

Review of ROBERT J. C. YOUNG, *The Idea of English Ethnicity*. Pp. xiv+291. Oxford: Blackwell, 2008. Hardbound £60.00 (ISBN 978-1-4051-0128-8); paperbound £19.99 (ISBN 978-1-4051-0129-5).

The summer of 2010 saw the brief flaring (and the despairing collapse) of overt English nationalism that invariably accompanies the England football team's participation in a World Cup. In this impressively wide-ranging and thoughtful study, Robert J.C. Young recognises the importance of sports such as football and cricket to ideas of Englishness, both because they function as affirmations of a shared cultural identity, very often through the national teams' re-enactment of a narrative of 'heroic failure' (19) that seems quintessentially English, and because they show how Englishness as a concept and as an experience resists easy definition, how it inevitably overlaps with and rubs against other models of identity, particularly 'Britishness'. As Young notes, 'The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is the only country on earth allowed to field four national teams in international football' (12).

*The Idea of English Ethnicity* focuses primarily on the shaping of English ethnic identity during the Victorian period. The book forms part of the 'Blackwell Manifestos' series, and Young takes advantage of the 'manifesto' rubric to put forward a bold, and upbeat, argument concerning English ethnicity. He suggests that, over the course of the Victorian period, conceptions of Englishness moved away from 'Saxonism', which had its historical roots in the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and which defined the English as an exclusively Germanic (and, by implication, Protestant) race, and towards a more open and 'inclusive' (172) approach, which was as much cultural and linguistic as it was racial. Challenging the view that the mid-to-late-nineteenth century was a time of increasingly rigid and restrictive theories of race, Young claims that 'the liberal achievement of the nineteenth century was that the ethnicity of Englishness was transformed from a

Saxonist doctrine of racial singularity and exclusivity' (241) into a flexible discourse which in the twentieth century proved to be, on the whole, tolerant of racial difference and accepting of immigration and ethnic diversity.

This is an appealing argument, particularly for English readers, and Young's presentation of it manages to be both persuasive and nuanced. It is also backed up by thorough research. While remaining alert to the aggressive and oppressive aspects of Victorian theories of race and nation, Young assembles an impressive range of sources to support his contention that the 'inclusive' understanding of English ethnicity can be traced throughout Victorian literature, science, and politics. For example, his comprehensive survey of nineteenth-century ethnological writing shows how Victorian racial science repeatedly found, often despite itself, that the English, far from being a 'pure' race, were inescapably mixed with the Celtic peoples of Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. Young also makes a convincing case for his claim that the expansion of the British Empire demanded, for the sake of imperial cohesion, a more accommodating definition of Englishness, one that could encompass both the English colonial diaspora and, to a lesser extent, the subject peoples of the Empire.

Throughout the book, Young perceptively highlights the fact that the open nature of English ethnicity also makes it insubstantial and difficult to define, commenting that the reason for 'the curious emptiness of Englishness so remarked on in recent decades' is that 'it was never really here, it was always there, delocalized, somewhere else' (236). For the most part, he does an excellent job of pinning down this elusive concept, but there are times when the book loses focus. Chapter 3, which discusses the anatomical and ethnological theories of Robert Knox and William F. Edwards, is a fine introduction to nineteenth-century accounts of race in general, but it has surprisingly little to say about English ethnicity specifically. Other chapters, however, are more representative of the book as a whole in their detailed engagement with particular strands of the Victorian

debate about Englishness. Chapter 4 offers a compelling analysis of the way in which *The Times* was forced to moderate its stridently chauvinistic and anti-Irish stance in response to political and scientific developments during the 1840s, while chapter 5 shows how a union between the 'Saxon' and 'Celtic' elements of English national identity was a crucial feature of the cultural project of Matthew Arnold.

The later chapters of the book address the fortunes of Englishness in the final decades of the nineteenth century, examining the complex relationship that existed between England and the global Anglophone community spread throughout the Empire and the United States. Young's discussion of this issue is detailed and illuminating, but his assessments of the legacy of Victorian theories of English ethnicity in the twentieth century are, at times, problematic. At one point, he states that by the end of the nineteenth century the 'dying liberal tradition' of Englishness was in terminal decline, superseded by a more restrictive and racially exclusive ideology encapsulated in the 1905 Aliens Act, a piece of legislation 'which marked the beginning of the end of Britain's long and noble history of being an open place of refuge for refugees and political exiles from Europe' (175). Yet this assertion is at odds with Young's wider claim, put forward throughout the book, that the Victorians left behind a lasting legacy of ethnic openness and tolerance. Moreover, the latter argument is somewhat undermined by the absence of any detailed consideration of twentieth-century discussions of race and ethnicity in England.

Nonetheless, *The Idea of English Ethnicity* remains an eloquent and powerfully-argued analysis of Victorian ideas of Englishness and race. Perhaps the book's greatest achievement is the extent to which it succeeds, despite the uncertainties and ambiguities surrounding its central thesis, in convincing the reader that the Victorians did indeed lay the foundations for a 'continuing tradition of flexibility and comprehension' that contributed to the subsequent development of 'a tolerant multiracial society' (239).

Contemporary Britain might really be the liberal, inclusive, multicultural place Young believes it to be. Just as long as no-one mentions the football.

GREGORY TATE

University of Surrey