



THE COMMON ROOM

## Unravelling Britishness

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### Abstract

This piece follows Stuart Ward's *Untied Kingdom* as it traverses a collapsing British Empire and an increasingly disunited United Kingdom to tell the complex history of Britishness in retreat across the world, mainly between 1945 and the early twenty-first century. It reviews some of the shifting meanings of Britishness that Ward charts in different contexts, different territories and at different moments in this history and the dwindling resonance of Britishness almost everywhere. It reviews other main themes that thread through the book: language, migration, race, belonging and unbelonging, nationalism, violence, and the impact of imperialism and colonialism on cultures, societies and mindsets.

**Keywords:** Britishness; imperialism; Englishness; archives; nationalism

The Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953 marked a high point in the narrative of the British Commonwealth – after 1948 increasingly called simply ‘the Commonwealth’. There was considerable success in associating it with modernity, youth and optimism, particularly through the figure of a glamorous young Queen and through the timing of the news that Commonwealth men had reached the summit of Everest which appeared in the press on Coronation morning. Stories showed the movement of people, loyal addresses and gifts from Empire and Commonwealth to London and then a reverse movement in November 1953 when Elizabeth II began a six-month tour of the Empire/Commonwealth and became the first reigning monarch to set foot in Australia and New Zealand. Scenes of cheering crowds in London in June 1953 were succeeded by scenes of cheering crowds in Bermuda, Jamaica, Fiji, Tonga and New Zealand in November and December and then, in 1954, by cheering crowds in Australia and countries in South Asia, Africa and the Mediterranean. The Commonwealth promised to maintain Britishness as a global identity through transforming and modernising its imperial dimension.

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By the time that Elizabeth II was succeeded by her son, Charles III, most of this was gone. At the Coronation in May 2023, the highly rehearsed ceremony in Westminster Abbey remained. Troops and dignitaries from across the Commonwealth were present and the flags of every Commonwealth nation. People from the United Kingdom who participated in the ceremony were of diverse ethnicities and religions. But since 1953, the Union Jack had been lowered in independence ceremonies in Asia, Africa and the Caribbean and the new flags of independent nations raised. Some had opted to become republics and more announced their intention to do so during Coronation week. Many nations in the Commonwealth had acquired new flags, new names, new national anthems and other national symbols to replace those associated with Britishness. New national histories had been written. In 2023, it was no longer possible to produce an image of rejoicing in a worldwide Commonwealth. Britishness had lost its charm across the world.

In his new book, *Untied Kingdom*, Stuart Ward sets out the history that produced these contrasting Coronations – the history of the end of the British Empire – tracing this history in all its complexity and contradictory impulses at different moments. His focus is on the retreat of Britishness as ‘a credible marker of globally resonant values, beliefs, history, culture, ethnicity and civic identity’, mainly in the period from 1945 to the early twenty-first century. At the heart of the book is the question of whether the end of the British Empire produced a climate in which Britishness lost its charm across the United Kingdom as well as across the Commonwealth. The book’s subtitle, *A Global History of the End of Britain*, indicates the main argument. The end of Empire was integral to the process through which Britishness ceased to be a unifying identity for the peoples of Scotland, Wales and England (it had never been a unifying identity for the people of Northern Ireland). The disenchantment with Britishness indicated by the rise of Scottish and Welsh nationalism has to be set in this context – the dismantling of Britishness across the world – to be fully understood. Britishness is now history in the former Empire: even if pockets of British sentiment survive, they don’t amount to very much and unfinished business is mainly confined to Gibraltar and the Falklands/Malvinas. The break-up of Britain is also unfinished business, but Ward argues that it is well advanced.

The term ‘Commonwealth’ was increasingly used for the British Empire during the Second World War, often ‘British Commonwealth of Nations’. This shift was meant to emphasise a British world of progress, welfare and development as opposed to an imperialism of domination, militarism and conquest. In the aftermath of war, ‘don’t mention the Empire’ became a watchword, but the language of Empire and Commonwealth became extraordinarily varied and confused. At least in part this was because negotiations of a new vocabulary in a Commonwealth that was quickly extended to include Ceylon, India and Pakistan were often secret, so that many people remained ignorant of the labels they were supposed to be using or avoiding. Confusion was compounded by the fact that in these negotiations, no agreement could be reached about the name of the organisation to which they all belonged. The disagreement turned on the term ‘British’. India would have nothing to do with this term

and did not want any part in an organisation that was described by it. The Indian government was prepared to join the Commonwealth only as a republic and only if 'British' was excluded from the name. Australia and New Zealand, who were not consulted, wanted to keep 'British'. The British government was prepared to lose 'British' if that ensured that India joined the Commonwealth. In the end, what people called the organisation to which they all belonged was left as a matter of individual preference and choice. 'British' became optional.

This negotiation about names is one of the 'little deaths' of 'Britain-in-the-world' that Ward charts in six central chapters of his book. Race is a central feature of many episodes in this history of 'little deaths' and *Untied Kingdom* provides an absorbing account of the varied fates of Britishness within different white racial communities. The negotiations over names suggested that notions of white racial prestige and superiority remained deeply embedded in these communities. In Australia and New Zealand, Britishness remained a key allegiance in the aftermath of war when both governments continued to operate immigration policies designed to keep out people of colour and to encourage (and fund) the entry of white Britons. In Rhodesia, the white racial community rebelled against the British government, declaring their independence from Britain and casting themselves as the true representatives of values that Britain had betrayed. In South Africa, the rise of anti-British Afrikaner nationalism to political ascendancy brought a government intent on the introduction of apartheid and a break with British connections. These policies cast the minority English-speaking population adrift, many of them reluctant to lose the benefits and privileges of the white population by making common cause with people of colour against apartheid.

The idea of the Commonwealth obscured the slavery, violence, atrocities and exploitation embedded in Britain's imperial history. The British narrative of a transition to Commonwealth presented this as an 'orderly withdrawal' from Empire – the final fulfilment of a British mission to prepare colonies for independence, and a gift graciously bestowed by the British. Ward highlights British violence in Kenya through a chapter on a 'little death' which begins with a cameo about Queen Elizabeth – one of the cameos at the beginning of each chapter that engage the reader with stories of individuals or groups caught up in the retreat of Britishness. Elizabeth was gifted a home in Kenya by the Kenyan colonial government but spent only two nights there, her visit cut short by the news of her father's death and her accession to the throne. By the time of her Coronation, there was ongoing colonial war in Kenya, and she never stayed in her home there again. Ward juxtaposes the story of the home she had vacated with the media narrative of colonial war, one in which the homes of white British settlers were under siege. As a place violated by insurgents, where British settlers were murdered, 'home' was stripped of its associations with domestic order and pleasures. Through its focus on black violence against white, this narrative distracted attention from British violence and brutal repression of the insurgency, but Ward brings to light considerable unease in the British media about British brutality. It is notable that the army, sent in to quell black insurgency in Kenya in the 1950s, was not sent to quell white rebels in Rhodesia, after their declaration of independence.

Australian migrants and visitors making the journey from Australia to Britain sometimes thought of arrival at a place thousands of miles away that they had never seen before as 'going home'. But in the post-1945 period, 'Commonwealth immigrants' were not associated with Australians or other white Commonwealth migrants but with black and Asian people arriving in Britain who were rarely viewed as internal migrants moving within a common British world from one part of the Empire/Commonwealth to another. 'Home' recurs as a key term in the histories of migration to Britain traced in *Untied Kingdom*. Caribbean migrants discovered an unhomely place when they were often expecting a motherland. Unbelonging is perhaps the most common theme in their accounts of experiences of Britain. Those who had thought of themselves as British in Caribbean colonies encountered a place where there was little acknowledgement of the long history that connected them to Britain and recast their identities in different ways including a shift to an identity as West Indian.

Belonging and unbelonging is a theme that runs through *Untied Kingdom*, developed particularly through discussion of Commonwealth Immigrants Acts from 1962 and through the stories of Caribbean and Kenyan Asian migration to Britain. In Australia and New Zealand, immigration policies designed to keep out people of colour were justified as preserving the 'British character' of their societies. The 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act in Britain was designed for the same purpose, one that was made explicit only in memoranda by government ministers. The 1968 Commonwealth Immigrants Act was more explicit through its patriality clause which permitted entry only to those with a parent or grandparent born in the United Kingdom – a requirement that many white people in the Commonwealth could meet but few people of colour. Ward brings the theme of unbelonging vividly to life in a cameo on Ranjanbala Vaid, a Kenyan Asian woman who arrived at Heathrow airport to join her brother in London but was refused entry under the terms of the 1968 Act. Over nine days, she shuttled between a range of airports on flights that took her to Germany, Switzerland, South Africa and Kenya – to some of these destinations several times. She was refused entry at all airports. It was only because of the media publicity attracted by her journey that she was finally granted entry to Britain.

Historians have neglected the part played by the end of the British Empire in the rise of nationalism in Scotland and Wales and in violent conflict in Northern Ireland. Ward fills in some of the gaps and silences. In Northern Ireland, he argues, nationalists were emboldened by the loss of British power and anticolonial struggles in other parts of the world which gave legitimacy to their cause. At the same time, Britain's retreat from long-standing commitments in the world unnerved Ulster unionists. Would they be next? Would Britain betray and abandon their kith and kin in Northern Ireland as they had abandoned them in Rhodesia? In Scotland and Wales, Ward sets the claims to independence made by Scottish and Welsh nationalists in the wider perspective of the dismantling of Britishness across the world. The mounting evidence that Britishness had lost its charm, that its economy had declined and its military withdrawn, that its power and prestige had

diminished along with its role on the global stage – these developments, he argues, fostered nationalism in Scotland and Wales and the desire to uncouple from a British identity.

Ward notes a shift to the language of Englishness by those who opposed the arrival of Kenyan Asian migrants – an Englishness identified as increasingly embattled and threatened. In Leicester where many of the early arrivals settled, this language was prominent in letters written to the *Leicester Mercury*, a regional paper with a large circulation, where letter-writers gave vent to their feelings on the fate of the native-born Englishman (never woman) who would be ‘a second-class citizen in an Afro-Asian community’, with immigrants given priority over him in all things. One letter-writer asserted that ‘our only hope lies in forming an English Nationalist party’.

The term ‘English nationalism’ makes no appearance in *Untied Kingdom*, and England and Englishness are largely missing from the account of Scottish and Welsh nationalism. What was the response to them from England and what was their response to English nationalism? The terms ‘England’ and ‘Britain’ are often used interchangeably by the English and in Anglocentric (sometimes London-centric) versions of British history. Ward comments that this elision did not extend to the British Empire which was never named ‘English’ – his book pays close attention to questions of language. The elision did not extend either to the ‘Global Britain’ slogan that the Conservative government came up with in the wake of Brexit in an attempt to refurbish the idea of Britain’s global role. Ward offers a wonderfully comprehensive account of the many polls and referenda held across the Commonwealth and the United Kingdom to settle questions about Britishness – usually with outcomes that were far from decisive. But polls which showed that people in England were more likely to identify as British than people elsewhere in the United Kingdom are missing. So is the question of why, unlike the populations of Scotland and Wales, there was no referendum asking the population of England whether they wanted a devolved assembly or independence. English dominance in the Union – geographically larger and with a much larger population, but with a wide range of internal regional differences and considerable London exceptionalism – is also missing. The very wide variety of hybrid and multiple identities evident in the histories of British imperialism and of migration within the British Empire/Commonwealth are neglected.

To write *Untied Kingdom*, Ward went on a tour of the former Empire that resembled Queen Elizabeth’s tour of the Empire/Commonwealth after her Coronation. His purpose was very different: to visit archives and libraries. In many National Archives across the former Empire, writing by elite and powerful white men (often with fancy titles) has piled up, carefully preserved. By comparison, writing by people of colour is thin on the ground – most of it by men. Ward went outside National Archives to retrieve their writing from a wide range of documentary records and newspapers. Among these is the prison writing of the Reverend Ndabaningi Sithole who was one of the founders of the Zimbabwe African National Union – a breakaway movement from the Zimbabwe African People’s Union. Writing by women of colour remains elusive, and it would be impossible to know anything about the story of

Ranjanbala Vaid's nightmare journey without the newspaper and other press sources that Ward carefully pieces together – in which *Time* called her a 'girl'. There needs to be acknowledgement of the wide range of work that has drawn on oral history to retrieve a range of voices, including those of women involved in the Zimbabwe African National Union and the Zimbabwe African People's Union.

In a shortish piece, it is impossible to do justice to the complexities of the global history traced in *Untied Kingdom*. Vivid in detail, bold in scope and exhaustively researched to cover a vast topic across vast territory, this is a must-read for all those interested in the multiple meanings of Britishness in different territories and different contexts at different moments, and in the histories of imperialism, decolonisation and their impact on cultures, societies and mindsets. It is a landmark study for the history of post-war Britain.