

Contemporary Issues in Historical Perspective

When Was Britain? Nostalgia for the Nation at the End of the “American Century”*

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By now it is practically axiomatic that rumors about the death of the nation in an age of postcolonialism and globalization are premature. Nowhere is this clearer than in the case of Britain. The transfer of Hong Kong to China, the devolution of Scotland, the moves toward abolishing hereditary peerage, and, on the very eve of the new millennium, the shift of power from London to Belfast—if these, taken either separately or together, do not signify the end of Britain as we have known it in its post-Victorian incarnations, it is hard to imagine what would.¹ To be sure, sterling persists as the “national” currency into 2003, when most of the rest of Europe has gone euro. There is still a monarchy and an established church. And neither the most reckless nor the most utopian among us can afford to be sanguine about the permanence of the recurrently “new” Irish situation or, for that matter, its long-term viability. Indeed, the very fact that national identities are repeatedly staged, ritualized performances designed to persuade subjects and citizens that the nation is above and beyond the vagaries of history means that there have been many incarnations of “Britain” over time and across space. And yet, the thoroughgoing, if not radical, disjuncture with the past that the events of the last few

* I take as my ironic point of departure the question posed by Gwyn Williams in the title of his 1985 book, *When Was Wales?* (London, 1985). This essay went to press six months before the war with Iraq led by Bush and Blair’s “coalition.” It was first given as the Modern European Luncheon Talk at the American Historical Association meeting in San Francisco in January 2002. An earlier version of it was presented at the “Pairing Empires” conference at Johns Hopkins University, organized by Paul Kramer and John Plotz, in November 2000. It has benefited from comments, criticisms, and all manner of useful references from Paul Arroyo, Jim Barrett, Catherine Candy, Clare Crowston, Jed Esty, Doug Haynes, Madhavi Kale, Craig Koslofsky, Robert Gregg, Philippa Levine, Ania Loomba, Laura Mayhall, Raka Nandi, Doug Peers, George Robb, Mrinalini Sinha, and Adam Sutcliffe. I especially appreciate Dana Rabin’s enthusiastic support for this project. Without the interest and insight of Tony Ballantyne, it would have been a very different thing indeed. David H. Burton, Catherine Hall, P. J. Marshall, and Peter Stansky have also helped to shape it, however variously and unwittingly, and I am indebted to each of them.

¹ I am hardly the first to observe this. See Tom Nairn, *After Britain: New Labour and the Return of Scotland* (London, 2000); and Peter Hitchens, *The Abolition of Britain from Winston Churchill to Princess Diana* (London, 2000). As George F. Will observed with some regret, “bland Tony Blair may have the most radical agenda in British history: the end of Britain”; see George F. Will, “Cheshire Cat, Cheddar Man,” *Newsweek* (July 10, 2000), p. 72.

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years of the 1990s have produced has yet to be recognized, let alone fully countenanced.

At the same time, it is difficult to ignore the ways in which the persistence, the endurance, and the longevity of Britain continue to be manufactured as evidence of its ongoing relevance in world politics and its ability to survive a putatively postnational future. Long after its demise in forms we have come to recognize in the twentieth century, “Britain” has a curious and instructive afterlife—one whose parameters and political stakes I want to sketch briefly here. In doing so I want to consider how the United States has been and remains the audience perhaps ripest for performances of Britain’s eternal Britishness. In the last three decades of the twentieth century, Britain emerged as a poignant, almost pathetic figure in American culture, a safe and utopian place where very little distinction between past and present could be discerned—a place untroubled, specifically, by the kind of racial strife that has torn at the fabric of modern American society, not least by intruding itself into twentieth-century American homes and the American psyche via television news and, later, commercial programming. I want to suggest above all that this persistent American image of Britain as a kind of Victorian and Edwardian oasis was possible because in its commercialized forms, both high and low, Britain has most often been stripped of its histories of blackness and imperial culture “at home”—even while, paradoxically, empire “over there” was (and remains) a central feature of Britain for export. Britain for export has in fact been a whitewashed Britain, a commodified balm for a certain segment of the American public seeking relief from racial tension and ugliness in the apparently racially harmonious past (and present) of the mother country.

Clearly one of the most obvious public sites for the staging of Britain in America has been at the high political level: first in the Reagan-Thatcher revival of the special relationship, then in Clinton-Blair centrism, and, more ominously in recent days, in the Blair-Bush alliance. Without diminishing the importance of this domain, I want to dwell here instead on the ways in which the performance of Britain has also been visible in the American commercial appetite for British history, most spectacularly in forms available on PBS, in Merchant Ivory films, or via the recent spate of Jane Austen mania—a craze that crossed both big screens and small and even made its way into regular network programming in the form of the weekly TV show, *Clueless*.² The extent to which this is an elite appetite in terms of class and race is a question worthy of more sustained discussion than I have space for here, especially if we wish to appreciate fully the tangled relationship between production and consumption, between representation and politics, and between politics and history in the modern “Atlantic world.”³ Regardless, the American

² See Devoney Looser, “Feminist Implications of the Silver Screen Austen,” in *Jane Austen in Hollywood*, ed. Linda Troost and Sayre Greenfield (Louisville, Ky., 1998), pp. 159–76.

³ Douglas Haynes, “White Lies: The British Past in Postwar America,” *History Teacher* 31, no. 1 (November 1997): 96–100, and his essay, “The Whiteness of Civilization: The Transatlantic Crisis of White Supremacy and British Television Programming in the United States in the 1970s,” in *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking with and through the Nation, Post Colonialism*, ed. Antoinette Burton (Durham, N.C., 2003). Allison Graham takes up many of these questions in her book

media, in its various private and public incarnations, has certainly done its part to keep Britain before the eyes of the American public. This is in some respects a legacy of the post–World War II period, though the monarchy and its accoutrements—routinely compressed as the sum total of Britishness—has been a source of interest, envy, and cultural critique for Americans since well before that, as Fred Leventhal’s recent work has demonstrated.⁴ Admiration for British pageantry, exceptionalism, and empire continues to be a theme of both network and cable news coverage, as the highly ceremonial passing of power in Hong Kong from Britain to China, the attention to fifty years of Indian independence, and the rhetoric around the Millennium Dome on New Year’s eve and day each testify. The relentless and prurient coverage of Lady Diana’s life and death, and especially her funeral, paraded traditional Englishness before the American public at the very moment when Britons were trying (also with the help of the media) to understand whether such traditions still had purchase, why, and for whom.⁵ The relative indifference with which many Britons in Britain viewed the televised ceremonies surrounding the death of the Queen Mother in April 2002 stands in stark contrast to the coverage of her passing on both cable and network television in the United States, where (incredibly) one CNN commentator actually claimed it was a story that was “emerging simultaneously” with accounts of escalating violence in the Middle East.⁶

Despite these contemporary images—and of course, because of them—for many Americans Britain on TV looks consistently like history: like the past at work in the present.⁷ Needless to say, there is plenty of American agency, even Yankee entrepreneurship, in this: Simon Schama’s recent multipart series on British history, as well as the airing of the program *Victoria and Albert* in the fall of 2002, are only the most recent examples of what local PBS stations actively seek out and buy from British production companies. If Raphael Samuel and others have been right in thinking that the rise of the heritage industry means that all nations are destined to become theme parks, Americans get to see Britain as-it-was-and-

Framing the South: Hollywood, Television, and Race during the Civil Rights Struggle (Baltimore, 2001).

⁴ The literature on this is vast. Most recently, see H. Mark Glancy, *When Britain Loved Hollywood: The Hollywood “British” Film, 1939–1945* (Manchester, 1999); and Fred Leventhal, “Essential Democracy: The 1939 Visit to the United States,” in *Singular Continuities: Tradition, Nostalgia, and Identity in Modern British Culture*, ed. George K. Behlmer and Fred M. Leventhal (Stanford, Calif., 2000), pp. 163–77.

⁵ See Adrian Kear and Deborah Lynn Steinberg, eds., *Mourning Diana: Nation, Culture and the Performance of Grief* (London, 1999).

⁶ Warren Hodge, “For the Queen Mother, Solemn Drums (and Offstage Disputes),” *New York Times* (April 6, 2002), p. A4. Despite its critical coverage, the *New York Times* continued to feature the Queen Mother’s death, lying in state, and funeral as front-page news (with color photos) on and off in the first two weeks of April 2002.

⁷ If Peter Mandler is right, and the very elite class that American public television stages as equivalent to “Britain” was in fact “uninterested in its own national past,” this is not simply ironic—it speaks to the real use-value Britain provides for legitimating Americans’ view of themselves as the future, especially given the corporate sponsorship of PBS. See Peter Mandler, “Against ‘Englishness’: English Culture and the Limits to Rural Nostalgia, 1850–1940,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 7, ser. 6 (1997): 158 ff.

is/as-it-is-and-was without ever having to go there—giving armchair imperialism a whole new meaning.⁸ But we must not leave it at that, for the versions of British history most Americans get access to have a critically important, if complex, relationship to empire. British imperialism is never erased completely from sight; how could it be if we believe the claim of Edward Said and others that empire made its way into the very interstices of eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and twentieth-century British life? Here the subtle ways in which people of color and imperial commodities and trinkets make their way into the filmscapes of Austen movies make for interesting ethnographic opportunities, as well as for an uncanny reprise of Said's reading of Austen as classic text for the (re)discovery of empire at home.⁹ In British-made programs—produced increasingly since the 1970s for export to the United States—empire is typically represented as a kind of agonistic moral dilemma (as in the critically acclaimed *Jewel in the Crown*); or as the quaint and exceptional ravings of a one-off egomaniac (as in the miniseries *Cecil Rhodes*); or, most recently, as the implied consequence of postwar immigration, which brought colonial people to Britain and left them with painful moral dilemmas about how to be Black Britons or how to accommodate their blackness to British life and mores in the present (as in the multipart crime drama *Prime Suspect*).¹⁰

Such staging by now has a long television history, as Douglas Haynes's recent research on the relationship between discourses of white supremacy and British TV programming in the United States in the 1970s powerfully suggests.¹¹ Significantly, it is crime dramas and not historical programming per se that has brought race as a recognizably "domestic" British social issue into largely white, middle-class American living rooms in the 1980s and 1990s.¹² As such it is a subject only dimly linked to empire, and, tellingly in the case of the Jane Tennison character of the *Prime Suspect* series, it is commonly connected (if not subordinated) to the story of a white woman's quest for professional recognition in the present day. In this way, empire and race are neatly and consistently segregated from each other at the same time that they are being refracted through the biography of a white woman. This maneuver is a continuation of narratives of Britain, empire, and home that originated with Victorian antislavery campaigns and have cast a long shadow on British fiction from *Jane Eyre* to Virginia Woolf and beyond. Coded as a social issue equivalent to women's emancipation, Britain's racial "problem" appears to have little or no relationship to Britain's "real" history (whether of monarchy or empire). How many Americans, one wonders, have even heard of Stephen Lawrence—the black British youth beaten by a local white gang—let alone are aware

⁸ See Raphael Samuel's three-volume collection *Patriotism* (London, 1989), his *Theatres of Memory* (London, 1994), and *Island Stories* (London, 1995); Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996); and Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain* (London, 1985).

⁹ See Claudia L. Johnson, "Run Mad, But Do Not Faint," review of Patricia Rozema's film, *Mansfield Park*, *Times Literary Supplement* (December 31, 1999).

¹⁰ Though no one has written a comprehensive account of these 1990s programs in the United States, Jeffrey S. Miller's history of earlier programming is instructive: *Something Completely Different: British Television and American Culture* (Minneapolis, 2000).

¹¹ Haynes, "The Whiteness of Civilization."

¹² I am grateful to Jim Barrett for this observation.

of how his violent death in 1993 has been linked in public discourse to both legacies of the Empire Windrush (post-1945 immigration) or to long-standing questions of race relations in Britain?¹³

The PBS broadcast of “The Murder of Stephen Lawrence” in January 2002 arguably helped to redress this invisibility, though the conditions of its presentation tell us much about how the American media translates “blackness” in Britain to its viewers at the beginning of the new millennium. Screened on Martin Luther King day, the program was introduced by Russell Baker as “highly unusual for Masterpiece Theater”—not because it dealt with racism in contemporary Britain but because of the mix of genres (handheld camera/documentary technique combined with semifactual narrative) that the film featured. This astonishing declaration was followed by Baker’s observation that “The Murder of Stephen Lawrence” allowed Americans to see racism in Britain today the way it had been in the United States during the Civil Rights era.¹⁴ With two brief strokes Baker effectively white-washed Masterpiece Theater’s own historical preoccupation with upper-class England and reinscribed Britain as history in the present in a new and highly imaginative narrative—in addition, of course, to occluding empire yet again in the story of what was Britain. His introduction not only obscured connections between imperial history and the present; it also cast American racial problems as a thing of the past and Britain itself as a belated, if not a derivative, terrain of racial strife.¹⁵ Moreover, the show was followed by a rerun of *Upstairs Downstairs*, and the publicity for the program was accompanied by advertisements for the next Masterpiece Theater production of *Othello* (staged in contemporary Britain in a metropolitan setting).¹⁶ Thus were Shakespeare and Edwardian Britain evoked as evidence of Masterpiece Theater’s traditional commitments as well as its adaptability in the face of an ever-evolving, ever-modernizing transatlantic taste for Anglophilia.¹⁷

¹³ Onyekachi Wambu, ed., *Empire Windrush: Fifty Years of Writing about Black Britain* (London, 1998); Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, *Imagining New Britain* (London, 2001); “Black Teenager Dies after Knife Attack by White Youths: Police Fear Racist Backlash,” *London Times* (April 24, 1993); “Race Case Police Fail to Provide Crucial Answers,” *London Times* (July 18, 1998); “Race in the Classroom: The Right Way to Advance Tolerance after Lawrence,” *London Times* (February 26, 1999); Kamlesh Bahl, “Lessons of Lawrence: An Open Letter to the Prime Minister,” *London Times* (March 2, 1999); Brian Cathcart, *The Case of Stephen Lawrence* (New York, 1999); Sir William Macpherson, *The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Report*: www.archive.official-documents.co.uk/document/cm42/4262.

¹⁴ Russell Baker, introducing Masterpiece Theater’s “The Murder of Stephen Lawrence,” January 21, 2002, on WILL (Champaign-Urbana, Ill.). The program also aired that night in PBS stations in New York, Philadelphia, and California.

¹⁵ The U.S. media coverage of Cathy Freeman in the 1998 Olympics paralleled this in fascinating ways. Freeman, an aboriginal athlete representing Australia at the games, was routinely compared to the Jackie Robinson of the 1940s and 1950s in terms of both her achievement and its significance. Commentators thereby produced a regressive, racialized timeline similar to Baker’s Lawrence/Civil Rights narrative and, of course, cast Freeman’s “blackness” as unproblematically equivalent to Robinson’s African-Americanness (“Negro-ness,” in the parlance of his times). Thanks to Tony Ballantyne for making this connection.

¹⁶ <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/lawrence/index.html>. Among other things, the site offers bibliographical links to sources related to the Lawrence murder.

¹⁷ In fact, *Upstairs Downstairs* was the focus of much early criticism of PBS among those who

Perhaps this savvy packaging signals a departure for PBS with respect to its approach to British programming in America in the twenty-first century. In her review of “The Murder of Stephen Lawrence” for the *New York Times*, Caryn James hoped as much. At the same time, she reviewed the film and the *Othello* production in the same article and reminded readers that Othello was played by Eamon Damon, who had also played a character on HBO’s popular prison series, *Oz*—a contextualizing gesture that suggests that critics may continue to refract British television exports through a very particular kind of cultural lens, one that capitalizes on the drama racial struggles (and black actors) provide without attending to the political power that representations of “black Britain” at once reflect, produce, and contest.¹⁸ Most if not all PBS watchers are still, I would argue, more likely to be aware of the effects of Salman Rushdie’s *fatwa* on debates about multiculturalism in Britain than they are about the ongoing, daily impact of post-imperial history on British society today.¹⁹ Chances are they understand those debates as “religious” or “fundamentalist” issues rather than as cultural and political manifestations of the demographic effects of postcolonial migration, labor conditions, and race relations in present-day Britain. This is a narrow, ahistorical reading that the events of September 11, 2001, and after seem, unfortunately, only to confirm, at least as they are covered in the American media. It is also a reading that obscures the fact that British Muslims are largely Indian and Pakistani either by origin or descent and therefore represent, among other things, the after effects of imperial rule in the contemporary metropole.²⁰ The image of the horseguard with a small tear in his eye that graced the cover of the *New Yorker* in September of 1997, in the second of two issues in as many months devoted to commemorating fifty years of the end of empire, speaks as eloquently to the kind of American nostalgia for what Britain was as any PBS program—playing as it does on that classic London tourist experience, the changing of the guard.²¹

American nostalgia for Britain as an essentially white island of history is not, therefore, necessarily interrupted or challenged by the popularity of Raj fictions (where race happens “over there”); the occasional “real life” crime episode where black Britons are involved (either as policemen, suspects, or victims); or even actual events having to do with race, ethnicity, and postcolonialism in Britain, as the minimal coverage of the Bradford and Oldham race riots in the U.S. news in the summer of 2001 testifies. Events in Ireland—which have historically had to do precisely with questions of race, ethnicity, and emergent postcolonialism—are an intriguing exception to which I can only allude here. Not unlike the Rushdie affair, they are typically understood in confessional terms rather than as indices of

believed that reliance on such “foreign” programming was “un-American.” See David Stewart, *The PBS Companion: A History of Public Television* (New York, 1999), pp. 71–82; and Timothy Brennan, “Masterpiece Theatre and the Uses of Tradition,” *Social Text* 12 (1985): 102–12.

¹⁸ Caryn James, “Crime and Race in England, Both Factual and Fictitious,” *New York Times* (January 21, 2002).

¹⁹ See Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, 1993).

²⁰ I am grateful to Tony Ballantyne for pressing this point.

²¹ *New Yorker* (September 15, 1997).

conditions of postcoloniality as well. What I want to explore for now is the ways in which nostalgia for Britain (Britain primarily as “England,” it should be said) represents one expression of the contemporary desire for what America has not been in the twentieth century: that is, ordered, white, untouched by social upheaval, homogeneous, and polite, if not quaintly anachronistic.²² And to appreciate this fully we must consider how and why the practice of British history in the United States has not only traditionally fulfilled this desire but also continues to do so by incorporating the challenges that postcolonial theory and history have to offer in a neatly repackaged form of British studies, thereby attempting at once to neutralize the impact that the so-called new imperial studies has had on the “island story” and to turn the imperial turn into a market advantage for upcoming professional historians (the next generation of purveyors of British history). In this sense, I want to suggest that, rather than an endangered species, British history both “high” (academic) and “low” (in its public culture varieties) is destined to survive well into the twenty-first century as a remarkably resilient cultural commodity.

I take as my historical evidence the 1999 report published by the North American Conference of British Studies (NACBS)—sometimes referred to as the Stansky Report since Peter Stansky, professor of history at Stanford University, was the presiding author.²³ The report was designed to assess the state of the field, evaluate the role of British history and British studies in the academy, and especially to examine the future prospects for students working primarily in history graduate programs. Compiled by committee, the report is, by its own admission, a response “to the widespread perception among the members of the profession that British Studies does not occupy the same position of importance within the academy [as it did].” Indeed, the authors of the report argue that “there is general agreement that British history no longer holds its traditional claim to attention in the American academy.” Though they do not detail why this should be so, the implication is that the appreciation of things English in general has declined over the past few decades: “In future, rather than relying on a strong anglophilia among students and their families, the study of Britain must stand or fall on its broader significances for the history and present situation of humanity.”²⁴ The question of how the democratization of undergraduate admissions has affected college and university life is completely side-stepped—thereby obscuring the ways in which

²² Because of its connection to television watching (the small screen), this American love of British history may be connected to what Lauren Berlant calls the “downsizing” and “privatization of U.S. citizenship,” together with the desire for an American citizen (like the fetus and the child) “not yet bruised by history.” See her *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham, N.C., 1997), pp. 3, 6. That such nostalgia for empire can exist side by side with nostalgia for a “British” nation shorn of its domestic imperial legacies should be no surprise, given (1) the historically concentric relationship between nation and empire; (2) the generally accepted view that empire represented the best Britain had to offer to the world; and (3) the disaggregation of empire from racial questions in popular American culture described above.

²³ Peter Stansky et al., *NACBS Report on the State and Future of British Studies in North America* (November 1999); available on-line at <http://www.nacbs.org/report.html>. Thanks to Peter Hansen for this website reference.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

the whiteness of the American university student body has been challenged since at least the 1960s. The authors of the report explain that British history courses “ought not, of course, be considered or planned solely on the basis of undergraduate appeal.” But the authors of the report are not uninterested in addressing the question of audiences, which they believe are winnable by other means (“market trends are not our nemesis, but our opportunity”).²⁵

Chief among the report’s preoccupations is an insistence on the fact that “the history of Britain is arguably the most important ‘national’ history precisely because it has been the most intertwined with, and influential upon, other histories worldwide, in all their dimensions—political, economic, social and cultural.”²⁶ This linkage between British history and world history is then laid out in some detail, with sections devoted to (1) the interaction of the English state with its “nearest neighbors” (Scotland, Wales, Ireland); (2) Britain’s relationship to “a great many countries and regions . . . most obviously South Asia, but also the Caribbean, Africa and even Latin America”; (3) “the huge diaspora of peoples from the British Isles,” which has, it is claimed, “done much to[ward] making English the closest thing to a world language”; (4) “the Empire itself,” which not only encompasses “the military and political ‘expansion of England’ and its ways” but is also “a story of complex relationships between the colonizing and the colonized, and of two-way flows of influence”; (5) “‘globalization’ in all its many dimensions—political, economic, social and cultural”; (6) other (mostly European) states and the process of state formation; (7) collaboration with English departments (where “the emergence of English as the second language of the world, where it is not already the first, only adds to the indispensability of British history”); and (8) the study of law and science.²⁷ Despite the fact that even contemporary Britons who are resistant to the Europeanization of Britain recognize the need to think of themselves “not as her Majesty’s loyal subjects but as citizens of Europe,” the economic realities of continental dependence and interrelationship are scarcely of concern in the report at all—raising questions about the scope of the global and the particular politics of American perspectives on the future past of Britain as well.²⁸

At one level, the diagnoses and the prognoses offered by the NACBS report are not surprising. They are even admirable evidence of a principled awareness of the shifting place of Britain in the world and the academy, and of the willingness of the body that is responsible for British history in North America to seize the moment and reimagine what a new, postmillennial British studies might look like. Like all useful historical evidence, the NACBS Report both reflects the historical moment in which it was written and produces a number of political and ideological claims worthy of further scrutiny if we are to appreciate more fully how nostalgia for Britain has worked, and continues to work, in the American context. Despite its recurrent emphasis on market opportunity, the report registers a profound am-

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 15–19.

²⁸ Max Beloff, “Empire Reconsidered,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 27, no. 2 (May 1999): 15.

bivalence about the role of the new imperial studies in creating a climate where a new and improved British history is not just desirable but apparently politically necessary and economically profitable as well. The authors of the report repeatedly reassure their readers that their text is not a prescription for a “postcolonial” British history. My sense is that they take up this position because they genuinely do not wish to be seen endorsing one method over another and because they understand (or misunderstand) postcolonialism as an “attack” on the nation. According to the report, “no group has been more vocal in its condemnation of British Studies than those historians whose work focuses on the impact of imperialism on colonial subjects and who have had the most contact with colleagues in non-Western areas.” And furthermore, “New work in post-colonial theory, gender and empire, imperial legislation and indigenous resistance movements has helped formulate an attack on British studies from within and has been adopted—albeit in a caricatured form—by those wishing to argue against British replacement hires on political grounds. These demoralizing trends, along with the recent deaths of luminaries such as Edward Thompson, Raphael Samuel and Lawrence Stone, have cast a pall over British historians who have been more inclined to accept these criticisms and lament the end of an era than to mount a spirited defense of British Studies.”²⁹ The conflation of critiques of national history with attacks on the future of British studies is telling, especially since many interlocutors of the nation do not imagine that it is really in danger of disappearing, even and especially under the aegis of late twentieth-century global capitalism.³⁰ The report’s determination to link the narrative of attack with the death of British history’s past “luminaries” is equally instructive, given the way in which Thompson became embroiled in debates about empire at the end of his life and the critiques of British history as usual that Raphael Samuel was engaged in—a project he called “unravelling Britain”—since at least the 1980s.³¹

Clearly the positions articulated by the report are motivated in large measure by a concern for the waning appeal of British history as a subject in the American academy as well as by its concomitant structural vulnerability in institutions of American higher education. These are not concerns to be dismissed lightly, if at all. What is significant, however, is the way British history is recast in the report: the way it is turned from unwitting casualty into a redemptive pedagogical and institutional, if not also a political, force. The right and proper place of empire in British history bears heavily on this redemptive possibility. Studies of the British empire in their most recent forms are represented in the report as a kind of corruption of “internal” national history, rather than as projects that reveal the impact

²⁹ Stansky et al., p. 10.

³⁰ See David Held and Anthony McGrew, “The Great Globalization Debate,” in *The Global Transformations Reader*, ed. David Held and Andrew McGrew (London, 2000), pp. 1–45.

³¹ E. P. Thompson, *Alien Homage: Edward Thompson and Rabindranath Tagore* (Oxford, 1993); see Robert Gregg and Madhavi Kale, “The Empire and Mr. Thompson: The Making of Indian Princes and the English Working Class,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 32 (1997): 2273–88; and Robert Gregg, “Class Culture and Empire: E. P. Thompson and the Making of Social History,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 11, no. 4 (1998): 419–60; and Samuel (n. 8 above), *Island Stories*.

of empire on domestic relationships, economies, or imaginations. Imperial histories also emerge as the only politically motivated versions of British history on offer, as opposed to the “internal” version which is apparently outside political considerations and immune, both in its origins and in its contemporary practices, from the impact of contemporary (let alone past) politics and history.³² Even more striking is the way the “national” history of Britain is reinvented so that it becomes the best, most auspicious ground for doing imperial, world, global, and transnational histories. As the report notes, “British history is perhaps the best single avenue of inquiry into the large processes of ‘globalization’ in all its many dimensions—political, economic, social and cultural. As creators of the first true ‘world system’ and the first world market, and as the originators of industrialism, the British occupy a unique position in human history.”³³ Again, these discussions are always connected to structural changes in the political economy of departments and universities, ever with an eye to the practical advantage that British history can bring. If this is the echo of a certain paradigm of “British” pragmatism—one that has historically pitted itself against the theoretical pretensions of the French—it also arguably approaches what might be called the stereotypically American quest for commodification and marketability, especially where that quest has historically invoked “human history” and universal values to ratify its self-interest.

The Americanization of British history that the NACBS report offers circles invariably back through the nostalgia for (a certain version of) the “British” nation, which, as I have suggested, is characteristic of the late twentieth-century American commercial appetite for things British more generally. That is to say, the report offers the possibility of a British history whose imperial past is the crucial, if also muted, foundation for the participation of British historians in shaping accounts of new global order as manufactured in the future American college classroom:

Many of us believe that we must overcome the insularity that has too often afflicted British history. To remain viable, we need to demonstrate that *the history of Britain is not merely an “island story,” but indeed a world story*. This group is not advocating imperial history per se: it, too, is susceptible to insularity in some of its preoccupations and practices. It is referring instead to an appreciation of British history as an avenue of inquiry into the larger processes that have transformed the globe and the relations among its inhabitants. *Though the term globalization strikes some as too triumphalist and trite to carry serious analytical weight, it does at least allude to the importance of an historical transformation that transcends national boundaries, a world-incorporating phenomenon that is at once political and social, economic and cultural, technological and intellectual*. Historians of Britain—or more particularly of Britain in relation to the rest of the world—are as well prepared as anyone to understand the course and character of this global process.³⁴ [Emphasis mine]

³² This language of inside/out replicates a long history of dichotomous thinking linked by Rushdie and others to imperialism. See Robert Gregg, *Inside Out/Outside In: Essays in Comparative History* (New York, 1999).

³³ Stansky et al. (n. 23 above), p. 17.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

Here the “British” story becomes a world story, if not a stage for *the* world story—or, possibly, the lens through which other world stories are glimpsed. This might well be interpreted as a call for the British national story—which is, ineluctably, an imperial story—to be used as the basis for the kind of global or transnational history that looks out from the center to the periphery, taking in the latter without doing much to question the centrality of the former. This is especially true because the authors of the report do not expressly call for young British historians to be trained in anything other than the island story; at one point the report even suggests that “specialist” lecturers be “brought” into surveys and other courses to deal with other material or regions that arise in this new British-based world history model. Many will recognize in this suggestion the 1960s and 1970s “area studies” approach in a new historical form, one that places disciplines like English or programs like South Asia studies in a subordinate position reminiscent of the status of “native informants” who made much of what counts as “colonial knowledge” possible in the first place.

The report concedes that “much of the most interesting scholarship in recent years has pursued lines of inquiry that . . . interrogate traditional conceptions of Britain and Britishness, rethinking the boundaries that have been drawn around these subjects.” But the desire for a recentering of a nationalist agenda is difficult to ignore, even in its politically corrected, updated form, as when the authors remind us of the importance of the British diaspora. This, the authors claim, “has done much to[ward] making English the closest thing to a world language. This effect on world history is vast and largely unexplored, though its origins go back centuries in British history. A history of the English-speaking peoples, their similarities and differences, and their collective role in world history, would make a stimulating, and attractive, course (without having to carry Churchillian baggage).” Less obviously, but equally powerfully, the report’s attempt to domesticate some of the new empire work is in danger of echoing an imperial attitude with regard to colonial peoples and encounters that reveals the neocolonial perils of such incorporationist gestures. To wit: “We have seen efforts to push the parameters of British history to the limits of its influence, incorporating the experiences of those peoples—Africans, Asians, and others—whose collision with this expansionist state transformed their societies and mentalities.” The transformation of Britain itself by these “collisions” scarcely registers, though there is some recognition elsewhere in the report of the ways in which new scholarship has challenged the boundaries of Britain itself.

The fact that the report was written collectively may account for such contradictions and ambivalences in the text. Such unevenness is also evidence, I think, of the combination of paranoia and competition the authors convey in their quest to portray British history as an endangered species that, at the same time, promises to be a model for the salvation of national history, albeit only of the exceptional kind like Britain’s. For example:

British history increasingly must vie with African history and Latin American history and Chinese history and various other nationally or regionally-defined histories, not to mention thematically and ethnically-defined specialties such as women’s history and

Jewish history and military history. Whatever prospects exist for British history in this environment are less likely to be realized if its advocates insist on Britain's traditional place of privilege in the discipline than if they demonstrate that it remains a vital field of study that offers insights and connections that benefit students and colleagues in other areas. A British history that stresses its encounter with and significance to the rest of the world may be far better prepared to do this than one that accentuates its insularity.

As Bill Readings has so persuasively argued in his 1996 book, *The University in Ruins*, the language in which discussions about globalism and globalization are conducted is not that of culture but that of economic management.³⁵ This is a phenomenon that can be seen more starkly in the NACBS report than perhaps in the habits of American television-viewing audiences, unless we understand BBC productions and "British history" as it is taught in North America as "events which make audiences happen"—audiences that are curious about, and possibly seduced by, the romance of what was Britain. The fact that Masterpiece Theater has long been funded by Mobil suggests important and heretofore unremarked connections between the corporate investments of public television and those of American universities. Some might argue that British history as it has been taught in this country can be read as a kind of competitive response to the likes of Masterpiece Theater and its Russell Bakers: not as a way of interrogating Britain as history, but as a way of putting a brake on the runaway American triumphalism (we are the future, you are the past) embedded in that publicly accessible and highly popular narrative. The fact that neither the NACBS nor the Masterpiece Theater set appears to see or to care about the most statistically numerous constituency subject to commercial and artistic influences emanating from and through Great Britain—teenagers buying and listening to the kinds of music Paul Gilroy argues is the basis for a contemporary "black atlantic"—reminds us of the ultimately limited reach of traditional British history (regardless of who its purveyors are), as well as of the equally limited purchase of the unproblematically "white nation" in an era of accelerated transnational commerce and racialized commodification.³⁶

The most resistant, and perhaps most generous, reading of the NACBS report is that it argues for British history as a local history, competing with other local histories in an age of globalization but with a historically new competitive disadvantage because of the material realities of late twentieth-century capitalisms and their cultures—and that in doing so it reproduces, both consciously and unconsciously, some of the values and presumptions of British imperialism itself. Such a reading was anticipated twenty years ago by J. G. A. Pocock in his *American Historical Review* article, "The Limits and Divisions of British History." There he argued that British history is an ostensibly local history that "extends itself into Oceanic, American and global dimensions" on nothing less than a "planetary

³⁵ Readings (n. 8 above), p. 30.

³⁶ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), esp. chap. 3. Though Gilroy himself underplays it, that music is itself a hybrid of Caribbean and South Asian forms (such as "the bangramuffin" of Bally Sagoo in the early 1990s).

scale.”³⁷ Pocock’s location as an expatriate New Zealander practicing a particular brand of English history in the United States reminds us—among other things—of the peculiar circuitry of imperial and ostensibly national histories, as well as the politics of location where historical interpretation is concerned.³⁸ Whether consciously or not, Pocock himself echoed modernist discourses of the interwar period, specifically those articulated by T. S. Eliot, who responded to Britain’s imperial decline by advancing a robust English particularity that could reground Britain in a kind of self-contained (if not originary) national culture.³⁹ I would argue that the reach for the global that the NACBS report articulates represents in many ways what globalization in its weakest forms can mean in practice in many American academic settings: that is, it can be a way to repackage existing national states and forms without either interrogating their location in geopolitical structures of power (what Mrinalini Sinha calls imperial social formation) or displacing the West as the originary site of knowledge, power, resources, history.⁴⁰ Clearly there are, and have been, numerous scholars at work countering the reinscription of an essentially British/European imperial worldview in narratives of the global—in monographs, textbooks, and well-established periodicals like the *Journal of World History*.⁴¹ But with its emphasis on state formation, world-systems theory, and economic empiricism, the race for the global in a time of economically straitened institutional circumstances may also signal a much-coveted opportunity for those who feel threatened by the “cultural turn” to wrest the historiographical high ground away from representation toward a newly legitimated global “reality.”⁴²

The political implications of this kind of repackaging, as well as its consequences for commodity capital and the commercializing of virtually all domains of thought, practice, knowledge, and history, is a question one hopes the NACBS will continue to engage—especially given the appetite for British history that Americans of all kinds still have. My experience of teaching British history in a fairly wide variety of institutional settings (a former teacher’s college, a small

³⁷ J. G. A. Pocock, “The Limits and Divisions of British History: In Search of the Unknown Subject,” *American Historical Review* 87, no. 2 (1982): 319.

³⁸ The seed essay of the *American Historical Review* piece was published as “British History: A Plea for a New Subject,” *New Zealand Journal of History* 8 (1974): 3–21, and reprinted in the *Journal of Modern History* 4 (1975): 601–24. It was also first given in the United States as the address for the Modern European History section of the American Historical Association in 1978, an itinerary of which I was unaware until recently.

³⁹ Jed Esty, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton, N.J., in press), provided courtesy of the author. See esp. pt. 3, “Insular Times: T. S. Eliot and Modernism’s English End” and pt. 4, “Becoming Minor.”

⁴⁰ Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The “Manly Englishman” and the “Effeminate Bengali” in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester, 1995).

⁴¹ See, most recently, Michael Adas, “From Settler Colony to Global Hegemon: Integrating the Exceptionalist Narrative of the American Experience into World History,” *American Historical Review* 106, no. 5 (2001): 1692–1720; and Robert Tignor et al., *Worlds Together, Worlds Apart: A History of the Modern World from the Mongol Empire to the Present* (New York, 2002).

⁴² See Anthony Hopkins, “The History of Globalization—and the Globalization of History?” in *Globalization in World History*, ed. Anthony Hopkins (London, 2002), pp. 11–46, and also his “Back to the Future: From National History to Imperial History,” *Past and Present*, no. 164 (August 1999): 198–243.

private university, a Big Ten setting) does not make me sanguine about the end of Anglophilia; quite the opposite. I have found that undergraduates of many different backgrounds and class positions come to British history classes hoping for the same kinds of relief from the combative subjects of racial strife and struggle they get in American history and literature courses that many white middle-class Americans seek when they turn on Masterpiece Theater. The difference is that college students are more vociferous about their anger (and puzzlement) at the “corruption” of British history as they expected to receive it: they vote with their feet, and on course evaluations where they often pull no punches about the “excessive” attention to race and imperial subjects on my syllabi.

There may well be, in other words, more of an audience for an Anglophilic version of British history than the pundits imagine, even perhaps among unanticipated constituencies, since taste in history is correlated not directly or self-evidently to skin color or class position but rather to the complex matrix in which those signifiers create meaning and political consciousness. If indeed the face of Anglophilia is changing, that transformation runs parallel to the ways in which Britain, and British history, have not disappeared but are reappearing in “new,” yet recognizable, cultural and political forms. As the reception in America of David Cannadine’s recent book *Ornamentalism* suggests, even British imperial history is being repackaged and circulated without race, or with an attenuated account of it—thereby helping to guarantee that empire will remain user-friendly and unthreatening to the American fetish of Britain as whiteness.⁴³ The extent to which this kind of account whitewashes the racial strife at the heart of twentieth-century British history and naturalizes the vexed political contexts in which British history has been written in the last three decades is simply astonishing. For Enoch Powell (1912–98; Tory M.P. for three decades), writing as recently as 1985, the specter of the empire taking revenge on the nation could be understood only in racialized terms: “What sort of country will England be when its capital, other cities and areas . . . consist of a population of which at least one-third is of African and Asian descent? My answer . . . is that it will be a Britain unimaginably wrecked by dissension and violent disorder, not recognizable as the same nation it had been, or perhaps as a nation at all.”⁴⁴ In this view, Britain itself is in danger of being no longer recognizable as a nation because of the legacies of empire. Although it is tempting to ask it, the question is not so much why Americans—whether consumers of PBS or purveyors of British history—are so enamored of Powell’s fantasy of Britain. Rather, it is how such whitewashed versions survive in an age of global communications, when it should be as easy to see reports of race riots in Britain as it is to see an ornamentalized British imperial history cross the sightline of an elite transnational readership. In this sense, the acclaim that has greeted Cannadine’s book is in stark contrast to its real “Other”—not Said’s *Orientalism* but the four-hundred-page Parekh Report, commissioned by the Runnymede Trust in 2000, which underscored the fact of multicultural life in contemporary Britain and

⁴³ David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire* (Oxford, 2001).

⁴⁴ Quoted in Clare E. Alexander, *The Art of Being Black: The Creation of Black British Youth Identities* (Oxford, 1996), p. 5.

called for an end to “Englishness” as its signature national identity because of its equation with whiteness and the inaccuracy of that designation for a decidedly multiethnic population.⁴⁵

Significantly, perhaps, I have found that many undergraduate students have less trouble accepting the “incursions” of race into the national narrative than they do those of gender and sexuality. This is more fruit for discussion, especially since in the NACBS report the specter of empire appears to be much more threatening than that of gender or women or even “ethnicity,” subjects the authors repeatedly acknowledge as “quite properly” a part of the story of national history. The report may have misread or overdetermined the cultural realities of the late twentieth-century North American classroom, but its authors have their finger on the pulse of the late twentieth-century university, which has come to recognize that it is no longer the citadel of national culture and has attempted to respond with corporate models of incorporation—primarily of “difference” and otherness but also, arguably, of those particular identities and politics that challenge the universals at the heart of globalization. In light of this shift, American universities have not just embraced globalization as the greatest good but also have done so by simultaneously fetishizing and then absorbing the global: by incorporating “the world” as a utopian—and, one must say, fantastical—version of the nation-state and its “cultures.” Nowhere is this more evident than in American engagements with Britain as history, the “when” that was Britain. In this sense, the much-critiqued “return” of empire to British history is nothing compared with the eternal return of Britain in America, where British history is destined to live on as the longed-for savior of national history—and now, apparently, as the guarantor of transnational marketability as well.

There will be many for whom the events of September 11 signal a high-profile return of Britain to the world stage, with the old imperial power advising the new (though by no means unexperienced) American hegemon in what is perhaps the most dangerous moment in world history yet. Even the transfer of imperial power from one anglophone empire to another—which historians interested in such geopolitical truisms have long recognized as having occurred in the immediate post-1945 era—appears to be newly visible in newly staged ways. In the same week that Blair’s “foreign policy guru,” Robert Cooper, argued in the *Observer* that “we still need empires,” Emily Eakin opined in the *New York Times* that “today, America is no mere superpower or hegemon but a full-blown empire in the Roman and British sense.”⁴⁶ The extent to which the news-watching American public knew about the tremendous popular opposition to Blair’s support of the war against Afghanistan and, later, Iraq, remains an open question, bound up in its own way with the comparative invisibility in the U.S. media of racial disturbances in Britain

⁴⁵ Lord Bhikhu Parekh et al., *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain* (London, 2000). For one Labour government minister’s response, see Robin Cook, “Celebrating Britishness,” www.lco.gov.uk/text_only/news/speechtext.

⁴⁶ Robert Cooper, “Why We Still Need Empires,” *Observer* (April 7, 2002); Emily Eakin, “It Takes an Empire,” *New York Times* (April 1, 2002). I am grateful to Tony Ballantyne for these references.

in the summer of 2001. But claims about the new world apparently inaugurated by 9/11 should give us pause. It is worth noting here that Tony Blair's appreciation for the commodity value of a new script for the Anglo-American relationship was evident well before that terrible day. His gift to George W. Bush of a statue of Winston Churchill in the summer of 2001 is evidence of this, signaling as it does not just the reproduction of images of another historical moment in the Anglo-American relationship but also the desire for a new version of it—all of which helps to facilitate the recirculation of the British past in the present and, very possibly, in the future as well.