

End of Empire and the English Novel Since 1945

Ed. Rachael Gilmour and Bill Schwarz

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Reviewed by Nick Bentley, Keele University

As Salman Rushdie has noted, E.P. Thomson once said that England was the last colony of the British Empire (130). The effects of decolonization during the period after the Second World War clearly had major ramifications on those areas of the world that had previously been under British rule, but it also had profound effects in Britain, both materially and in the collective imagination, if such a thing can be said to still exist. The necessity of coming to terms with the loss of status as a central world power, the diminishing role of Britain in international politics, along with changing social and cultural situations at home and the development, through the immigration of peoples from previous colonies, of the multicultural and pluralized ethnic identities in Britain, have all contributed to this sense of a (post)colonial England. *End of Empire and the English Novel Since 1945* is a collection of essays that address the way in which fiction engages with the processes of the dismantling of empire in the period after the war, as well as the lingering nostalgia for a lost imperial past in some of the writers covered.

Bill Schwarz's Introduction sets out the parameters of the book in its aim to shift the emphasis in postcolonial literary studies away from the focus on "black British" and second-generation writers such as Salman Rushdie, Hanif Kureishi and Zadie Smith to those novelists of the period who occupy the "parochial" literary imagination of the mainstream English. The book also rejects those writers who were brought up in colonial contexts and "returned" to England such as Doris Lessing, Colin MacInnes and Jean Rhys. This focus on location as the basis for the construction of national identity in fiction is problematic, but is understandable in the book's attempt to identify a group of writers who engage with empire but have often been overlooked as commentators because of their apparent centrality to Englishness. Schwarz's knowledge of the subject is revealed in the wide-ranging critical introduction he provides and the readings he offers of some central writers, including Anthony Burgess and Paul Scott, whose engagements with the colonial context reveal many of the complexities, anxieties and tensions of the period.

The first main chapter by Patrick Parrinder explores the way in which dystopian, speculative and science fiction can be seen to be engaging with issues of decolonization through the imaginative displacement of present concerns onto futuristic landscapes. His discussion begins by looking at the way in which George Orwell's dystopic vision of a future England reveals some of the anxieties surrounding Britain's loss of power in the postwar world. As he argues,

“*Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a story not just of ideological tyranny but of national humiliation and defeat” (39). In other writers of the period this crisis of national identity is registered in the move to provincial settings, for example in the work of William Cooper, and in a discourse of anti-Americanization that was a staple of much New Left writing. In this context he explores the science fiction of John Wyndham and Arthur C. Clarke. He goes on to discuss the way in which Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh also come to terms with Britain’s loss of power in novels that contain an implicit anti-American feeling such as *The Loved One* (1948) and *The Quiet American* (1955).

In the next chapter, Cora Kaplan discusses the crime novelist Josephine Tey and her influence on later women’s crime novelists such as Ruth Rendell. In particular she traces the way in which the “effects of empire” are represented in Tey’s *The Franchise Affair* (1948) and Rendell’s *Simisola* (1995), the latter of which Kaplan shows to be influenced by earlier female crime fiction and Tey in particular. Richard Steadman-Jones discusses the once popular John Masters’s novel-sequence concerning the Savage family. This series of novels traces the family’s involvement in significant historical events and contexts in the history of imperial engagement in India, such as *Nightrunners of Benghal* (1951), which is centred on the events surrounding the 1957 Indian Mutiny. Steadman-Jones examines the way in which Masters’s conservative politics results in the novels’ tendency to overlook the ideological aspects of Britain’s involvement in India, preferring to concentrate on narratives of personal crises and relationships that focus on personal moral struggles. In this, Steadman-Jones traces the influence of E.M. Forster on Masters’s fiction.

In Chapter 4, Rachael Gilmour explores the negotiation of Englishness in the fiction of William Golding, emphasizing that the claim to universality in his writing has often obscured his engagement with culturally-specific notions of empire. She argues convincingly that Golding’s work “combines a clear sighted critique of imperialism’s status in the English psyche with a deep investment in a historically rooted, unique and apparently homogeneous Englishness which is not separated from its imperialist origins” (96). She pursues this argument in detailed readings of two sets of Golding’s fiction, one from the 1950s and the second from the late 1970s and 1980s. Deborah Philips takes a similar de-universalizing approach to popular romance fiction in which she traces the presence of empire narratives. She identifies the penchant for the “exotic novel” within the Mills and Boon series, which tend to locate in countries that were previous British colonies. As Philips notes, the heroine in these novels is almost always “an ideal of English femininity” (117) who then encounters a hero of the colony, but not a “native” of the region. This argument is pursued through a close reading of Kathryn Blair’s *The House at Tegwani* (1950), in which a white English woman tames the “primitive masculinity” of a white South African and who “together are seen to represent the benign and progressive future for South Africa” (119). Tellingly, however, there are few black characters in this narrative of

imperial harmony. Philips goes on to trace the particular imperial ideologies and blind spots in a number of romance novels set in Africa.

In the following chapter, Michael Ross looks at William Boyd's *A Good Man in Africa* (1981) and *Armadillo* (1998). He identifies the way in which Boyd's comedy often resides in the inability of the British in postcolonial locations to recognize the "loss of hegemony" that decolonization has precipitated. In this context, Ross makes reference to Paul Gilroy's theory of "postcolonial melancholy" as a feature of the British psyche in the postwar period, although he stresses that Gilroy's model is not the only thing going on in "the diverse array of Boyd's melacholics" (135). Huw Marsh offers a reading of Penelope Lively's *Moon Tiger* (1987) that extends the critical reception beyond the formal experiments of Lively's novel to identify the way in which it speaks to its historical moment, utilizing a theoretical framework that draws, critically, on Linda Hutcheon's notion of historiographic metafiction. Travel writing from D.H. Lawrence to Tim Parks is the subject of Suzanne Hobson's chapter. The discussion is divided into two sections, the first on how differing attitudes to the empire can be tracked in readings of Lawrence's writing from the 1950s onwards; the second on how, for Tim Parks, "Lawrence offers a model of ambivalent attachment to Englishness" (167).

Sarah Brophy shifts the theoretical focus on narratives of empire to discuss the place of queer theory in relation to a reading of Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*. James Proctor looks at Pat Barker and David Peace as two contemporary writers who produce novels that combine the English regional with narratives of empire and postcolonialism. In this context, he produces perceptive readings of Barker's *Union Street* (1982) and Peace's "Red Riding Quartet" (1999-2002). The last main chapter is David Alderson's "*Saturday's Enlightenment*," which offers a critique of Ian McEwan's 2005 novel. Alderson argues that despite the novel's complexities of narrative distance and political positioning, the novel reveals tacit support of the wars with Iraq and Afghanistan that is representative of a shift in some quarters of left-liberal thinking in the early and mid-2000s. He also identifies the way in which McEwan posits an idealisation of the (heterosexual) family, against which a metaphors of external threat symbolizes the 9/11 attacks on America, and an implicit critique of the anti-War demonstrations which form an important part of the novel. Alderson argues convincingly that the novel's "set of events loosely strung together" reveals this metaphorical association through "a symbolic logic of substitution and concretisation" (232).

The book closes with an afterword from Elleke Boehmer which addresses the question: "To what extent and in what ways has the English novel satisfactorily contended with empire?" (238). She argues that the essays revealed in the book show that the postwar British novel has "captured in a range of morbid symptoms, or sensed as [...] distress, unease, unsettlement" a prolonged engagement with empire, and that "the centre is shown to be striated by its margins, just as the margins have been by the centre" (240). Boehmer's afterword supplies

a fitting set of reflections and observations to a book that problematizes problematizing in interesting ways the range of approaches and engagements with discourses of empire and its end in the postwar period identified in a range of writers and genres that have previously been thought to be restricted to traditional and nostalgic notions of Englishness.

Works Cited

Rushdie, Salman. "The New Empire within Britain." *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981-1991*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992. 129-38. Print.