Cumbrian Identities: Introduction

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THIS special section arises from a day conference on 'Cumbrian Identities' which was held at the University of Cumbria's Ambleside campus on 25 April 2009, organized by Lancaster University's Centre for North-West Regional Studies in conjunction with the CWAAS. In recent decades 'identity' has established itself as a core term, and a key concept, in the analysis of contemporary and historical culture, and this collection of essays is the first to investigate Cumbrian identity, or identities, in a focused and sustained manner. The six essays here cover an impressive range, and explore many of the elements that might contribute to a sense of Cumbrian identity or identities: John Walton considers in what ways Cumbria might meaningfully be viewed as a region, and asks what, if anything, within Cumbria might lead to a shared sense of identity among its inhabitants; Charles Phythian-Adams looks at the region in the early medieval period, and reconstructs the interaction of peoples in terms of ethnic as much as spatial identities; Angus Winchester explores how personal names, both Christian names and surnames, might have acted as localized cultural markers in the early modern period; Penny Bradshaw reviews the role the Lake District has played in the construction of individual poetic identities; Richard Newman surveys how industrialization contributed, and contributes, to the making of local identities in the region; and Mike Huggins considers the possible role of sport in the construction of Cumbrian identities. In this introduction I shall reflect on some of the issues that are thrown up when one foregrounds 'identity' as an analytical category, and briefly relate these to the rich discussions found in our six essays.

As certain common phrases indicate, there are essentially two directions in which the sense of identity operates. The first is inward-looking or self-reflexive (e.g. *self-identity*, *identity crisis*) – our sense of who we are, and which elements in our make-up we regard as important in terms of giving us our sense of who we are. But the second, arguably very different from the first, is outward-looking (e.g. *mistaken identity*, *identity parade*) – our sense of who other people are, and (again) which elements we regard as important in terms of giving us our sense of who, or what, other people are.

It is evident that these two characterizations need not agree with each other. Inward-looking self-identification may be affected by wishful thinking, or myth-making, or sheer self-delusion. So, for instance, visitors to 'Mendips', the suburban childhood home of John Lennon (now owned by the National Trust), may reasonably question whether he was really the 'Working-Class Hero' he believed himself to be. The outward-looking identification of others may be affected by misunderstanding, or suspicion, or even hatred. In considering immigrant communities, or ethnic groups, the stakes may be very high indeed. To take an example from an earlier period: a notorious entry in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for 1002 records that 'in that year the king [Æthelred 'the Unready'] ordered to be slain all the Danish men who were in England – this was done on St Brice's day – because the king had been informed that they would treacherously deprive him, and

then all his councillors, of life, and possess this kingdom afterwards'.[1] In recent decades there has been extensive debate as to what may have been the markers of Scandinavian ethnic identity in Viking Age England, and some scholars have queried whether any such markers can be definitively specified, arguing instead that there were no markers that were unambiguously essential to Scandinavian identity, or that may not have been adopted by non-Scandinavians as well (for example, language, personal names, dress styles, hair styles).[2] This recent scholarly debate, however, is preoccupied almost exclusively with an 'inward-looking' view of identity. The 'outward-looking' view is much simpler. Evidently, some Anglo-Saxons felt it was unproblematic to identify who was 'Danish' and who was not, and to implement a lethal policy on that basis. Fine nuances of 'inward' identity may be disregarded in cruder 'outward' processes of identification, and the application of an identity-label may be an over-simplified categorization that reduces individuals to types.

As has already become clear, a second distinction in the study of identity is between individual identity and collective identity. Looking inward, how does my sense of self relate to my sense of membership of other social groups, whether defined by place, nation, age, gender, language, religion, occupation, or other shared interest? Looking outward, in what ways do I identify others according to their membership of social groups, and what types of group do I regard as important in performing such identifications? (And contrariwise, with what groups do others identify me?)

And a third distinction relates to the question of how identities come into being, and how enduring or ephemeral they may be. In her influential book *The Archaeology of Ethnicity: Constructing Identities in the Past and Present*, Siân Jones distinguished between what she termed 'primordial' and 'instrumental' concepts of identity, or ideas about identity (and we should note that, as the title of Jones' book indicates, one of the types of identity most discussed in modern scholarship is ethnic identity).[3] To believe that identity is 'primordial', Jones explains, is to believe that it is hard-wired, inherited, and largely unchangeable. To believe that identity is 'instrumental', on the other hand, is to believe that it is variable, able to be manipulated according to situation, the result of choice. Clearly there are strengths and weaknesses in both views. The 'primordialist' view of identity recognizes the potential for one's identity to be something one is born into or grows up with, something that is psychologically deep-rooted and significant; but it is in danger of suggesting a biological basis for identity, and of denying the possibility of change or variation. The 'instrumentalist' view acknowledges the manner in which people's sense of identity may alter according to time and circumstances, not least through social interaction with others; but it runs the risk of regarding one's identity as something superficial and disposable, able to be put on and taken off at will. The practical limits of instrumentalism are also shown up by the fact that identity is fundamentally social, and therefore the 'inward-looking' and the 'outward-looking' are in fact in dialogue with each other. In most cases even self-identities have to be recognized and validated by others, and it may be problematic if they are not; in Richard Jenkins' words, 'social identity is never unilateral'.[4] Or as Robert Young asks of ethnic identity: 'Could a blond Anglo-Saxon plausibly claim to be a Bengali? There is always a little bit of nature left within ethnicity'.[5]

Both 'instrumentalists' and 'primordialists' have stressed that a person's identities are often multiple, and related to one another in a scale or matrix, and that different identities

may become activated or prominent at different times or under different circumstances. In the present publication we are concerned, of course, with the concept of 'regional identity' above all.[6] How does regional identity resemble or differ from other large forms of collective identity, such as ethnic identity or national identity? Is it inflected by class, gender, age? Is it more or less fluid, or more or less important, than other forms of identity?

To continue with yet another question: what makes someone a Cumbrian, able to lay claim to a sense of Cumbrian identity or to be regarded by others in such terms? Clearly, one's position in the primordialist/instrumentalist debate will condition whether one answers this question according to criteria of ancestry, birth, and upbringing, or those of choice or simple residence. Indeed, it is obvious that even physical residence within a region or place is not actually required for participation in a sense of regional or spatial/national identity, as indicated (on a large scale) by the global phenomenon of diasporas and expatriate identities and (on a small scale) by various Cumbrian societies in London.[7] And moreover, the presence of the Lake District within Cumbria gives a particular twist to this observation. Harking back to Wordsworth's famous description of the Lakes as 'a sort of national property', W. G. Collingwood insisted that 'thousands of town-dwellers are Lake-folk at heart. They have every right to call the Lakes theirs, if affection and adoption count for anything'.[8]

What size of unit is involved in the formation and expression of place-based identity? Clearly we might think about an increasing scale, from local identities (see for example Winchester and Newman in this volume), to regional (see Walton, Phythian-Adams), to national, and such a scale is also complicated by the role played by urban identities (see Newman, Huggins). Defining a region is difficult in itself (see Walton, Phythian-Adams), and in the present instance a particular issue is the relationship between region and county (again, see Walton). The county of 'Cumbria' was, of course, brought into existence as an administrative unit in 1974. But one can find ample evidence of the idea that the territory covered by the present county was perceived as a meaningful unit prior to that date, even at the same time as one can find abundant loyalties and identities focused upon, and expressed through, the individual counties of Cumberland, Westmorland, and Lancashire. So, to choose an example close to home, the geographical scope of the CWAAS itself correlates with the modern county of Cumbria, even though the CWAAS came into being more than a hundred years before the modern county did (1866). Similarly, many distinguished writers before 1974 sought to find a term that embraced the whole region, from W.G. Collingwood's *The Lake Counties* (1902) to Norman Nicholson's *Greater Lakeland* (1969) (see Walton).

As such book titles suggest, a particular issue in the study of Cumbrian identity is the relationship between 'the Lake District' and the larger region, and many of the essays here explicitly address this point. To many or most non-Cumbrians, it is the Lake District that defines the region of Cumbria, and the two units are often regarded, reductively, as synonymous. Many of the essays here, more concerned with inward-looking self-identification, take pains to rectify such a perspective and to show how Cumbrian self-identities are so much richer and more nuanced than this (see for example Walton, Newman, Huggins). Such a redress is important, of course, but, as noted above, self-

identification is only half of the picture in terms of the functioning of identity, and the outward-looking identification by others, however reductive, is a legitimate and significant part of the process (not least because of the effect it may have on lived lives). Moreover, in certain spheres it was precisely the Lake District, and not the larger region, that was involved in the establishment and negotiation of identity (see Bradshaw).

But although the Lake District may now, to most outsiders, act as the element that defines Cumbria as a whole, we need not fear that the very concept of 'Cumbria' is a Romantic or post-Romantic invention; as Angus Winchester has written elsewhere, 'the perceived unity of the historic counties of Cumberland, Westmorland, and Lancashire north of the Sands, long predated the arrival of tourists to visit the Lakes'.[9] How far back, though, was this unity perceived? Has the sense of the region, and therefore the sense of regional identity, altered substantially over the centuries and even millennia (see Phythian-Adams)? The region has seen a succession of peoples and cultures leaving their mark: nineteenth-century antiquaries may have paid especial attention to the region's Scandinavian heritage, but they did not neglect the Celtic element either, nor indeed the Roman and (in the early modern period) the German.[10] To what degree, then, might a shared sense of history impart a sense of regional identity (see Walton)? In modern Cumbria, or at least the Lake District, that sense of history might specifically be a sense of literary history, in light of the absolutely central role played by Wordsworth in defining the region (see Bradshaw).

Literature, sport, industrialization, naming practices, early medieval politics: these and many other topics are reviewed and analysed in the following collection of essays. Individually, they provide a great deal of stimulation and insight; but cumulatively, they break new ground as a concerted exploration into the phenomenon of 'Cumbrian identities'. As I have outlined in this introduction, 'identity' itself is a complex and much-debated concept, and there is more work to be done, no doubt, in the study of Cumbrian identities; but the essays published here put the whole subject on a new and stronger footing.

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Notes and References

[1]   Dorothy Whitelock (trans.), *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Revised Translation* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1961), 86

[2]   See for example Dawn M. Hadley and Julian D. Richards (eds), *Cultures in Contact: Scandinavian Settlement in England in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries*, Studies in the Early Middle Ages 2 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000)

[3]   Siân Jones, *The Archaeology of Ethnicity: Constructing Identities in the Past and Present* (London: Routledge, 1997), 65-79; see also Peter Heather, *Empires and Barbarians* (London: Macmillan, 2009), 12-28

[4]   Richard Jenkins, *Social Identity* (London: Routledge, 1996), 23

[5]   Robert J. C. Young, *The Idea of English Ethnicity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), x

[6]   See Adrian Green and A. J. Pollard, 'Introduction: Identifying Regions', in Adrian Green and A. J. Pollard (eds.), *Regional Identities in North-East England, 1300-2000* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2007), 1-25

[7]   See J. D. Marshall, 'Cumberland and Westmorland Societies in London', *CW2,* lxxxiv, 239-54

[8]   W. G. Collingwood, *The Lake Counties* (London: Dent, 1902), 2-3. See Ernest de Selincourt (ed.), *Wordsworth's Guide to the Lakes: The Fifth Edition (1835)* (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), 92

[9]   Angus J. L. Winchester, 'Regional Identity in the Lake Counties: Land Tenure and the Cumbrian Landscape', *Northern History* 42 (2005), 29-48 (p29)

[10]   See Matthew Townend, *The Vikings and Victorian Lakeland: the Norse Medievalism of W.G. Collingwood and his Contemporaries*, CWAAS Extra Series 34 (Kendal: CWAAS, 2009)