

British Culture of the Postwar

an introduction to
literature and society
1945-1999

Edited by
Alistair Davies
and **Alan Sinfield**



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London and New York

First published 2000 by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group

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contributors, individual contributions

Typeset in Goudy and Gill Sans by
Curran Publishing Services Ltd, Norwich
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British
Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

British culture of the postwar: an introduction to literature
and society, 1945–1999/[edited by] Alistair Davies and Alan
Sinfield.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

1. English literature–20th century–History and criticism. 2.
Literature and society–Great Britain–History–20th century. 3.
World War, 1939–1945–Literature and the war. 4. Great
Britain–Social conditions–1945– 5. Great Britain–Civilization–
1945– 6. World War, 1939–1945–Influence. 7. Social problems
in literature. I Davies, Alistair. II Sinfield, Alan.

ISBN 0–415–12810–2 (hbk)

ISBN 0–415–12811–0 (pbk)

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Acknowledgements

When was 'the postwar'? For some, the displacement of 1950s stuffiness by the social experimentation of the 1960s brings the period to an end; for others, it is concluded by the abrupt assault by Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government on the prospect of sharing that had been envisaged as the pay-off for the war; or perhaps the embracing of market forces by Tony Blair's New Labour government of 1997 is decisive. Or maybe such views are (typically) parochial, and international developments are more important: the ending of the Cold War, or the pressures towards globalisation.

The contributors to this volume offer no single perspective on the postwar period in Britain and its culture. In discussing the literature, film and visual arts of the past fifty-five years, they discover radical discontinuities and underlying continuities. We would like to thank them for the enthusiasm and care they have brought to the project.

Lines from poems by W. H. Auden and Paul Muldoon in chapter six are quoted with permission of Faber and Faber.

Nannette Aldred and the editors would like to thank all those at the Tate Gallery Archives who helped to locate material from the ICA Archives. Plates 7.1 to 7.4 are from the early exhibitions organised by the ICA, and are reproduced courtesy of the *Architectural Review*. Plate 7.5, a Reg Butler photomontage showing the working model for a monument to 'The Unknown Prisoner' on the proposed site, the Humboldt Hohe, West Berlin, is reproduced courtesy of Rosemary Butler. Plate 7.6, an installation shot of Victor Burgin's 'Photopath' in the exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form: Live in Your Head*, ICA 1969, is reproduced courtesy of Simon Wilson, Tate Gallery (ICA Archives).

The editors are also grateful for the support of Joanna Cheetham, Gowan Hewlett, Vincent Quinn, Talia Rodgers and Kate Wilcox.

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Part I

From imperial to post-imperial Britain

The postwar world order

When the Second World War ended, millions of Britons took to the streets to celebrate. After six years of suffering, their joy was understandable, but the cost of victory was huge. 264,000 servicemen and 90,000 civilians had been killed in the war. The industrial and commercial centres of cities and towns, in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales as well as in England, had been destroyed in the blitz. Much of Britain's housing stock and physical infrastructure – railways, roads, schools and hospitals – had suffered severe bomb damage. Basic food-stuffs were in short supply, while industry faced disabling shortages of raw materials, machinery and markets. The British economy, which had been one of the strongest before the war, was now technically bankrupt, sustained only by America's ability and willingness to extend credit. Those dancing in the streets were largely oblivious to the ways in which the war had transformed the global political and economic order and Britain's position within it.

In 1939, Britain was the world's greatest imperial power; by 1945, even though the empire remained intact, Britain was an enfeebled state in a world divided between two new superpowers, the USA and the Soviet Union. Britain's wartime defeats had convinced many under British rule that the British Empire was no longer invulnerable. The ease, for instance, with which the Japanese overwhelmed Singapore in 1942 had an immediate impact on the region, with the result that British troops had to be stationed in India to keep nationalist agitation in check. Winston Churchill, the wartime Prime Minister, could not conceive of an independent India, declaring that he had not become the King's chief minister to oversee the dissolution of the British Empire. However, the new Labour Prime Minister Clement Attlee, following his landslide election victory of 1945, made Indian

independence a priority, in part because it had been a long-standing Labour Party commitment, in part because he realised that Britain lacked the resources to hold India. Nevertheless, after India became independent in 1947, the Labour government was as keen as the Conservatives to hold on to what remained of the empire, for without it, Britain had no hope of preserving its status as a world power (Robbins 1998; Morgan 1999).

Suez and Europe

The Conservatives returned to power in 1951. Their most dramatic attempt to slow down the pace of de-colonisation, however, had the effect of speeding it up. In 1956, the British, French and Israeli governments conspired to invade Egypt, in retaliation for its nationalisation of the strategic Suez Canal, the British empire's direct link by sea with Arab oil and its colonies in South-East Asia. The action not only divided public opinion in Britain with an unprecedented intensity, it was also condemned by the rest of the world, most significantly by the USA which threatened to speculate against the pound. British troops were withdrawn and the Prime Minister, Sir Anthony Eden, was forced to resign. Five years later in 1961, Eden's successor, Harold Macmillan made the first (unsuccessful) attempt to join the recently formed European Economic Community. The decision, like Suez, again divided public opinion, but for the political elite (on the left as on the right), the lesson of Suez was that Britain was no longer a world power. While its traditional ties with the empire and the Commonwealth and its close postwar alliance with the USA were important, its future lay in a still to be defined relationship with Europe. British politics have ever since been preoccupied with the attempt to define the exact nature of that relationship.

Post-imperial melancholy

'Great Britain has lost an empire and not yet found a role,' one American politician famously remarked in 1962. Many of the leading British and American commentators on postwar British culture have echoed his sentiments. For them, the politics and culture of postwar Britain have been defined by evasive inwardness and nostalgia (Hewison 1977, 1981, 1986), cultural retardation (Wiener 1981), middle-class conformism (Nehring 1993), anti-technological romanticism (Veldman 1994) and insularity (Piette 1995). The cultivation of

empiricism in philosophy, of the figurative in painting, of realism in fiction, of the personal voice in poetry, and of the comic and the domestic in film and television has involved a very conscious refusal of the dominant forms of artistic modernity in postwar America and Europe (Appleyard 1989).

Most strikingly, the postwar period reveals a loss of confidence and ambition amongst British writers (Kenner 1987). Critics of the postwar novel in Britain have suggested that the turn to fabulation, allegory and self-reflectiveness – from William Golding to John Le Carré, Iris Murdoch to J. G. Farrell, Elizabeth Bowen to Paul Scott – mirrors the end of imperialism's confidence in historical narrative (Scanlan 1990; Connor 1996). Similarly, critics of postwar poetry and drama in Britain have found writers (John Osborne, Kingsley Amis, Philip Larkin and Donald Davie) either expressing a profound resentment and anxiety at Britain's loss of imperial status or (Trevor Griffiths, David Edgar, David Hare and Geoffrey Hill) analysing that resentment and anxiety (Morrison 1980; Sinfield 1983; Moore-Gilbert 1994).

The popular success in the 1980s of the 'Raj revival' in films and TV dramas and of 'heritage' films set in the Edwardian period (no less than support for the Falklands/Malvinas War in 1982) convinced many that post-imperial British culture remained, four decades after the end of the Second World War, in a state of unresolved mourning for a glorious past, when the empire gave Britons (or rather the English) an unshakeable sense not only of their intrinsic superiority but also of their central position in world affairs (Wright 1985; Hewison 1987; Corner and Harvey 1991; Samuel 1994; for discussion of 'heritage culture' in Scotland, McCrone *et al.* 1995; and Northern Ireland, Brett 1996).

Counter-cultural Britain

For other leading interpreters, however, this is not the whole story. The rise of the counter-cultural movements of the 1960s, they suggest, has had decisive effects in creating a positive, post-imperial culture in Britain, a culture coinciding with or provoking profound social and political re-alignments and transformations: 'the harvest of the sixties' in Patricia Waugh's memorable phrase (Sinfield 1989 and 1997; Marwick 1991 and 1998; Waugh 1995). Women writers appeared – notably Doris Lessing and Margaret Drabble – who devoted themselves to the disadvantaged position and distinctive insights of women. In Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, as the demand for devolution or separation became more powerful (Bogdanor 1999), a

new generation of dissident intellectuals began to make fundamental challenges to the subordinate position of the regions within what they considered to be Britain's English dominated unitary state. (Tom Nairn's seminal *The Break-Up of Britain* was published in 1977, a Marxist critique of nationalism which has been central to subsequent debates about the topic (Nairn 1988; Beveridge and Turnbull 1989; McCrone 1992; Craig 1996; Nairn 1997).)

From the 1960s onwards, writers and intellectuals began to reflect on the ways in which the influx of immigrants, largely from the Caribbean, India, Pakistan and East Africa, was changing British culture. Even while detailing the politics of racism in the postwar period and the riots of the early 1980s, recent commentators have argued that since the 1970s, youth and popular cultures have shaped new trans-ethnic identities in Britain (Gilroy 1987; Hebdige 1987), while post-colonial critics, examining the globalisation both of the economy and of culture, have taken the migrant experience – the loss of home, the crossing of borders, the inhabiting of different selves – to define the experience of the majority under globalisation (Bhabha 1994; Chambers 1994).

Post-colonial metaphors and post-colonial actualities

Nations, however, are not just imaginary states but actual formations of power. For a new generation of British historians and cultural critics, Britain is less a unitary state than a unionist one with long-standing affiliations to a Protestant monarchy, an established Church, and a national parliament (Kearney 1989; Colley 1992; Samuel 1998). While unionism has made possible the relative cultural autonomy of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, it has also set inevitable limits to change (Paterson 1994; Mitchell 1996; Bogdanor 1999). Recent proposals to end the civil war in Northern Ireland by sharing sovereignty between Britain and Ireland (a solution made easier by the pooling of sovereignty within the European Union) have confirmed for some Irish post-colonial thinkers not only a positive detachment in both states of the idea of nationality from the idea of the nation-state, but also in Britain a willingness to question unionist institutions (Kearney 1997). As Siobhán Kilfeather reminds us in her essay in this book, writing in Ireland, Scotland and Wales has taken place within and against the structures of the unionist state. Indeed, many Scottish and Welsh writers, she argues, have taken inspiration from Ireland's successful

political and cultural independence from Britain (even if the newly independent Irish state was to prove a culturally repressive one). Migration also, as Minoli Salgado argues in her essay on Salman Rushdie, is not merely a metaphorical condition but is experienced by many in Britain as a condition of profound social and economic inequality. There is an essential difference between those like Rushdie who migrate between two elites and those who migrate for reasons of economic necessity. These are both timely interventions in key post-colonial debates: debates which more than any other continue to raise questions about the nature and possibility of Britain's post-imperial identity.

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