for a long time have been, to speak accurately, two kingdoms in the island: the Scottish kingdom, namely, and the English. . . . Yet all the inhabitants are Britons . . . I say, therefore, that all men born in Britain are Britons, seeing that on any other reasoning Britons could not be distinguished from other races.⁴

James in 1604 also invoked the usage of geographers. Here, too, he was in the right. Continental geographers seem generally to have regarded the area as the "British Isles": we find the phrase, for instance, in Sebastian Münster's *Cosmographia* which was first printed in 1544 and which was constantly reprinted in the ensuing century.⁵ The editions of Ptolemy which came out regularly in the 16th century, and which were really handbooks of descriptive geography, also use as a general rubric the expression *Insula Britannica*.⁶ Abraham Ortelius in his great *Thesaurus* has a long entry under "Britannicae Insulae."⁷ And the continental practice is also followed by English geographers in the second half of the 16th century.⁸ The maps which accompanied these books also have the same headings. Geographically, of course, it was impossible to separate the two kingdoms of Scotland and England. As John Major remarked in his history "you could walk dry footed anywhere in Britain."⁹

The political and literary traditions on which James VI and I was

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

² *The Governour*, edited by H. H. S. Croft, 2 vols. (1880), I, cxl: a letter to Thomas Cromwell, 1538.

³ *Opera Omnia* (Leyden, 1725), I, 9. At p. 2 he refers to Elyot as "eques Britannus."

⁴ John Major, *Greater Britain*, ed. and trans. A. Constable (*S.H.S.*, 1892), pp. 17-18.

⁵ S. Münster, *Cosmographia* (Basle, 1559), pp. 42-55.

⁶ *Geographia Universalis* (Ptolomaeus), ed. Pirkheimer (Basle, 1540); *Geografia . . . di Tolomeo*, ed. Magini (Venice, 1598), II, 27: "Descrizione dell isola Albione, detta per eccellenza La Britannia."

⁷ *E.g.* edition of 1587, s.v.

⁸ E. R. G. Taylor, *Tudor Geography, 1485-1583* (1930), pp. 114-15, 185, 192.

⁹ ". . . since it is possible to pass from England to Wales, and from Scotland by way of England to Wales, dryshod, . . ." *Greater Britain*, p. 18.

drawing were thus very substantial. Some of the early kings had used the word Britain; the claims of Edward I, revived later by Henry IV, were reminders of the help that ancient history, even if mythological, could be to present policy. From the 12th century onwards romantic literature was constantly diffusing the materials of Arthurian romance, with their evocation of Britain. The mutual involvement of the two countries by war, marriage and diplomacy in the later middle ages was a spur to the adoption, however intermittently and hesitantly, of a fresh terminology. In all these fields the 16th century saw rapid developments. The historians were active, both in elaborating and (more rarely) in denying the legendary history of Britain.¹ In this they linked up with the revived literary interest in Arthurian romance, which flourished as never before with the stimulus of the Tudor dynasty,² and which was still an active tradition on the continent, as Cervantes complains in *Don Quixote*.³ Above all the affairs of the two countries become inextricably involved. The marriage planned in the late 15th century was at length brought about in the early years of the 16th. Politically this produced at first only greater hostility, so that further dynastic alliances were later proposed. But the wars and religious upheavals of the mid-century left the two countries associated as never before. It would have been surprising if an erudite monarch like James had not sought to cement his two kingdoms by an expression which had already been employed for over a century at least in Anglo-Scottish negotiations and which was part of the familiar furniture of the contemporary mind.

It would also have been surprising if foreign kings had not used the style in advance of James's proclamation of 1604. We have no clear example of this happening, though the proclamation itself refers to the use of the expression in "ordinary letters to ourselves from divers foreign princes." After all the courts of princes were thronged with men who had acquired the humanist habit of equating *Anglia* and *Britannia*; their secretaries were men who were educated in the new discipline. This was particularly true of the papal court and there survives, oddly enough in Edinburgh, a curious illustration of "British" (English) figuring in a papal brief.⁴ This is directed to the citizens of Genoa and urges them to return to the secretary of the English king some bales of wool which he had had on board the *Trinity*: the boat had been captured by Moors and retaken by the Genoese. In the words of the brief, which is signed by Jacopo Sadoleto,

¹ See the discussion in Sir Thomas Kendrick, *British Antiquity* (1950); the index, s.v. "Britain", lists the passages in the book where the etymologies of the word given by 16th-century antiquaries will be found. Of these one of the most elaborate is George Buchanan's, *op. cit.*, I, 1-17. It is worth noting that 16th-century French antiquaries argued cogently that Britain had acquired its name from the Britons in Brittany, not the other way round: E. Pasquier, *Recherches de la France* (1633), p. 31.

² For this see the refs. in my *Polydore Vergil* (Oxford, 1952), p. 157.

³ *Don Quixote*, I, ch. 49; II, ch. 23.

⁴ *Edinburgh University Library, Misc. Charters*, Laing II 654/2. Mr D. A. Bullough drew my attention to this. See Appendix.

the ship is British, the wool is British and the people whose friendship the Genoese are exhorted to cherish is the British nation. This proliferation of good style is, of course, a special effort: Brian Tuke was clerk of the signet and an important man;¹ the papal letter, moreover, is directed to another Italian government. Yet one feels that more such manifestations of the rightness of "British" are probably to be found in the archives not only of the papacy, but of other foreign governments.

James's interest in abandoning the old titles and adopting a new title, "like that famous and ancient King Arthur to embrace under one name the whole circuit of one thousand seven hundred miles, which includes the United Kingdom now possessed by his Majesty,"² was known in London in April 1604, while James was still at Berwick on his way south. The months intervening before the proclamation of October may well have seen the arrival at court of a foreign letter using the new title.

Reflecting on the foregoing one is prompted to two conclusions. The first is that the action of the Romans which was most to influence the later history of this island, was their adoption of the name "Britannia." The second is that not the least important of the actions of King James was his attempt to impose a term which would unite his double inheritance. The "Great Britain" of the proclamation met with opposition, both in England and in Scotland.³ That it prevailed in the end was due in large part to the long history of "Britain" and "Great Britain" in the middle ages.

APPENDIX.

Brief of Leo X to Genoa, 17th August 1514, (see above p. 64 and notes).

Leo PAPA X^s.

Dilectis filiis salutem et apostolicam benedictionem. Proxime accepimus, Nauim quandam Britannicam, cui Trinitas nomen erat, et quam paulo ante prope portum Ligorni Mauri, perfidissimi Christiani nominis hostes, ui ceperant, nunc a nonnullis ciuibus uestris magna uirtute, domino aspirante, receptam fuisse; Quemadmodum igitur antea ualde dolebamus, Tantam praedam ad eiusmodi Communes hostes nostros peruenisse, Ita ea receptione accepta non potuimus non gaudere, ea etiam ratione, quod intelleximus dilectum filium Magistrum Brianum Carissimi in christo filii nostri Henrici Angliae Regis Illustris Secretarium ad sexaginta quattuor, quas pochas uocant, lanarum britannicarum saccos in dicta nauis imposita habuisse; quas quidem lanas pro officio et fide uestra, proque ea amicitia, quae uobis cum Britannica natione interceditur, Saluas esse, et predicto

¹ See *Dict. Nat. Biog.* He was twice licensed to export wool just before this incident: *Lett. and Papers Hen. VIII*, I (new edition), nos. 885 (15), 1661 (6). The capture of this ship by Moors is reported on 10th June, 1514 by the Venetian agent at Naples, *ibid.*, no. 2991.

² The Venetian secretary Scaramelli writing to the senate, 17th April, 1603, quoted by Bindoff, p. 205.

³ Bindoff, pp. 212-16.

Secretario, ut aequum est, illesas conseruatum iri non dubitamus; quandoquidem in huiusmodi casibus Tales in unumquemque praestare nos conuenit, quales esse alios in re uestra cūperetis; Hortamur itaque uos in domino, et enixe requirimus maxime cum hac de re idem Illustris rex apud nos per suas literas non uulgarem in modum institerit, ut huiusmodi lanas eidem Briano secretario siue eius legitimis procuratoribus integre restitui et consignari curetis, Incommodi laboris ac periculi eorum, qui dictas lanas receperunt, per eundem Secretarium ratione habita; ne ue patiamini, ut ei, cui et Deus et Virtus uestrorum ciuium ita egregie praesto fuit, aliunde, quod prohibere uos possitis, damnum aliquod aut incommodum inferatur; id si quemadmodum speramus feceritis, declarabitis plane, id quod de uobis sentimus, quodque semper fuistis, Officiosos et rectos homines uos esse, nostrique et huius sanctae sedis hortationum quam debetis, curam et rationem habere; iidemque nobis rem gratissimam, uobis utilem commodamque, ac predicto Regi expectatissimam facietis. Datum Romae apud Sanctum Petrum sub annulo Piscatoris die xvij Augusti M^o.D.Xiiiij. Pontificatus nostri anno secundo.

Ia. Sadoleto.

Endorsed: Dilectis filiis Antianis et Communitati ciuitatis Ianuensis.

[*In another hand:* Breue de restitutione Lanarum in nauī Britannica captarum.]