

“Keep the balance”: The Politics of Remembering Empire in Post-Colonial Britain

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Abstract

This article uses a memory studies lens to explore the inherent tension in discourses that defend empire in post-colonial Britain. It argues that many Britons try to reconcile their awareness of colonial violence, racism, and exploitation with their wish to view themselves in a positive light. This at a time when the memory of empire continues to be associated with British national identity in the present. It studies three phenomena that characterize much engagement with the imperial past: firstly, the acknowledgement of imperial wrongs within otherwise celebratory accounts; secondly, the idea that there is an empire-critical master narrative against which one must present a counter-memory in order to keep the balance; and thirdly, the defence of individual Britons that allows for a depoliticized endorsement of empire and liberates contemporary Britain of guilt. It uses the rhetoric of a number of authors, filmmakers, and politicians as the point of departure to study the politics of remembering empire in post-colonial Britain.

Introduction

Asserting the importance of imperial memory in Britain has become something of a national pastime in recent years. In the lead-up to the Brexit referendum, Leavers and Remainers alike invoked the Empire – some as the antecedent to a glorious Global Britain of the future, others as the symbol of an anachronistic longing to return to the past.¹ Whether they found it appealing or repelling, both sides seemed drawn to the memory of empire. Much academic

¹ See Johnson, “Boris Johnson Exclusive”; Tomlinson and Dorling; Mathew.

work on the role of imperial memory in Britain has tended to focus either on outright nostalgia or on attempts at repressing unpleasant memories of the dark sides of empire.² Here, I want to demonstrate that negative memories of empire may be called forth also by those who seek to rehabilitate it.

This article uses a memory studies lens to explore the inherent tension in discourses that defend empire in post-colonial Britain. It argues that many Britons try to reconcile their awareness of colonial violence, racism, and exploitation with their wish to view themselves in a positive light. This at a time when the memory of empire continues to be associated with British national identity in the present. It studies three phenomena that characterise much engagement with the imperial past: firstly, the acknowledgement of imperial wrongs within otherwise celebratory accounts; secondly, the idea that there is an empire-critical master narrative against which one must present a counter-memory in order to keep the balance; and thirdly, the defence of individual Britons that allows for a depoliticized endorsement of empire and liberates contemporary Britain of guilt. In the following, I take as my point of departure the rhetoric and cultural production of a number of authors, filmmakers, and politicians to study the politics of remembering empire in post-colonial Britain.

Acknowledging Wrongs, Celebrating Empire

“Britain is addicted to glory,” writer Afua Hirsch notes in a recent column in the *Guardian*. She describes the feeling of being “in the middle of a culture war” over imperial memory: on the one side there is a “pervasive [...] state-sponsored amnesia”; on the other the challenges to the celebration of empire by (descendants of) formerly colonized people like herself. Hirsch ties the “culture war” to the question of British identity in the present: “Britishness – at least this patriotic, defensive, glory-addicted version of it – seems to be in a highly fragile

² See Buettner, “Setting the Record Straight”; Gilroy; Rothermund 5-6; Wilson.

place. It cannot withstand being problematised or critiqued” (Hirsch, “Glorifying a Violent Past”). Other black British writers have criticised the failure of politicians and populace to confront colonial crimes, and, like Hirsch, they connect the question of how empire is remembered to contemporary identities. In his posthumously published memoir, cultural theorist Stuart Hall argues that while many in Britain consign colonialism to the past and tend to forget its destructive effects, “in this post-colonial moment, the sensibilities of colonialism are still potent. We – all of us – are still its inheritors, still living its terrifying aftermath” (Hall 21). The legacies of empire, Hall maintains, concern not only those from formerly colonized areas, but the former colonizers as well. Citing a YouGov poll in which 59 % of respondents said they felt the empire was “something to be proud of,” the sociologist Kehinde Andrews argues that the majority of Britons have a selective memory of empire that needs to be countered:

Lest we forget: far from being a benevolent saviour, the British empire was based on the exploitation, murder and devastation of people across the globe [...] Perhaps a recognition of the brutality, violence and horror at the dark heart of empire would shake the nation out of its postcolonial melancholia. To acknowledge the dark side of colonialism, however, would destroy the nostalgia that is such a strong part of British imperial identity. (Andrews)

Paul Gilroy’s phrase “postcolonial melancholia,” which Andrews uses here, was coined to dissect the enduring and conflicted emotional attachments to the imperial past which prevent white Britons from developing a more nurturing and inclusive version of Britishness. These critics share the diagnosis of Britain as a place still imbricated in its imperial past – a past whose dark sides, they argue, are repressed, with destructive consequences in the present. By pushing back against this amnesia and insisting on bringing those dark sides to light, Hirsch, Hall and Andrews bear evidence to the contested nature of imperial memory. Judging from

their words, one might expect celebration of empire to entail a complete forgetting of imperial wrongs. However, colonial nostalgia and endorsement of empire actually come in much more subtle and perhaps therefore much more insidious guises. The existence of counter-discourses like theirs is used as a rhetorical springboard for speakers who seek to rehabilitate the memory of empire. In acknowledging the wrongs of empire, its proponents create a platform from which they can safely celebrate it.

What is remarkable about these phenomena is their longevity. Thirty-odd years ago, Salman Rushdie argued that Britain was succumbing to “Raj nostalgia.”³ He condemned the recent spate of films and books committed to telling stories of India as a “revisionist enterprise” (91). However, the cultural products criticized by Rushdie did not necessarily present rosy images of the colonial record in India. Some were more ambiguous, combining empire critique and empire nostalgia. Rushdie discusses Paul Scott’s *The Raj Quartet*, published between 1966 and 1975 and adapted as an immensely popular television series in 1984. He recognises the unflattering portrayal of many British characters in the novel, but argues that what is significant is how its form, with its firm focus on British people, suggests that they, rather than Indians, are “*the ones whose stories matter*” (90, italics in original). As he argues, “[i]t is no defence to say that a work adopts, in its structure, the very ethic which, in its content and tone, it pretends to dislike. It is, in fact, the case for the prosecution” (90). This gets to the heart of the ambiguities of much British cultural engagement with the imperial past. While explicitly condemning the dark side of colonialism, many people continue to see the British Empire and the people who ran it in a positive light. The acknowledgement of imperial wrongs is still accompanied by a deeper, even structural, commitment to discourses that hark back to the colonial era.⁴

³ The “Raj” being the commonly used name for British Crown rule in India.

⁴ I elaborate on this tension in white postcolonial nostalgia in Rasch, “Postcolonial Nostalgia.”

John McBratney also discusses the conundrum of *The Raj Quartet*. He argues that the novels might not on the surface seem nostalgic if taken at face value since they

expose an Empire that was cold, exploitative, self-serving, and irresponsible.

... Yet in a deep sense *The Raj Quartet* is nostalgic. Despite its anatomizing of a corrupt Empire, it finds in the imperial past a value now lost – the value of a particular vision of the Empire which, according to Scott, some servants of the Raj held and which, if more had adhered to, might have changed Britain and India for the better. (205, italics in original)

Scott, according to McBratney, celebrates the essential value of Empire, even if he condemns the cases where the practice of empire strayed from the ideal. McBratney concludes that “in resurrecting this vision, Scott unconsciously undermines the force of his indictment of Empire” (205). We are faced, then, with a phenomenon of retrospective endorsement of empire that is mixed with liberal criticism of it.

Writing for the *Guardian* in 2015, Stuart Jeffries identifies a new boom of Raj nostalgia, with films such as the *Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, television series like *Indian Summers*, and restaurants like the new chain Dishoom, all catering to a British appetite for a “rose-tinted” version of the colonial past in India. Jeffries notes that today, as in the 1980s, many of these products are not “straightforwardly nostalgic for the Raj.” Instead, they stress the corruption, racism and violence of empire in a way that can be “aberrantly decoded by nostalgic Britons” for whom “British costume dramas about the disgrace of the Raj function as pretexts for the pleasures of fixating on the opposite.” As Jeffries sums up, “it’s as if we perverted Brits need to masochistically admit doing the bad stuff (you know, rape, murder, colonising a third of the world), before we can enjoy basking in colonial nostalgia properly.”

His analysis of Britons as “aberrant decoders” points to a strategy to manage the tension between the knowledge of imperial horrors and the desire to view oneself positively.⁵

A similar double movement is played out in the newest addition to the catalogue of nostalgic costume dramas, Stephen Frears’s *Victoria and Abdul*. In the film, Queen Victoria befriends an Indian clerk, Abdul Karim, who has been sent to present her with a medal and becomes her confidant the moment they catch one another’s eyes. The Empress of India emerges as a crusader against discrimination, as she struggles against the establishment at court who are too racist to accept the friendship.⁶ When those closest to her have spied on Karim in an attempt to reveal him as “a lowborn impostor,” she is outraged: “You despicable toads. Racialists! [...] Picking on a poor defenceless Indian. [...] How dare you look down on Abdul. [...] Abdul is a loyal, wise, sympathetic human being who has raised himself on his own merits.” Thus, some negative aspects of empire are admitted, here in the shape of racial prejudice, while the figurehead of Victorian imperialism herself is exempted from critique.

The film also voices explicit criticism of empire, but consistently relegates it to Mohammed, Karim’s slightly laughable (and much less handsome) sidekick. Mohammed complains about their journey to Britain: “Five thousand miles to present a bloody medal to the oppressor of the entire Indian subcontinent.” In response, Karim tells him to cheer up and enjoy the immense honor and privilege of serving the Queen: “You don’t realize what a great honour this is for us.” By letting Mohammed insist that “[t]hese people are the exploiters of a quarter of mankind,” the film tries to dodge criticism of whitewashing the record of British rule. However, the film never takes his protests seriously, and all his anger is dismissed by

⁵ Another example of this tension was the 2007 bicentenary for the abolition of the slave trade which was criticized for using the commemoration of slavery as an occasion for celebrating British deeds. The memorial service in Westminster Abbey was disrupted by Toyin Agbetu, a London-born activist of Nigerian descent, who explained afterwards that he protested against the focus on the English abolitionist William Wilberforce to the neglect of British guilt and the agency of (former) slaves in securing the abolition: ‘The “Wilberfest” abolition commemoration has eradicated any mention of resistance, rebellion and revolution instigated by millions of African people’ (Agbetu). See also Donnington 13–14; Hirsch, “Toppling Statues?”; Vervaecke.

⁶ See Al-Kadhi; Hans.

Karim. Through the token efforts at empire criticism, the grand costume drama acknowledges the dark side of empire even as it sets it to one side, in order to let viewers revel in the world before decolonization. These waves of conflicted nostalgia bear witness to the contested nature of imperial memory in contemporary Britain.

Memory theory may help to unpack what is at stake. Psychologists and sociologists have demonstrated the tendency for individuals as well as groups to recall the past in a way that reflects positively on them.⁷ As Roy Baumeister and Stephen Hastings point out: “People want to think well of their social group, and so even if they are equally exposed to truthful and flattering versions of the past, they may find it easier to understand, remember, and repeat the flattering ones” (292). While this comment might imply a complete repression of unpleasant memories, other scholars argue that there are limits to how the past can be reframed in the light of the present. Barry Schwartz has pointed out that in order to be “serviceable to the present” memories must display “a minimal sense of continuity with the past” (82). Memory is, on the one hand, fundamentally caught up with the interests of the present, but on the other, it remains tied to the past, so that narratives need to have at least some founding in what actually happened. There is, in other words, a tension between what James Wertsch calls “a usable past” (123) and Schwartz’s limits to “reconstructability” (104).

Thus, while white Britons may prefer to view the imperial past in a positive light, they also need to accommodate their knowledge, however vague, of the actual violence, exploitation and discrimination involved in the imperial endeavour. “The hidden, shameful store of imperial horrors,” Paul Gilroy argues, “has been an unacknowledged presence in British political and cultural life during the second half of the twentieth century” (94). While Gilroy writes these horrors are “hidden” and “unacknowledged,” they are also a “presence” that is often briefly invoked, only to then be set aside. The result is a tension between the past

⁷ See for example Schacter 150–53.

as one would like to remember it, and the past as one knows it to have been. If Scott and later producers of guilt-ridden nostalgia seem split between criticising empire and exonerating individuals and certain values, it is a result of their attempt to cope with this knowledge in “aberrant” ways, so as to preserve a positive self-image.

It is not only filmmakers and novelists who navigate the tension between positive and negative accounts of the imperial past. One of Britain’s most prominent Conservative politicians, Boris Johnson, often celebrates the country’s imperial record.⁸ When he joined the Leave campaign in the lead-up to the Brexit referendum, he said he was confident in Britain’s ability to act alone, since “[w]e used to run the biggest empire the world has ever seen” (“Boris Johnson Exclusive”). Yet in his speech to the Conservative Party Conference on 2 October, 2016, Johnson reassured his listeners that he harbored no dreams of bringing back the Empire: “I am not going to pretend that this country is something we are not” (Conservative Party Conference). Reflecting on the colonial legacies of the foreign secretary’s office – “so dripping with guilt bling that it looks like something from the Kardashians” – he elaborated that “those days are gone forever, and that is a profoundly good thing. It is good for Britain and good for the world that in the last 60 years – in living memory – those responsibilities have been taken away.” Warding off accusations of imperial nostalgia, Johnson stressed his acceptance of Britain’s new role in the world, and his view that decolonisation has been “a good thing.”⁹

But even as Johnson distances himself from empire, he discusses it in positive terms. He invokes the “responsibilities” that have now “been taken away”; he makes the process of decolonisation sound like a peaceful and orderly one, where “we unbundled the British empire”; and although he alludes to the imperial violence of “the invasion or conquest of 178 countries,” he passes it off as a joke: “that is most of the members of the UN – not a point I

⁸ See, for instance, Johnson, “Cancel the Guilt Trip”.

⁹ Note that while Johnson’s speech suggests that there has been a radical break between the past and the present, Hirsch, Hall and Andrews argue that the effects of colonialism linger to this day.

majored on in New York at the UNGA,” just as the exploitation that enabled the gilded furnishing of his office is made light of with the reference to the excesses of the pop icons the Kardashians. While apparently happy to consign the Empire to the past, Johnson stresses the significant influence that Britain still exerts on the world stage, and ends by citing Churchill’s vision that “the empires of the future will be empires of the mind.” The imperial past thus occupies a complicated role in Johnson’s rhetoric. On the one hand, it is something to keep at arm’s length, so as not to be seen as backward-looking or unmindful of imperial wrongdoing. On the other, it is a source of light entertainment as well as pride. Remarkably, Johnson never quite pinpoints why it was a good thing for the Empire to have been “unbundled.” This vagueness allows him to suggest that he embraces the post-colonial world order, without having to condemn any part of the imperial “responsibilities” assumed in the past. Like the producers of literature and cinema discussed above, Johnson pays lip service to the notion that it is a “good thing” that the empire is gone, but preserves the idea that it was fundamentally a force for good. Like the consumers of those cultural products, Johnson’s audience is provided with a version of the past that allows them to congratulate themselves on a liberal self-image, while getting the emotional benefits of inheriting a glamorous past.

One final example of the rhetorical disowning of imperial wrongs amid a general rehabilitation of empire can be found in historian Niall Ferguson’s *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World*. Ferguson asserts that “[m]any charges can of course be levelled against the British Empire; they will not be dropped in what follows” (xx). However, drop them is largely what he does, focusing instead on his central argument, that “empire enhanced global welfare – in other words, was a Good Thing” (xx). Ferguson does not deny that the Empire had its problems, citing slavery, the Amritsar massacre and expropriation of the Matabele as some of them (xxiv). He just insists that they are outweighed by its contributions. As Elizabeth Buettner says: “‘Blemishes’ are briefly invoked to clear the decks

for Ferguson's unabashed emphasis on the positive side of Britain's imperial 'balance sheet'" (*Europe after Empire* 442, citing Ferguson, xxiv).¹⁰ This idea of a "balance sheet," of needing to take into account both positive and negative aspects of the imperial past, permeates Britain's commemorative culture, yielding a simultaneous condemnation and endorsement of empire.

Keeping the Balance

The question of balance also points to another way of tackling the disputed nature of the imperial past; namely to set up one's endorsement of empire as a corrective to a supposedly overly critical master narrative. Ferguson opens his book with the question "whether the Empire was a good or bad thing," arguing that "[i]t is nowadays quite conventional to think that, on balance, it was bad" (xii). But is Ferguson correct that the negative interpretation of empire has indeed become "conventional wisdom" (xiii)? As the 2014 poll cited by Andrews indicates, 59 % of respondents feel pride in the British Empire and only 19 % see it as a source of shame (Dahlgreen).¹¹ This hardly sustains the image of a general sentiment of empire critique against which a few people, such as Ferguson, are heroically battling. But for a scholar who wants to present himself as providing a scientific corrective to lazy assumptions, the rhetorical device is appealing. When Ferguson concludes that India "owes more than it is fashionable to acknowledge to British rule," he suggests that he is going against the stream of scholarly fads to provide a more accurate rendition of the past (358). This strategic claim-making relies on the idea of a conflict over memory and of Ferguson as

¹⁰ In a lambasting review of Ferguson's works, Indian author Pankaj Mishra also comments on his selective admission of imperial wrongs: "Frequently accused since *Empire* of underplaying the dark side of imperialism, Ferguson seems to have come up with a rhetorical strategy: to describe vividly one spectacular instance of brutality – he expends some moral indignation of his own on the slave trade – and then to use this exception to the general rule of imperial benevolence to absolve himself from admitting to the role of imperialism's structural violence in the making of the modern world" (Mishra)

¹¹ Howe cites a Gallup poll from 1997 with 70 % expressing personal pride in the imperial past ("Internal Decolonization?" 300).

working from a minority position. It serves to dismantle counter-arguments as simply “fashionable.” Saying he hopes to “enable the reader to decide,” Ferguson proposes that “conventional” historiography keeps empire’s “credit side” hidden from people, and that he is simply offering up the tools for independent decision making on a contested issue (xxiv–xxv).

The idea of a balance sheet works two levels. On the one hand, there is the question of the balance within a given representation, with Ferguson insisting that “on balance,” empire was more “good” than “bad.” On the other hand, there is the question of the wider field of representations of empire, where Ferguson suggests that the criticism of empire has now become hegemonic and oppressive and that he provides a refreshing and necessary counter-narrative. Ferguson’s argument depends on what Sara Ahmed has termed an “inflationary logic” which represents his viewpoint is as prohibited and inflates “the very power of the ‘whoever’ that is doing the prohibiting” (31). This inflationary logic establishes Ferguson as a minority and implies that *for that reason* he holds the moral upper hand.

To shed light on this discussion of commemorative balance, we can turn again to memory studies, where scholars have long studied the conflict that accompanies memory in the public sphere.¹² When speaking of “collective memory,” we should never assume that there is consensus on how the past ought to be remembered. Rather, different narratives vie for attention, and while one “master commemorative narrative” may gain the upper hand at one time, it may be challenged and replaced by “countermemories” favored by other groups.¹³ Often, however, the process is more complex than what the deceptively simple language of “master” and “countermemories” might suggest. Michael Rothberg warns against perceiving memory as a “zero-sum game,” and demonstrates that even memories which appear to be at odds may draw force from one another (11). In the case of British narratives

¹² See, for example, Cubitt 222–31; Gillis 5.

¹³ See Zerubavel 10–11.

about Empire, empire critics and empire apologists alike draw sustenance from the existence of a perceived “master narrative” against which they can present their version of history as a corrective, readjusting the “balance sheet.”

Thus, we saw Hirsch, Andrews and Hall arguing against a “master narrative” which is clearly not the empire-critical one that Ferguson presents as “conventional,” but rather one of “state-sponsored amnesia.” Employing a similar rhetoric of counter-memory yet with quite a different agenda, defenders of empire have come to position themselves as fighting equally one-eyed discourses. The very existence of narratives that are critical of the imperial past is used to set up nostalgia and empire endorsement as a marginalised position that offers a reasonable counterweight. While Rothberg insists that memory is not about “winners” and “losers,” many of those who participate in struggles over memory (including those cited by Rothberg himself) clearly imagine a competition between differing accounts. It is this perception that allows for arguments about the need to “keep the balance.”

The notion of memory competition informs the words of the creator of the television series *Indian Summers*, Paul Rutman. He comments on the way empire is remembered in Britain: “People on the right are quietly still terribly proud of it, while those on the left see it as a great source of shame. In the midst of that, there were ordinary people who went out there to try to make something of [themselves]” (qtd. in Jeffries). There is an interesting switch from present to past tense in Rutman’s sentence: now there are people on right and left, back then there were “ordinary people.” In other words, the problem for Rutman is the polarized way in which empire is remembered today, rather than the imperial past itself. In positing a left-right axis, Rutman suggests that both of those sides are too extreme, and that a pragmatic middle ground is somehow more fitting, thus implying that while one should not be “terribly proud” about the empire, neither should one feel ashamed about it. In his

discussion of “pride” or “shame,” furthermore, Rutman seems to imply a British people made up solely of those responsible for the colonial enterprise, ignoring those Britons whose families have been on the receiving end of colonialism.

Rutman’s remarks bear a striking resemblance to the words of another filmmaker, David Lean, from thirty years earlier. The director of the 1984 screen adaptation of E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* reflected on the changes he had made to the original: “Forster was a bit anti-English, anti-Raj and so on. I suppose it’s a tricky thing to say, but I’m not so much. I intend to keep the balance more. I don’t believe all the English were a lot of idiots” (David Lean, interviewed by Derek Malcolm in the *Guardian* on 23 January, 1984, qtd. in Rushdie 91). Like Rutman, Lean represents himself as seeking out the middle ground, and by implication, as painting a truer, more neutral picture of the empire. The accusation of bias creates a platform for Lean and Rutman to present their own nostalgic accounts as the more balanced ones. They foreground the existence of a conflict over imperial memory, but in their ostensible search for a middle ground, they come down in favour of a positive interpretation.

The accusation of bias against empire also found expression in the reception of an exhibition entitled “Power and the People” at the museum of the National Archives in Kew in 2009. The exhibition was criticized for providing a skewed version of history, with one display concluding that the impact of colonisation on the colonised was “profoundly oppressive” (qtd. in Leach). Historian Ashley Jackson argued that the exhibition failed to take into account the positive aspects of empire: “No matter how unpopular the view, it is a fact that certain subject peoples benefited materially from British rule – in terms of status, property ownership, and access to social and political goods” (qtd. in Leach). As he stresses the need to tell a story of the benefits delivered by empire, Jackson suggests that he is speaking against a political correctness that he perceives to be governing public discourse. When he says that it is an “unpopular” view, when director David Lean says it is “tricky” to

be in favour of a “balanced” account, and when Ferguson says his history differs from the “fashionable” and “conventional,” they imply that there is a true story of empire, facts that are being obscured and oppressed, and that their work redresses an imbalance in representation. The debate on empire is staged as one in which postcolonial criticism rules the day, and suppresses all attempts to account neutrally for empire as it really was. This is a convenient vehicle for couching empire celebration as a much-needed corrective to a misleading picture. Legitimation of empire is equipped with useful rhetorical tools when dressed up as subversive counter-memory.

Following Gilroy, we may argue that, in fact, these “correctives” are not the effort in counter-memory that they make themselves out to be, but actually represent the predominant narrative, a narrative that meets the challenge of confronting the horrors of the imperial past with “a chain of defensive argumentation” (Gilroy 94). Indeed, the polls cited above show that British opinion about empire tends to be favorable, and the words of black British commentators suggest that many still long for a public and popular recognition of imperial brutalities. Ferguson may be right insofar as contemporary historiography is generally critical of empire. But this critical line of thinking evidently has not yet won the day among a population where pride in empire is still widespread, especially among the older demographics.¹⁴ However, what interests me here is not so much whether there are more empire critics or celebrants out there, but rather the rhetorical guise that empire nostalgia takes on today. Here, it is significant that Ferguson and others represent themselves as the last defenders of a narrative that has been losing out. Using Rothberg’s concept of “multidirectional memory,” we can see that some of the same notions of fighting against oppressive narratives that have otherwise characterized the mobilization of colonized people

¹⁴ Elizabeth Buettner makes this distinction between academia and popular opinion (*Europe after Empire* 444). The YouGov survey found that while 48 % of 18-24-year-olds report feeling pride in the Empire, the figure is 65 % for those over 60 (Dahlgreen).

and more recently the calls for recognition of colonial crimes are now employed by defenders of empire.

Defending Britons, Defending Empire

One visitor to the National Archives exhibition complained that its critical representation of empire amounted to anti-Britishness. The exhibition, he argued, “seems to be rewriting history, ignoring crucial parts of the Empire and British history, and presenting a one-sided and anti-British view” (qtd. in Leach). In linking empire critique and anti-Britishness, he repeated an oft-made association. We find the same connection made by Lean when he says that Forster was “a bit anti-English.” These examples demonstrate that the debate about the imperial record is not only about the world “out there,” but also about metropolitan Britain itself.

Contemporary debates over the nature of empire are consistently related to questions of Britishness, and vice versa. In his condemnation of “Raj nostalgia,” Rushdie argued that the “refurbishment of the Empire’s tarnished image” came in response to the contemporary decline of Thatcher’s Britain: as the country’s real power diminished, delusions of grandeur abounded (91–92). Rushdie thus connected Britain’s present predicament to the romantic fascination of the imperial past. Margaret Thatcher herself, on celebrating the victory in the Falklands War, proclaimed that “this nation still has those sterling qualities which shine through our history.” Although drawing different conclusions from Rushdie, Thatcher drew on the same store of imperial memories to give symbolic meaning to present British actions. Today, scholars discussing the fragmentation of British identity, nationalist pressures in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and the country’s uncertain relationship to the EU, often make a similar connection between the crises faced by contemporary Britain and the

continued prominence of imperial memory.¹⁵ Whether they condemn or condone it, the memory of Empire seems to hold an exceptional explanatory power for those who discuss the state of Britishness today.

In these discussions, Hirsch observes, “‘British culture’ is perceived as something white.” In the 1980s, Rushdie pointed out that the celebration of empire in Thatcher’s Falklands speech was targeted only at part of the population: “I say white Britons because it’s clear that Mrs Thatcher wasn’t addressing the two million or so blacks, who don’t feel quite like that about the Empire. So even her use of the word ‘we’ was an act of racial exclusion” (Rushdie 131). Similarly, when Johnson says “[w]e used to run the biggest empire the world has ever seen,” he excludes those who did not “run” the empire, but who were being “run.” As shown above, there are a number of Britons who do not see the imperial past as a source of pride and entertainment. As argued by Hirsch, Hall and Andrews, it had catastrophic societal as well as personal consequences – consequences that are belittled and excluded in Johnson’s speech.

Because of the link between empire and a particular version of Britain, attacks on empire are often seen as attacks on Britain. Conversely, people may come to the defence of individual Britons engaged in imperial activities, and through them, grant the imperial enterprise a more sympathetic face. In this, they rely on another phenomenon of memory. Memories are particularly emotionally potent if they portray in detail the life and suffering of individuals, identifying them as mothers, brothers, people with dreams and aspirations, loving relationships and tragic losses. Through a focus on the intimate, the political context of the past can be downplayed.¹⁶ To set the stage for his narrative, Ferguson includes in his introduction a description of his many family members who spread across the globe to

¹⁵ See Howe, “Colonising and Exterminating?” 3–4; Kumar; Wilson 180–81. Placing empire and metropole within the same analytical frame has been important to “new imperial history” as well as postcolonial and cultural studies for the past few decades (Gilroy; MacKenzie; Said; Ward; Webster).

¹⁶ See for example Buettner, “Cemeteries, Public Memory and Raj Nostalgia”; De Mul; Harris; Rasch, chapter 6.

cultivate “virgin real estate,” practice medicine, teach, and set up businesses, sending home tales of “hard-won happiness” (xv). This humanizing of individual colonizers is characteristic of much representation of empire, and so is the emphasis on their hard work to uplift themselves and the societies in which they arrived.

Ferguson’s family story has nothing in the way of similarly humanizing stories of the people whose lives were touched by his family or by the empire they represented. They are entirely excluded from the picture, with the exception of this memory of his Kenyan childhood:

We had our bungalow, our maid, our smattering of Swahili – and our sense of unshakable security. It was a magical time, which indelibly impressed on my consciousness the sight of the hunting cheetah, the sound of Kikuyu women singing, the smell of the first rains and the taste of ripe mango. I suspect my mother was never happier.’ (xiv)

The maid and the Kikuyu women form part of the backdrop, together with the fauna and furniture, against which Ferguson’s consciousness and his mother’s happiness can be described. We hear nothing of who they were, or how their lives were disrupted by colonialism or by the brutal counter-insurgency campaign that ended the era Ferguson so nostalgically recalls.

In his description of his television series about the Raj, Paul Rutman suggests that he is seeking out a middle ground between the memories of empire of the right and left. That middle ground, in Rutman’s view, is represented by those past Britons who partook in the imperial endeavor. He seems to relieve them of individual responsibility of what shameful aspects of imperial history there might be, as they were merely “ordinary people,” pursuing the simple ambition of making a life for themselves. In distinguishing between the hotly contested memory of empire more broadly and the individual lives of “ordinary people,”

Rutman proposes that a depoliticized reading of empire might be possible, and that these people can be defended without necessarily taking sides in the debate about the imperial record. While the series itself gives substantial airplay to Indian grievances, Rutman's words betray the angle from which he is coming at the question. His "ordinary people" are colonizers who "went out there," not the ordinary colonized people who were already "there."

To a larger degree than *Victoria and Abdul*, *Indian Summers* foregrounds and takes seriously Indian anti-colonialism. It still revolves around the lives and concerns of the British at a hill station, but it does have a broader cast of Indian characters than the film, and gives some emotional depth to at least some of them. A review in *The Telegraph* suggested that the contemporary climate in Britain made the series dull: "The flaw of *Indian Summers* is that necessity, imposed by modern liberal sensibilities, requires the British characters to be perfectly ghastly, especially the male ones, who must exude imperial entitlement. The result is none is worth rooting for with the possible exception of the conflicted Alice," who is in love with Aafrin Dalal, the series's main Indian protagonist. This comment in itself speaks volumes to the struggle over the memory of empire in Britain. The reviewer does not exactly take issue with these "modern liberal sensibilities," but implies that they have been taken too far when they make for poor television because viewers cannot identify with the colonizers; that something was lost when "the burden of heroism rested with the Indian characters" (Rees).

It is significant that it is precisely Alice, with her intimate connection to Dalal, who is "worth rooting for." As a clerk in the British administration, Dalal grows disillusioned with British rule and joins the independence movement when he finds out that the wealthy Indian businessman Ramu Sood, though innocent, has been framed and hanged for murder. Despite its critical take on the racism of some of the British characters, the series still invites its

viewers to sympathise with those Britons, like Alice, whose “color-blindness” and burning sense of the injustice of colonial rule places them on the right side of history. It even, and highly improbably, inserts several Britons at the centre of the Indian independence movement. The ashes of the executed Sood are stolen by his close friend, the likable Scotsman Ian McLeod. While a British officer tries to disperse the crowd, McLeod leads a subversive memorial service by spreading his ashes and saying, “Here lies Ramu Sood. I was proud to work for you as your employee. I was proud to call you my friend. Hanged by the district court for a murder he never committed ‘cause he was too damn good!” (Rutman season 1, episode 10). The deceased man’s mother kisses McLeod’s feet to his protests and the crowd lifts him up. Also present at the funeral service is Alice, urging McLeod to speak. These two characters, respectively the close friend and the lover of Indian characters, embody the idea that personal relationships are stronger than racial and political divides. While the series holds up colonialism for critical scrutiny, and while Indian characters are to some extent represented as self-actualizing individuals, it maintains the idea that the real Britons, that is, those whom we are invited to identify with, were really not that bad after all.

The defence of the humanity and good intentions of imperial actors extends beyond “ordinary people” to the very head of Empire, as we see in *Victoria and Abdul*. The film gives Queen Victoria a familiar and sympathetic face, as well as a personal relationship to an Indian man. As in *Indian Summers*, the dramatic gaze does not distribute subjectivity evenly in this relationship. While the queen goes through developments as a character (we see her depressed, happy, angry, disappointed), Karim remains entirely flat: he emerges onto the stage full of reverence for the Queen, and ends sitting by her statue next to the Taj Mahal where we gather that he now goes every day, greeting her effigy by kissing its feet, just as he did when he first met her. The Indian author of the book on which the film is based, Shrabani Basu, insists that she “can’t stand” Raj nostalgia, and that telling Abdul Karim’s story is

about recovering a history that the British have been “trying to erase” (Samuelson). However, in the film, Karim functions mainly as the stereotypical “loyal servant” through which the film can pay homage to the Queen and absolve her of guilt for the injustices of empire.

The film invites audiences to indulge in a fantasy of empire as benevolent and filled with meaningful and intimate relations that cut across racial divides. Both the racism of the members of the royal court and the anti-colonialism of Mohammed come across as less noble than the pure and intuitive friendship between Karim and the Queen. “Why can’t we all just get along?” the film seems to be asking. In this close friendship, both parties are comfortable in their roles: the Queen constantly reminds people around her that she is the queen, while Karim seems entirely content, even honored, with his position as her servant, always referring to her as “my Queen” and “the Empress of India.” Thus, the film suggests that a friendship that surpassed the apparently petty politics of racism and anti-colonialism was possible, and that in such a friendship, colonizer and colonized would happily accept their roles.

Although as far from an “ordinary person” as it is possible to be, the Queen is humanized and portrayed as helpless to change the nature of a system that was prejudiced against Indians. Rather than complicit in the imperial enterprise, the Empress of India is surprised when she hears about the wanton destruction of British soldiers: “But, this is terrible!” she exclaims when Karim tells her, in his only critical remark, that “[t]hey’re always smashing things up. The British soldiers have taken the jewels of the Taj Mahal.” When the Prime Minister informs her of the decision to annex Zululand, she retorts “whatever for?!” The monarch thus comes across as blameless, at worst under-informed, about the actions carried out in her name.

Taken together, the upshot of all this cultural production is that blame for the racism, violence and exploitation of imperialism resides nowhere. With both “ordinary people” and the head of empire exonerated, any residual guilt is left with a faceless system and a few “bad

apples,”¹⁷ with whom audiences are rarely asked to identify. Through the defence of individual actors in the imperial system, empire itself is defended in a seemingly depoliticized fashion, but with highly political implications.

Conclusion

In contemporary Britain, the celebration of empire does not happen *in spite of* but *through* an engagement with the criticism of empire. Johnson’s Churchillian vision of “empires of the mind” seems less anachronistic because he says that he is happy that empire has been “unbundled.” Ferguson’s positive version of imperial history is strengthened by his self-representation as a brave fighter against an unthinking dogma. And the nostalgic images of empire in recent cinema are made more palatable through their acknowledgement of anti-colonialism. Rather than muting criticism of empire, its defenders use that criticism against itself, to blunt its power.

Throughout this paper, “celebration,” “defence,” and “nostalgia” for empire have been used interchangeably. By way of conclusion, it is worth considering the relation between these related terms. Nostalgia refers to the longing for a different time or place, implying a sense of regret or a wish to return that we do not necessarily find in the celebration or defence of something.¹⁸ While nostalgia’s “distinctive rhetorical signature” is the *contrast* between “good past/bad present” (Davis 15–16), while in celebrating or defending the past, one may actually stress its *continuation* in the present. Central to all three, however, is the positive evaluation of that which went before, in this case the British Empire. Because of the close relationship between memory and identity, and between empire and Britain, such an endorsement of empire can serve to prop up British self-confidence in the present. Thus, defending and celebrating empire need not entail a wish to return to an imperial world order,

¹⁷ The expression is Buettner’s (“Setting the Record Straight” 99–100).

¹⁸ See Walder 9.

but may simply be a way to maintain a positive self-image in the present. At a time when Britishness is felt to be threatened by internal and external forces (such as the breakup of Britain, immigration, and the EU), the memory of empire may provide the solace of continuity with a past that offers glamorous and heroic mirrors for the present.

Because the memory of empire in contemporary Britain is so hotly contested, propagating a positive view of it will often entail defending it against a perceived onslaught of critical discourse. Consequently, the struggles over the meaning of empire are often brought to the foreground in contemporary memory practices. Whether people mix their endorsement of empire with an acknowledgement of imperial wrongs, whether they insist on keeping the balance against a critical “master narrative,” or whether they defend individual imperial actors, they all register their awareness that the memory of empire is disputed. Criticism of the imperial past is not suppressed, but rather employed as the rhetorical springboard for the affirmation that empire was, despite its detractors, “a Good Thing” (Ferguson xx).

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