



The Four Nations: A History of the United Kingdom

By Frank Welsh

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Even by comparison to the United States, the United Kingdom has had a brief and fractious history. Its existence as an undivided entity lasted only for a disputatious 125 years, and its future remains precarious. In *The Four Nations*, Frank Welsh offers a lively narrative history of the four component parts of the British Isles—England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. Moving from the Roman period, which first defined many of the current internal boundaries, through the present day, Welsh describes the history of each nation, their interactions, and the impacts of crises ranging from the Norman Invasion to the Protestant Reformation to the two world wars of the twentieth century. Along the way, Welsh questions many cherished illusions and poses some awkward questions: To what extent were Scotland, Ireland, and Wales victims of predatory English aggression? How serious is the frequently invoked specter of national fragmentation? Filled with illuminating vignettes and provocative insights, *The Four Nations* is an accessible and comprehensive introduction to the troubled histories of the British Isles.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Welsh (A History of South Africa, etc.) examines over 2,000 years of the history of England, Ireland, Wales and Scotland, focusing on how these nations interacted to shape one another's history. Unsurprisingly, England is the major player here. The history of Scotland and Ireland is largely a matter of their attempts to remain free of, and then accommodate to, a hegemonic England. Welsh begins with the Roman conquest of Britannia and establishment of the modern-day borders of England, Scotland and Wales. He concludes in the year 2001, considering whether "the end of the United Kingdom" is at hand (to those who fear it, he replies that "the unitary state had been disintegrating for over a century"). After detailing the construction of the U.K., Welsh devotes most of the latter part of the book to events in Ireland—from the failed Rising of 1798 to the Great Irish Famine, Gladstone and the failure of Home Rule, the partition of Ireland, sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland and the present-day peace process. By comparison, Welsh's treatment of Scotland and Wales is minimal. Welsh has chosen breadth of coverage over depth. We get only a few pages, for instance, on the 1688 Glorious Revolution—one of the seminal events in British history—and surprisingly little on WWII. Nor is there much about the development of the British Empire. Welsh's narrative is too often a dry recitation of well-known dates and names, rarely delving below the surface or offering fresh insight. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Review

"The Four Nations is a hugely enjoyable read, full of vigor and liveliness as well as provocative commentary. It informs and instructs in an accessible way that none of its rivals can match."

"A compelling and sometimes controversial account of how four kingdoms--England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales--became one.... [Welsh] constantly challenges received opinion and urban myths."

About the Author

Frank Welsh is the author of nine previous books, including A Borrowed Place: The History of Hong Kong and A History of South Africa.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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