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978-1-107-07126-1 - Continental Drift: Britain and Europe from the End of Empire to the Rise of Euroscepticism

Benjamin Grob-Fitzgibbon

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

On the afternoon of 7 May 1948, Winston Churchill addressed the 750 delegates at the first Congress of Europe. ‘This is not a movement of parties but a movement of peoples’, he declared. ‘If there is rivalry of parties, let it be to see which one will distinguish itself the most for the common cause’. Everyone had been invited to the Congress ‘in his individual capacity, nevertheless this Congress, and any conclusions it may reach, may fairly claim to be the voice of Europe’. Its delegates included ‘statesmen of all political parties, leading figures from all the Churches, eminent writers, leaders of the professions, lawyers, chiefs of industry and prominent trades-unionists’. Their common cause was a united Europe. Churchill, their Honorary President, implored them to ‘pull together and pool the luck and the comradeship’. If they did so, then all of Europe might ‘move into a happier sunlit age’.¹

Churchill was speaking in the Hague not as the leader of the Conservative Party and His Majesty’s Loyal Opposition, nor as a former British Prime Minister, but as a citizen of Europe. The British delegation that he led included the Liberal Peers Lord Layton and Lady Violet Bonham-Carter; the trade unionist Bob Edwards and Labour MPs Kenneth Lindsay and Leslie Hale; and the Conservatives Leopold Amery, Robert Boothby, Lady Rhys-Williams and Henry Hopkinson.² These Britons were joined by other European dignitaries such as Léon Blum, Jean Monnet, Paul Reynaud, Konrad Adenauer, Paul-Henri Spaak and Paul van Zeeland, names that would soon become synonymous with the cause of European unity. Even the Vatican sent a representative.³ With British cross-party support and delegations

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from fifteen other European countries, the Congress adopted a political program that committed its delegates to work towards a ‘parallel policy of closer political union’, which would ‘sooner or later’ involve ‘the renunciation or, to be more accurate, the joint exercise of certain sovereign powers’.⁴ In the economic sphere, it agreed that ‘The nations of Europe can only be saved by a complete economic union, providing a single market for labour, production and trade’.⁵ Finally, the Congress declared that ‘No scheme for European Union would have any practical value without the effective participation of Great Britain. The United Kingdom is an integral part of Europe’.⁶ A future European Union would be both politically and economically integrated with Great Britain at its heart.

It is hard to imagine, some seventy years later, that in the aftermath of the Second World War, Britain – an imperial Britain, closely allied with the United States and grappling with the beginnings of the Cold War – sought to lead Europe into an integrated Union. It is perhaps harder still to fathom that it was that imperialist *par excellence* Winston Churchill who first popularised the phrase ‘the United States of Europe’ and encouraged the French, Germans and other Europeans to put aside their differences and instead work together in common cause. When, in November 2013, the President of the European Commission, José Manuel Barroso, called for British Prime Minister David Cameron to show the type of political courage and vision displayed by Churchill – quoting his 1948 statement that ‘We must aim at nothing less than the Union of Europe as a whole’ – he was met with resistance from prominent British Eurosceptics. Nigel Farage, leader of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), even accused Barroso of ‘hijacking a single phrase by Churchill’, of taking it out of context to ‘paint him as a fan of political union in Europe’.⁷

In the midst of the 2010 General Election campaign, the Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg argued that the rise of UKIP and the Eurosceptic wing of the Conservative Party could best be explained as a reaction to the loss of empire. Whilst for the European continent the creation of the European Union (EU) was an ‘absolute blinding triumph of peace over war, of democracy over tyranny’, for Britain it was an ‘admission of weakness’. Continued British hostility to the European project, Clegg suggested, was inextricably linked to British nostalgia for the days of empire.⁸ The Liberal Democrat leader was not alone in this view. Three years earlier, Stuart Hall – founding editor of the *New Left*

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Review and a leading British cultural theorist – claimed that ‘The very notion of Great Britain’s “greatness” is bound up with empire. Euroscepticism and Little Englander nationalism could hardly survive if people understood whose sugar flowed through English blood and rotted English teeth’.⁹ That Euroscepticism was wrapped up in conceptions of race and imperialism was self-evident to Clegg and Hall; why that was so is less clear.

Some popular Eurosceptics have encouraged such criticism from the Left. For example, Daniel Hannan, Conservative Member of the European Parliament for south-east England, has frequently interspersed his commentary on the iniquities of the EU with praise for the Empire.¹⁰ Concurrently, known apologists for the British Empire such as historians Niall Ferguson and Andrew Roberts have written widely on their opposition to deeper British integration with the European continent, condemning the EU as undemocratic and unaccountable.¹¹ Even Bagehot – the *Economist*’s esteemed columnist on Britain – has noted the link between contemporary Euroscepticism and imperial longing.¹² For the political class and Fourth Estate, it is a commonplace that the rise of Euroscepticism has gone hand in hand with the decline of the British Empire. For academics, however, the worlds of empire and the post-war British relationship with the European continent have remained tucked away in disciplinary silos, and never the twain shall meet.¹³

Given the integrated nature of British imperialism and Britain’s place in Europe, it is perhaps surprising that these two elements of a common story have been treated so separately by the academic community, yet there is a distinct divergence.¹⁴ On the one hand, there is a vibrant debate over the end of the British Empire, one which is increasingly interested in the effect that British imperial decline has had on the United Kingdom itself.¹⁵ On the other, there is an historiographical community that explores the United Kingdom’s entry into the European Economic Community (EEC), albeit one that is chiefly concerned with examining why Britain has remained ‘on the side-lines’ of Europe.¹⁶ These two communities have not, for the most part, interacted. For one camp, the Empire and its decline is the chief focus of their studies; for the other, the various institutions and organisations that have worked towards European integration. The only area upon which the two seem to agree is that decolonisation had very little to do with British approaches to Europe and vice versa.¹⁷ This self-imposed

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isolation of ‘imperialists’ from ‘Europeanists’ is not only a trend in recent historiography. On the contrary, it long pre-dates the establishment of the EU and its predecessors.¹⁸ It is a strange irony that, in the press and amongst politicians, there is an assumption that the decline of empire and Europe (particularly the rise of Euroscepticism) have gone hand in hand, whereas for historians there is an equally strongly held contention that empire and Europe have had nothing whatsoever to do with each other!

What are we to make of this? Writing of her experiences as an undergraduate at Bristol University in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Linda Colley found history to be ‘thoroughly compartmentalized’, with British history, imperial history, American history and European history all operating ‘along parallel tracks’ that did not meet.¹⁹ Thirty years later, this compartmentalisation was still present, and Colley joined David Armitage in his lament of ‘the persistent reluctance of British historians to incorporate the Empire into the history of Britain’.²⁰ Although historians have, since the 1980s, begun to explore the impact of empire on the British Isles – pioneered in large part by John MacKenzie and his remarkably successful *Studies in Imperialism* book series – there has nevertheless remained a hesitancy (conscious or unconscious) to extend this study of the imperial impact to an exploration of Britain and the European continent. It is telling that in MacKenzie’s series of close to one hundred books, none explicitly explores the relationship between an imperial Britain and the European continent.²¹

If imperial historians have tended to marginalise the effects of empire on Europe (and the decline of empire on Britain’s relationship with European integration in the post-war period), then historians of Britain’s interactions with the continent have ignored the British Empire all together.²² This is in part because it does not form part of *their* story of growing European unity.²³ Their search through time to find signs and developments which may (or may not) foretell what is a distinctly modern phenomenon (the EU) points to a larger problem in the literature on Britain’s relationship with Europe in the twentieth century. When exploring the dynamics of this complex association, historians have tended to adopt the views and language of modern policymakers, whereby ‘Europe’ has become synonymous with ‘the European Union’ and its predecessors. Consequently, to explore Britain’s relationship with ‘Europe’ has come to mean exploring the United Kingdom’s

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relationship with those countries and institutions that make up the EU. It is perhaps inevitable under such circumstances that the main conclusions historians have reached are that Britain has remained distant from ‘Europe’ (read, the ‘EU’) and that Britain’s interactions with ‘Europe’ have had little to do with the Empire/Commonwealth. Yet for those Britons living in the 1940s, ’50s and ’60s, operating without the benefit of historical hindsight, it was by no means clear that ‘Europe’ was indeed limited only to the particular administrative organs of the European Coal and Steel Community and later the EEC. ‘Europe’ was far broader than most historians have defined it to be; British considerations of their own place within that Europe were far more complex.

Yet there is perhaps a broader reason for the neglect of Europe by most British historians and nearly all imperial historians, one which rests on notions of British insularity and – dare I say it – cultural arrogance, marked most clearly by the once universal (and still common) usage of ‘England’ and ‘English’ for ‘Britain’ and ‘British’, without much thought to Scotland, Wales and Ireland.²⁴ This attitude, often unintentional, has been extended beyond England and the United Kingdom to the European continent. In his inaugural lecture as Regius Professor of History at the University of Cambridge, Richard Evans highlighted this trend with a summary of recent attempts to define English historiography, demonstrating persuasively that, despite a deep British historiography on European history, still the assumption persists of an inherent Anglo-centrism.²⁵ Like Linda Colley, he sees as significant the ‘fact that “British” and “European” History remain essentially separate in UK universities’,²⁶ concluding that it is ‘in many ways rather artificial to oppose the study of British History to the study of European. . . . [O]ur national identity coexists, as in fact it has always done, with many kinds of identity too, local, regional, immigrant, European, “Western” . . . Europe is an essential part of this wider picture’.²⁷

It is the purpose of this book to retell the story of Britain’s post-war relationship with the European continent, keeping the broader context of British foreign affairs and Britain’s place in the world firmly in view. It argues that Britain’s relationship with the European continent has been intimately shaped by the government’s handling of the end of empire, by the public’s changing perceptions of Britain’s place within the world and by the nation’s search to define what it means to be British (and European) in the aftermath of both war and empire. It suggests

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that, in the immediate post-war world, British politicians, civil servants and the public at large viewed British identity as both an imperial one and a European one. There was no contradiction between being an imperial power, part of the English-speaking Atlantic world and a European nation. This identity shaped their approaches to domestic and international policy, their management of the end of empire and their engagement with the European continent following the Second World War. However, from the mid-1950s through the early 1970s, this identity and the worldview it inspired was challenged; challenged by the decline of empire and ultimate decolonisation, by the establishment of the EEC on an understanding of Europe that most Britons by and large did not share and by a Cold War that drew the United Kingdom ever closer to the United States. These challenges were accentuated by a change on the European continent itself, with a shift to a European identity that was no longer based on imperialism/colonisation and was increasingly sceptical about an Atlantic worldview. To complicate matters further, this idea of Europe went through various iterations from the 1940s to the 1960s – both within the United Kingdom and on the continent – ensuring that not only were the core belief systems of Britons in flux during these years, but that the very concept of Europe itself also was constantly changing and evolving.

Throughout the mid-1960s, successive British governments sought to realign their vision of Europe with that of the six member-states of the EEC; however, this necessarily meant a readjustment of their concept of the Commonwealth and Britain's place in the world. With this readjustment came an increasing split with the ideologies and identities of the British public. British entry into the EEC in 1973 occurred at an economically difficult time, with an oil crisis imminent and rising food prices placing increasing strain on the British economy. Despite a successful referendum in 1975 confirming Britain's membership in the Community, many Britons began to suspect that it was the decline of empire in combination with entry into the EEC that had thwarted Britain's place in the world. By choosing Europe over empire, they held, Britain had lost its way; only by distancing itself from Europe and re-embracing Britain's imperial values could the British people reignite the flame of greatness that had been extinguished. Margaret Thatcher, although not the founder of this ideology, was quick to recognise its political potency. It was during the Thatcher years of 1979–90 that the Conservative Party moved from being the party of

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Europe to the party of Euroscepticism. Whilst Britain had an empire and empires were largely the preserve of Europeans, British foreign policy rested firmly on the concept of an imperial Europe with Britain leading the way; when, in the 1960s, the loss of empire, combined with a redefining of what it meant to be ‘European’, separated notions of imperialism from European-ness, a Euroscepticism was born that became impossible to separate from nostalgic neo-imperialism.

This book, then, is the story of the British and Europe, from the end of empire to the rise of Euroscepticism. At the close of the Second World War, many Britons believed that the United Kingdom’s responsibility was to lead not just the British Empire and Commonwealth but Europe also. By doing so (and by keeping intact their ‘special relationship’ with the United States), Britain could move towards a post-war concept of world governance and society with Britain firmly holding the reins. For Britons in these years, greater integration with the European continent was not an alternative to empire but an opportunity to extend their imperial mission alongside and in collaboration with the strengthening of Commonwealth ties. Seventy years later, the Empire is long gone, the Commonwealth has lost its political significance and the United Kingdom’s reputation in Europe is largely as an Atlanticist brake on European ambitions. How the British evolved from being a nation of imperial Europeans to one of post-imperial Eurosceptics is the subject of this book.

* * *

To understand Britain’s post-war vision of its place in Europe and the world, we must turn first to the pre-war era. That the United Kingdom has throughout its history revelled in its island nature, physically removed from the rest of Europe, is indisputable. The unique geography of the British Isles has shaped its political, social, economic and cultural development, leading to an earlier conception of a unified state than was the case on the European continent and a common national identity at a comparatively early stage of its evolution.²⁸ The historian R. W. Seton-Watson – writing in 1937 – argued that ‘Britain’s hybrid position as part of Europe, and yet in some respects outside it served [throughout its history] as a natural stimulus to overseas commercial and political development – trade following the flag – and to reliance upon a strong navy’.²⁹ Britain’s island geography ensured that it developed a naval tradition, which in turn made it a natural competitor in the

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quest for empire.³⁰ Furthermore, unlike its neighbours on the continent, the British Isles had a natural separation and protection from invasion which allowed it to escape the necessity of developing a large land army. For this reason, Britons adopted certain national attributes, such as a reverence for ‘English liberty’ and commerce, that were less prevalent on the continent.³¹ Consequently, throughout much of the late eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there was a connection in the British mind between liberty and imperialism that was far less developed on the continent.

In others ways, however, Britain was unquestionably European in its outlook and history. In its earliest times, it knew nothing beyond the continent – indeed, was peopled *from* the continent – and its past was inextricably linked with its European neighbours; once extra-European expansion began, the very Otherness of those elsewhere in the world encouraged the development of a concept of European ‘race’ with which the British firmly identified. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the United Kingdom was no closer or further removed from France in its foreign relations than was Prussia (and Germany thereafter), and the Isles had a more interconnected history with the Netherlands – despite the sea that separated them – than the Netherlands had with its more immediate continental neighbours to the south and east.³² Until the twentieth century, the British and German peoples ‘never fought each other’, and their ‘traditions of political cooperation were reinforced by dynastic, cultural, religious and economic ties’.³³ Yet an integrated demographic, economic and religious history was not the only element holding Europe together.

From the seventeenth century onwards, European-ness and imperialism became synonymous. To be European *was* to be imperial. European rivalry – particularly among the British, French, Dutch, Spanish and Portuguese – encouraged mercantilist economics and eventually more explicit imperial expansion. Although the Protestant Reformation drove a religious wedge (indeed, wedges) through and within the European nations, there was a discernible ‘European’ approach to the rest of the world, held as much by Britons as by those on the continent.³⁴ Throughout the eighteenth century and into the era of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1789–1815), there could be no doubt that Britain was at once a European power and an imperial power, both waging war with other European states for supremacy within Europe whilst at the same time engaging in intense

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competition with those very same powers for control of the extra-European world. Britain after 1815 emerged as the victor in a Europe that was a 'far less competitive one than in the preceding two centuries'; however, this did not cause the government to withdraw from the continent.³⁵ On the contrary, it developed a policy of manipulating the European continent into a 'balance of power', which allowed Britain a free hand to pursue its imperial ambitions. This was not a rejection of a European role for the United Kingdom, as some historians have suggested, but rather a continuing recognition that Britain would always have a responsibility in Europe when conflict arose; only by ensuring peace and stability on the continent could Britain pursue its imperial interests outside it.³⁶

Following the Crimean War of 1853–56 and the cabinet's 1864 refusal to intervene against Prussia in its clash with Denmark, the government did indeed withdraw from active intervention on the European continent. Nevertheless, there continued throughout the premierships of Gladstone and Disraeli certain 'inherited traditions' from the mid-Victorian era, not least of which were 'rival claims to the manifest British moral leadership of Europe'. The Whigs and Liberals believed it was the duty and responsibility of Britain to establish 'under British auspices a concert of powers sharing a common liberal ideology'; the Cobdenites saw in Europe a natural habitat for their free-trade economics, where a common non-interventionist foreign policy and open markets could bring lasting peace and friendship to the European peoples; and the Conservatives asserted that continued British leadership in Europe stemmed from Viscount Castlereagh's achievements after the Napoleonic Wars, when he had worked to achieve a conservative consensus amongst the restored European monarchies.³⁷ 'Splendid Isolation' (as it later came to be known) was therefore less a rejection of a British role in Europe than an affirmation that Britain's place in the world – as Europe's leading power – was necessarily larger than the European continent and thus primarily concerned with Britain's extra-European interests.³⁸ By 1902, even this belief was falling out of fashion, leaving the British government's policy of (relative) isolation from the European continent in effect for less than forty years.³⁹

Even during these years of self-imposed exile, the government had continued to act very much as a *European* imperial power, for example, during the combined Anglo–French endeavours to open the

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Suez Canal or at the 1884 Berlin Conference, when representatives from Great Britain, France, Germany, Austria-Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, Portugal, Spain, Russia, Sweden-Norway, Denmark and the Ottoman Empire came together to partition Africa into European colonies and dependencies.⁴⁰ Writing in 1897 – the year of Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee – the Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury, claimed that a federated Europe was ‘our sole hope of escaping from the constant terror and calamity of war, the constant pressure of the burdens of an armed peace, which weigh down the spirits and darken the prospects of every nation in this part of the world. The Federation of Europe is the only hope we have’.⁴¹ Some seventy years later, another Prime Minister – Harold Macmillan – wrote that Salisbury’s vision was an example of ‘thinking in larger terms’ than just the ‘British Empire [which had] reached its apogee of glory and power’.⁴²

When the Second World War erupted in 1939, it did so against the backdrop of two centuries of British foreign policy in which European and imperial considerations were carefully balanced, often inextricably linked. Since the founding of the United Kingdom (and before), Britain’s chief rivals had come from within Europe, and it was against other European states – primarily France – that Britain had ‘Othered’ itself to prove its national uniqueness.⁴³ Yet, throughout it all, there was a grudging recognition of a shared heritage and common European imperial outlook that caused seemingly opposed powers to join forces, particularly when the beneficiary of such cooperation was a European power rather than an extra-European one. If anything, the Second World War only heightened the sense that Britain’s past, present and future was linked to the European continent. If Britain and the British Empire were to survive in the post-war world, they would do so only by leading a larger Europe.

Britain, an island set apart, for many decades the head of a great empire, was (and has always been) a European nation also. As the dynamics of world power shifted following the Second World War, Britain’s imperial heritage and its role in Europe were placed under the microscope like never before. Whereas once it had been taken for granted that Britain was both imperial *and* European, the events of the war years shook the British Empire and the European continent, providing Britain with an opportunity to re-examine its relationship with each amidst the rubble that was left. It is here that our story begins.