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Hyphen-Nation

Introduction

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Scotland.[1] But, in the context of Europe and devolution, there are, of course, a range of other millennial books on the same subject, such as John Redwood's anti-Europe *The Death of Britain* or Andrew Marr's book-of-the-television-series, *The Day Britain Died*.[2]

There are also those who perceive this break-up from outside the country. An

article by an expatriate, Andrew Sullivan, in the *New York Times* supplement on 21 February 1999 was called "There will always be an England" (see left). It uses the headline "Farewell Britannia" on every other page. Sullivan writes: "As the century ends, it is possible...to talk about the

recent construct, cobbled together in the seventeenth century in the Act of Union with Scotland."[4] The historian who has written most influentially about this cobbling together of a nation, Linda Colley, seems to predict this dismantling when she writes in *Britons* that "we can plausibly regard Great Britain as an invented nation superimposed, if only for a while, onto much older alignments and loyalties."[5] Colley's subtitle "Forging the nation 1707-1837" emphasises this point: Britain was forged together but was always also a forgery.

Additionally there are, of course, voices from Scotland and Wales that also look forward to the end of Britishness as the route to a fuller and better national future free from England. From Wales, R. S. Thomas writes that "Britishness is a mask. Beneath it there is only one nation, England."[6] Similarly, it is now twenty years since Gwynfor Evans, the former leader of Plaid Cymru published his book *The End of Britishness* in 1981, arguing that "Britishness is Englishness." From Scotland, Robert Crawford writes that "It is hard to think today of what could be confidently called 'British' culture rather than English or Scottish culture.... Scottish culture seems to have moved into a post-British phase."[7]

Meanwhile, as a last point of orientation, there are those more positive voices that consider culture, and identity itself, as pluralistic and multi-layered. These voices try to articulate a future for Britain while recognising the pressures that are currently questioning the limits of terms such as "Britishness." Perhaps most prominently in these quarters, the "unsettling" of Britain has been detailed by The Parekh Report.[8] The report, commissioned by the Runnymede Trust, sees seven reasons why the idea of Britain is at a turning-point: globalisation, the country's decline as a world power, its role in Europe,

devolution, the end of empire, the spread of social pluralism, and postwar migration. The report's conclusion is that Britain ought to be recognised as the "Community of communities" it has now come to be, and, for that matter, always was. Changes in the understanding of British culture and in the transmission of appropriate national stories, signs and symbols, can follow through from this appreciation of present and past pluralism.

The current government's latest initiative over questions of national identity has been for David Blunkett to announce a new Citizenship Course to start in secondary schools next year.[9] In terms of contemporary examples that might be considered on such a course, I want to look at some of the current images and perceptions of Britain.

Contemporary Britishness

The Observer's

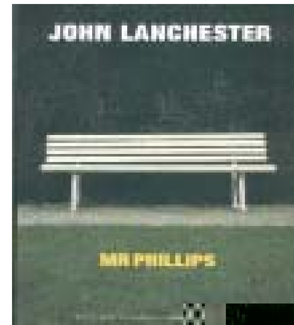
according to one understanding of the concept, a nation is chiefly defined by its cultures,

rationing. So, it would seem churlish to criticise J. K. Rowling alone because her books do not faithfully depict Britain at the millennium. However, what is of interest and open to inquiry is, first, the reasons for the popularity of the books, and, second, the methods of marketing them. To what extent are the images of national identity in the hands of Potterites, as Suzanne Moore calls them? Well, in the light of a new Government Citizenship Course, one of the facts that underlines the way the novels are perceived as representing Britishness is that they have replaced *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropist* at the top of the list of Labour MPs' favourite novels.[14] One of the selling-points in this context has been the perception that Harry is "classless." Perhaps, but as the most successful virtual Briton, Harry's world lacks a postcolonial dimension even though it has become so popular in a postcolonial world.

My context for concern about this stems from an essay on the teaching of British St

a sense of suburban *faux* gentility attaching to it. Mr Phillips himself is the reserved, undemonstrative, insular, repressed and sex-obsessed white English archetype. The book cover shows an improbably clean, white, and unoccupied bench in a green and pleasant spot.

Mr Phillips is a book that marginalises issues of community and ethnicity to unexplored sidelines, implying them almost exclusively through their conspicuous absence. The book glosses Mr Phillips with the sheen of Ulysses, but



made step out of the Britain of 1945, the year Mr Phillips was in fact born. Mr Phillips's embodiment of traditional, formal Anglicised Britishness is expressed in the narrator's refusal to address him by his fore name from first page to last. Because even Mr Phillips, whose ironic first name is Victor, thinks of himself as "Mr Phillips."

Edward Said has tried to argue in *Culture and Imperialism* that the imposition of national identity is implicit in the domestic novel in its boundaries, exclusions, and silences—the imperial interstices of society that contrapuntal reading can reveal by turning the narrative inside out, temporarily centralising its supposed margins.[16] This is what Zadie Smith in *White Teeth* seems to have done with the version of London in *Mr Phillips*. *White Teeth*

children are born to at least one black parent,[18] to stand alongside if not contradict

Lanchester's *Mr Phillips*

prominent in the debate over “the break-up of Britain” and their ideas of a singular,

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In *Britons*, Linda Colley has suggested that for the early Victorians Britishness symbolised "an affective form of co-identity to which the various peoples of the Empire could lay claim in order to overlook their perceived national and racial differences."[24]

Colley illustrates this view by using Sir David Wilkie's *Chelsea Pensioners Reading the Gazette of the Battle of Waterloo* (1822), a canvas that depicts Welsh, Scots, English and Irish troops, and a black bandsman, gathering to celebrate the British victory over the French (see left). Discussing the same painting, Simon Gikandi, in his excellent *Maps of Englishness*, says that the painting shows that "if a modern British nation cannot be imagined outside the realm of empire, then imperialism becomes the raison d'être of Britishness itself."[25]

Britishness has always been a hybridised and hyphenated identity. To insist, as the New Right has, that an individual show an allegiance to a narrow idea of Britain above or instead of another identity, national, regional, religious, or ethnic, is against the very idea of Britishness. The alternative to a recognition of hyphen-nation is a recourse to, among other things, discourses of Englishness that are once again surfacing in the press and which may seek to align England with a white Anglo-Saxon tribe. Whatever other allegiances people in the British archipelago feel, they may want to remain British in a hyphenated way; which is all anyone ever was anyway. With such a recognition it might be possible to celebrate the range of contemporary cultural achievement in Britain,

just as the English football team's success under Swedish management has resulted in the tabloids' invention of "Svengland." This may have more importance than at first appears, given that football violence, the most virulent focus of nationalism and racism, came top in the *Observer's* "Britain Uncovered" poll, when people were asked the question "What makes you most embarrassed when you think of Britain?"

Finally, Britishness is not different in being a hyphenated national identity but it is explicitly amenable to the recognition that it is hybridised, pluralistic, and diverse. As such, it stands not as a warning against but as a warning for all contemporary discussions about national reconfiguration. The best conclusion I can find about national identity as it is too often discussed in the British press at the moment comes from Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*: "'England,' said Christophine, who was watching me. 'You think there is such a place?'....'You do not believe that there is a country called England?' She blinked and answered quickly, 'I don't say I don't *believe,* I say I don't *know*, I know what I see with my eyes and I never see it.'"[26]

Notes

[1] Tom Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain* (London: Verso, 1977); *After Britain: New Labour and the Return of Scotland* (London: Granta, 2000).
[2] John Redwood, *The Death of Britain* (London: Macmillan, 1999); Andrew Marr, *The Day Britain Died* (London: Pimlico, 2000).
[3] Andrew Sullivan, *New York Times*, 21 February 1999, 40.
[4] Ibid., 78.
[5] Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 5.
[6] R. S. Thomas, quoted by Katie Gramich in Susan Bassnett, ed., *Studying British Cultures* (London: Routledge, 1997), 97.
[7] Ibid., 95-5.

[8] Lord Parekh *et al.*, *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain* (London: The Runnymede Trust, 2000).
[9] *The Guardian*, 15 October 2000.
[10] *The Observer*, 18 March 2001.
[11] Claire Armitstead,