

INTRODUCTION

*Empires, in common with most other historical events,
leave behind them after-images ... There is no one
version of the British imperial myth.*

– BERNARD PORTER, EMERITUS PROFESSOR OF
HISTORY, UNIVERSITY OF NEWCASTLE, UK 2015¹

Books on Brexit, on how and why parts of Britain voted to leave the European Union, fell hot off the press in late 2016, saw a resurgence during 2017, and then appeared a little more slowly throughout 2018 as the public's appetite waned and we all became less and less sure of what was happening and what might happen. In the heat of the moment, in the month or the year of the event, emotions are often still running too high to see clearly. Sometimes you have to wait a little time before you can know what really happened.

Why Brexit? Once you have children, you realise that the answer to 'Why?' is never simple. Whatever your reply, the child can almost always ask 'Why?' to that. And then, of course, there are the questions of who did what to whom, where, when, how, and by how much. Above all, we want to highlight what will be

seen as important in retrospect. What was it all about? What did it all mean?

Jo Cox MP was murdered a week before the EU referendum in June 2016, by a man who, when asked for his name, replied, 'My name is death to traitors and freedom for Britain.' Many racist attacks and more killings followed the vote.² In the aftermath of the referendum, government spending was diverted from health and social care towards paying for Brexit, in ways that will have foreshortened many other lives. So, given some breathing space, an obvious question to ask is whether one reason for a narrow majority voting to leave the EU was partly that we were now finally hearing the 'language of the unheard'³.

Those dedicated to recovering national sovereignty, to taking back money supposedly spent in the EU, and removing immigrants, certainly claimed that the referendum was the voice of the previously silent majority, the largely unheard masses.⁴ Did people feel they had not been listened to sufficiently? Or are there many more explanations as yet hardly explored?

Some of the dozens of books that were published in the immediate aftermath of the referendum promised the full story of the political manoeuvring that got the UK to this point, and others promised to make sense of the vote, with a couple of tomes focusing on the supposed evils of immigration and Islam. One or two suggested that Britain would eventually not leave Europe⁵ and even change its mind quickly and choose to Remain, and that it would actually be this that would make Britain great again.⁶ Others showed signs of their authors adapting and responding to rapidly changing times in interesting ways.⁷

This book tells a different story. We have had the benefit of a little more time to stop and think. Here we argue that part of the reason the Brexit vote happened was that a small number of people in Britain have a dangerous, imperialist misconception of

our standing in the world, and that this above all else was the catalyst for the process leading up to Brexit, especially for those arguing most fervently for Brexit.

In this book we suggest that once Brexit happens, we will be faced with our own Dorian Gray-like shockingly deteriorated image. Of course, we cannot be completely sure what a post-Brexit Britain will look like until long after we leave the EU, or fail to properly leave, but the flailing, erratic attempts at negotiation to date do not inspire confidence in the dawn of a new British Empire. Looking into the mirror, people often see what they want to see, especially if that mirror is largely angled by a tabloid press and a patriotic BBC telling them what they want to hear. The reality can be strikingly different.

Here we suggest that in the near future the EU referendum will become widely recognised and understood as part of the last vestiges of empire working their way out of the British psyche. Other European countries had already been shedding their (smaller) empire mentalities immediately following the Second World War, but Britain found it hard to come to terms with the reality that, by the late 1960s, foreign country after foreign country had escaped the clutches of the British – some peacefully, others as a result of ferocious conflicts. Almost all those with any substantial populations that remained colonies by 1969 would gain independence in the 1970s.

The post-war creation of the ‘New Commonwealth’⁸ had been much more than a rebranding, although in Britain few acknowledged that point. Despite importing former colonial labour from the late 1940s onwards, Britain began to get into serious economic difficulties once it had lost control of almost all its colonies. But, worse than that, its people had inherited a colonial mentality that would have repercussions for decades to come.

Images of domination and pride in the empire, illustrated by

maps with lots of pink on them, adorned classroom walls into the 1960s; often they were still there in the 1970s. Books continued to be written even well into the twenty-first century extolling *How Britain Made the Modern World*.⁹ Such writing covered up the real story of how, out in the big wide world, British influence and dominance had diminished. Governments of all political preferences either felt unable to explain this fact to the British population or did not themselves recognise this new reality. Instead, they clung to a pretence that much of the old empire could be held on to by force.

National Service, by which some two million young men were conscripted into Britain's armed services between 1946 and 1962, was used to force many young British men to fight colonial wars.¹⁰ The experiences of these men shaped the attitudes of their generation. As one RAF flight controller explained, 'We had Empire Day at school and we all thought empire was a marvellous thing. When Britain chose to give her empire away we were all rather saddened. The colonial people had all the blessings of British colonial rule and look how casually they dismissed them.'¹¹

When the British public did vote to stay in the European Economic Community in 1975, there was a vague feeling that since the old empire was 'going, going, gone', another alliance was better than nothing. Flippantly, people were told that maybe the price of Danish butter might come down. Later, much later, *The Brexit Cookbook* hit the bookshops with its promise that:

Scotch eggs and trifle built the greatest Empire the world has ever known until the EU forced us to eat Danish pastries and pizza. But now the kitchen tables have been turned. We've taken back control and can cook what we blooming well like. So, put down your croissant, stop chomping on your ciabatta and cook something properly patriotic for a change with *The Brexit Cookbook!*¹²

There was also some rejoicing when it was revealed that the television programme *The Great British Bake Off* was being screened in 196 countries and the format copied for home-grown shows in twenty of those countries. Britain can still offer culinary cultural gifts to the world, it was said!

It also offers great confusion, not least in the use of the term 'Britain'. In this book, we adopt the common shorthand of Britain being synonymous with the sovereign state of the UK, but we never refer to Britain as a country. Strictly speaking, Britain is made up of four countries, three of which constitute Great Britain with the fourth being Northern Ireland. If you are already confused or annoyed by this, you are not alone.

In *Rule Britannia*, we try to provide an honest appraisal of the importance to the Brexit decision of Britain's origins; the British Union of separate countries; Britain's overseas endeavours; the manufacturing of tradition; the establishment and often brutal running of the empire. All this is folded into an assessment of our changing relationship with Commonwealth countries and the story of how badly we treated people from the Commonwealth in the past, even through to the 1970s and 1980s, and, remarkably, still today. Laid out like this, we then see how similar that older racism is to how the British often think of and treat people from Eastern Europe today.

Both of us saw the racism of 1970s Britain, and sadly, this is not so different today – although it is often a much older group of people who are most racist now. Thankfully, there are fewer racist murders than in the 1970s, perhaps because it is no longer skinheads leading the racist charge but men with a similar lack of hair, now due to age, typing out bile on the comment sections of newspaper websites. So many of those bigoted men today would have been the same age as or might even have been the very same skinheads who were in the National Front in the 1970s.

David Cameron still sports a fine head of hair, but he has lost most of what reputation he once had for competence. Despite the continual clamour of complaints he received from his EU-hating opponents, David Cameron did not have to promise a referendum in the Conservative manifesto in 2015. But he and his friends in government concluded it was worth the risk. They could see that if they did not promise the EU rebels their referendum then the Conservative Party might tear itself apart, that the UK Independence Party (UKIP) would take even more votes from the Conservatives, and that Labour might then have gained power in 2015. In the event, UKIP disintegrated, with their votes going mainly to the Conservatives; there was some speculation that erstwhile leader Nigel Farage would stand for a Northern Irish Democratic Unionist Party parliamentary seat.¹³

Furthermore, the long Brexit referendum run-up and debate became a useful distraction from the reality of austerity. In any case, once the EU referendum result was declared, David Cameron immediately quit as Prime Minister, with his family wealth of well over £10 million intact.¹⁴ He then charged up to £120,000 for speeches¹⁵ and re-joined White's Club, the 'gentlemen-only' club he had resigned from on becoming PM.¹⁶ He left a woman to sort out the mess.

In this book we are not arguing that any soft/hard, in/out or maybe position would have been preferable in hindsight. Instead, we want to suggest that Britain will be diminished by the process of trying to leave the EU whichever way it does it, and that there is no welcoming empire, Commonwealth or other set of countries ready to quickly embrace new trading and other relationships with Britain. We suggest that an adjustment like this was always on the cards.

Partly, if not largely, because of failing to come to terms with its loss of a huge empire, the UK had been ramping up economic inequality since the late 1970s, reaching a point where the gap between rich and poor in Britain was wider than in any other European country. When India, and then most colonies in Africa,

won their freedom, the British rich found themselves suddenly becoming much poorer. They blamed the trade unions and socialists in the 1970s. To try to maintain their position, from 1979 onwards they cut the pay of the poorest in a myriad of ways and vilified immigrants in the newspapers they owned or influenced, while managing to hold on to some of the pomp and ceremony that their imperial grandparents had enjoyed.

Something had to break, and, in the end, it was a break with the EU – it was Brexit. It is true that Brexit was partly the language of the unheard – the masses cocking a snook at the demands of their overlords – and there were some who actually believed the propaganda that problems in health, housing and education were due to immigrants, and some who really thought ‘their’ country was being taken over by colonial and EU immigrants, by refugees from anywhere, or even by Islam. But there were many others who voted Leave out of hope. They just hoped for something better than what they had.

The British had been distracted from the rise in inequality and the consequent poverty that grew with it by decades of innuendo and then outright propaganda suggesting that immigration was the main source of most of their woes. Without immigrants, they were told, there would be good jobs for all. Then they were told, at first in whispers, and later through tabloid headlines, that without immigrants their children could get into that good school, or the school they currently go to would not be so bad. Without immigrants, they could live in the house of their dreams, a home currently occupied by immigrants who have jumped the queue and taken their birthright. ‘We’ (always ‘we’, always ‘us’) need to cap net immigration to the ‘tens of thousands’ and then all will be so much better. All this was said to distract people from looking at who was actually becoming much wealthier and who was funding a political party to ensure that the already wealthy could hoard even more in future. Or, as Alex Massie of *The Spectator* wrote in 2016: