



The Isles: A History

By Norman Davies

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The Isles: A History By Norman Davies

Written by one of the most brilliant and provocative historians at work today, *The Isles* is a revolutionary narrative history that takes a new perspective on the development of Britain and Ireland, looking at them not as self-contained islands, but as an inextricable part of Europe.

At every stage, *The Isles* connects offshore development with parallel events on the Continent. This richly layered history begins with the Celtic Supremacy in the last centuries BC, which is presented in the light of a Celtic world stretching all the way from Iberia to Asia Minor. Roman Britain is seen not as a unique phenomenon but as similar to the other frontier regions of the Roman Empire, such as Germany. The Viking Age is viewed not only through the eyes of the invaded but from the standpoint of the invaders themselves--Norse, Danes, and Normans. Plantagenet England is perceived, like the Kingdom of Jerusalem, as an extension of medieval France. In the later chapters, Davies follows the growth of the United Kingdom and charts the rise and fall of the main pillars of 'Britishness'--the Royal Navy, the Westminster Parliament, the Constitutional Monarchy, the Aristocracy, the Protestant Supremacy, the British Empire, the imperial economy and sterling area, and the English Language.

The book ends with the crisis confronting Britain now--the emergence of the European Union. As the elements that make up the historic Britishness dissolve, Davies shows how public confusion is one of the most potent factors in this process of disintegration. As the Republic of Ireland prospers, and power in the United Kingdom is devolved, he predicts that the coming crisis in the British State may well be its last.

This holistic approach challenges the traditional nationalist picture of a thousand years of "eternal England"--a unique country formed at an early date by Anglo-Saxon kings which evolved in isolation and, except for the Norman Conquest, was only marginally affected by continental affairs. The result is a new picture of the Isles, one of four continents--England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales--constantly buffeted by continental storms and repeatedly transformed by them. Illuminated by the same clarity and piercing originality that distinguished *Europe: A History*, *The Isles* will become an agenda-setting book, one that will encourage a reassessment of what it means to be British while sparking debate about ideas of national identity and sovereignty.

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The Isles: A History By Norman Davies Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #1116292 in Books
- Published on: 2000-03-02
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.30" h x 2.60" w x 6.60" l, 3.75 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 1296 pages

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

When did British history begin, and where will it all end? These controversial issues are tackled head-on in Norman Davies's polemical and persuasive survey of the four countries that in modern times have become known as the British Isles. Covering 10 millennia in just over a thousand pages, from "Cheddar Man" to New Labour, Davies shows how relatively recently the English state was formed--no earlier than Tudor times--and shows, too, how a sense of Britishness emerged only with the coming of empire in the 18th and 19th centuries. A historian of Poland, and the author of an acclaimed history of Europe, Davies is especially sensitive to the complex mixing and merging of tribes and races, languages and traditions, conquerors and colonized that has gone on throughout British history and that in many ways makes "our island story" much more like that of the rest of Europe than we usually think. Many myths of the English are dispelled in this book, and many historians are taken to task for their blinkered Anglocentrism. But the book ends on an upbeat note, with Davies welcoming Britain's return to the heart of Europe at the dawn of the new millennium. --*Miles Taylor, Amazon.co.uk*

From Publishers Weekly

Following his acclaimed *Europe: A History*, British historian Davies has written a wondrous, landmark chronicle of the British Isles--already a bestseller in the U.K.--that challenges conventional Anglocentric assumptions throughout. Davies situates prehistoric Britain as part of a Celtic world stretching from Iberia to Poland to Asia Minor. Unlike most historians, who stress Britain's Anglo-Saxon heritage, Davies shows that the isles' fourfold division into England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales arose from a complex mixing of peoples in a constantly fluctuating patchwork of ethnic communities, statelets and kingdoms. Bursting with fresh insights on nearly every page, this magisterial narrative, scholarly yet down-to-earth and engrossing, reveals Davies at his iconoclastic best. He declares that the Viking legacy is much greater than traditional historians admit, and that the Battle of Hastings in 1066 was not a famous showdown between the English and French, but an intricate scramble for the final Viking spoils in England (valiant English King Harold II was leader of the Anglo-Danish party). The dense narrative really hits its stride with serial wife-slayer Henry VIII and Elizabeth I, and Davies gives full play to the distinctive yet intertwined cultural, economic and political affairs of England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Plumbing the roots of English (and British) prejudice, parochialism, xenophobia and imperialism, Davies includes vastly illuminating mini-essays on such sundry topics as class divisions, the loss of empire, race relations, the rise of organized sports, and the steady advance of a standardized English language. He closes with a provocative forecast: "The breakup of the United Kingdom may be imminent," a prediction he bases on the resurgence of nationalist consciousness and the fact that what he sees as the U.K.'s *raison d'etre*--the perpetuation of empire--has vanished. An advocate of Britain's full integration into the European Union, he chastises the U.K. for clinging to America's apron strings, yet he adds that a fuller embrace of the Continent might only hasten the U.K.'s breakup. No one who cares about Britain's past or future should miss this superb book. Color and b&w photos, maps. 50,000 first printing; author tour. (Mar.)

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From Library Journal

For a specialist in Eastern European history like Davies (emeritus, London Univ.) to attempt to write a synthesis of British history from the Stone Age to the present might seem reckless. As in his last book, *Europe: A History*, Davies will likely engage some of his readers while enraging the rest. Davies examines how the various component parts of "the Isles"--England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales--interacted with one another and the rest of the world. Consequently, a great deal of attention is given to the English colonization

of Ireland, Scotland's relationship with England before and after union, and the creation of empire. These interactions, which form the crux of the book, are well argued and conceptually sound. Davies also recounts how men such as Thomas Babington Macaulay used their historical writings to create an image of "Great Britain" during the 19th century. Davies's use of popular culture, such as music, is well integrated into the text and appendixes. The result is enjoyable reading that is well researched in the secondary literature--but it's not the revolutionary narrative that its publicity claims. Specialists will likely criticize Davies on a number of points, for example, the brevity of his analysis of the English reformation. Recommended for public and academic libraries.

-Frederic Krome, Jacob Rader Marcus Ctr. of the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati

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Ruby Martinez:

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