

Postwar Literature and Postcolonial Studies

Graham MacPhee

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In their introduction to *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World*, Catherine Hall and Sonya Rose suggest that “Britain’s imperial role and its presence within the metropole shaped peoples’ identities as Britons and informed their practical, daily activities” (22). Yet they, and the scholars who contribute to the collection, acknowledge the difficulty of identifying these presences. As Graham MacPhee argues in his most recent book *Postwar British Literature and Postcolonial Studies*, tracing the presence of empire in metropolitan culture “requires a sensitivity to the displaced and often submerged ways in which this [colonial] legacy informs conceptions of individual and collective identity.” This sense of displacement is traced by MacPhee, whose book is concerned with the ways in which the literature and culture of the postwar period “is informed by and responds to colonisation, decolonisation, and Britain’s subsequent global role” (3).

Postwar Literature and Postcolonial Studies is divided into three distinct yet complementary chapters, each examining a different aspect of empire’s legacy. Chapter 1, “Rethinking the End of Empire,” looks at decolonisation and seeks to complicate the ways in which this process has often been mapped. The legacy of empire, MacPhee argues, is evident in Britain well beyond the convenient watersheds of Indian independence and the 1956 Suez debacle, and the intellectual responses to it were more complex than has often been suggested. MacPhee’s reading of the Indian novelist Mulk Raj Anand’s memoirs, for example, allows him to open up some of the uncertainties and inconsistencies in the responses to empire of canonical figures such as T.S. Eliot, E.M. Forster and Leonard Woolf. In the discussion which follows, MacPhee examines the ways in which postwar literature engages both with the changing makeup of metropolitan culture brought about by immigration and with the shifting dynamics of global hegemony, principally the emergence of the United States as the global superpower. Readings of work by writers of the Caribbean diaspora—George Lamming, Samuel Selvon, Louise Bennett—and of white British writers—George Orwell, Graham Greene, Philip Larkin—inform a discussion of the period until the early 1970s when the Sterling Area began to break down and British forces were withdrawn from the Arabian Gulf.

In Chapter 2, “Decolonising the Discipline,” MacPhee turns his attention to the discipline of postcolonial studies itself, and in particular

the relationship between the national and the global. An attentive discussion of Raymond Williams's 1958 essay "Culture is Ordinary" draws out the way in which, in its earlier incarnation at least, Williams's British Cultural Studies tended to elide not only the role of empire but also the fragmentation underlying a metropolitan culture seen by Williams as cohesive. Yet, MacPhee does not view fragmentation as in itself liberatory and goes on to problematise the work of important figures in postcolonial studies such as Stuart Hall and Homi K. Bhabha. MacPhee is adept at creating dialogue between texts, using each to illuminate the other, and his use of Frantz Fanon to introduce a stronger sense of the experiential into Hall's semiotic reading of 'race' is particularly well worked. The section concludes with a discussion of globalisation and the role of 'national literature'—and nationalism—within a transnational perspective.

In the final section, MacPhee reads a selection of post-war poetry, drama and fiction in light of the ideas and arguments outlined in the preceding chapters. As he suggests in his introductory comments, these readings again challenge categorisations that eschew complexity in favour of neatness. His reading of Samuel Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), for example, discusses the novel not only in terms of its important depiction of the immigrant experience, but also in terms of wider atomisation in British society. MacPhee suggests that the racism experienced by Selvon's characters is not simply the response of "a homogenous community responding to outsiders for the first time," but rather "a function of the disintegrative structuring of social experience that held out the promise of 'community' built on the aggressive exclusion of a visibly conspicuous 'enemy within'" (127). The idea of the "enemy within" is a conscious reference to Enoch Powell's 1970 speech of the same name, which, MacPhee argues, is both anticipated and challenged in Selvon's novel. While less famous than his notorious 1968 "Rivers of Blood" speech, Powell's idea of an "Enemy Within" is in turn identified by MacPhee as an important touchstone in the development of Thatcherism, and particularly in Thatcher's identification of a nexus of domestic enemies, which crossed boundaries of 'race,' class and nation. A similarly expansive sense of history is evident in MacPhee's discussion of Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* (2005). MacPhee scrutinises readings of the novel that view the journey of its narrator, Najwar, as indicative either of secure and unproblematic integration into the nation or of continued alienation due to an irresolvable 'clash of civilisations.' A critique of the category 'post-9/11 literature' runs through the final pages of the book and, as with his opening discussion of Suez and the end of empire, MacPhee is justifiably wary of identifying too neat a delineation between 'then' and 'now.'

MacPhee's closing comments juxtapose Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2005) and Andrea Levy's *Small Island* (2004), contrasting the misguided empiricism of the former with the more firmly historicised and complex revisionism of the latter. This pairing does not immediately suggest parallels, but in bringing these novels together MacPhee identifies two

quite different attitudes towards the past, and perhaps two quite different directions for contemporary British literature. It is only in these concluding pages that the argument feels somewhat squeezed, as if MacPhee is exploring new directions just as the book ends. But this is perhaps the point: *Postwar British Literature and Postcolonial Studies* suggests many fruitful ways in which one can read the intersections between empire's legacy and post-war British literature, opening up territory for future studies.

Work Cited

Hall, Catherine and Sonya O. Rose, ed. *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006. Print.