

Stephanie Barczewski, *How the Country House Became English*, London: Reaktion Books, 2023, 392 pp., ISBN 9781789147605.

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Country houses are widely regarded as quintessentially English. These buildings form a key part of England's heritage, having become especially popular tourist sites since the mid-twentieth century. In this period, they also became subjects of academic interest, with Mark Girouard's *Life in the English Country House* (1978) paving the way for understanding the country house as a cultural and national symbol. Moreover, in their connection with the English landscape, they have long been portrayed in poetry, music, painting, and literature. In his seminal *Happy Rural Seat* (1972), Richard Gill presents English country houses not merely as elite residences, but as emblems of stability, tradition, and a pastoral ideal.

These buildings continue to attract significant academic interest, particularly for their role in shaping and reflecting notions of Englishness, which is central to Stephanie Barczewski's *How the Country House Became English* (2023). Prior to this, Barczewski—Professor of Modern British History at Clemson University, South Carolina—had examined the imperial dimensions of British country houses in her 2014 volume, *Country Houses and the British Empire, 1700–1930*, which she considers complementary to her more recent work. In her latest volume, the author shifts focus to national identity—an element she contends must be studied alongside empire as two inseparable and mutually constitutive categories of historical enquiry.

As Barczewski states in her precise and solid introduction, “this book was [...] originally a result of a ‘Brexit moment’”.¹ From 2016 onward, scholars have been compelled to reconsider both the trajectory of British history in relation to the wider world and the nature of British identity—or, as the author astutely suggests, *identities*. In this respect, the book is about English identity as much as the country house. It is also about English history, particularly from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century, and its paradox of celebrating order and stability while being punctuated by disruption and violence. By revealing how country houses encapsulate these contradictions, the author shows how they came to be perceived as symbols of Englishness.

In the opening section of her work, the author argues that the English country houses have often been marked by episodes of violent disruption by deconstructing the notion—particularly widespread in literature and, more generally, in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries—that they functioned as enduring symbols of historical continuity. In the first three chapters, she examines the Reformation, the Civil Wars, and the Age of Revolution as key periods of violence and upheaval reflected in English country houses. The Reformation and subsequent Dissolution of the Monasteries of the 1530s are analysed in the first chapter, the former being an extremely violent event and the latter causing the largest land transfer in England since the Norman Conquest. Emphasis is placed on country houses serving as refuges for Catholic priests, the seizure of land, and the adaptation of monastic buildings after their dissolution. A century later, many country houses were destroyed in the English Civil War, the most violent event in English domestic history. In the second chapter, Barczewski focuses particularly on the massive damage to private property that accompanied this bloodshed, mainly because she believes that this aspect has been largely overlooked in historical memory studies. Notably, she draws a connection between the Dissolution of the Monasteries and the Civil War, showing how the former resulted in the building of numerous country houses—often converted from former monastic sites—while the latter led to their destruction. Through detailed case studies, she enables the reader to trace the transformations of places such as Abbotsbury (explored in depth), Godstow House in Oxfordshire, Leicester Abbey in Leicestershire, and others. The third chapter explores the eighteenth century as a period when architectural choices became increasingly entangled with political ideology, beginning with the aftermath of the 1715 Jacobite rebellion, when country houses were used to assert Whig values and celebrate the Glorious Revolution. A pivotal point is the French Revolution, after which country houses revived and imitated medieval

¹ Barczewski, Stephanie. 2023 “Introduction: Englishness and the Country House.” *How the Country House Became English*, London: Reaktion Books Ltd, p. 8.

architecture. By adopting Gothic styles, these buildings became physical embodiments of national superiority conferred by continuity and markers of difference from France.

At the same time, English identity was shaped in part by interactions with external entities. The second half of the book, also comprising three chapters, examines England's contact with the other nations of the United Kingdom, the British Empire, and continental Europe. The absence of a British style of country house is brought to the fore in the fourth chapter, which presents the defensive nature of the border zones between England and Wales and between England and Scotland into the early modern era as the main reason that prevented the development of hybrid architectural styles. The fifth chapter explores the complex relationship between country houses and the British Empire, from the Tudor and early Stuart periods to the twentieth century, a period in which country houses evolved from sites of imperial curiosity to symbols of English superiority. While early displays reflected fascination with the exotic, by the nineteenth century, architecture emphasized racial and cultural hierarchy. These shifts mirrored changing notions of English identity, transforming the country house into a space that affirmed imperial dominance. The sixth chapter turns to connections with continental Europe, posing the question: "what makes a building 'English': its resistance to continental influences or its transformation of them into something unique to the national context?" (p. 255). Barczewski discusses how, by the twentieth century, the country house had become a symbol of Englishness, celebrated for its rural charm and historical continuity. Yet this idealized image increasingly isolated the English country house from both its imperial and European contexts, reinforcing a nostalgic, pastoral vision of English identity.

The narrative as a whole is compelling and richly developed, and the author demonstrates in detail how architecture intersects with politics, empire, and culture. Barczewski also offers a rich collection of stories about specific English country houses and their owners. However, even if engaging and consistent with the purpose of the book, these case studies require special attention from the reader, both to follow the argument and not perceive them as digressions.

How the Country House Became English concludes at Castle Drogo in Devon, a site that encapsulates the tensions—between continuity and disruption, native and foreign influences—that Barczewski traces over centuries of English country-house architecture. However, this conclusion seems rather ambiguous and does not fully summarise the book's main argument: the question posed by the title of the book is addressed more explicitly in the final part of the last chapter, where the author states that the concept of the

“English” country house was a nineteenth-century construction, shaped by a desire for political stability and cultural continuity in the wake of the French Revolution. Ultimately, the open-endedness of the conclusion, which echoes the question posed in the title *How the Country House Became English*, may be intentional and reflects the complexity of defining what identity really is—a central claim of Barczewski’s book.

References

Gill, Richard. *Happy Rural Seat: The English Country House and the Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972.

Girouard, Mark. *Life in the English country house: a social and architectural history*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978.