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PART I

Origins

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CHAPTER 1

What Is Britain?

Andrew Murphy

All nations are fictions, but some are more believable than others.[1]

I

At five in the morning on 15 July 2020 a truck arrived at Colston Avenue in Bristol carrying a life-sized statue of a female figure. A small group of people in hi-vis jackets installed the statue on a nearby plinth. The next day, a team of workers was sent by the Bristol city authorities to remove the statue, restoring the plinth to its previous, vacant condition. The woman featured in the statue that so fleetingly stood on Colston Avenue was Jen Reid. Reid had attended a protest in the previous month, during the course of which the original statue that had stood on the plinth had been torn down and taken to Bristol harbour, where it was thrown in the sea. That statue had been put in place in 1895, with the plinth bearing a plaque indicating that it was '[e]rected by citizens of Bristol as a memorial of one of the most virtuous and wise sons of their city'.[2] The particular son of Bristol in question was Edward Colston (1636–1721), after whom Colston Avenue is itself named. In commissioning the statue, the Victorian citizens of Bristol were celebrating Colston's extensive philanthropic legacy in the city, but the protest in which Reid took part focused on another, bleaker aspect of his life. Colston had wide-ranging business interests, with many of them centred on the Royal African Company, of which he became a member in 1680, later serving as its Deputy

[1] Darran Anderson, 'Time Moves Both Ways', in James Conor Patterson (ed.), *The New Frontier: Reflections from the Irish Border* (Dublin: New Island, 2021), p. 12.

[2] For full details of the Colston statue, see the Historic England listing at https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1202137. For the Jen Reid statue, see Aindrea Emelife's article in the *Guardian*, 15 July 2020, at www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/jul/15/marc-quinn-statue-colston-jen-reid-black-lives-matter-bristol.

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Governor.[3] The Company had been founded in 1672 and, as David Olusoga has noted, it

> was responsible for transporting and enslaving more Africans than any other company in British history. More than any other institution it established Britain as a key player in the transatlantic slave trade, setting her on an upward trajectory that, by the eighteenth century, would enable her to become the dominant slave-trading power in Europe.[4]

The tearing down of the Colston statue was inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement and was a response to the history of British involvement in slavery and the vast profits that accrued from it – profits that flowed into cities such as Bristol that were heavily involved in the 'triangular trade' between Britain, Africa and, primarily, the Caribbean. The transatlantic element of this trade is estimated to have involved the displacement and enslavement of 6 million people, about 40 per cent of whom were transported in British ships.[5]

After Colston's statue had been toppled, Jen Reid had climbed up onto the empty plinth and had stood there briefly, giving a 'Black Power' salute. An image of her standing in this pose was seen by the artist Marc Quinn, who worked with her to produce a statue that recreated the moment, and it was this sculpture that was then installed on the plinth in the early-morning hours of 15 July.[6] Reid herself observed of her statue: 'This sculpture is about making a stand for my mother, for my daughter, for Black people like me. It's about Black children seeing it up there. It's something to feel proud of, to have a sense of belonging, because we actually do belong here and we're not going anywhere.'[7]

The history of the Colston and Reid statues raises several important questions that are central to the concerns of the current volume. Reid's assertion of belonging is potent, and it resonates with the question of *who* exactly constitutes the British nation. In *The Clamour of Nationalism*, Sivamohan Valluvan argues that 'while nationalism is, of course, to some degree always about belonging, it does also draw much of its purpose and

[3] See Colston's *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (*ODNB*) entry: https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/5996.
[4] David Olusoga, *Black and British: A Forgotten History* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2016), p. 73.
[5] See James Vernon, *Modern Britain 1750 to the Present* (Cambridge History of Britain, vol. IV) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 82–3.
[6] The question of Quinn's role in the project – as a white, male artist – was not without controversy. See, for instance, Kadish Morris's astringent critique in 'Marc Quinn's Black Lives Matter Statue Is Not Solidarity', https://artreview.com/marc-quinn-black-lives-matter-statue-is-not-solidarity/.
[7] Quoted from www.stylist.co.uk/people/jen-reid-black-lives-matter-activist-statue-edward-colston-bristol-marc-quinn/408167.

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sense through identifying iconic figures of non-belonging'.[8] Those populations who were on the receiving end of the imperialist project – including a slave trade that guaranteed, to coin a phrase, 'the wealth of the nation' in Britain – were systematically subjected precisely to a policy of enforced non-belonging. The mindset of British imperialism was that distant populations neither had a claim on the metropolitan centre nor could they possibly have any shaping influence on it.

This mindset proved to be of enduring force. In 1948, with the high period of empire already coming to an end, the Westminster parliament passed a British Nationality Act that granted citizenship to those born in both the former and the then-current colonies, thus theoretically offering them the possibility of formal incorporation within the British national community. Those who availed themselves of this right quickly found, however, that that community, as already constituted, was not exactly welcoming of colonial migrants. In the same year as the British Nationality Act was passed, the *Empire Windrush* arrived in London carrying immigrants from the West Indies – an event discussed by J. Dillon Brown in Chapter 15 in this volume. Among those disembarking from the ship was the Trinidadian calypso singer Aldwyn Roberts, who performed and recorded under the stage name 'Lord Kitchener' – a resonant choice of name given the historical Lord Kitchener's iconic role in the 'Kitchener Wants You' British Army recruitment poster at the beginning of the First World War. As he disembarked from the *Windrush*, Roberts was filmed by Pathé News singing one of his own songs, 'London Is the Place for Me', which he had written during the course of the *Windrush* voyage. It included the following verse:

> To live in London you are really comfortable
> Because the English people are very much sociable
> They take you here and they take you there
> And they make you feel like a millionaire
> London: that's the place for me.[9]

Before long, however, it became clear to those who arrived on the *Windrush* (and to those who followed them over the years) that, in many respects, Britain did not, in fact, want them, nor was London – or

[8] Sivamohan Valluvan, *The Clamour of Nationalism: Race and Nation in Twenty-First-Century Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), p. 37.

[9] A segment of the Pathé footage is included in a documentary clip available on YouTube at www.youtube.com/watch?v=7AprO_Z13LM. The complete song is available on Spotify, and also on YouTube at www.youtube.com/watch?v=dGt21q1AjuI.

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anywhere else in Britain – a particularly welcoming place for immigrants from the ex-colonies.[10] Later in his career Roberts would write a very different kind of song about the experience of living in the UK, with far starker lyrics:

> If you're brown, they say you can't stick around.
> If you're white, well everything's all right.
> If your skin is dark, no use you try:
> You've got to suffer until you die.[11]

The British-born descendants of the earliest migrants oftentimes fared little better than their elders. The Conservative politician Enoch Powell once insisted that '[t]he West Indian or Asian does not, by being born in England become an Englishman', and while Powell is often seen historically as an ideological outlier, nevertheless it is commonly the case that conceptions of British national identity are framed – as in Powell's formulation – in ways that are specifically intended to be exclusionary.[12] Thus, for instance, in more recent times, the former British prime minister John Major offered a vision of Britain as a 'country of long shadows on county [cricket] grounds, warm beer, invincible green suburbs, dog lovers and pools fillers'.[13] Major's speech was reported in the *Independent* newspaper at the time under the headline 'What a Load of Tosh', but what is striking about it – beyond how unspeakably dreary Major makes Britain sound – is how narrow his vision of the nation is. There is no room here for any cultures that might exist beyond the numbingly ordered, sedate white suburbs.

[10] Over time, the provisions of the 1948 British Nationality Act would be significantly altered by successive pieces of new legislation, which increasingly eroded the settlement rights of citizens of Britain's former colonies. The '*Windrush* generation' continues, of course, to suffer significant disadvantage at the hands of the British state – see, for instance, www.bbc.com/news/uk-57271540 and www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/jul/07/at-least-five-who-applied-for-windrush-compensation-die-before-receiving-it.

[11] The song – 'If You're Brown' – is available on Spotify, and on YouTube at www.youtube.com/watch?v=0pRinJr5Byw. Roberts himself did, in fact, have a reasonably successful career in England before returning to Trinidad later in life. For details, see Philip Carter's *ODNB* entry: https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/73811.

[12] Quoted in Olusoga, p. 513. It is, in fact, questionable whether it is accurate to see Powell as an 'outlier' – Olusoga notes that a Gallup poll conducted in April 1968 indicated that 74 per cent of those questioned expressed support for the sentiments articulated in Powell's infamous 'rivers of blood' speech (p. 513). On Powell's career more generally, see Paul Corthorn, *Enoch Powell: Politics and Ideas in Modern Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

[13] See www.independent.co.uk/voices/leading-article-what-a-lot-of-tosh-1457335.html. 'Pools' here refers to a prize competition based on predicting sets of scores for professional football (soccer) games. At one time extremely popular, general interest in the pools declined with the introduction of the British National Lottery in 1994, though the competition still survives in a residual form.

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We gain a sense from Major's speech – with its faux-arcadian focus – of the fact that race is not the only vector of 'non-belonging' when it comes to how the nation is conceived. In this regard, we might register a link from the Jen Reid statue in Bristol to an earlier London project of Marc Quinn's in which he placed a sculpture of a naked and pregnant Alison Lapper on the vacant 'fourth plinth' in Trafalgar Square. This plinth had originally been intended to carry a statue of William IV but had sat unused for more than a century and a half after the funds raised for the statue itself proved insufficient. Quinn became the first in a series of contemporary artists invited to provide a piece for temporary exhibition at the site. Lapper, the subject of Quinn's statue, is herself an artist. She has phocomelia, as a result of which she was born without arms and with foreshortened legs. For a statue of a pregnant woman artist with a disability to be placed in such an iconic location – a location dominated by the crudely symbolic assertion of male-gendered militaristic national potency embodied in Nelson's Column – is a strikingly bold attempt to situate at the heart of the metropolis a figure whose intersectionality makes her emblematic of multiple communities traditionally excluded from conceptions of the nation and its symbolic representation – communities the Irish writer Rosaleen McDonagh has brilliantly gathered under the embracing term 'the unsettled'. McDonagh is a member of the Traveller community and thus is, in a narrow sense, not aligned with the 'settled' community; she also has cerebral palsy and thus, for her, as she writes, 'the word "intersectionality" [is] something other than an abstract academic term'.[14] In its various incarnations over the centuries, the British nation has rarely afforded a central place to women, or to those with disabilities, to members of the Traveller community, or indeed to the working classes or those who do not conform to heteronormative understandings of sexual and gender identity. For centuries, the official discourse of the nation has tended to place these groups at the margins, where, in many instances, they serve, together with the colonised, the enslaved, migrants and refugees, as emblems precisely of what the nation is *not*: it is not Black, foreign, female, disabled, impoverished or – as Brian Lewis makes clear in Chapter 18 – Queer. Projects such as the Reid and Lapper statues set out to challenge and correct this narrative.

These statues, then, and their locational contexts raise important questions about culture and its relation to conceptions of national identity. Culture can serve to create, sanction and endorse an officially approved

[14] Rosaleen McDonagh, *Unsettled* (Dublin: Skein, 2021), p. 25.

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understanding of the nation, as in the case of the Colston and Nelson statues, or it can serve to challenge and reimagine that understanding. This dual aspect of the relationship between culture and the nation can be brought further into focus by considering contrasting, related works by two British authors. Firstly, we might take the instance of James Thomson (1700–1748). Thomson was one of the most popular British writers from the middle decades of the eighteenth century into the early decades of the nineteenth century. His extended poem *Seasons* was, for instance, reprinted more than 400 times between the first appearance of its complete text in 1730 and the closing decades of the nineteenth century.[15] In the year immediately before the full text of the *Seasons* appeared Thomson published the poem *Britannia*, in which he exhorted the British navy to 'rise! . . . And as you ride sublimely round the World'

> Make every Vessel stoop, make every State
> At once their Welfare and their Duty know.
> This is your Glory; this your Wisdom; this
> The native Power for which you were design'd
> By *Fate*, when *Fate* design'd the firmest State,
> That e'er was seated on the subject Sea.[16]

Thomson reprised these bullish, patriotic sentiments at a later point in his career when he wrote the lyrics to a rather better-known text: 'Rule Britannia', which has, of course, for centuries served as a prime totemic anthem of British nationalism, supremacy and exceptionalism.[17]

In those places where 'Rule Britannia' is sung with the greatest flag-waving fervour – the BBC's annual 'Last Night of the Proms' event at the Royal Albert Hall, for instance – it is often coupled with 'Jerusalem', a song with lyrics by another British poet: William Blake. Those who participate in such events often think of Blake's text as occupying precisely the same patriotic ground as Thomson's national panegyric, except that, by contrast with Thomson's focus on Britain, Blake is more narrowly concerned specifically with his native England (Thomson, by contrast, was Scottish). Where Shakespeare's John of Gaunt in *Richard II* famously imagines England as 'This other Eden, demi-paradise' (II.i.42), Blake's

15 See his *ODNB* entry: https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/27306.
16 [James Thomson], *Britannia A Poem* (London: T. Warner, 1729), p. 11.
17 David Armitage, in *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), has described Thomson as 'the aggressively Anglicising son of a Scottish Whig mother and a Lowland Presbyterian minister father' (p. 173), but Gerard Carruthers offers a rather more nuanced view of his relationship with British nationalism in *Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), pp. 84–5.

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text advances further still, asking whether it may be possible that 'the holy Lamb of God' might himself actually have been seen 'On England's pleasant pastures' and whether 'the Countenance Divine' might 'Shine forth upon our clouded hills'.[18] England is thus not, as in Gaunt's speech, an *equivalent* to the Garden of Eden; rather, it is potentially *itself* sacred ground – habitation of the divinity – thus making the English themselves God's own chosen people.

What those waving their Union flags at the Albert Hall and elsewhere typically tend to miss, however, is the complexity of Blake's vision in 'Jerusalem'. What he offers is, in fact, not a celebration of what England is, but rather of what it might be. Far from registering England's present glories, Blake instead imagines what the nation could be if his compatriots could be persuaded to 'buil[d] Jerusalem / In England's green & pleasant Land'. But this will only happen through struggle: a struggle that requires 'mental fight', involving the deployment of metaphorical armaments – a 'Bow of burning gold', 'Arrows of desire', a 'Chariot of fire'. These weapons are, we might say, significantly different in kind from the very real warships that Thomson calls on, in *Britannia*, to 'Make every Vessel stoop' in the face of British naval supremacy. By contrast with the exalted *potential* England of the future, the England of Blake's own present time is actually a land represented in the poem synecdochally by 'dark Satanic Mills' – emblematic of the dehumanising industrialisation that was beginning to take hold during Blake's own lifetime as the earliest phase of the Industrial Revolution got underway. It is, for Blake, partly the struggle against the forces of materialist exploitation that may potentially produce an England worthy of considering itself a new Jerusalem. The flag-waving version of the poem so often performed at public events in Britain thus represents a strong misreading of Blake's text. Taking Thomson and Blake together, then, we can say that where Thomson's text serves to confirm immediate orthodoxy, Blake's, by contrast, places that orthodoxy under interrogation and calls for a refashioning of the nation in a better form.

II

When political, social and cultural forces place the manner in which the nation is conceived under interrogation it is often the case that a backlash follows from those invested in an orthodox reading of the national

[18] William Blake, *Complete Writings with Variant Readings*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 480–1. All subsequent quotes are from p. 481.

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narrative. Thus, for instance, when the Colston statue was torn down and thrown in Bristol harbour, Priti Patel, the British Home Secretary, condemned the incident as 'utterly disgraceful'.[19] Patel's Conservative colleague, the MP Simon Clarke, took up the matter in a rather less heated manner on Twitter, cautioning that '[r]e-writing parts of ... history, or seeking to erase them because they are painful ... does not bring enlightenment' and insisting that '[o]ur history is complex, as is inevitably the case for any nation state of at least 1,200 years'.[20] It is unlikely that anyone would disagree very much with Clarke's assertion that 'history is complex'. His invocation of the conjunction 'nation state' is rather more problematic, given that the two elements of the term sit in an intricate relation to one another and have their own distinctive histories. More problematic still is Clarke's assertion that the 'nation state' of Britain (or perhaps he intends simply England) is 'at least 1,200 years' old. It is rather difficult to grasp quite what Clarke wished to signal with this figure, which does not really take us back to any particular major formative moment in the history of the island of Britain. We might say that Clarke drops us in a rather arbitrary spot, chronologically; we look around, find the Romans long gone, the Angles and Saxons with a few centuries under their belts and the Normans far off on the distant horizon.[21] To borrow from Samuel Beckett: 'Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes.'[22] In fairness to Clarke, however, we can also say that the issue of when the nation – whether that be any particular nation or 'the nation', more abstractly, as a concept – comes into formation is a topic that has actually exercised political scientists and historians a great deal in recent decades. The issue was specifically brought into focus by Walker Connor in 1990, in his much-cited article 'When Is a Nation?'.[23] The primary focus of this present section will be the question of when and how the British nation comes into being – and the ways in which conceptions of national identity and nationhood have shifted and evolved over a protracted period of time in Britain.

For some theorists, the nation as a political structure and nationalism as an ideologically driven praxis are products of a modernity prompted by the

[19] See www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-bristol-52962356.
[20] https://twitter.com/SimonClarkeMP/status/1270326461422088194?s=20.
[21] It is possible that Clarke may have had Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (731) in mind as a foundational moment for the English nation, though, of course, Bede's text did not in any sense at all initiate a 'nation state'.
[22] Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), p. 41.
[23] Walker Connor, 'When Is a Nation?', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 13(1) (1990), 92–103.

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