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British writing from empire to Brexit: Writing, identity, and nation

by Robert Spencer, Howard J. Booth, and Anastasia Valassopoulos,
Abingdon, Routledge, 2025, 206 pp., £3199 (paperback), ISBN
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BOOK REVIEW

British writing from empire to Brexit: Writing, identity, and nation, by Robert Spencer, Howard J. Booth, and Anastasia Valassopoulos, Abingdon, Routledge, 2025, 206 pp., £3199 (paperback), ISBN 9781032137865

Taking readers on a 116-year journey from the height of the British Empire through to the divisive referendum that took Britain out of the EU, *British Writing from Empire to Brexit* is, in a sense, a literary pre-history of Brexit, presenting a persuasive claim for literature's ability to construct and deconstruct conceptions of cultural solidarity. The authors see the 2016 EU referendum as revealing the fragility of an ostensibly monolithic British national identity, but importantly, argue that this fragility is not new or particular to Brexit. Rather, the structural inequities within British society (relating to region, class, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality) were entrenched by colonial expansion and have since been masked by the myths of a democratic national unity. "[N]ational identity", they write in an acerbic Introduction, is "a diversion from and a compensation for the evacuation of solidarity from other spheres of life over the last 40 years or so, particularly in the context of the increasing enclosure of social and economic life by capital" (20). The book shows how this social reality has also given rise to literary imaginaries that open up "inclusive forms of national identity" and "ethical and political connections across national boundaries" (191).

There have been a number of scholarly works that explore how contemporary literature has responded to the fallout from Brexit and how the referendum must be understood within the context of Britain's colonial history (see Eaglestone Robert (2018), Stuart Ward and Astrid Rasch (2019), Caroline Koegler, Pavan Kumar Malreddy, and Marlena Tronicke (2021), and Kristian Shaw (2021)). What makes *British Writing from Empire to Brexit* stand out is its mapping of a literary *longue durée* of the Brexit vote that speaks to the authors' combined expertise in Victorian, Modernist, late-20th century, postcolonial and contemporary literatures. The impressive range of canonical and non-canonical literary texts that are explored across this book is read as offering dissonant, disruptive and dissenting perspectives on the dominant myths of national solidarity that equate Englishness with whiteness and disregard the formative histories of empire and migration. Works by such disparate writers as H.G. Wells, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Sam Selvon, Kamala Markandaya, Caryl Churchill, Abdulrazak Gurnah, and Kamala Shamsie (to name only a few) are brought together as a corpus that "dramatize[s] struggles over national definition" (17).

The three main chapters cover the periods of late British colonialism (1900–1948), decolonization (1948–1980), and the rise of multiculturalism (1980–2016), respectively. Chapter one, "Nation, Empire, and Identity in Late Colonial British Writing", examines ways in which early 20th-century literature questions (among other things) the imperial pursuit of profit, the valorization of national sacrifice through war, and the marginalization of Irish, Welsh and Scottish cultures. Chapter two, "Post-War Unsettling", commits to the "rival possibilities" (114) contained in post-war British texts that refuse the parochialism and melancholia of dominant responses to the end of the Empire. Chapter three, "'We Have Been Made Again'", sees the growth of postcolonial studies and the rhetoric of multiculturalism as a "rebuttal to the social and political apparatuses enjoined to [...] deny the continued [...] legacy of empire" (136). At the same time, the chapter examines writing by diasporic novelists

that is sceptical of a state-sanctioned doctrine of multiculturalism, whereby racial and cultural essentialisms are reified instead of transcended.

There is much of relevance in this book for postcolonial scholars, not only in its charting of the influence of colonialism on British life but also in its methodological approach, deploying as it does a “contrapuntal” close reading of texts (following Edward Said) that is alive to the “connections between apparently discrepant worlds” (19). The close, contrapuntal readings, moreover, sit in dialogue with the materialist connections between British politics and culture made by Raymond Williams, Perry Anderson, Tom Nairn, Stuart Hall, and Paul Gilroy. In doing so, *British Writing from Empire to Brexit* provides an archetype for understanding how colonialism has remade Britain, and where postcolonial theory intersects with a tradition of British Cultural Studies that would have become radically different without decolonization and diasporic migration from across the Empire. Simultaneously, the book highlights the impact of Britain’s relationship with the EU on the direction of cultural studies.

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