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INTRODUCTION

In the second act of Mike Bartlett's 'future history' play *King Charles III*, an exasperated Prince Harry absconds from Buckingham Palace after a row with his newly crowned father. He drifts anonymously through London's side streets in search of a midnight snack where he encounters Paul, a kebab vendor at a kerbside rotisserie, and the pair fall into a conversation about the troubled state of the nation. 'It's like this meat here, all pulled together' ventures Paul, gesturing to the rotating spit – constantly turning and churning but becoming 'smaller all the time' with each slice of the chef's blade. With long carving motions he prepares a shawarma for the incognito Prince, which brings him to the nub of the problem: 'When does Britain get so cut down, that it's not Britain anymore?'[1] The question is allowed to linger, unanswered – as though speaking for itself. In essentials, it is the same question that sets the agenda for this book.

Invoking the 'end of Britain' can seem like an exercise in gratuitous coat-trailing, inviting controversy before a single page is turned. But historians and political pundits have been confidently predicting Britain's expiry date for more than half a century, ever since the first wave of support for separatist political parties in Scotland and Wales in the late 1960s. Speculation about the long-term viability of the Union acquired the weight of scholarly ballast with the publication of *The Break-Up of Britain* – Tom Nairn's influential elegy from 1977 – and has become standard journalistic fare ever since.[2] Though the early momentum stalled with the defeat of the 1979 devolution referendums, Welsh historian Gwyn Williams could nevertheless pronounce shortly afterwards that Britain had 'begun its long march out of history'.[3] In a similar vein, Linda Colley's landmark 1992 study, *Britons: Forging the Nation*, was animated by a sense that 'so many of the components of Britishness' had faded and 'a substantial rethinking of what it means to be British' could no longer be avoided.[4]

Since that time, a surfeit of opinion polls and social surveys have probed the strength of British sentiment, compared with English, Scottish, Welsh or Northern Irish attachments, with results tilting ever-more decisively towards

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sub-national loyalties.[5] The urge to keep repeating the same question – with ever-growing frequency – became a fixture of British political life from the time of the devolution settlement of 1997, and was refashioned as a binding political instrument during the close-run Scottish Independence vote of 2014 (with polls conducted ever since adding a question about whether voters are inclined to revisit the proposition). Viable nations with a stable body politic do not, as a rule, feel compelled continually to gauge the depth of shared feeling (vis-à-vis the strength of not-so-shared feeling). Any social entity – whether it be a trade union, tennis club or a nation-state – that habitually asks its members whether they would not prefer to be part of something else can hardly be said to have longevity on its side. Over time, there is a sense in which the polling itself has merged into a ritualized tolling of the death knell.

To contemplate Britain's quietus, then, is by no means a preposterous or even a particularly original proposition. But this book is different. It is not in the mould of the 'end of Britain tomes' that appeared in quick succession with the inauguration of the Scottish and Welsh assemblies at the turn of the millennium.[6] Nor does it offer a searing critique of the shortcomings of the unitary British state, or mount a case for the self-determination of its constituent parts.[7] Nor, for that matter, does it add to the vast weight of political commentary on the internal political dynamics of devolutionary pressures since the 1970s, assessing the remarkable upswing in the recent fortunes of the Scottish National Party, Sinn Féin and Plaid Cymru.[8] These are all distinct and necessary approaches that remain crucial to informed contemporary debate. But they also proceed from the same unexamined premise: that the affective ties uniting the Kingdom have frayed to the point where they can longer be taken for granted.

Untied Kingdom addresses this underlying problem, asking questions about the changing historical contingencies of being British and the deeper ruptures over time that have brought matters to such a precarious impasse; not a detailed accounting of 'devolution' per se, but a wider history of what Alvin Jackson terms the 'emotional or spiritual deficit in the Union'.[9] The surprising swing towards 'yes Scotland' in the 2014 independence referendum was widely attributed to the serial missteps of the 'no' campaign, as recriminations redounded on its dearth of charisma, relentless negativity and conspicuous failure to provide an emotional dimension to the Unionist cause. But the lack of passion and verve was not simply the fault of Unionism's 'bloodless advocates'. As Janan Ganesh noted at the time, 'big things do not happen for small reasons . . . the trigger for such large events may be fiddly and particular . . . but the ultimate cause is deep and

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structural'. The scapegoating of the campaign overlooked a more intractable problem: that the Union's binding moral compact had been steadily unravelling for decades, unable to recover from the mortal blow of Britain's post-war imperial retreat.[10]

THE IMPERIAL DISAPPEARING ACT: GLOBAL PROJECTIONS

'With the end of Empire and the fading of uniting wartime memory, Britishness has receded as something felt in the pulse, a hot, urgent value, and retreated into official abstraction.'[11] Andrew Marr is only the most recent in a long line of influential voices to discern a link between the historical burden of imperial decline and the slow depletion of shared British sentiment since the Second World War. Speculation about a possible connection between the two can be traced as far back as the origins of decolonization itself. Virtually all the early prophets of the 1970s gave prominence to the end of empire as the crucial precursor event that opened the devolutionary floodgates, and over the years, historians of remarkably diverse leanings from Linda Colley herself to J. G. A. Pocock, Raphael Samuel, Krishan Kumar and Norman Davies have thrown their intellectual weight behind it.[12] To this day, the empire routinely resurfaces to make sense of the diminishing returns of being British, not least in the context of the fault lines exposed by the Brexit crisis.[13]

Yet for all its presumptive explanatory power, the end of empire tends to be framed as an abstract tipping point, with little sense of its real-life interactions or everyday consequences. It appears as a remote backdrop – self-contained and largely self-explanatory – that need not delay matters or divert attention from the main act. As such, its allegedly corrosive properties are habitually glossed over, reducible to the 'disappearance of the project which for so long had defined Britishness and British institutions' – a conspicuous absence rather than a vital interface.[14] This has sustained a range of positions that attribute an extraordinary dynamism to an unexamined subject, as though the empire's mere 'disappearance' were causation itself. A crude logic of subtraction (take out the empire and the edifice crumbles) has taken the place of fine-grained analysis – exemplified by David Marquand's pithy formula: 'Shorn of empire, "Britain" had no meaning … it is by definition impossible for Britain as such to be post-imperial'.[15] When the answer literally defines the problem, why probe the matter further?

This book sets out to take seriously the proposition that being British was always heavily entangled in overseas projections, affecting peoples in

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disparate parts of the globe who came variously into contact with its expanding perimeter. Understanding its protracted demise therefore requires a similarly wide-angled lens. A global history of the end of Britain is not simply about embracing a more diverse or 'inclusive' story, even if it does admit a wider cast of historical actors. More importantly, it addresses the problem in its proper dimensions, working from the premise that *not* approaching the matter in this way simply misses – and misconstrues – too much. If social identities are inherently relational, arising out of intricate patterns of material and cultural exchange connecting peoples across wide distances, then focusing solely on the 'British of Britain' can provide only a partial and incomplete perspective. By incorporating the fate of Britishness in the many corners of the world where it has long since ceased to command any popular allegiance, the diminishing strength of unitary sentiment in the contemporary United Kingdom emerges in a whole new light.

What follows therefore is an attempt to redraw the boundaries of the subject itself – the end of Britain rendered as a series of global ruptures with profound consequences for metropolitan and 'overseas' constituents alike. Charles Dilke's nineteenth-century imagining of a 'Greater Britain' furnishes the principal navigating instrument, retooled for present purposes to override its white racial affiliations and admit a wider assortment of peoples and cultures into its purview.[16] Dilke himself was an unapologetic, dyed-in-the-wool Victorian racist. But the skewed moral compass so typical of his generation can shed valuable light on how his conception of a globally linked fraternity of British peoples ultimately fared. The exaltation of 'the British race' was to be Britain's undoing, and in this sense the otherwise embarrassingly obsolete cadence of Greater Britain can be rendered fit for purpose. It can also contribute to an alternative reading of decolonization, looking beyond the political and ideological implosion of empire to consider the diminished resonance of Britain-in-the-world, affecting an extended chain of communities located variously 'offshore'.

Approaching the subject in this way means jettisoning several key misconceptions and red herrings. Anyone familiar with the long and intricate history of constitutional devolution in the UK will recognize the futility of formulating a direct cause-and-effect relationship. As several critics have pointed out, the centrifugal forces pulling the 'Four Nations' apart emerged either too soon (the Home Rule crises of the late Victorian era) or too late (the post-Thatcher surge of devolutionary pressure) to establish any neat correlation with the end of empire.[17] Similarly, the well-worn paradigm of 'internal colonialism', positing Scotland and Wales as

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England's 'last colonies' still awaiting emancipation, tends to oversimply a far more complex reality and is best pushed to one side.[18] Readers in search of validation for such reveries are advised to look elsewhere.

If meaningful connections are to be made, a more circuitous route is needed, relinquishing hard and fast distinctions between 'the British' and the wider world they inhabited and assimilated to an expansive view of themselves. This is not a book where the empire is something that 'happens' to Britain, but one that traces how the United Kingdom and its overseas affiliates all became swept up in the global dislocations of imperial decline. The end of empire was no mere trigger but an integral component of the 'Break-up of Britain' – as fundamental as the ongoing political ructions over Scottish independence or the Northern Ireland border. Though the ultimate fate of the Union cannot yet be known, there are valuable insights to be gleaned from viewing its current travails in a much wider perspective, as merely the latest in a long line of civic ruptures in a world where being British has ceased to resonate as a unifying proposition.

It is emphatically a work of history, focused primarily on the four crucial decades from the late 1940s to the early 1980s when the external props of empire faltered, and the expansive properties of Britishness were desentimentalized. If 'the ultimate cause' of Britain's demise 'is deep and structural', it is to be found – it will be argued here – in the progressive rollback of its imaginative frontiers. For many, indeed most of the contexts to be explored here, the 'end of Britain' is no idle prediction but a simple, unadorned fact of everyday life – from Kenya to Australia, Zimbabwe, Canada, Jamaica, New Zealand, India, Pakistan, Hong Kong, Singapore, South Africa, Barbados and even (in a somewhat different vein) the Falkland Islands and Gibraltar. As such, it is by no means premature to render the matter as 'history'. Nor can residual British sentiment in the United Kingdom – still capable of stirring genuine, albeit highly ambivalent feelings – be said to have emerged unaffected from the complex fragmentations of empire's end. Here, too, there is a history to be told, even if its full implications remain to be seen.

'THINGS FALL APART': THE ARGUMENT OF THIS BOOK

Among the many repercussions of the Brexit vote of June 2016 was the renewed currency of worldly aspirations among its chief advocates – specifically, the idea of restoring 'Global Britain' as a worthy and desirable national goal. Initially intended as a makeshift substitute for EU membership, over time it also became a means of checking separatist

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momentum in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The promise of reactivating a 'world role' could be contrasted favourably with the narrower preoccupations of devolutionary politics, tapping into memories of a time when Britain seemed to count for so much more. But for all its historical resonances, it is the fundamental novelty of Global Britain – the need to spell it out so baldly in such unprecedented circumstances – that exposes the outworn logic of the idea of Britain itself. If Global Britain needed to be rediscovered to resist the tide of national fragmentation, what does that say about the historical connections between the two?

Marquand's premise that 'the British state was, by definition, a global state; and the British people, by definition, was a global people' provides an invaluable starting point, but it remains poorly conceptualized.[19] British identities did not simply evolve in tandem with historical patterns of outward expansion and imperial conquest; they were themselves largely conditioned by overseas enterprise, responding to the need for a serviceable shorthand to encompass new and unfamiliar social realities. From the early seventeenth century, schemes for overseas colonization were tentatively couched in the aspirational language of Britain and Britons. By the mid-eighteenth century, with the consolidation of maritime commerce and incessant global warfare with France, the idea of a British people operating beyond the conventional bounds of geography had become increasingly commonplace. The massive outpouring of migrants in the nineteenth century lent critical mass to an emergent global civic idea, forging a shared identity and corporate purpose, not only among the diverse accumulations of migrants themselves (sourced from every corner of the United Kingdom), but also from a wider assortment of peoples drawn by all manner of complex motivations – physical coercion, material advantage and the lure of British constitutional liberties.

The point is not to impose some spurious uniformity on the intricately layered possibilities for being British but the very opposite – to embrace the sheer diversity of peoples and cultures that became bundled together under such an open-ended category. There can be no easy definitions or simple historical consensus about the many variations of Britishness throughout the lifespan of the empire, but equally there can be no doubt about the effects of imperial decline on the intricate patchwork of affinities forged throughout the world in Britain's name. It is the sheer capaciousness of the subject – geographically, ideologically, sentimentally – that holds the key. Much of what follows engages with long-standing variations, vexations and outright contradictions deeply embedded in a 'greater' conception of

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Britain harking back hundreds of years, unable to withstand the unique pressures brought to bear in the post-war world.

'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold', runs Yeats's well-worn aphorism, but when it comes to accounting for the end of Britain the centre–periphery axis only gets us so far. If British identities emerged out of a wider confluence of peoples and patterns of exchange, their recessional in the second half of the twentieth century also needs to be recounted as a collective experience. To be sure, a crucial piece of the puzzle is the diminished capacity of the United Kingdom to fulfil the role of an imperial hub, having shouldered the burden of two world wars and a crippling economic depression. The challenge of imperial overstretch was nothing new in itself, but the effects of a sustained period of global conflict placed intolerable restraints on what John Darwin terms the 'British world-system'.[20] With a severely reduced capacity to invest overseas, service the heavy requirements of imperial defence and provide the manufacturing clout to sustain traditional patterns of intra-empire and Commonwealth trade, Britain entered the post-war world as a depleted force. This, combined with the unprecedented demand to invest the country's residual resources in rebuilding projects at home (attending to the social as much as the physical infrastructure), set the putative imperial centre down a path of irreconcilable differences with British subjects overseas. Latent conflicts of interest that had permeated empire–Commonwealth networks for generations became endemic in these years, unpicking the many pre-existing flaws in the Greater British fabric.

But there were other factors in play that cannot simply be ascribed to a Gibbonesque 'decline and fall'. The mid-twentieth century marked a decisive moment when 'modern globalization encountered the forces of decolonization' – radically altering the terms of exchange of raw materials for industrial goods between colonies and metropoles.[21] Global demand for manufactures encouraged deeper patterns of economic integration between exporters of finished consumer goods, undermining the economic rationale of colonial systems of commercial allegiance. This coincided with a period of innovation in international civic norms and global governance, with a profusion of multinational organizations and regional blocs that cut across older cultural alignments, marginalizing sub-systems of world order founded on shared British constitutional custom. The global ideological struggle of the Cold War compounded these developments, adding a further dimension to the general climate of adversity for colonialism worldwide. Taken together, the historical conditions that had cultivated and consolidated an imperial culture of Britishness were called into

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question, profoundly impacting the signifiers of 'greatness' and putting on notice the lazy equivalence of territorial purview with national prestige.

But these factors were slow to reveal themselves and, at least initially, British-derived models provided a certain inspiration for the emerging configurations of global order, particularly in the interwar years where hopes were entertained that the British Commonwealth might provide a template for a 'world Commonwealth'. Despite the influence of J. C. Smuts and other key Commonwealth figures in drafting the UN Charter, however, it soon transpired that a new 'culture of internationalism' geared towards global scales of political organization would throw down a challenge to the comparatively naive conception of a worldwide continuum of interdependent British peoples. 'Globalism offered an alternative to empire', as one history of this pivotal period affirms, drastically curbing the potential of the Commonwealth as a conduit of Greater British sentiment.[22] The most visible sign was the 'Independence Day' spectacle of Union Jacks hauled down in every corner of the globe and replaced by alternative markers of national esteem. But the political success of anti-colonial nationalism tended to overshadow a far broader complex of 'worldmaking' initiatives that experimented with 'political forms beyond and below the nation-state', striving for equality, human dignity and a new international order.[23] The sheer range and proliferation of new moral worlds on offer – Marxist, pan-African, 'non-aligned', or simply humanitarian – would call into question the durability of 'British worlds' anchored in English constitutional liberties.

These global realignments also undercut British identities in far more direct ways. After an extended wartime and interwar hiatus, a renewed era of hypermobility was inaugurated in the early 1950s with British subjects around the world once again asserting their rights (and enhanced means) to move freely to and from Britain, now enshrined in the extraordinarily wide provisions of the British Nationality Act of 1948.[24] This coincided with a mid-century communications revolution that brought dramatic improvements in audio and visual broadcasting technologies, drawing peoples separated by vast distances into more tightly integrated patterns of virtual proximity. These developments might have been expected to consolidate and perhaps even intensify transoceanic networks of Britishness, forging deeper social interactions and breaking down long-distance barriers to familiarity. And to be sure, these possibilities were anticipated and eagerly exploited by way of assisted emigration schemes and enhanced collaboration at what appears (in retrospect) as 'the high point of Britannic broadcasting cooperation'.[25] But over time, and particularly a time when wider British allegiances were subject

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to intense material and ideological strain, the very opposite tendency began to emerge.

It was a prime example of 'the politics of recognition' – Charles Taylor's conceptualization of 'how much an original identity needs and is vulnerable to the recognition given or withheld by significant others' – played out over immense distances. Self-styled 'British' communities in all parts of the world would be confronted with the jarring 'misrecognition' that arises whenever peoples and cultures presumed to be bound by protocols of mutual regard are suddenly struck by their glaring absence (and find themselves questioning and reformulating their affinities accordingly). Taylor stressed the fundamentally dialogical character of identity-formation – the constantly evolving modes of self-expression 'through interaction with others who matter to us'. The question of 'who mattered' would expose the finer distinctions of being British in the decades after 1945, when a whole range of localized inflections were drawn into closer physical and moral proximity, and hence unprecedented scrutiny.[26]

Stuart Hall drew on Taylor's term to describe the metropolitan encounter of the 'Windrush' generation of West Indian arrivals in the 1950s, who found themselves constantly reminded of the limits of imperial Britishness ('Who are these people? Where are they from? What language do they speak? ... Could someone ever be black and British?'). 'Misrecognition' was coupled with a pronounced 'misremembering' on the part of their hosts, such that Caribbean 'histories, and their long historical entanglements with Britain, disappeared from daily consciousness'. But Hall also saw that the enmity could cut both ways, observing how working-class whites and West Indian migrants 'grew to misrecognize each other as the main cause of their misfortune'.[27] These dynamics did not appear overnight, but marked an acceleration of interwar trends where newly arrived migrants, students and intellectuals from all parts of the empire converged around an incipient counter-political culture centred on London in particular.[28] The effects were compounded throughout the post-war world wherever and whenever competing British sensibilities produced similar shocks of mutual misrecognition.

Often, the extreme measures employed to preserve Britain's global coordinates only accentuated the problem, particularly when it came to combatting colonial insurgencies. It is sometimes overlooked that the decades of decolonization marked a late surge of imperial consolidation, with rising rates of British emigration and even higher rates of military deployments overseas – increasing the likelihood of violent clashes with anti-colonial resistance movements. The same technological innovations that

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enabled Britain to intensify its military deployments – from Kenya to Malaya, Cyprus, Aden and elsewhere – also brought the grim realities of conflict closer to home. As Erik Linstrum's work so lucidly shows, 'the networks of imperial modernity' not only made 'atrocities possible' but also brought people into ever-more vivid contact with their unnerving implications.[29] The effect was to undermine confidence in overextended frontiers, polarizing attitudes about the morality and the fundamental necessity of British interventions abroad and exposing divisions in the very communities that British power was meant to defend.

Indeed, the fault lines of misrecognition multiplied in these years to expose latent divisions among the 'old' or 'white' Commonwealth. Long-standing embarrassments such as the 'White Australia' immigration policy or the practice of racial segregation in South Africa produced echoes of older liberal and humanitarian misgivings, now lumbered with an immediacy and intensity by technology's triumph over distance. Even the increased frequency of intergovernmental conferences (though presented as the pinnacle of Commonwealth fellow-feeling) brought the disruptive potential of physical proximity to the fore. From the late 1940s, each gathering of Commonwealth prime ministers furnished a fresh volley of recriminations as the certainties of white solidarity faltered. Here, too, an element of misremembering played a part, affecting influential opinion in each of the old settler societies – particularly among an emergent post-war generation bent on relinquishing the imperial baggage of Britishness by promoting new, more self-sufficient conceptions couched increasingly in terms of 'national identity'. It was not simply a case of 'de-dominionization' – decoupling the white empire from outmoded affections for the motherland – but also a process of internal discord, as once-normative British sensibilities fractured internally across social, ideological and generational lines.[30]

The retrenchment of imperial interests and the attendant patterns of misrecognition became self-reinforcing, not least because the idea of Britain drew so heavily on long-distance projections. As the system faltered in one part of the world, others could not avoid being affected (where they were not directly embroiled) – as witnessed, for example, by the spontaneous scramble for new citizenship laws throughout the Commonwealth when Canada unilaterally downgraded British subjecthood in 1946. Being British was not something that could prosper in the absence of significant others (real or imagined) equally invested in other parts of the world. When white Rhodesians finally renounced the British connection in 1965 while striking the defiant pose of loyalty's last true bastion, they were to discover

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