5. Explorers

The theme of this essay is people and language, but it will only consider the ethnic majority British population. Minorities will be discussed later. This focus will clarify the context for the period covered in the essay.

Historians call this period “early modern”, roughly the end of the 15th to the end of the 18th centuries. It is chiefly characterised by the spread of global trade and perhaps consequentially, the decline of feudalism, the rise of money economies and the growth of towns. It was the golden age of maritime exploration and I have chosen to mark the beginning of the period with its seminal year, 1492.

It also marks the last significant stage in the evolution of the English language, when all the conditions developed for it to become the common language of the world. Meanwhile, as Europe was engulfed by religious conflict, a new form of government emerged in England. I have chosen to mark the end of the period with the year that it came to rule all of the islands, 1707.

Who are the British?

The first people to be called “British” were Celts. They came from Central Europe in the early to mid-1st millennium b.c.e.. They brought iron-working, so their arrival marks the beginning of the “iron age” in Britain. Civilisation, in the sense of towns, money and writing, came to Britain with the Romans from 43 c.e.. This brought settlers from all over the empire. We know for example of Gauls and Hispanics (from what is now France and Spain, respectively) and of soldiers at Hadrian's wall from as far away as Syria.

Most of the Romans who came to Britain would have been administrators and soldiers, so would only ever have been a minority, and mostly urban. They seem to have integrated with the Celts, producing a blended culture we call Romano-British. The population of Britain may have been around 3 million before the plague of 250. It probably recovered to some extent before declining again as invaders killed and abducted people as slaves.

The descendants of these North Sea slave traders became settlers. Around 450-590, Anglo-Saxons came west from the continent. We can't be sure to what extent the Anglo-Saxons replaced the Romano-British. One small clue is the names of places. Anglo-Saxon place names can be found throughout England and creeping into Scotland and Wales. They are marked by the endings “ing”, “ham” and “ton”, for example “Billing”, “Nottingham” (which has both) and “Luton”. It's also known that the Anglo-Saxon word for foreigner was “weal”, and this sound is preserved very obviously in “Wales” and “Cornwall”. It is also in many towns and villages in Britain, for example Walton, Welling, Waltham, etc.

It is worth noting however, that place names are only a weak clue to the settlement of people for a number of reasons. For one thing, places can retain their names even after the people have gone. For another, people can use old names for new places long after the origin has been forgotten. A clear modern example of this can be found in New England, USA, where the place names Boston, Worcester, Manchester, Bangor, etc., have been borrowed from places in Britain.

After the Anglo-Saxons came the Vikings, in the 9th and 10th centuries. They are believed to have settled in the North and East of England. Their place names are shown by word endings “by” and “thorpe”, like for example, “Whitby” and “Scunthorpe”. They got all the way across the country, as shown by the area of South Lancaster that includes the city of Liverpool. It was once under a Danish Lord at West Derby.

Recent genetic evidence suggests that the Vikings left no trace in the genes of the British. Perhaps they were small in number, and part of a ruling class that mixed only rarely with the locals. When the Normans came in a single raid in 1066, they completely killed off and replaced this ruling class. They too, left no traceable contribution to the genetics of the population. As far as the population is concerned, we can estimate from the Norman census, called the Domesday Book, that the late 11th century population of England was about 1¼-2 million, still well below its Roman level.

Despite subsequent conquests of Wales, Ireland and Scotland, the people of these lands retained distinctive "celtic" identities. The language of the English gradually crept North and West. Welsh, which is believed to be strongly related to Romano-British, eventually became a minority language in Wales. Likewise, the "Gaelic" languages of Ireland and Scotland became almost exclusively confined to the rugged far West and remote islands.

At this point it is important to note that "British" is not an ethnic, but a civil, category. The many immigrants who have become citizens are British. Should it be necessary to refer to the ethnic majority population the phrase "White British" is sometimes used. I think this is inadequate for two reason: because it is based on appearance and because it doesn't distinguish between English, Welsh, Scottish and Northern Irish. The alternative "Anglo-Saxon" also suffers from lack of specificity. Along with the ethnic majority of England, it can also refer to the majorities of Canada, the USA, Australia and New Zealand, as well as non-British minority populations elsewhere in the world.

The evolution of the English language

Languages change naturally over time. So every living language is different, perhaps incomprehensibly different, to how it was 1½ thousand years ago. Here's something someone said in England some time before the Norman conquest:

"hige sceal the heardra heorte the cenre
mod sceal the mare the ure maegen lytlath
her lith ure ealdoe eall forheawen
god on greote a maeg gnornian
se the nu fram this wigplegan wendan thenceth"

Native speakers of modern English can't understand this. This is the language of the Anglo-Saxons, called "Old English". The whole verse reads: "The mind must be the firmer, the heart must be braver, the courage must be the greater, as our strength grows less. Here lies our lord all cut to pieces, the good man on the ground. If anyone thinks now to turn away from this war-play, may he be unhappy for ever after".

The gradual changes that happen to languages causes them to split and diverge as people move. Relationships are preserved however, in predictable ways, for example, a pattern referred to as "regular correspondence" can be seen is these examples:

English	German	Swedish
stone	*stein*	*sten*
bone	*bein**	*ben**
oak	*eiche*	*ek*
home	*heim*	*hem*
rope	*reif**	*rep*
goat	*geiss*	*get*
one	*ein*	*en*

The “regular correspondence” is found in a consistency of vowel changes (typically “o”, “ei” and “e”, in the three languages, respectively). There is also a typical connection of meaning, shown by the words with asterisks (*). The German word *bein* for example, is related to the English word *bone* but actually means “leg”. The Swedish word *ben*, means *bone* or leg. The German word *reif*, meant *rope* in old German, but now it means “ring” or “hoop”.

Old English was probably very similar to the Old German of the 5th and 6th centuries, when the Anglo-Saxons came and settled in Britain. They may have picked up some words from the natives. Words from the deep Celtic past often relate to metals and to features of the land, for example: *iron, lead, town*. Words of Roman origin are more often connected to building, war, trade, gardens and food, for example: *wall, tile, chalk, mill, pit, cheap, meagre, mint, apple, plum, cherry, pear, kitchen, peas, cheese, butter, kettle*. Words to do with seafaring are predominantly German, such as: *ship, sail, boat, keel, sheet* and possibly *float* and *sea*.

The relationship between English and German is not only found in words, but also in grammar. While the past tense of “dance” for example, is “danced”, the past tense of “sing” is not “singed”. As with other Germanic languages the past tense is made by changing the vowel sound, so the correct form is “sang” and the past participle is “sung”.

The arrival of the Normans in 1066 is thought to have changed English in two important ways: Firstly, they more-or-less completely replaced the Anglo-Saxon aristocracy. As the most common written form of a language is that of the aristocracy, they killed off the speakers of the form of Old English that was written down. Secondly, they brought in lots of words and phrases from their own language, Norman-French.

Imagine if you were an English person of the 11th-13th centuries. At home you would speak your own dialect of Old English, but if you wanted to communicate with Lords you would have to speak some Norman-French. Eventually, you might start using some French words even when you were speaking to other English people, especially if they had strong and difficult to understand regional accents.

French gave English words like *people*, *art*, *danger*, and *collision*. Now, most are spelt and sound different, like *battle*, *music*, and *dance* (from the French words with the same meaning: *bataille*, *musique* and *danse*). French also gave English the alternative, and perhaps simpler way to form a past tense, adding “d”, as in “danced”. This form has spread through the language, gradually forcing out the old Germanic style vowel change. All these changes are regarded as sufficient to call this a new language, “middle English”.

In the period covered by this essay, English underwent its final step-change and began to evolve into the world language of today. This began with the early development of towns that mixed together people from all parts of Britain, many speaking dialects. Entertainers and journalists, particularly when making use of new printing technology, wanted to maximise their audience. As they simplified some aspects of grammar and borrowed memorable phrases from various dialects, they created what is now called “Modern English”.

The well-known works of Shakespeare are sometimes taken to represent the beginning of this phase. It is commonly thought that he invented many new words, but it seems more likely that he picked them up and made them fashionable. By using these words, along with a bit of theatrical cadence, people could show themselves to be modern, urban and sophisticated. This not only expanded vocabularies, but changed the way people felt about language. From its beginning, Modern English was shaped by its attraction to new words and new sounds.

Modern English is called a “borrowing” language. This means that it usually does not find English forms for foreign word, but simply adds the foreign word to its vocabulary (a fact which is helped by its use of a phonetic script). Trade is probably a factor. If foreign goods are new and exciting then using their foreign names may make them more desirable and fashionable.

The world in 1492

In the time of the Mongol empire, that's 1206-1368, after its initial aggressive phase, it became possible to trade into the empire at one end and get goods from the other. Linking the wealthiest parts of the three continents, it became quite a dynamic trade system. It even used “bills of exchange” (paper money), which had never retained their value for so long. This was the first age of explorers. It's most famous being the Italian, Marco Polo (1254-1324).

The empire broke, but the idea of European trade with Asia lived on. Looking at the geography, you might think Europeans could get to the East by passing through the Red Sea. This however, would involve stepping into Muslim territory, and Christian had only been doing that as violent marauders since the crusade of 1095. If you were an adventurous European merchant, how would you get your hands on the goods from India and China that would make you a fortune?

In August 1492, a Genoese sailor (from Genoa in Italy), set off to get to the far end of the three continents by going west. This wouldn't have been attempted by the way, without a compass, a tool that had come to Europe from China early in Mongol times. Likewise, it may not have been attempted without a Caravel, a new type of ship with a shallow keel and two sharply angled sails, excellent for sailing against the wind. The Caravel was first made in the 1450s in Portugal, just before Columbus went there to train as a sailor.

The final ingredient was the backing of a wealthy state. Columbus tried Portugal first. He then tried Genoa and Venice, and even England. Generally, the most experienced sailors of these old seafaring nations said that he'd underestimated the size of the world. When Spain was finally united, Columbus tried there. Perhaps it was the Spanish Court's lack of seafaring experience that lead it to missed his big miscalculation.

In return for financial support, Columbus agreed to claim all territory he discovered for Spain. They imagined there would be some nice little islands out there. In October 1492, Columbus was pleased to have found a surprisingly big one. It was about the size of Portugal, and became known as Cuba. There was more land just off its north coast. It would be at least a decade before anyone could guess just how big that was. They called it the New World, and later, nobody is quite sure why, it became known as the Americas.

Based on his miscalculation of the size of the earth, knowing that he was at the right latitude and seeing the dark-skinned locals, Columbus guessed he was close to India. So he called the islands he found the “West Indies”. That is still their name, although they are 15,000 kilometres from India. He also called the locals “Indians”, another name that stuck, even though it is clearly absurd.

The Spanish Empire

Columbus did quite well out of the adventure, and the Royal house of Spain did very well. Despite the inflation caused by the flood of gold and silver into Europe, and the depopulation of parts of the countryside caused by migration, the Spanish aristocracy as a whole grew rich. Go to Spain today, to the beautiful cities of Toledo, Valencia and Seville for example, and you will get a taste of the wealth the discovery brought. A relatively small, speculative investment made the Spanish ruling class, the wealthiest in Europe.

A flood of Spanish and Portuguese explorers followed Columbus, and while he was off on his second trip, the Pope agreed that only Spain and Portugal could claim any land out there. The treaty of Tordesillas divided the world in two, again based on Spanish miscalculations of the world's size, giving an overly generous proportion to little Portugal.

In America, Spanish adventurers destroyed the local civilisations and became a New World aristocracy. Just like the Romans had done in Spain over 1½ thousand years earlier, the Spanish established large slave plantations and imported cheap and popular goods into Europe. This was the time of the arrival into Europe of potatoes, tomatoes, tobacco, corn, chocolate, pineapple and peanuts.

All of this wealth crept into the politics of Europe and in 1521, King Charles V of Spain became Holy Roman Emperor. The Spanish ruling class became so wealthy it could have united Western Europe at that time. There could have been a European state comparable in size and strength to Mughal India or Ming China.

Two important things changed its direction. The first was religion. In 1517, an agent of the Roman Catholic church went to Wittenberg in Saxony, Northern Germany, to raise money. He was selling indulgences. That meant for a payment, he could forgive you of your sins so that when you died you could go straight to heaven. Martin Luther, a local priest, objected. He wrote out 95 criticisms of church practises. Someone got hold of it and started printing. Within 2 years it had spread around all the cities of Europe and Luther couldn't turn back.

It is interesting how it spread so fast. All those chartered towns on the waterways of central Europe had become linked by established trade routes. The urban people were part of the developing money economy and were deeply suspicious of the church. On becoming Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V went to the City of Worms for a meeting with Luther. It didn't go well. At the end Charles made a general condemnation of Luther and anyone who supported him. Many historians say that the history of Europe might have been very different if the new Emperor had been just a little more skilled and diplomatic.

In 1524, German peasants in the South rebelled and were defeated within a year. They were angry at the continuation of serfdom and land enclosures. Luther hated rebellious peasants. He was theologically radical but politically and socially reactionary. The peasants however, claimed to stand for Luther's ideas, so he became an unwilling symbol of rebellion. Because of the growth of towns, infrastructure and printing, ideas spread quickly.

In 1531, six powerful Northern nobles and ten cities formed a Lutheran alliance, known as the Schmalkaldic league. In response, the Catholics formed the Nuremberg league, with the Emperor's support. In 1546, war broke out between them and continued for over 100 years. The Spanish aristocracy now had the wealth to unite Europe, but the authority of the Church, which was the only viable institution of European unity, was being eaten away by Protestantism.

England versus Europe

The second reason why Spain did not become the centre of a European empire was the role played by England. Why it was the first to achieve a lasting Protestant victory is disputed. Some say it was all about economics and politics, while others focus on the private problems of the King.

When Henry VIII was crowned in 1509, he was perhaps in the strongest position an English King had ever been. He had a proper civil service and no real contenders for his crown. This was a time when people were talking less of loyalty to Lord's and more about loyalty to England. You might say there was a rise in national consciousness.

Nevertheless, there was one other power in the land, the Church. It owned about 1/3 of the land, which is more than the King. Henry was a showman, a popular character, who even sang with his own band. To begin with he was loyal to the Church. In 1511, after the birth of his son, he walked a barefoot pilgrimage to a Holy shrine in Norfolk. This Catholic duty was part of his image-making. His son however, died after just two weeks. His wife, Catherine of Aragon, from the Royal house of Spain, gave birth to several children who died very early.

For the first 24 years of his reign, Henry made speeches and proclamations defending the Church against Luther and other Protestants. In 1524, an English Protestant called William Tyndale, tried to publish the Bible in English. Henry's men stopped the printers and tried to arrest him, but Tyndale escaped to the Netherlands and published his Bible there. In 1530, a man called John Hitton, became the first recorded Englishman to be burned at the stake. His crime was smuggling copies of Tyndale's Bible into England.

The exiled Tyndale also wrote a book saying that it was God's law that there should be one King in every realm. This reflected the spirit of the new nationalism. It was against the Pope and any kind of European unity. A flirtatious courtier called Anne Boleyn gave King Henry a copy. She also hosted meetings of scholars for him to attend, which questioned the right of the Pope to interfere with the King's will.

In 1533, Henry suddenly changed his position. He defied the Pope and declared himself Head of the Church in England. He got a divorce and married Anne, who was already pregnant. Anne had a daughter, Princess Elizabeth, and Princess Mary was officially demoted to Lady Mary. That's when Henry's civil service sprang into action. They used English nationalism to force the country to accept what had happened. Everyone was made to swear an oath to the King. Monasteries and nunneries were destroyed. 10,000 monks and nuns lost their homes. Most of the money and property when to local Lords, who became enthusiastic supporters of Henry.

Very soon afterwards, things changed again. There is evidence that the head of the civil service, Thomas Cromwell, now wanted to re-establish the alliance with Spain. The price would be getting rid of Anne. In 1536, a wild sex scandal engulfed the Court, eventually leading to Anne’s execution. Historians now generally agree that it was all the invention of Thomas Cromwell.

Now, as Head of his own Church, Henry was free to have as many wives as he wanted. His next wife gave birth to a son, Edward. The next two were divorced and executed, respectively. His last wife, Catherine Parr lived on after he died in 1547.

Was it about economics and power, or wives and sons? Perhaps personal and political interests can coincide. The Church was extremely rich. Not only did it collect rents and sell indulgences, it also had a big stake in mining and the wool industry. The King made a lot of allies from those who seized this wealth. At the same time his alliances helped to prevent Spanish domination and European unity.

Religious war

Henry did his best to stop the radicalism he had inspired. In 1543, he issued a law saying that only Churchmen, scholars and aristocrats were allowed to read the Bible. He even re-introduced some Catholic-style things in his Church: celibacy for priests, and insisting of the sanctity of the Mass.

His son Edward, however, became King at the age of 9, and was surrounded by fanatical Protestants. In his short reign, he made religious guilds and cults of saints illegal, he encouraged the “iconoclasts”, who destroyed church decoration and imagery, and he banned the Mass. He died at

the age of 15, having never been a King in his own right.

Next in line was a Catholic, the daughter of Catherine of Aragon, Lady Mary. At first she seemed to conciliate, but as her reign went on, she became more zealous in the fight against Protestantism. Sixty women and two hundred and twenty men were burnt at the stake. She became known as “bloody Mary”.

She married Philip, King of Spain, but died childless in 1558, throwing the country into another succession struggle. Henry's next eldest child was Elizabeth, but her right to rule depends on whether you accept Henry's divorce from Catherine of Aragon. Otherwise, you would recognise the claim of Elizabeth's second cousin, Mary Queen of Scots. Luckily, for Elizabeth, Mary Queen of Scots was overthrown by a rebellion in Scotland and spent most of her life as Elizabeth's prisoner.

Elizabeth's England was officially Protestant, but Catholicism was still very strong under the surface. Despite the oaths and persecutions, a large (but unknown) number of people either stayed Catholic or just accepted Protestantism in words alone. There were several uprisings and conspiracies to put Mary Queen of Scots on the English throne, but they all failed, thanks to the power of the civil service around Elizabeth. Eventually, Mary Queen of Scots was executed, and the crown was claimed by King Philip of Spain.

In 1588, Philip sent a fleet of 147 ships to claim his Kingdom. This story became a powerful piece of Elizabethan propaganda, and it has been taught in British schools ever since. The Spanish “Armada” (Spanish for “fleet”) was intended to pick up 19,000 soldiers from the coast of the Spanish Netherlands (what is now Belgium) and take them to England. Thanks to the weather, and tactical disruption by the English fleet, they missed the pick-up point and couldn't turn back. After sailing all the way around the islands, only 67 ships, less than half, got back to Spain. Most were wrecked on Britain’s rocky shores.

By surviving this, and continuing to support Protestants fighting Spain, England continued its policy of sabotaging European unity. By supporting English merchants (who were effectively pirates) they disrupted the Spanish Atlantic trade, and in the process made many of those merchants very rich. Money coming into London caused inflation, which can be bad for aristocrats with large estates, but good for financial investors. It also helped to stimulate the arts. This period is sometimes known as “Shakespearean”, making it the first period not to be named after a monarch, but an entertainer.

Queen Elizabeth died without an heir in 1603, bringing the Tudor dynasty to an end. Mary Queen of Scots left behind a baby boy when the Protestant rebels expelled her. They made him King James of Scotland, at 18-months of age. So, although he had been christened Catholic, he was raised as a Protestant. He was James VI of Scotland, and on Elizabeth's death in 1603, at the age of 37, he became King James I of England.

That religion in Britain was moving into a phase of pragmatism is reflected in the life of William Parker, Lord Monteagle. He had been an active Catholic religious warrior in his youth, but mellowed with age. When, in 1605, a group of Catholic fanatics tried to assassinate the new King in Parliament they sent their old friend Baron Monteagle a letter warning him, not to attend Parliament that day. Some historians have questioned this suggested there may have been a counter-conspiracy. Nevertheless, these are the facts:

The opening of Parliament was scheduled for November 5th, 1605. At the time, the cellars of the palace of Westminster were available for private hire. The conspirators gained access in advance and put 36 barrels of gunpowder in them. This strongly suggests that they intended to detonate an explosion as soon as the House of Lords was full and the King entered. The man caught in the

cellar, purportedly guarding the gunpowder was Guy Fawkes. The others were tracked down and killed later.

The following year, the failed plot was commemorated by a state-sponsored event called “Bonfire night”. It is still celebrated in the Anglo-Saxon lands every November 5th. Because of Guy Fawkes, we call the human effigy we put on the fire, the “Guy”. The whole thing has the feel of a brilliantly executed piece of propaganda. It even has a song:

Remember, remember the 5th of November
Gunpowder, treason and plot
I see no reason why gunpowder treason
Should ever be forgot

The English Civil War

King James went on to rule for 22 years, over a country becoming increasingly non-conformist. He seems to have professed pragmatism, saying he would accept people of different beliefs as long as they “will be quiet and give but an outward obedience to the law”. As time went by however, he did more and more to enforce conformity, such as insisting people swear an oath to the Church, publishing an official Bible in English and forbidding all others.

He also published a book called The True Law of Free Monarchies, in which he explained that Kings were put on Earth by God, and must be obeyed at all times. His son, who became King Charles I in 1625, seems to have had the same attitude to his authority, although perhaps lacked the judgement and diplomatic skills of his father.

The relationship between King Charles and his Parliament deteriorated until in 1642, he attempted to rule without it. At first, he was relatively successful, but then Parliament organised a standing army called the New Model Army under the command of Oliver Cromwell. They fought back, defeating and executing the King in 1649.

Cromwell became a dictator, and his form of non-conformist Protestantism, called Puritanism, became deeply unpopular. It involved for example, abolishing Christmas and making football illegal. Nevertheless, there were signs of religious pragmatism under Cromwell. For example, Jewish people were allowed to live in Britain again. This may have been economically useful but we can't be sure how popular it was.

After his death, the old King's son was welcomed back as King Charles II, but the monarchy was now very different. Rather than getting heavily involved in politics, the monarch's main aim would be to secure the existence of the monarchy itself by raising its popularity. Charles II was pretty good at this: he sponsored theatre, science, art, and was generally regarded as charismatic and tolerant.

In 1669, a Parliamentary Committee on Trade said “some ease and relaxation on ecclesiastical matters [is] likely to assist in the improvement of the trade of the kingdom.” Had we now entered the phase of religious pragmatism? Not quite. When Charles was succeeded by his Catholic son, James in 1685, Parliament could not accept it. It chose an alternative: the joint monarchy of Charles I's grandson and James' daughter.

William III, known as William of Orange, and Mary, were crowned, and James deposed. Apart from the fact that the religious question still lingered, this demonstrated conclusively that Parliament was now in charge. It could ignore the age-old tradition of succession and choose a King or Queen. This event became known as the “Glorious Revolution”.

England and Scotland had been under one Monarch since 1603, but had two governments and two exchequers, that is to say, they were completely financially separate. When the Scottish government invested heavily in a failed project to develop colonies in Central America, it fell into a debt it couldn't service without English help. By the terms of the agreement, signed in 1707, the two nations were merged and the United Kingdom was born.

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John Gandy

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