

## **There'll always be an England : representations of colonial wars and immigration, 1948-68**

“In Malaya,” the Daily Mail noted in 1953, “three and a half years of danger have given the planters time to convert their previously pleasant homes into miniature fortresses, with sandbag parapets, wire entanglements, and searchlights.”<sup>1</sup> The image of the home as fortress and a juxtaposition of the domestic with menace and terror were central to British media representations of colonial wars in Malaya and Kenya in the 1950s. The repertoire of imagery deployed in the Daily Mail for the “miniature fortress” in Malaya was extended to Kenya, where the newspaper noted wire over domestic windows, guns beside wine glasses, the charming hostess in her black silk dress with “an automatic pistol hanging at her hip.” Such images of English domesticity threatened by an alien other were also central to immigration discourse in the 1950s and 1960s. In the context of the decline of British colonial rule after 1945, representations of the empire and its legacy – resistance to colonial rule in empire and “immigrants” in the metropolis -- increasingly converged on a common theme: the violation of domestic sanctuaries.

Colonial wars of the late 1940s and 1950s have received little attention in literatures on national identity in early post-war Britain, but the articulation of racial difference through immigration discourse, and its significance in redefining the post-imperial British national community has been widely recognised.<sup>2</sup> As Chris Waters has suggested in his work on discourses of race and nation between 1947 and 1963, these years saw questions of race become central to questions of national belonging. Waters explores the race relations literature of this period to review the ways in which the idea of a “little England” was used against a black migrant “other” who was

identified as a “dark stranger.”<sup>3</sup> The myth of “little England,” as he notes, can be traced back to the Edwardian period, when it was often used as an anti-imperial image. It was in the context of anxieties about national weakness, provoked by the Anglo-Boer war (1899-1902), that G. K. Chesterton, in a symposium of papers by the Patriots’ Club, advocated a return to “our ancient interest in England” as opposed to “our quite modern and quite frivolous interest in everywhere else,” in tracing the “error in our recent South African politics.”<sup>4</sup> As Alison Light’s work has shown, the imagery of “little England” was further developed in the inter-war period, when national identity was increasingly domesticated, emphasising hearth, home, and herbaceous border.<sup>5</sup> After 1945, Waters argues, this version of nation was reworked against the migrant other – “an other perceived as a ‘stranger’ to those customs and conventions taken to be at the heart of Britishness itself.”<sup>6</sup>

Bill Schwarz’s work also explores what he calls a “re-racialisation” of England in the late 1950s and early 1960s, but his focus is on the impact of decolonisation on the metropolis and, in reviewing the history of white settler communities in empire, he is concerned to trace a range of connections between empire and “home.”<sup>7</sup> One connection is what he describes as “a battle between two irreconcilable Englands,” exemplified most starkly by Ian Smith’s unilateral declaration of independence in Rhodesia in 1965. But another is the convergence of the language of white settler communities in empire and white opponents of immigration in the metropolis, as both identified themselves as beleaguered, vulnerable, and embattled: “With immigration, the colonial frontier came ‘home.’ When this happened, the language of the colonies was reworked and came with it ... two inter-related sentiments slowly cohered, unevenly and partially. First, whites were

coming to imagine themselves as historic victims; and second – commensurably – blacks were believed to be acquiring a status of supremacy.”<sup>8</sup>

While literatures on national identity have focused on questions of race, literatures on gender and sexuality have noted the pervasive anxieties about white masculinity in this period. Such anxieties manifested themselves in various forms. A preoccupation with the new “home-centred” working-class man expressed concern that he was becoming apolitical, with declining participation in public life of all kinds, whether in trade unions or public houses. The intense homophobia of the 1950s saw a rash of criminal prosecutions of gay men, some of them extensively publicised. A key anxiety about black migrants in Britain concerned “miscegenation” – a notion which was highly gendered, focusing on fears that black men were stealing “our women.”<sup>9</sup> Work on cultural representations of gender in film and drama has analysed the ways in which such anxieties were addressed through a misogynistic discourse which showed white women emasculating men.<sup>10</sup> However, the connections between such anxieties and national identity have rarely been explored.<sup>11</sup>

The notion that loss of imperial power had any impact on the metropolis has generally gone unrecognised, with the conventional historiography of decolonisation presenting -- in Bill Schwarz’s memorable phrase -- “a stunning lack of curiosity” in this area.<sup>12</sup> If Gayatri Spivak’s comment that “empire messes with identity” has generally been taken to apply to colonised rather than colonising nations, there has been a particular absence of attention to the way empire messed with British/English identities in a period of decolonisation.<sup>13</sup> In this article, I share Schwarz’s concern to make connections between empire and “home.” But I also attempt to make connections between aspects of the literatures on national identity, which emphasise the racialisation of Britain in the 1950s, and the literatures on gender and sexuality

which emphasise the anxieties surrounding white masculinity. The convergence of discourses of colonial wars and immigration on the image of a threatened domestic sanctuary, suggests that it is important to explore questions of gender and their intersections with questions of race, as an area which is central to a consideration of the impact of loss of imperial power on narratives of Britishness and Englishness.

Representations of colonial wars and immigration in the mainstream British media are a rich source for exploring such questions, and demonstrate the extent to which racial difference was articulated in Britain in the 1950s not only in immigration discourse, but also through images of empire. Benedict Anderson's work has argued that the development of printed media was an important factor in the process by which people were able to imagine a shared experience of identification with the nation as an "imagined community."<sup>14</sup> But the development of visual media, as well as a popular press, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, dramatically increased the audiences who could be involved in such identification. James Ryan's work has shown the importance of photography to the production of imperial spectacle in Britain and its empire in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in a traffic of images between home and away.<sup>15</sup> The development of motion pictures in the twentieth century meant that visual images became increasingly significant in the projection of national imagery, and reached a wider audience. As Bill Schwarz comments: "Increasingly through the middle decades of the twentieth century, the imagination of the nation has been inscribed first and foremost in its cinema."<sup>16</sup>

In this article I examine imagery in the mainstream British media to explore the complexity and ambivalence of the theme of a domestic sanctuary threatened with violation, and its interplay of ideas of racial and gender differences. I argue that while both representations of colonial wars and immigration showed black men invading

white territory, this was a territory which was characteristically defined in terms of home and family. Domestic order thus became an increasingly important marker of Englishness, and one which was strongly gendered, showing black as a male category, while white women were foregrounded as symbols of a nation under siege. The absence of black women from these images enforced the association between Englishness and domestic order, constructing both home and family as white. But the foregrounding of white women was ambivalent. They were shown defending their homes alongside men in empire, while in the metropolis they were assigned roles as guardians of internal frontiers against “miscegenation” and “blacks next door.” At the same time, they were seen as points of entry for national weakness, as they were blamed for loss of imperial power, while fears of “miscegenation” focused on relationships between black men and white women.

These images domesticated the frontier, providing a focus on a “little England” – an idea which was associated with fears of national decline, and developed between the wars, when colonial rule was contested, particularly through the Irish War of Independence and the rise of Indian nationalism. Before 1939, however, although sometimes used as an anti-imperialist image, “little England” also coexisted with notions of imperial identity. It could be invoked to characterise white settler communities creating English homes and gardens in Kenya or Rhodesia, or as a place from which adventure heroes journeyed to exciting masculine exploits on far-off frontiers.<sup>17</sup> What is striking about the 1950s is the increasing identification of the frontier as the herbaceous border or the privet hedge. In representations of colonial wars, genres which, before 1945, had usually been sharply differentiated – the domestic and the adventure narrative – began to merge.

This domestication of the frontier, and the image of a threatened domestic sanctuary, with its suggestions of national vulnerability, point to the many tensions involved in redefining England as post-colonial. Chief among these tensions were anxieties about white masculinity as the frontiers where, in pre-1939 imperial narratives, British men had found and demonstrated their manhood disappeared. The classic frontier hero of imperial imagery became an increasingly embattled figure, as colonial war imagery showed white men pinned down in domestic settings, defending their homes alongside women. Such images disrupted the distinction between “home” and “empire”, as Britishness in far-off territories was increasingly constructed in terms of “home”, and domestic order and harmony became key signs of “civilisation” – “away” as well as at “home” – constructed against the savagery of the colonised and the immigrant. Moves to counter anxieties about white British masculinity included not only a misogynistic discourse, blaming women, but also a prolific genre of Second World War nostalgia which transposed the soldier hero from an imperial setting to a Second World War setting.

“There’ll always be an England while there’s a country lane” announced the popular song, much-quoted in discussions of dominant images of rurality in ideas of Englishness. References to empire in the song’s refrain – “the empire too, we can depend on you” -- are generally ignored. How were narratives of nation reworked when they could no longer depend on “the empire too” – in a period when colonial rule was widely contested, the process of decolonisation gathered pace, and Britain made the transition from colonial power to post-colonial nation? What was the impact on narratives of Britishness and Englishness of a diminution of British territories and a contraction of its frontiers? In addressing these questions, this article considers various ways in which the relationship between England and empire in the song were

reconfigured after 1945. Since empire and its legacy were increasingly portrayed as a threat to Englishness, the song's refrain, and its idea of imperial connections, became problematic. While "There'll always be an England" was strongly asserted in the early post-war period, "the empire too" began to be forgotten, disavowed or denied.

### **Colonial wars and the second world war**

In films made during the war "There'll always be an England" is sung by female British internees in Occupied France in Two Thousand Women (1944), and whistled by male British prisoners of war as they march into prison camp in The Captive Heart (1946).<sup>18</sup> Representations of Britain during the war insistently referred to traditional rural images of Englishness.<sup>19</sup> But this notion of a gentle, peaceful land was also disrupted by images of the home front as a place of danger in the blackout and the blitz, and as a place where women were mobile, abandoning domesticity to serve in aircraft factories, the services and the land army, as shown in films such as Millions Like Us (1943), The Gentle Sex (1943) and A Canterbury Tale (1944).<sup>20</sup>

"There'll always be an England" is a song which aptly encapsulates the England evoked in The Captive Heart – one which captivates Captain Hasek (Michael Redgrave), a Czechoslovakian man who has become a prisoner of war by masquerading as a British soldier to escape return to a concentration camp. Hasek falls in love with the idea of Celia Mitchell (Rachel Kempson), the wife of the man whose identity he has assumed, through the photographs and letters that he receives from her at the camp. He also falls in love with the idea of England that she conjures in these letters. She is shown writing to him – speaking the words of her letter against scenes of English village life – church, country station, and cricket match. The film cuts to a scene of another cricket match, played by British prisoners of war in the

camp. As the cricketers return, enthusiastically discussing the game, they are reduced to silence as Hasek reads her letter to them: “The apple trees are in full blossom, already making the orchard look like a sheet of fleecy snow. And ten-acre meadow is all white too, because this year that’s where the ewes are pastured with their lambs. Soon the garden will be filled with the scent and colour of the may and beyond the river you can see the first vivid green of the larches in the bluebell wood.”

This association of the home front with women in domestic settings, often located in rural scenes, marks a shift in ideas of home in films which were made as the war was coming to an end. Both The Captive Heart and Diary for Timothy (1946), mark a transitional moment between war and post-war, portraying home as a place of safety where women have spent the war passively waiting for their men to return.<sup>21</sup> Diary for Timothy foregrounds gentle, domestic images as its central character – a baby boy – is shown the story of what has been happening in Britain in the first six months of his life and is entrusted with the task of making a different world when the war is over. He is shown home as a place of danger for other people as they shelter from doodlebugs under their kitchen table, and a team go out to rescue those buried in the rubble which had been their home. But home is a place of safety and security for him, as he lies warm and comfortable in his mother’s arms. In The Captive Heart, home is represented in opposition to the hardships of the prisoner-of-war camp – a haven which the prisoners, including Hasek, long to see. Although both films are careful to emphasise an inclusive British identity incorporating Welsh and Scottish characters, and urban as well as rural locations, both associate the idea of home as peaceful haven against war, not only with English rurality, but also with women and domesticity.



Women, moreover, are portrayed as passive figures. The messages for the baby boy in Diary for Timothy are all from men in a film where the script by E. M. Forster is spoken by Michael Redgrave. Timothy's mother says virtually nothing, is portrayed mainly in a domestic setting, and is waiting for her husband's return. Although this return is not shown in the film it is promised through the voice of Timothy's father in a letter promising that "we will all be together again." In The Captive Heart, the return is shown through the early release of some of the prisoners, and resolves the anxiety and pain of the men in the prison camp, as one receives news of his wife's love affair, another of his wife's death in childbirth, and a third feels obliged to break off his engagement because he has lost his sight. As the audience knows, however, women have been guarding the home during the war – for apart from one shot of a mobile woman in uniform saying farewell to her family as she boards a train, they are shown in domestic settings. Women have been faithful to men, or unfaithful only through unfortunate misunderstandings, and are waiting for them to come home – a notion which is extended to incorporate Hasek as he journeys to England on release from prisoner-of-war camp to find Celia Mitchell, and the film ends with the promise of their happiness. As the men return, order is restored, and all is well.<sup>22</sup>

The place of home in films, portrayed during the war as a potentially dangerous front line where women were active, and shifting by 1945 to an image of a place of safety where women patiently waited for their men, changed once again in the rash of Second World War texts which were produced in the 1950s. As Marcia Landy observes, these films were "prone to presenting the women as faithless creatures, as negligible, or as insubstantial, focusing on the male group."<sup>23</sup> This is evident in the way servicewomen -- with one or two exceptions, such as Odette (1950) and Carve

Her Name With Pride (1958) – generally featured only as a backdrop to scenes of male heroism.<sup>24</sup> As John Ramsden comments: “Whole hours of these films go by without a woman even uttering a word, and, if they are there at all, it is in roles without responsibility, pushing flags around RAF maps in Angels One Five, ... or doing the same job a decade later at the Admiralty while Kenneth More plots to Sink the Bismarck.”<sup>25</sup> It is evident also in the way in which the home front faded from view, and war was generally sealed off from domestic imagery. Prisoner of war films in the 1950s, as Marcia Landy comments, offered “no space for fantasies of home,” in striking contrast to The Captive Heart.<sup>26</sup> Women, whether in the armed forces, in factories, or in a domestic setting, generally faded from view, and the emphasis was on the homosocial worlds of active service or the prisoner-of-war camp.

Representations of colonial wars in the 1950s have attracted little attention by comparison with these Second World War texts.<sup>27</sup> Yet colonial wars -- Malaya (1948-58), Kenya (1952-1956), Cyprus (1954-1959) -- were widely reported in newspapers during the 1950s, and represented in a range of films, including The Planter's Wife (1952) set in Malaya, and Simba (1955), set in Kenya, both made by Rank.<sup>28</sup> In paying tribute to the courage of the planter in Malaya and the farmer in Kenya, both these films conformed broadly with the aim of government propaganda. The images in Simba of Mau Mau ransacking and burning white farms, and butchering farmers, fitted government concerns that this aspect of the war should receive substantial coverage, to counter any impression of “Africans being manhandled and oppressed by white imperialists.”<sup>29</sup> The casting of Claudette Colbert, an American star, as heroine of The Planter's Wife fitted government concerns to bring British efforts against Communism in Malaya to American attention, and the Rank publicity release expressed the hope that the film would “help make the American people as a whole

more aware of the part Britain is playing against Communism in the Far East.”<sup>30</sup> At the same time, such casting was also intended to secure commercial success for the films, in both Britain and America, reflecting Rank’s designs on the American market, as well as its concern to challenge Hollywood’s dominance of British box-office receipts. The choice of Jack Hawkins to play the male lead in The Planter’s Wife was probably an important factor in its box-office success in Britain. In the year after its release he was voted the most popular male star in Britain, while Dirk Bogarde, who played the male lead in Simba, had displaced Hawkins as most popular male star in Britain by 1955.<sup>31</sup>

Colonial war films took an opposite trajectory from Second World War films of the 1950s. The latter transposed the adventure hero from an imperial to a war setting, and took up many of the themes of pre-war imperial films – a homosocial world where men were removed from the domestic scene, and demonstrated courage, endurance and humour in far-away places. Post-war imperial films, however, unless they were set in the past, portrayed heroes whose capacity for action was increasingly eroded, and moved towards a concern with home fronts and with women. When in the Korda imperial classic, The Drum (1938), produced just before the war, the question is posed: “do you think you can conquer the English?” and the reply is “I tell you the empire is just waiting to be carved to pieces,” a British audience can be confident that someone who utters these words is an evil, devious villain – probably a fanatic too – who will get his come-uppance during the course of the film.<sup>32</sup> It is a measure of how quickly British colonial rule declined that there can be no such confidence in the 1950s. Although the army arrives in the nick of time to save the day in The Planter’s Wife and Simba – as it does in The Drum -- neither film shows much confidence that the British can continue to maintain control for very long. Both portray a time on the

clash between British resolve to stay on and maintain colonial rule and the end of empire.

Where texts of imperialism had generally shown the hero sealed off from domestic settings, exploring and conquering vast territory, the hero of post-1945 colonial war films was a distinctly embattled and beleaguered figure. The Planter's Wife is framed by sequences of violence against planters' homes. Beginning with shots of "bandits" crawling on their bellies from the night-time jungle, killing a planter as he emerges in pyjamas from his bungalow, and then setting fire to it, the film ends with a long sequence of another planter's bungalow under siege on the following night by "bandits", who cut the barbed wire, occupy the sandbagged parapets, and shoot the searchlights. The main theme of Simba is similarly the threat to white homes, families, and settlement in Kenya from the Mau Mau. Early sequences of the film show British homes under threat. Allan Howard (Dirk Bogarde), on a visit to his brother from England, is met at the airport by Mary Crawford (Virginia McKenna), but the moment of arrival at his brother's farm is disrupted by the sight of police outside. The movement into a white home becomes a revelation of the Mau Mau, who have ransacked the house and killed Allan's brother. The film ends with a scene of conflagration as this farm, now run by Allan, is destroyed by a black mob.

As the title of The Planter's Wife suggests, British women occupied an important place in representations of colonial wars. Liz Frazer (Claudette Colbert), the wife of the title, is shown like her husband Jim (Jack Hawkins) living under constant threat of death and ambush, surrounded by menace, and in particular danger within the home. While Jim wants to pack her off to safety in England, she determines to stay with him. This image of the plucky white British woman, staying on despite the

danger was common to media representations of colonial wars in this period. The Daily Mail celebrated another planter's wife in Malaya in 1948: "Mary...will not leave her husband because his labourers are watching for the first signs of weakness in the master's bungalow. Her departure would be so construed and could panic the coolies who are openly anti-Communist and fearful of the Communist-led guerillas."<sup>33</sup> Where England as home was represented in The Captive Heart as a place to which the prisoners of war longed to return, the notion of return was more ambivalent in images of colonial wars, for return represented retreat – in the language of the popular press "scuttling." In The Planter's Wife Jim agrees to let Liz stay on, but she also successfully persuades him to "take some leave." In Simba the notion of return is also coded as "taking leave" as Mary's father is shown telling his wife about his plans to do so over their midday meal, just before he is murdered in a Mau Mau attack. England in both films stands for a safe haven away from the violence of colonial wars – but neither portrays a return, celebrating instead the courage of those who stay on.

An emphasis on women as heroines was also characteristic of newspaper reports of war in Kenya. The story of Mrs. Dorothy Raynes-Simson and Mrs. Kitty Heselburger attracted particular attention. Killing three Mau Mau who attacked them in their sitting room, and wounding a fourth, they were widely celebrated as "the two bravest women in Africa."<sup>34</sup> The Daily Express compared them both to heroines of Westerns and to male heroes of the second world war: "If you are a woman of Kenya out on the lonely farms in the black zones you wear slacks all day, you have a holster on your hip, and you look like the heroine of a Western film...Britain! Do you remember the way you reached out in love and praise to the men of Arnhem, embattled and faithful? Today give your hearts to the women of Kenya. They are surrounded by menace but they do not budge."<sup>35</sup> However taboo in a Second World

War context, the armed British woman, shooting to kill, was a recurrent image of female courage in colonial wars, and women killing non-white men became a sign of strength rather than pathology. In The Planter's Wife Liz Frazer shoots a “bandit” in the compound of her bungalow against the background of domestic animals and washing-line, drawing a gun from the folds of her dress. Later, when her home is attacked at night she is behind a machine gun. Mary, the heroine of Simba, is shown behind a machine gun as a white farm is attacked by the Mau Mau.

This image of the woman fighting to defend her home against attackers was not only associated with strength and courage but also with vulnerability. After she has killed the “bandit” in the compound, Liz Frazer swoons and is taken up in the arms of Jim, who carries her into the bungalow. Newspaper reports stressed themes of female vulnerability as well as female heroism. When Dr. Dorothy Meiklejohn and her husband were attacked by Mau Mau, the Daily Express reported: “Dr. Dorothy pulled herself from the floor by clutching the furniture and crawled upstairs. There she tore pillow cases and tried to staunch her many wounds. There is no telephone in the house. So alone, unarmed, and only half-conscious she drove along the empty track for help.”<sup>36</sup> In the reporting of Dorothy Raynes-Simson and Kitty Heselburger’s killings of three Mau Mau there was emphasis on their friends as well as themselves “all living alone and all middle-aged or old.”<sup>37</sup>

The domestic world on which such images focused was also ambivalent – one which marked the civilisation of the British against those who resisted their rule, but which also threatened to feminise British masculinity. The heroes in colonial war films are still men of action taking on all comers, but the shadow of the decline of British colonial rule hangs heavily over this image. John Newsinger, analysing military memoirs of British soldiers who served in Malaya in the 1950s, comments

that they tell “a story of colonial warfare waged by young white men in an exotic locale against an alien foe: the very stuff of the imperial imagination.”<sup>38</sup> In media images, however, civilians were usually the focus of interest, especially when there were attacks on women, and when the home front was foregrounded there was an elaboration of domestic detail that suggested male vulnerability as well as female. Pyjamas frequently figured as a sign of unpreparedness for attack -- in the opening of The Planter’s Wife, and in newspaper reports from Kenya where men were killed “eating their New Year’s Day dinner in pyjamas and dressing gown” and “in pyjamas, taking his nightly last look round with his 32-year old wife.”<sup>39</sup> In Simba, the Mau Mau kill a British farmer in his kitchen as he goes to investigate noises which interrupt his mid-day meal. The hero of The Planter’s Wife is first shown in his bedroom, awakened from sleep by a telephone call – the police checking on his safety – introducing both the notion that his home is under threat and the domestic setting in which he is pinned down during the main action of the film, defending it against attack. As a man of action, he is nevertheless closely associated with this domestic world as he turns the bungalow into a military fortification, and it is this bungalow that is the scene of battle. It is perhaps in an attempt to align him more closely with the traditional adventure hero of imperial films – whose struggles and conquests were in vast territory -- that he is shown at day break, crawling under the barbed wire which surrounds his home in an attempt to save his rubber trees from attack. However, even in this sequence, he is still in sight of the bungalow.

In Guns At Batasi (1964), a film set somewhere unspecified in post-colonial Africa, the British soldier is removed even further from the traditional hero.<sup>40</sup> The film explores the impact of loss of empire on British masculinity, showing soldiers who are immobilised by the process of decolonisation, pinned down in barracks.

When they do take action it is to move only a few yards, still within sight of the mess. The film continuously asserts the racial superiority of the British and at the same time shows that such superiority no longer provides any guarantee of authority or power.

Guns At Batasi is an elegy for the soldier hero, particularly the imperial soldier, and is infused by imperial nostalgia.

Guns At Batasi invokes British racial superiority particularly through a contrast between African mayhem and British order. In early sequences of the film, all the action is African as Africans stage a coup, demonstrating on the streets and setting fire to cars. This action extends to the barracks, where the British Colonel (Jack Hawkins) hands over command to the African Captain Abraham (Earl Cameron), in line with a policy of non-involvement. Led by Lieutenant Boniface (Errol John), supporters of the coup take Abraham prisoner and raid an ammunition store to arm themselves. Shot from a white British perspective, Africans are shown as a threatening mob in the opening sequence of the film, as British soldiers driving an army truck encounter African demonstrators, and in a later sequence which shows African demonstrators attacking a car from the point of view of whites inside it. Following both these sequences there are cuts to the barracks and the mess as places where the British maintain order. Such order is symbolised by Sergeant Major Lauderdale (Richard Attenborough) who rules the mess with a rod of iron. In the first mess sequence a soldier takes down a portrait of the Queen, betting that Lauderdale will notice its absence within two minutes of arrival, and wins the bet. In the second mess sequence this order is connected with pre-1945 British colonial rule as the men swap stories about “best stations,” recalling “church parade in Singapore before the war,” and India – “Jewel of the East they used to call it – what a pity they had to give it away.”



As in colonial war films, the emphasis on the domestic world inhabited by the British provides an ambivalent image, for the mess is not only a place of British order but also the place where, throughout the first half of the film, British soldiers are confined – under orders from their Colonel to stay there until what he calls “this little spot of bother” blows over. Against scenes of African action, they are shown indoors, drinking, chatting, and playing billiards. Their passivity is emphasised by the comments of one soldier: “Bloody marvellous! Two hot chocolates chuck bricks at each other and the whole British army is immobilised.” As the men dine in the mess on the Queen’s birthday and a loyal toast is proposed, African mayhem disrupts the orderly scene as Abraham, who has been wounded while escaping, bursts in, collapsing on the billiard table. This is the watershed of the film. Thereafter the British move away from confinement, immobilisation and impotence. Defending his men, his mess, and Captain Abraham, against what he sees as Boniface’s “mutiny,” Lauderdale takes action which culminates in his movement out of the mess to blow up guns trained on it by Lieutenant Boniface. The image of a British soldier resisting a mutineer is linked to images of other British soldier heroes by Lauderdale who, in a confrontation with Boniface, recalls reading about their exploits on the North West frontier, with “beads of sweat pouring down my face from a battle two hundred years old.”

If Lauderdale symbolises the values of old imperial Britain, it is Miss Barker-Wise (Flora Robson), a Member of Parliament who comes to Africa on a visit, who symbolises the new era of loss of imperial power. The contrast between them is thus represented through sexual difference – a contrast in which the idea of a post-imperial Britain is feminised and presented as decidedly unattractive, for Miss Barker-Wise is a bossy middle-aged woman with a cigarette permanently hanging from the corner of

her mouth. Lauderdale – no youth himself – calls her an “old bag,” and this is a verdict which the film endorses. Miss Barker-Wise occupies a female role which was common in texts that explored British post-war malaise, for while women were incorporated into the story of nation in Malaya or Kenya to stand for both heroism and vulnerability, they were also blamed for national weakness and decline in a range of texts which showed them either attempting to emasculate men or championing liberal causes.<sup>41</sup> Miss Barker-Wise does both. She attempts to order Lauderdale around and champions Africans in general and Lieutenant Boniface in particular – describing him to Lauderdale as “a civilised and cultured man.” The film shows Boniface as cruel and untrustworthy, and Miss Barker-Wise eventually discovers her own error of judgement. In the closing sequence of the film she admits her error to Lauderdale.

Lauderdale may win a small victory over a woman, but the values he represents are shown as otherwise defeated in a post-imperial world. It is not Lauderdale but Boniface who has the last word for the coup is successful, and Boniface demands that Lauderdale leave the country. The British Colonel’s own impotence is shown as he orders Lauderdale to return to England by the next available plane, at the same time admitting that in Lauderdale’s place he would have done exactly the same. The action of the soldier hero in the aftermath of loss of empire is thus shown as more likely to earn punishment than medals. In a brief moment of frustration and anger, Lauderdale disrupts British order, hurling a glass at the main symbol of authority in the mess -- the portrait of the Queen. He then quickly reverts to his own meticulous standards, sweeping up the shattered glass, straightening the portrait, and marching briskly – even jauntily – away from the mess. Despite its closing image of an undaunted Lauderdale, Guns at Batasi is imbued with sadness for a lost world, and shows the British army profoundly affected by decolonisation – its

capacity for action eroded to the point of immobility, its authority diminished, and its soldier heroes unhonoured.

Guns at Batasi was dedicated to “the Warrant Officers and Non-Commissioned Officers of the British Army, past and present, who have at all times upheld the high traditions of the service.” The Planter’s Wife was “dedicated to the rubber planters of Malaya, where only the jungle is neutral, and where the planters are daily defending the rubber trees with their lives.” Such dedications announced the films’ celebration of the courage and service of the ordinary British civilian or soldier, embattled in empire or former empire, and suggested that their record went otherwise unacknowledged. Quoting an advertisement for The Planter’s Wife -- “There are few medals for the people of Malaya, the police, the military, the planter and the planter’s wife” – The Times commented that the film “sets about distributing them.”<sup>42</sup>

Colonial wars, however, like the texts that portrayed them, were generally forgotten once over. In contrast the celebration of the heroism of the British forces in the Second World War became a major industry. Beginning in the 1950s when, on Nicholas Pronay’s count, eighty-five films made between 1946 and 1960 were devoted to this theme, it was an industry that also produced numerous best-selling novels, autobiographies, biographies, memoirs and stories in children’s literature and comics.<sup>43</sup> Most of these texts produced representations that were sealed off from the present, securing an image of British heroism. When they were juxtaposed against the present, as in The Ship that Died of Shame (1955), they were pervaded by anxieties about British masculinity.<sup>44</sup> This film, opening with scenes of male camaraderie and heroism in the War, shows men who are aimless and adrift once it is over, and who attempt to recapture something of the spirit of the war by putting their former ship into service once again. As they use the ship for increasingly illicit purposes -- contraband,

forged currency, gun-running, and finally harbouring a child-murderer – the ship registers its shame at what the men have become. As its engines die and it finally disintegrates, it offers an image of England calling men back to duty and honour in a post-war world characterised by a malaise which is specifically identified as masculine.

Colonial wars and decolonisation are an important context for understanding the immediate nostalgia for the Second World War, and the speed with which the war assumed a major place in ideas of national identity, once it was over. The soldier or adventure hero was increasingly difficult to produce in an imperial setting. Only a few 1950s texts continued to celebrate his exploits in empire, and these were generally set in the nineteenth or early twentieth centuries. The much wider range of Second World War texts which were often highly popular, could provide an image of British male heroism set in the recent past. Against the beleaguered hero of colonial war films, the loss of British male authority and power in Guns at Batasi, and the post-war masculine malaise of The Ship That Died of Shame, they offered a reassuring representation of British masculinity where heroic struggles could be transposed from an imperial to a Second World War setting and resolved in the knowledge of the outcome of the war: a famous victory.

### **Domestic order**

“Not a day passes but English families are ruthlessly turned out to make room for foreign invaders,” William Gordon, MP for Stepney, stated in 1902 in the House of Commons, advocating the control of Jewish immigration to Britain. “ ... Out they go to make room for Rumanians, Russians and Poles ... It is only a matter of time before the population becomes entirely foreign.”<sup>45</sup> As Gordon’s speech suggests, the

idea of an English home and family, threatened by an alien other, was not confined to images of colonial wars, and was current in immigration discourse before 1945. It was in the 1950s, however, that representations of empire and its legacy – resistance to British colonial rule in empire and “immigrants” in the metropolis -- increasingly converged on a common theme: the threat to an Englishness symbolised by the idea of “home.”

Representations of Englishness which made reference to the small-scale and familiar – the privacy of domestic and familial life -- invoked a particular exclusive and intimate identity. They were developed between the wars when, as Alison Light’s work has shown, in contrast to the expansive rhetoric of empire, the English were also imagined as inward-looking -- decent, but quiet and private. This version of Englishness not only celebrated the female sphere of domesticity, but also the quiet, pipe-smoking Englishman, tending his garden.<sup>46</sup> It was extended during the Second World War when, as Light comments, Britain could be seen as “a sporting little country batting away against the Great Dictators.”<sup>47</sup> J. B. Priestley, in his Postscripts, broadcast on radio in 1940, exemplified the pipe-smoking Englishman, as he offered his audience a version of a fireside chat – the intimacy and homeliness of the occasion reinforced by his slow delivery in a Yorkshire accent. He also celebrated homely virtues – as, for example, in his broadcast on Dunkirk, which told the story of the “little holiday steamers,” and the ordinary pleasures they offered in a pre-war world, “the gents full of high spirits and bottled beer, the ladies eating pork pies.” These were the steamers which, to rescue British soldiers had “left that innocent foolish world of theirs ... made an excursion to hell and came back glorious.”<sup>48</sup>

After 1945, in the context of the reversal of the colonial encounter through migration to Britain from colonies and former colonies, this version of national

identity was increasingly mobilised to construct both “family” and “home” as white. In the 1950s, oppositions between the “immigrant” and Englishness were gendered as well as raced – the former generally represented as a black man and Englishness frequently embodied in the figure of a white woman. The black man was often seen as transient and adrift, rarely represented as having family or a settled home, and characterised in terms of an incapacity for domestic and familial life. The white woman embodied Englishness as domestic and familial life and the notions of the rootedness and stability -- belonging, attachment and settlement -- that this life suggested.

Representations of the alien other as male were common before 1939, particularly in the image of a male horde descending to attack the British -- a commonplace of imperial narratives.<sup>49</sup> But the characteristic absence of colonised women from such images took on new significance as the frontier moved from the battlefield to the domestic interior -- the planter’s bungalow in empire or the privet hedge in metropolis. Home and family became much more important as markers of difference between colonisers and colonised, English and “immigrant.” In immigration discourse, the foregrounding of domesticity worked to suggest “immigrants” as people who did not belong in Britain, and the absence of women from these representations before the early 1960s reinforced a disassociation from ideas of family or domesticity. In contrast, in representations of colonial wars, domesticity and family were images of white civilisation that worked to suggest whites as settlers who belonged in Malaya and Kenya through a network of attachments to their families, and to the land that they owned and cultivated. The colonised -- never shown in domestic settings apart from in their role as the tamed and domesticated “houseboys” of the British in Kenya -- were associated with bestial

imagery: as denizens of the jungle in The Planter's Wife, as primitive savages in Simba, as wild animals in the Daily Express report of the attack on Raynes-Simson and Heselburger through quotation of their comment that: "they came silently like panthers with incredible swiftness."<sup>50</sup>

In both empire and metropolis, alien others were not only disassociated from domestic life, but also shown violating English domestic boundaries. The domestication of the frontier is particularly apparent in the elaboration of domestic detail to signify Englishness. In newspaper reports of Dorothy Raynes-Simson and Kitty Heselberger killing three Mau Mau in Kenya, photographs and text reconstructed the moment of attack – the women in their lounge, one cracking a Christmas nut against a background of Christmas cards arranged on the mantelpiece, both close to the radio listening to the nine o'clock BBC news.<sup>51</sup> In immigration discourse there was a similar proliferation of domestic imagery as homes and streets in the metropolis were described in detail, with a particular attention to boundary objects – clean lace curtains, clean windows, tidy dustbins, washed front door steps, neat house fronts.<sup>52</sup> These scenes of domestic order became images of Englishness under threat. The Daily Express commented on the Kenyan interior: "The house is warm with the comfort of good books and nice things – if you don't brood on the bullet hole under the old Dutch clock. This could be Carshalton instead of No Woman's Land."<sup>53</sup> The Daily Mail noted the "warm Kenya sun beating down on a lovely English-looking garden... It might have been Worcestershire or Herefordshire in deep summer. The Mau Mau terror has been poised to strike at their homestead – any British homestead – for months. They were not afraid."<sup>54</sup> In Sheila Patterson's account of West Indians in Brixton, neat house fronts stood for what she called "our ways – a conformity to certain standards of order, cleanliness, quietness, privacy and

propriety,” and she noted that “no immigrant group has in the mass so signally failed to conform to these expectations and patterns as have the West Indians.”<sup>55</sup> Elspeth Huxley in a series of articles on “immigrants” first published in Punch in 1963, chose the “quiet street” and “privet hedge” as emblems of Englishness threatened by “immigrants.” West Indians in particular, she noted, disrupted English quiet and order by playing loud music and keeping late hours at weekends. They also violated boundaries, leaving yards and front steps filthy and windows unwashed, and lying in bed with their feet sticking out of the window.<sup>56</sup>

In Kenya a particular symbol of threat to homesteads was the disloyal servant – either himself a member of the Mau Mau or someone who would let them into his employer’s home.<sup>57</sup> Richard Dyer has noted the rigid binarism around which Simba is organised, where white stands for modernity, reason, order, and stability, and black for backwardness, irrationality, chaos, and violence.<sup>58</sup> But it is also worth noting that stability and order are represented mainly through images of home, so that treachery is associated with the domestic, not the political or military, and is thus a particularly intimate betrayal. The distinction between different black masculinities represented in the film -- the tamed and domesticated “houseboys” and the atavistic and murderous Mau Mau – is blurred by white anxieties about whether “houseboys” will betray them. These are anxieties which are shown as justified. There remains a distinction between loyal and disloyal servants since the film shows an attack on a white farm where some let the Mau Mau in, while others are themselves murdered. Mary’s mother, whose husband is killed in this attack, has defended her servants against charges of possible disloyalty by arguing that they are each “one of the family,” reinforcing the idea of an intimate betrayal. The master or mistress and servant relationship stood for the wider authority and control of white over black, as well as



the idea that black men could be tamed. This scene of white domestic order invaded by black violence, through treachery from within, could be read as a particularly telling instance of the violation of a domestic sanctuary signifying loss of imperial power.

The notion of Englishness threatened from within also appeared in immigration discourse, where it was developed through a focus on internal frontiers – homes, neighbourhoods, streets – where English families and homes were under siege from “blacks next door.” In the late 1940s and 1950s a focus on “miscegenation” in discourses on immigration foregrounded relationships between black men and white women. Like the image of the English family under threat, fears of “miscegenation” had also surfaced in various contexts in the first half of the century, but in the 1950s they intensified and were always highly gendered.<sup>59</sup> Characteristic questions were those posed by Picture Post in 1954: “Would you let your daughter marry a negro?”, by Colin MacInnes in 1956: “What of these tales of coloured men corrupting our young girls?”, and by the Daily Express in 1956: “Would you let your daughter marry a black man?”<sup>60</sup> If black migration to Britain brought a fear of the collapse of the boundaries between colonisers and colonised, black and white, it was particularly through the breaching of this internal frontier that such a collapse was imagined.

Flame in the Streets (1961), a film representing a wide range of conflicts between white English and black “immigrants” in the metropolis, exemplifies many of these anxieties.<sup>61</sup> The action of the film, contained within Guy Fawkes Day, is set against the background noise of fireworks, as bangers are thrown and rockets go up, reinforcing a pervasive sense of tension. In the workplace white men abuse black. In the streets white teddy boys attack black men, disrupting the community bonfire party. But the central conflict of the film is in a white working-class home inhabited by the

Palmer family -- Kathy (Sylvia Sims), her mother, Nell (Brenda de Banzie), her father Jacko (John Mills) and her grandfather (Wilfred Bramble) – and is provoked by Kathy's announcement that she plans to marry Peter Lincoln (Johnny Seka), her black teacher colleague. Nell is the guardian of internal frontiers, and it is her reaction to Kathy's plans that prompts much of the action of the film.

Nell is herself strongly associated with domesticity. Throughout the film she is characterised by her aspirations for a better home in a better district – one with a bathroom. Apart from one shot at the garden gate which shows her anxiously looking out for Kathy, she ventures from the home only once – to find Jacko, who is in a trade union meeting, and tell him of Kathy's plans. The film is infused with liberal attitudes, and the representation of Nell draws on notions of the neurotic and materialistic housewife, while her outbursts against Kathy are presented as hysterically racist. But her warnings to Kathy are nevertheless reinforced by the film's images. She has told Kathy that “you're no better than the whores in the high street,” and as Kathy leaves home to wander the streets in search of Peter's house she passes a white whore on the arm of a black man. She has told Kathy that “they live like animals, -- six, eight, ten to a room,” and when Kathy enters the house it is to find multi-occupied rooms, peeling wallpaper, stained walls, washing hanging from the ceiling. As Kathy tries to find Peter's room, she becomes a voyeur, catching glimpses of black life within the rooms she enters, and encounters a scene that even Nell had perhaps not imagined -- a black man in bed with a black woman who invites Kathy to join them. Finally on the landing she encounters Judy – a white woman married to a black man and pregnant by him. What Judy tells her reinforces Nell's message. Gesturing at the domestic disorder she says with heavy irony: “it's a great life – look around.”

Domestic order not only became a central image of Englishness, but also frequently the only resolution narratives offered to the conflicts they portrayed. The Times, reviewing Simba, wondered whether there was something distasteful in making a record of the violence and bloodshed in Kenya and “tacking on to that record a conventional film love story.” As this comment suggests, in representations of colonial wars domestic and adventure narratives began to merge. The imperial adventure, although occasionally incorporating themes of heterosexual romance, had formerly been resolved mainly by the restoration of British military and political order. Now reconciliations on the home front became the main resolution. In The Planter’s Wife the impact of colonial war in Malaya is explored primarily through the damage it has done to the relationship between Liz and Jim Frazer. The main sign of this damage -- Liz’s decision not to return to Malaya if she goes back to England to take their son to boarding school –is part of her recognition of the breakdown of their marriage as a result of the war. As she acts to save her marriage and stay by Jim’s side, the movement of the film is toward reconciliation between husband and wife. The final image – where they stand together happily united on a station platform, waving farewell to their son who is being taken back to England by friends, and not by Liz – seals the notion of reunion. But the wider conflict in Malaya remains unresolved, and it is the restoration of their marriage that provides the only resolution in the film. As the Times commented : “the film is sensible enough not to pretend that, because husband and wife kiss and make up, all is well in Malaya.”<sup>62</sup>

Flame in the Streets also offers reconciliation between white husband and wife as its only resolution. The film undercuts its association of Nell with hysteria through the detailed attention given to her point of view in her conflict with Jacko. As she tells him that he had no time for her, treated her like part of the fixtures, turned the front

room into an office, even made love to her as though he were taking a quick drink, Jacko is reduced to tears. His efforts to make amends and reunite the family are demonstrated when he accepts Nell's instructions to go and find Kathy and bring her home. As he fulfils his mission and Kathy comes home bringing Peter with her, racial violence erupts, and white teddy boys push a black man into a lighted bonfire and badly injure him. The fate of this man, the conflict on the streets, as well as the central problem which the film poses -- whether Kathy can bring Peter home and incorporate him into white family life through marriage -- all remain unresolved. As Peter crosses the boundary of the Palmer home for the first time, and Jacko brings Nell downstairs to meet him, the film ends on an uneasy image. Jacko and Nell are on one side of the family hearth and Kathy and Peter on the other, in a shot that is angled to show them separated by the whole width of the room. Whatever the future, however, Jacko and Nell have been reunited. In offering reconciliation between Nell and Jacko as its only resolution, the film heightens its use of family and home as emblems of white life, and of Englishness.

It is significant that the home and family used as emblems of Englishness in Flame in the Streets is white, urban, and working-class. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century texts on the white urban poor in the metropolis had produced a pattern of associations between class and race, deploying a repertoire of racial imagery which linked "darkest England" and "darkest Africa," and portrayed "colonies of heathens and savages in the heart of our capital."<sup>63</sup> The urban crowd was associated with fears of unrest and disorder in the metropolis.<sup>64</sup> In post-war immigration discourse, however, "immigrants" took the place formerly assigned to the urban poor, and it was the urban working classes who were used to represent order and belonging. In both Patterson's and Huxley's accounts of Brixton, the contrast between the neat

English house fronts and the domestic barbarism of “immigrants” is embedded in an opposition between “immigrants” and “residents.”<sup>65</sup> The representation of the Palmers’ home in Flame in the Streets is characteristic of immigration discourse. Its neat house front and privet hedge contrasted to the chaos and noise of “immigrant” housing stand for the propriety and order that are so closely guarded by Nell. The symbols of Englishness in such texts were not the pastoral but the urban or suburban - the “quiet street.”

Henry Mayhew had commented on the London poor in 1851 that as “vagabonds and outcasts” they lacked “hearth and rootedness ... sacred symbols to all civilised races.” His notion of the urban poor as rootless was developed by other nineteenth-century writers who portrayed them as “wandering hordes” and “nomadic tribes.”<sup>66</sup> But in the 1950s, it was the urban working classes who were used to represent the values of the “hearth” against “immigrants.” In Flame in the Streets such rootedness is suggested in the detailed portrayal of the Palmer family, across the generations, and in the character of Jacko who still lives in the house where he was born and takes on the mantle of his father – a founder of the trade union – in his work as a shop steward. In contrast, none of the black characters in the film is endowed with family connections. The representation of “immigrants” as transient, rootless, and adrift was common in the 1950s -- as sailors on the point of moving on to another port in Pool of London (1950) and A Taste of Honey (1961), as “drifters” in Colin MacInnes’s novel, City of Spades (1957) where they inhabit a world of prostitution, illicit drinking, gambling, drugs, and violence.<sup>67</sup> In 1950s texts “dark strangers,” “wandering hordes,” and “alien races” in the metropolis are no longer the white urban poor but “immigrants.” England itself, constructed against “immigrants,” takes on increasing significance as a place standing for order.

## **Imperial identities**

In 1966 The Sunday Times reported Ian Smith's claim that: "If Sir Winston Churchill were alive today, I believe he would probably emigrate to Rhodesia – because I believe that all those admirable qualities and characteristics of the British that we believed in, loved and preached to our children, no longer exist in Britain."<sup>68</sup> In neatly reversing the notion of Britain as the heartland of empire, Smith positioned himself as a true defender of the nation against the metropolis. He did this paradoxically through rebellion against British rule in Rhodesia. The identity that he was defending was imperial, exemplified by Winston Churchill who had died in the year that Smith declared unilateral independence in Rhodesia (UDI), and whose funeral Smith had attended. In claiming Rhodesia as the heartland of empire – a place to which Churchill would now emigrate -- Smith constructed white Rhodesians, embodying exemplary British qualities, against a metropolis that had given up on imperial rule. Smith's disavowal of Britain as the centre of empire was given particularly dramatic form through UDI, but it was a view shared by other white settler communities in Africa, many of which identified themselves as bearers of true Britishness, and true defenders of the nation, against a metropolis that they accused of betraying the cause of empire.<sup>69</sup>

In 1968, Enoch Powell also wrestled with the question of Britain's imperial identity in addressing the question: "why, in retrospect, our history of the last 20 years seems to have been one long series of retreats and humiliations, from Suez to Aden, from Cyprus to Rhodesia."<sup>70</sup> Unlike Smith, however, Powell chose to disavow not Britain as the heartland of imperial identity, but imperial identity itself. This was the culmination of a long journey Powell had made from an intense attachment to such

identity – one where the shock of the news of imminent Indian Independence had proved so severe that “I remember spending the whole of one night walking the streets of London trying to come to terms with it.”<sup>71</sup> The empire, he had claimed in the same year, “is the structure on which we are dependent for our very existence.” In his 1951 electoral address to constituents he had insisted that “I BELIEVE IN THE BRITISH EMPIRE. Without the Empire, Britain would be like a head without a body.”<sup>72</sup> Yet by 1968, Powell had moved to a position where, in a startling formulation, “retreats” and “humiliations” were out of the question since Britain – with the possible exception of rule in India – had never been an imperial power.

Both Smith’s disavowal of England as the centre of the empire and Powell’s dismissal of that empire as a “myth” came at a moment when the process of decolonisation was virtually complete. Taken together they suggest some interesting ways in which imperial identities affected narratives of nation. In breaking with Britain, Smith represents himself as a defender of imperial identity. Powell in some ways suggests the appropriateness of such a move, since, in the interests of denying “humiliations” and “defeats,” he manages to produce a version of Britain which is shorn of an imperial identity, not through the process of decolonisation, but through dismissal of its imperial past as “myth.”<sup>73</sup> But although these two stories appear completely contradictory they have a major theme in common. Both construct the idea of England against empire. Smith’s version of this opposition resembles that of Miss Barker- Wise in Guns at Batasi: England betrays the values of empire since it can no longer be relied on to uphold white rule over blacks, even contemplating a move, however gradual, to black majority rule in an independent Rhodesia. In Powell’s version of this opposition, England becomes a place to which “our generation ... comes home again from years of distant wandering.” This is the domestic sanctuary

which Powell had once thought dependent on empire for the very structure of its existence, but which he now finds to be characterised by “the continuity of her existence ... unbroken when the looser connections which had linked her with distant continents and strange races fell away.” The empire, if it ever existed -- and Powell has considerable problems in altogether denying this -- has been a distraction, but fortunately “the nationhood of the mother country remained unaltered through it all.”<sup>74</sup> Powell has forgotten the refrain of the song – “the empire too, we can depend on you,” but not its main theme: “There’ll always be an England.”

Powell’s speech on the illusion of empire received little media coverage. His “Rivers of Blood” speech on immigration in 1968, however, received very extensive coverage, and has become the most well-known text in British immigration discourse. Powell may have confidently announced in 1964 that England had “remained unaltered” by an imperial past which he simultaneously denies, but in 1968 he represented “immigrants” – by which he meant black and Asian immigrants – as a major threat to Englishness. A main symbol of this threat in his speech was the familiar idea of the violation of domestic sanctuaries. Domestic order, guarded by an English woman, is disrupted by “immigrants” who turn her “quiet street” into a “a place of noise and confusion.” They threaten the boundaries of her home – pushing excreta through her letter box, breaking her windows. Reversing the story of imperial identity – expansive, active, masculine -- Powell tells a story about nation which foregrounds a white woman, and which evokes powerlessness and vulnerability at home in a quiet English street. The violation of a domestic sanctuary becomes a symbol of a nation under siege.<sup>75</sup>

Powell’s “Rivers of Blood” speech and its reverberations bring into sharp focus the main ways in which imperial identities affected narratives of nation once



colonial wars were forgotten and decolonisation was more or less complete. But there were other narratives which developed the construction of Englishness against empire – narratives which, in representing decolonisation as a moment of ruin for former colonies, celebrated rather than denying an imperial past. Chief among these was an opposition between British order and disorder in former British colonies -- a theme strongly developed in colonial nostalgia. In Guns at Batasi, African mayhem is represented as inevitable when not contained by British rule. A British soldier comments at the outset: “They got rid of our government, now they want to get rid of their own,” and the film, in tracing the story of a successful coup, shows an African country being taken over by a violent mob. Evocations of British order against disorder in former colonies could work to suggest empire as an historical burden for the British which had mercifully been lifted, or as a blessing bestowed on people who were naturally disposed to the violence which erupted once the British departed. In either case they represented decolonisation as a disaster for former colonies.

I have argued here that the image of a domestic sanctuary, threatened with violation, signifies loss of imperial power. Despite his dismissal of the empire as a “myth,” Powell’s “Rivers of Blood” speech demonstrates the continuing importance of empire in imaginings of Englishness and, as this article has demonstrated, draws on imagery which had gained wide currency in the British mainstream media in the post-1945 period. In its emphasis on domestic boundary markers – letter-boxes, windows -- the reworkings of England’s frontiers are particularly apparent. This emphasis suggests how far the decline of British imperial power, and the collapse of Britain’s imperial frontiers, prompted fears of a wider collapse -- of boundaries between colonisers and colonised, black and white. Powell’s “quiet street,” like the English home of colonial war imagery and Nell’s neat house-front and privet hedge in Flame

in the Streets, is a place where a white woman guards boundaries. The emphasis on women suggests how far frontiers were re-imagined in terms of domestic space, and national vulnerability. The domestication of the frontier in this imagery deprives frontiers of associations with expansiveness and enterprise, and with virile and active masculinity.

The image of a threatened domestic sanctuary, however, not only suggests the fear of collapse of boundaries, signifying loss of imperial power, but also works to deny the notion of collapse. Its emphasis on domestic order affirms Englishness as stable and rooted -- an image reinforced by disruptions of that order by “terrorists” in empire and “immigrants” at home. As the English home and family are constructed as symbols of that order, against black as a male category, dissociated from family or domesticity, a national identity is invoked which is intimate, private, exclusive, white – Englishness not Britishness. This version of Englishness shows an England that is threatened by empire and its legacy. But at the same time it provides reassurance that boundaries cannot be breached, since England itself is imagined as a domestic sanctuary, against empire and former empire. There is no longer “the empire too”, but there will “always be an England”.

### **Acknowledgements**

I am very indebted to Mike Paris, without whose generous sharing of knowledge and ideas on film research I could not have written this piece. I am also grateful to John Walton and the two anonymous readers for the *Journal of British Studies* for their valuable comments.

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<sup>1</sup> Daily Mail, 26 January 1953.

<sup>2</sup> See especially Paul Gilroy, “There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack”: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation (London, 1987); Bill Schwarz, “‘The Only White Man In There’: The Re-racialisation of England, 1956-1968,” Race and Class 38 (1996): 65-78; Chris Waters, “‘Dark Strangers’ in our Midst: Discourses of Race and Nation in Britain, 1947-1963,” Journal of British Studies 36 (1997): 207-238; Kathleen Paul, Whitewashing Britain: Race and Citizenship in the Postwar Era (Ithaca, 1997); Wendy Webster, Imagining Home: Gender, ‘Race’ and National Identity 1945-64 (London, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Chris Waters, “‘Dark Strangers’ in our Midst’ ”: 208.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Martin Wiener, English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit 1850-1980 (Cambridge, 1981), p. 60.

<sup>5</sup> Alison Light, Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars (London, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> Chris Waters, “‘Dark Strangers’ in Our Midst’ ”: 208.

<sup>7</sup> Bill Schwarz, “‘The Only White Man In There’ ”; Bill Schwarz, “Black Metropolis, White England,” in Modern Times: Reflections on a Century of English Modernity, ed. Mica Nava, Alan O’Shea (London, 1996), pp. 182-207; Bill Schwarz, “Reveries of Race: The Closing of the Imperial Moment,” in Moments of Modernity: Reconstructing Britain 1945-1964, ed. Becky Conekin, Frank Mort, and Chris Waters (London, 1999), pp. 189-207.

<sup>8</sup> Schwarz, “‘The Only White Man In There’ ”: 73.

<sup>9</sup> Lynn Segal, “Look Back in Anger: Men in the Fifites,” in Male Order: Unwrapping Masculinity, ed. Rowena Chapman, Jonathan Rutherford, (London, 1988), pp. 68-96; Alan Sinfield, Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain (Oxford, Blackwell, 1989); Sheila Jeffreys, Anticlimax: a Feminist Perspective on the Sexual Revolution (London, Women’s Press, 1990); Chris Waters, “Disorders of the Mind, Disorders of the Body Social: Peter Wildeblood and the Making of the Modern Homosexual” in Moments of Modernity: Reconstructing Britain 1945-1964, ed. Becky Conekin, Frank Mort, and Chris Waters (London, 1999).

<sup>10</sup> John Hill, “Working-class Realism and Sexual Reaction: Some Theses on the British ‘New Wave,’ ” in British Cinema History, ed. James Curran & Vincent Porter (London, 1983) pp. 303-311; John Hill, Sex, Class and Realism: British Cinema 1956-1963 (London, 1986); Micheline Wandor, Look Back in Gender: Sexuality and the Family in Post-war British Drama (London, 1987); Terry Lovell, “Landscapes and Stories in 1960s British Realism,” Screen 31 (1990): 357-376.

<sup>11</sup> But see Richard Dyer, White (London, 1997), especially pp. 184-206; Webster, Imagining Home.

<sup>12</sup> Bill Schwarz, “‘The Only White Man in There’ ”: 65

<sup>13</sup> Gayatri Spivak, Outside in the Teaching Machine (New York, 1993), p. 226.

<sup>14</sup> Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (London, 1983).

<sup>15</sup> James Ryan, Picturing Empire: Photography and the Visualisation of the British Empire (London, 1997).

<sup>16</sup> Bill Schwarz, “Politics and Rhetoric in the Age of Mass Culture,” History Workshop Journal 46 (1998): 139.

<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of this imagery, see Graham Dawson, Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities (London, 1994), especially pp. 58-76.

<sup>18</sup> Two Thousand Women (Frank Launder, 1944); The Captive Heart (Basil Dearden, 1946).

<sup>19</sup> See Jeffrey Richards, Films and British National Identity: From Dickens to Dad’s Army (Manchester, 1997), pp. 97-104. Richards records that This England (1941) was retitled Our Heritage for its Scottish release (p. 97).

<sup>20</sup> Millions Like Us (Frank Launder and Sidney Gilliat, 1943); The Gentle Sex (Leslie Howard and Maurice Elvey, 1943); A Canterbury Tale (Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1944). For a discussion of the image of the mobile woman in wartime British cinema see Antonia Lant, Blackout: Reinventing Women for Wartime British Cinema (Princeton, 1991), especially Chapter 2.

<sup>21</sup> A Diary for Timothy (Humphrey Jennings, 1945).

<sup>22</sup> In Frieda (Basil Dearden, 1947), return is represented as more problematic. In this film, a peaceful rural English home and community is disrupted by the return of fighter pilot, Bob Dawson (David Farrar) accompanied by the German nurse, Frieda (Mai Zetterling) who has helped him to escape. But the film resolves the problem posed by Frieda’s presence as she is shown increasingly accepted and incorporated into the community, reinforcing the idea of English tolerance.

<sup>23</sup> Marcia Landy, British Genres: Cinema and Society, 1930-1960 (Princeton, 1991), p. 178.

<sup>24</sup> Odette (Herbert Wilcox, 1950); Carve Her Name With Pride (Lewis Gilbert, 1958).

- <sup>25</sup> John Ramsden, "Refocusing 'The People's War': British War Films of the 1950s," Journal of Contemporary History 33 (1998): 57.
- <sup>26</sup> Landy, British Genres, p. 176.
- <sup>27</sup> See Andy Medhurst, "1950s War Films," in National Fictions, ed. Geoff Hurd (London, 1984), pp. 35-9; Nicholas Pronay, "The British Post-bellum Cinema: A Survey of the Films Relating to World War II Made in Britain between 1945 and 1960," Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television 8 (1988): 39-54; Neil Rattigan, "The Last Gasp of the Middle Class : British War Films of the 1950s," in Reviewing British Cinema, 1900-1992, ed., Wheeler Dixon (New York, 1994), pp. 143-52; Ramsden, "Refocusing 'The People's War.'" Ramsden notes a dearth of studies of British post-war films about the war of 1939-45, by comparison with films made during the war.
- <sup>28</sup> The Planter's Wife (Ken Annakin, 1952); Simba (Brian Desmond Hurst, 1955). There is discussion of Simba in Richard Dyer, "White," Screen 29 (1988): 44-64; Webster, Imagining Home pp. 52-55.
- <sup>29</sup> See Susan Carruthers, Winning Hearts and Minds: British Governments, the Media and Colonial Counter-Insurgency 1944-1960 (London, 1995), pp. 167-168.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 112.
- <sup>31</sup> See Andrew Spicer, "Male Stars, Masculinity and British Cinema 1945-1960," in The British Cinema Book, ed. Robert Murphy (London, British Film Institute, 1997), pp. 144-153. Dirk Bogarde also starred in The High Bright Sun (Ralph Thomas, 1965), a colonial war film, set in Cyprus. The Planter's Wife was one of Rank's biggest box-office successes in 1952. See Vincent Porter, "Methodism Versus the Market Place: The Rank Organisation and British Cinema," in The British Cinema Book, ed. Murphy, p. 126.
- <sup>32</sup> The Drum (Zoltan Korda, 1938). There are discussions of pre-1939 imperial films in Jeffrey Richards, "Boy's Own Empire: Feature Films and Imperialism in the 1930s," in Imperialism and Popular Culture, ed. John MacKenzie (Manchester, 1986), pp. 140-164; Landy, British Genres, pp. 101-110; Lola Young, Fear of the Dark: 'Race', Gender and Sexuality in the Cinema (London, 1996), pp. 55-83; Richards, Films and British National Identity, pp. 31-81;
- <sup>33</sup> Daily Mail, 16 August 1948.
- <sup>34</sup> Daily Mail, 5 January 1953.
- <sup>35</sup> Daily Express, 7 January 1953.
- <sup>36</sup> Daily Express, 24 November 1952.
- <sup>37</sup> Daily Express, 7 January 1953.
- <sup>38</sup> John Newsinger, "The Military Memoir in British Imperial Culture: the Case of Malaya," Race and Class 35 (1994): 48.
- <sup>39</sup> Daily Express, 3 January 1953; Daily Express, 26 January 1952.
- <sup>40</sup> Guns at Batasi (John Guillermin, 1964).
- <sup>41</sup> See Webster, Imagining Home, Chapter 4.
- <sup>42</sup> The Times, 19 September 1952.
- <sup>43</sup> Nicholas Pronay, "The British Post-bellum Cinema": 39.
- <sup>44</sup> The Ship That Died of Shame (Basil Dearden, 1955).
- <sup>45</sup> Quoted in Steve Cohen, "Anti-semitism, Immigration Controls and the Welfare State," Critical Social Policy 13 (1985): 74.
- <sup>46</sup> Light, Forever England, especially pp. 1-19.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 8.
- <sup>48</sup> J. B. Priestley, Postscripts (London, William Heinemann, 1940), pp. 1-4.
- <sup>49</sup> This image had particular currency in Hollywood "British" empire films, such as Gunga Din (George Stevens, 1939) which focused on the North West Frontier and the soldier hero. It was also a common image in British imperial films such as The Drum (Zoltan Korda, 1938).
- <sup>50</sup> Daily Express, 5 January 1953.
- <sup>51</sup> See, for example, Daily Express, 5 January 1953; Daily Mail, 5 January 1953; Illustrated London News, January 17, 1953.
- <sup>52</sup> See, for example, Sheila Patterson, Dark Strangers: A Sociological Study of the Absorption of a Recent West Indian Migrant Group in Brixton, South London (London, Tavistock, 1963), pp. 198-9.
- <sup>53</sup> Daily Express, 7 January 1953.
- <sup>54</sup> Daily Mail, 5 January 1953. Some newspapers reported that Dorothy Raynes-Simson was South African, but this did not disrupt the connections made between images of a peaceful home and garden and Englishness
- <sup>55</sup> Patterson, Dark Strangers, pp. 198-9.

- <sup>56</sup> Elspeth Huxley, Back Street New Worlds: A Look at Immigrants in Britain (London, 1964), pp. 46-7.
- <sup>57</sup> For a discussion of the way this image was deployed in representations of the Indian Rebellion of 1857, see Graham Dawson, Soldier Heroes, p. 91.
- <sup>58</sup> Dyer, "White," p. 49.
- <sup>59</sup> A newspaper headline in 1906 – "tainting the race" -- referred to the employment of Chinese seamen and resulting settlement of Chinese communities in London and other ports, and spoke of the results of interracial mixing between Chinese men and English women as "swarms of half-bred children to be seen in the district." See John Gabriel, Whitewash: Racialized Politics and the Media (London, 1998), p. 58. The Chief Constable of Cardiff's proposal of a legal ban on "miscegenation" in 1929 referred to the employment of African and Indian seamen, and resulting settlement in ports like Cardiff and Liverpool. See Paul Rich, Race and Empire in British Politics (Cambridge, 1990), p. 130. Although interracial sex was never made illegal, fears of "tainting the race" were extended during the Second World War as black British and American soldiers served in Britain. See Marika Sherwood, Many Struggles: West Indian Workers and Service Personnel in Britain (London, 1985); Ben Bousquet & Colin Douglas, West Indian Women at War: British Racism in World War II (London, 1991); Sonya Rose, "Sex, Citizenship and the Nation in World War II Britain," American Historical Review 103 (1998): 1147-76.
- <sup>60</sup> Trevor Philpott, "Would You Let Your Daughter Marry a Negro?," Picture Post, 30 October 1954; Colin MacInnes, "A Short Guide for Jumbles to the Life of their Coloured Brethren in England," in Colin MacInnes, England: Half English (London 1961, first published 1956), p. 25; Daily Express, 18 July 1956.
- <sup>61</sup> Flame in the Streets (Roy Baker, 1961). This film is discussed in Young, Fear of the Dark, Chapter 4; Webster, Imagining Home, Chapter 3.
- <sup>62</sup> The Times, 19 September 1952.
- <sup>63</sup> For a discussion of this imagery see Ann Stoler, Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things (Durham, 1995), Chapter 4.
- <sup>64</sup> See Anne McClintock, Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest (London, 1995), pp. 118-122.
- <sup>65</sup> Patterson, Dark Strangers, p. 98; Huxley, Back Street, p. 47. While Patterson calls "our ways" those of "residents," Huxley calls them those of "Brixtonians."
- <sup>66</sup> Quoted in Stoler, Race and the Education of Desire, p. 128. For a discussion of this imagery, see Ian Baucom, Out of Place: Englishness, Empire and the Locations of Identity (Princeton, NJ, 1999), pp 55-62.
- <sup>67</sup> Pool of London (Basil Dearden, 1950); A Taste of Honey (Tony Richardson, 1961).
- <sup>68</sup> The Sunday Times, 6 November 1966.
- <sup>69</sup> See Schwarz, "The Only White Man In There'".
- <sup>70</sup> J. Enoch Powell, "Myth and Reality," in Freedom and Reality, ed. John Wood (London, 1969), p. 243.
- <sup>71</sup> Quoted in Simon Heffer, Like the Roman: The Life of Enoch Powell (London, 1998), p. 115.
- <sup>72</sup> Quoted in Humphrey Berkeley, The Odyssey of Enoch: a Political Memoir (London, 1977), p. 52; Heffer, Like The Roman, p. 169.
- <sup>73</sup> J. Enoch Powell, "Myth and Reality," pp. 245-50.
- <sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 255.
- <sup>75</sup> J. Enoch Powell, "Immigration," in Freedom and Reality, ed. John Wood (London, 1969), pp. 213-219.