


BOOK REVIEW

## Stephanie Barczewski. *How the Country House Became English*

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Recent years have seen an explosion of interest in the imperial links of British country houses, with Barczewski's first book, *Country Houses and the British Empire* (2014), making an important contribution to the debate. Her new book recognizes that empire forms just one part of the story of the country house and turns instead to the less academically fashionable idea of national identity. She situates her analysis both in the context of rising nationalism, which reached its zenith in Britain with Brexit, and the longer history of English national identity. Barczewski seeks to understand the role played by country houses in these processes, and to "explain how they came to possess the attributes that permitted them to be identified as 'English' in the first place" (33). This is done by explaining their role in and experience of moments of disruption (with chapters on the Reformation, Civil Wars, and Age of Revolution), and the duality of English insularity and connectedness (through comparisons with Scotland and Wales, and assessment of the impact of empire and the relationship with continental Europe).

The first two chapters examine some of the winners and losers in the profound changes unleashed by the Reformation and Civil Wars. Discussion of the former includes the role of country houses as hiding places for Catholic priests, the confiscation of lands, and the repurposing of monastic buildings following their dissolution. The detail is impressive and profound changes seen in patterns of ownership and physical structure is readily apparent, both in numbers and the series of detailed case studies. Similarly, the Civil Wars brought widespread destruction to many country and manor houses, and the sequestration of estates on both sides is carefully mapped and described through numerous examples. Yet the focus on violence and disruption perhaps elides some quiet continuities: sequestration spelt disaster for some families, but many recovered their lands, sometimes quite quickly; more intriguing is the continuity of names as monastic lands and buildings were subsumed into country houses—a phenomenon evident in Barczewski's detailed appendices, yet goes unmentioned. Chapter 3 offers a nuanced reading of the political significance of architectural styles in the eighteenth century, not least in the discussion of gothic architecture. In avoiding simple stereotypes, Barczewski reveals the ways in which country houses were tied to the complexities of English politics. There is a danger of course in viewing everything through a self-aware political lens: gothic could be about status and taste as well as identity and ideology.

These three chapters are alive with the people who built, owned, lived in, or destroyed country houses; but it is not always clear what their collected voices tell us about the distinctiveness of the English country houses or the development of English identity. Both of these come to the fore in the second half of the book. The discussion of why no single British style of country house emerged is nuanced and deeply historicized, and sheds

welcome light on the European connectedness of Scotland in particular. It is somewhat reductionist, tacitly assuming that there were single unifying English, Scottish, and Welsh styles of building (“English” Palladianism did not sweep all before it in any part of Britain). Yet it is also aware that similar processes could bring very different outcomes: romantic nationalism, for example, led to the (re)emergence of older architectural styles in both England and Scotland, but this meant Jacobethan south of the border and Scottish baronial to the north. The discussion of empire takes a longer perspective than is common, beginning with a discussion of depictions of Native Americans in late Tudor and early Stuart plasterwork. Barczewski argues that these were about marking difference, an imperative that changed as empire grew through the eighteenth century when country house architecture came to be much more about integration. There is a shift in the scale of analysis that elides the inclusion of numerous motifs from across the empire—pineapples being the most obvious—but the overall argument of imperial unity and later racial hierarchies is powerful and convincing. The final chapter argues that continental European styles were hybridized with traditional English ones rather than adopted in their entirety. The result is discussed through the usual progression of architectural styles, but a familiar narrative is given freshness by Barczewski’s argument that each style—from Jones’s classicism to Grand Tour-inspired neoclassicism—was influenced but not dominated by European influences. Only with the search for an English historical style, from the late eighteenth century onward, did something more particularly English emerge, not least with the late-nineteenth-century interest in vernacular architecture.

Overall, the narrative is engaging and rich with case studies of people and places; the analysis is coherent (especially in the second half of the book), and the argument in each chapter is largely convincing. Ultimately, this is a book about English identity as much as the country house. Barczewski is skillful in bringing together the two, yet we sometimes lose sight of the core question posed on page 255: what it is that “makes a building ‘English’”? She shows us how it is linked to history (the Reformation, the Civil Wars), to geopolitics (England vis-a-vis Wales and Scotland, the growing empire) and to culture (the influence of continental Europe and the resurgence of romantic nationalism). Yet the conclusion takes the form of an epilogue, discussing Lutyens’s style and oeuvre, leaving the reader to pull together the various threads and decide for themselves how the country house become English. But perhaps that is how it should be: Barczewski provides ample evidence and compelling arguments, and she demonstrates that identity is subjective and contingent. We can make up our own minds.