

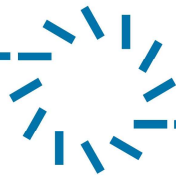
NATIONALIZING KNOWLEDGE

Peter Burke

Over the last generation, a time of debate over the cultural construction of nations, cultural historians have been joining political historians in the study of nationalism, as a shelf of books bear witness, from Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* to Joep Leerssen's *Nationaal denken in Europa*. The history of national languages has been studied and so have interpretations of the history and character of nations embedded in literature, drama and in art, including statues in public places, historical paintings and landscapes.

Tonight, however, my subject is knowledge, more exactly the process that I should like to describe as the 'nationalization' of knowledge: in other words, the increasing importance of national consciousness, national rivalry and nation-building in the processes of gathering, analysing and disseminating knowledge. The period I shall consider is the 19th century, a long 19th century that invades the borders of both the 18th and the 20th centuries. I shall be speaking about Europe, with occasional references to South America, and ranging from older nation-states, such as Spain and Sweden to new nation-states, such as Italy and Germany; and to cultural nations without states of their own at this time, such as Ireland or Poland.

It was in the 19th century that scholars came to be regarded as 'representatives of their respective countries', recruited, as the German scientist Hermann von Helmholtz put it, into 'an organized army labouring on behalf of the whole nation'.¹ An army of scholars who were sometimes involved with the continuation of politics by other means. Among the various possible disciplinary examples of this general trend, one might start with the history of history itself, since research, teaching and writing was increasingly conducted in a national framework.² Among the most important and the most widely-read histories produced at this time were histories of nations and peoples (the *Folk*, the *národ*, etc): Erik Geijer on the Swedes, František Palacký on the Czechs, Konstantinos Paparrigopoulos on the Greeks, Petrus Blok on the Dutch and J. R. Green on England. In Norway, which had been autonomous in the Middle Ages, the dominant school of historians supported the recovery of national independence that was achieved in 1905.



It was common at this time for scholars to place the origins of their nation far back in time. In Spain, for instance, the leading historian of the mid-19th century, Modesto Lafuente, argued that his country had already acquired ‘una nacionalidad’ in the early Middle Ages, under the Visigoths. Lafuente organized his multivolume history not around nation-building but around the gradual overcoming of obstacles to the political unification of a nation that in his eyes already existed.

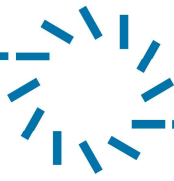
The emphasis on national history was supported by governments and other institutions. In France in 1833, François Guizot, a historian who held the post of minister of education, founded a society to promote the study of national history, the *Société de l’histoire de France*. In Belgium, prizes for national history began to be awarded, from 1851 onwards.

In Latin America the story was a similar one. In Brazil in 1840, the Historical Institute offered a prize for a plan for writing the nation’s history (the prize was won by a German). A few years earlier a visiting French scientist had asked the Chilean minister of education whether the history of Chile was worth writing. This rather tactless question received a forthright answer: ‘a national necessity’, *una necesidad nacional*.

National history was increasingly taught in schools as part of nation-building, aiming, for instance, as the late Eugen Weber argued in a famous study of France, to turn peasants with local identities into ‘Frenchmen’.³ Universities moved in a similar direction. At the University of Leiden, a new chair in *vaderlandse geschiedenis* was founded in 1860. In Oxford, the new ‘School of Modern History’, founded in 1872, emphasized the study of English history from the Middle Ages onwards (as indeed it still does).

National heroes were officially celebrated, including heroes of knowledge such as Carl Linnaeus in Sweden. A statue of Linnaeus was erected in Uppsala in 1829, his birthplace was turned into a museum in 1866, and the bicentenary of his birth was celebrated in 1907. In Italy, a series of so-called *edizioni nazionali*, funded by the government, made the works of national heroes of knowledge more accessible, beginning with Galileo and moving on to Leonardo da Vinci and to the physicist Alessandro Volta.

The study of geography was also officially encouraged for national reasons. It was taught in Italian schools after unification in order to encourage the love of the nation. In Germany, the professor of geography at Halle advocated the same policy a little later.⁴ National maps were produced as a matter of national honour and to



encourage national consciousness. It is probably unnecessary to add that the ‘nation’ of the historians and the geographers not infrequently extended beyond its official borders.

Again, it was in the 19th century that the study of national literatures was institutionalized in universities, mainly at the expense of the study of ancient Greek and Roman writers. A chair in *Germanistik* was founded at the new University of Berlin in 1810, for instance, two generations before unification, while Wilhelm Grimm was a leading supporter of what was variously called *deutschen* or *germanischen Altertumswissenschaft*, a name that suggests that classical studies were taken as a model.⁵

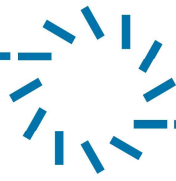
In Scandinavia, the enthusiasm for philology in the age of the Dane Rasmus Rask was linked to the search for national origins. In many countries, compiling dictionaries became a patriotic enterprise, collecting information about the use of the national language and also helping to standardize it and so raise national consciousness, as in the case of the *Słownik języka polskiego* (1807-14) for Poles, the *Słownik česko-německý* (1835-9) for Czechs and *A Magyar nyelv szótára* (1862-74) for Hungarians.⁶

When he was a professor at Jena, August Wilhelm Schlegel hoped to encourage national consciousness by writing a history of German literature for use in schools, while the English writer Charles Kingsley described English literature as ‘the autobiography of a nation’.

A number of famous histories of national literatures were produced in the 19th century, among them Georg Gervinus on German (1835-42), Francesco de Sanctis (a former follower of Mazzini) on Italian (1870-1), and Gustave Lanson on French (1894).⁷ In Italy, ‘national editions’ of Petrarch (1904) and Dante (1914) were published at the beginning of the 20th century.

Turning from literature to material culture, the rise of concern with what we now call the national ‘heritage’ or *patrimoine* dates from this period, essentially from the French Revolution onwards.⁸ In 1826, for instance, the Greek Assembly resolved ‘to declare national all antiquities’.⁹ Like its literature, the material heritage of the nation was regarded at this time as a means of teaching patriotism.

Public interest in archaeology, which was becoming an academic discipline in the 19th century, was fuelled in part by national pride (there were of course excavations in the Middle East which threw light on the Bible and Homer, but archaeology on the home ground was also important). Jens Worsaae, a Danish archaeologist who became minister of culture, described local antiquities as ‘national memorials’.¹⁰ In Britain,



archaeologists began to use the phrase ‘national monuments’ in the 1840s. The German scholar Gustaf Klemm declared that ‘the safest way to patriotism’ was a knowledge of prehistory. The first professor of archaeology at the Charles University in Prague, Jan Erazim Vocel, advocated what he called ‘Czech national archaeology’.¹¹

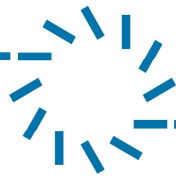
Needless to say, this national approach led to controversy. In Spain, the Academy of History once refused permission for a foreign archaeologist to excavate the famous site of Numancia because of its importance in the story of the nation. The clash between German and Polish archaeologists over the identity of early settlers between the rivers Oder and Vistula is only one of many similar controversies.¹²

In the domain of folklore and ethnography, it was a similar story. Like archaeology, folklore and the allied subject of ethnography evoked enthusiasm and attracted official support for national reasons, since peasants were often viewed by middle-class intellectuals as the most authentic part of the nation.

In Finland, a chair of folklore was established at Helsinki University in 1898, at a time when the country was still part of the Russian Empire. In Ireland, the Gaelic League, which had been founded in 1893 primarily to arrest the decline of the Irish language, also encouraged the collection of folklore. The establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922 was rapidly followed by the foundation of the Folklore of Ireland Society (1927) and a little later, the Irish Folklore Commission (1935).¹³

Museums and galleries, which are among other things storehouses of knowledge, were often founded and funded by governments in the nineteenth century for national reasons. Before 1900, the study of folklore was generally based in museums rather than in universities, sometimes open-air museums such as Skansen in Stockholm. Founded in 1893, Skansen has been described as providing a narrative of Sweden, while a neighbouring institution, Nordiska Museet emphasized common features of Nordic or Scandinavian culture.¹⁴

The names of new museums often suggest that nation-building or at the least national pride underlay the projects. Think of the National Art Gallery at the Hague (1800) the ancestor of the *Rijksmuseum*; the *Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum* (1802) in what has become Budapest; the *Nationalmuseet* in Copenhagen (1809); the proposals for a Russian national museum (1817, 1821); the *Národní muzeum*, Prague (1818); the British Museum and the National Gallery, London (their buildings opened in 1823 and 1824); and the



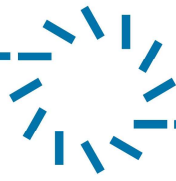
Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg (1852), founded as the ‘common property of the German people’ (*Gemeingut des deutschen Volkes*).¹⁵

Most of these initiatives came from the state but private initiatives were important as well, among them the Museum of National History at Hillerød in Denmark (1878), built at the expense of the owner of Carlsberg breweries, J. C. Jacobsen, perhaps in reaction to the recent defeat of Denmark by Prussia in the Sleswig-Holstein war of 1864.

Nation-building projects also underlay the foundation of some libraries and archives and the renaming of others. The French *Bibliothèque royale* became the *Bibliothèque nationale* after the Revolution. As you know, the *Koninklijke Bibliotheek* at the Hague went the other way, having been founded as a national library in 1798 and then ‘royalized’. There followed the Hungarian National Library (1803); the Spanish *Biblioteca Nacional* (1836, formerly royal); the plan for a German national library, put forward in the 1850s; the Italian *Biblioteca Nazionale* (1861, the year of the unification of Italy) and the Bulgarian National Library (1879).

In Britain, oddly enough, the national library was built up by a foreigner. Antonio Panizzi, the Italian émigré who built up the British Museum library from the 1830s to the 1860s, regarded it as a national institution, declaring that ‘This emphatically *British* library ought to be directed most particularly to British works and to works relating to the British Empire’. On another occasion he remarked that ‘The Museum is the library of the English nation and there ought to be in that library every book that was printed either by Englishmen or in English or related to England’.¹⁶ Like many of us on my island to this day, you can hear Panizzi hesitating between ‘British’ and ‘English’.

As for archives, the French *Archives Nationales* were established in 1800, the Norwegian *Riksarkivet* in 1817, the English Public Record Office in 1838. A major cultural project of the time in a number of countries was the publication of documents illustrating the history of the nation. The *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* for instance, began publication in 1826, at the initiative of a Prussian minister, with the motto ‘The Holy Love of the Fatherland Gives Encouragement [*Sanctus Amor Patriae dat Animum*]’. The medieval laws of Norway were published from 1846 onwards, a project approved by the *Storting* or Parliament. The English Rolls Series and the *Monumenta Hungariae Historia* both began publication in 1857. The Italian *Deputazione di Storia Patria* was founded to publish documents as well as to protect historic buildings and to conduct excavations.



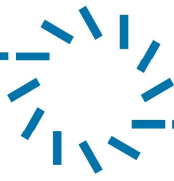
Huge dictionaries of national biography were another major enterprise. Their dates of publication, one following soon after another, give a strong impression of national rivalry. For example, the *Biographisch Woordenboek der Nederlanden*, in twenty volumes, began to appear in 1852; the Austrian dictionary (*Biografisches Lexikon des Kaisertums Oesterreich*), in fifty-nine volumes, in 1856; the Belgian dictionary, *Biographie Nationale*, in twenty-seven volumes, in 1866; the *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie*, in fifty-six volumes, in 1875, four years after unification; the English *Dictionary of National Biography* in sixty-three volumes, in 1885; the *Danske Biografiske Lexicon*, in nineteen volumes, in 1887; and the *Russky Biograficheski Slovar* in 1896. The Italians, by contrast, did not begin publishing the *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* until the centenary of unification in 1961.

These compilations were not always politically neutral. For example, the lives of the same individuals were claimed by different nations. Returning to the clashes between German and Polish scholars, it was inevitable that ‘Copernicus, Nikolaus’ would figure in the German dictionary and ‘Kopernik, Mikołaj’ in the Polish – though the entry in the *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie*, to the author’s credit, points out that Copernicus was a mixture (Polish father, German mother) and that in any case his achievement belonged to the world rather than to any nation.

General encyclopaedias also acquired a national colouring. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, a Scottish initiative, goes back to 1768, the German Brockhaus to 1796, the *Encyclopedia Americana* to 1829, the Polish *Encyklopedia Powszechna* to 1859, the French *Grand Dictionnaire Universel* (known after its editor as ‘Larousse’) to 1864, the Dutch Winkler-Prins to 1870, the Czech *Ottův Slovník Naučný* to 1888 and the Spanish *Enciclopedia universal ilustrada* to 1905. The famous 11th edition of the *Britannica* was described at the time in a London periodical as ‘a great glory to our nation’, despite the well-publicized participation of distinguished foreigners such as the Danish physicist Niels Bohr.

Encyclopaedias became one of many arenas in which nations competed. As a Polish historian, Tomasz Kamusella, puts it, ‘Each “civilized nation” was expected to produce one to be taken seriously by its neighbours and the European powers’.¹⁷

The point about encyclopedias an arena for national rivalry might be illustrated from the story of the *Enciclopedia italiana*, which began relatively late in 1929. A few years earlier, in 1920, an Italian ex-minister had written of the need ‘to give Italy, which lacks it, a national encyclopaedia like France, England, Germany and even Spain’.¹⁸



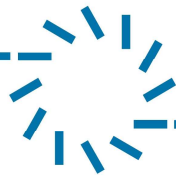
The *Enciclopedia italiana* was designed among other things to make publicity if not propaganda for all things Italian. The entry on ‘Garibaldi’, for instance, takes up 17 columns, while the corresponding entries in Brockhaus and Larousse use no more than one. The entry on ‘Milano’ continues for fifty-nine columns, compared to seven apiece in Larousse and Brockhaus. Incidentally, the *Enciclopedia italiana* was also a vehicle for fascist propaganda, as you can see by consulting the articles on ‘Fascism’ and on ‘martyrs’ – but that is another story.

Archaeology abroad was also affected by national rivalry. For example, the French and the British competed in the middle of the nineteenth century to discover the remains of Assyrian culture. Henry Rawlinson, a soldier turned excavator, asked Austen Layard, a diplomat-archaeologist, to arouse the interest of Stratford Canning, the ambassador to the Ottoman court, because ‘It pains me grievously to see the French monopolize the field’. Layard wrote to Canning that ‘The national honour’ was ‘concerned in competing with the French in deciphering the cuneiform inscriptions’. On the other side the French archaeologist Victor Place declared that ‘we must not let ourselves be outdistanced by England on a road which we ourselves have opened’.¹⁹ An archaeological expedition to Central Asia was recommended to the German Minister of Culture in 1904 in the following terms: ‘we Germans must use all our powers to secure for ourselves a rightful place in this sun’ (thus echoing a famous phrase in a speech by the Kaiser delivered just three years earlier).²⁰

Even the natural sciences were shaped by national consciousness and national rivalries.²¹ Take the case of geology: the first geological survey funded by the state, in the 1830s, took place in France and was emulated by other countries. The Swedish Museum of Geology ‘contained mostly Swedish minerals’.²²

The establishment of natural history museums was also part of nation-building. The foundation of the *Museo Nacional de Historia Natural* in Santiago, Chile (1822), for instance, was quickly followed by that of the *Museo de Historia Natural* (1823) in Bogotá.²³

Rivalry extended to the heavens. William Herschel’s discovery of the planet Uranus in the late 18th century was seen at the time as a victory of English astronomy over its French competitors (even though Herschel was a German who had moved to England). The President of the Royal Society, Joseph Banks, wrote to Herschel that the new planet should be named quickly, ‘or our nimble neighbours, the French, will certainly save us the trouble of Baptizing it’.²⁴ The christening of discoveries in the



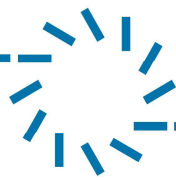
heavens as on earth after national symbols such as King George III (after whom Uranus was originally named) was a common practice. In the 1920s, the Dutch astronomer Willem Hendrik van den Bos described what he called ‘a mad scramble for indiscriminate double-star discoveries’ in the Southern Hemisphere, the intellectual equivalent of the earlier ‘scramble for Africa’.²⁵ In other words, the Soviet-American rivalry in space exploration in the age of Sputnik (1957) and NASA (1958) may be the most famous but it was certainly not the first example of this form of competition.

In this lecture I have been piling up examples in order to note the many domains in which the rise of nations and nationalism affected the organization of knowledge. The trend was a powerful one. All the same, I do not want to give the impression that it was irresistible. Major historical trends often coexist with their opposites. In the history of modern western knowledge, for instance, secularization coexisted with counter-secularization, professionalization with amateurization, specialization with attempts at interdisciplinarity and democratization with attempts to counter or restrict it.

In similar fashion, the trend towards the nationalization of knowledge coexisted with its opposite, with what might be called denationalization or internationalization. In the 19th century, this internationalization was fuelled by steam power, driving both trains and ships. It was thanks to the rise of the railways that international congresses organized in different parts of Europe became a normal feature of intellectual life in the second half of the century. The statisticians held their first international congress in 1853, the chemists in 1860, the medics in 1867, the geographers in 1871, the art historians, the orientalist and the meteorologists in 1873, the geologists in 1878.

The community of historians was relatively slow to organize itself, but the first International Congress of Historical Sciences was held in Paris in 1900, the location having been chosen to coincide with the world fair of that year, which also attracted congresses of mathematicians, physicists, chemists, botanists, geologists, meteorologists and psychologists.

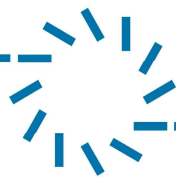
As for the steamship, it allowed the transatlantic barrier to be broken by the 1840s, making possible, for instance, the lecture tours in the USA made by the geologist Charles Lyell, the critic Matthew Arnold, the biologist T. H. Huxley and a number of British popularizers of science, followed a few years later by leading German-speaking intellectuals such as Max Weber, Werner Sombart, Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav



Jung. Even Australia was now within reach of Europeans: the British Association for the Advancement of Science held its 84th annual meeting in Melbourne in 1914.

In short, the nationalization of knowledge was a powerful trend, but it formed only a part of a more complex system. Looking back at this 19th-century trend from the perspective of 2011, it is difficult not to feel a certain ambivalence. On one side, envy or nostalgia for a period when scholars such as Guizot and Worsaae were appointed ministers and governments spent a good deal of money funding institutions that supported research in the humanities as well as in the natural sciences.

On the other side, it became increasingly clear in the 20th century, especially after 1919, that the nationalization of knowledge had encouraged national rivalry as well as expressing it and that nations were not always the most appropriate frameworks for research. Henri Pirenne, a great supporter of the kind of international scholarly cooperation that I just mentioned, advocated a comparative approach to history precisely as a means of minimizing national or nationalist bias. In my view he was absolutely right to do so. It was indeed the comparative history associated with Henri Pirenne and Marc Bloch that inspired the approach I have adopted in this lecture.



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- ¹ Helmholtz (1893), 24.
- ² Berger, Donovan and Passmore (1999); Berger and Lorenz (2008); Baár (2010).
- ³ Weber (1976).
- ⁴ Patriarca (1996), 8; Hooson (1994), 117.
- ⁵ Ganz (1973); Müller (1974).
- ⁶ Kamusella (2009).
- ⁷ Spiering (1999).
- ⁸ Poulot (1997).
- ⁹ Hamilakis (2007), 81.
- ¹⁰ Diaz-Andreu and Champion (1996), 33.
- ¹¹ Sklenář (1983); Trigger (1989), 248-61; Diaz-Andreu and Champion (1996), 123, 166 and *passim*.
- ¹² Diaz-Andreu and Champion (1996), 176, 203.
- ¹³ ‘O Giolláin (2000).
- ¹⁴ Sörlin, 76.
- ¹⁵ Jensen (1992); Bohman (1997); de Jong (2004).
- ¹⁶ Miller (1973), 117, 134, 275.
- ¹⁷ Kamusella (2009), 407.
- ¹⁸ Turi (2002), 18 and *passim*
- ¹⁹ Mogens Trolle Larsen, *The Conquest of Assyria: excavations in an antique land, 1840-1860* (1994: English translation London, 1996), 67, 95, 310.
- ²⁰ Harnack, quoted in Marchand (2009), 421.
- ²¹ Rocke (2001).
- ²² Bravo and Sörlin (2002), 101.
- ²³ MacLeod (2000), 109.
- ²⁴ Quoted in Holmes (2008), 103.
- ²⁵ Pyenson (1989) 65-6.