Introduction

Pat Thane

London in 1900 was the proud seat of the empress of India, capital of the world's largest empire, of one of the world's great powers. As Andrew Thompson's article points out, however, it was also experiencing some unexpected and painful shocks as the great British army struggled to hold South Africa within the empire in the Anglo-Boer war. London was home to people of a diverse mix of origins, notably the large population of Jewish refugees from the Russian empire, but it was perceived overwhelmingly as a "white" city.

London as we approach 2000 rules just tiny fragments of that empire, such as Hong Kong (for just a few months longer) and the Malvinas/Falklands (probably not for much longer). It is a minor player in world politics, with a weak economy. Its population is visibly so diverse that it no longer makes sense to describe it as "white." It is an astounding, exhilarating mix, if not always an easy one. Young or old, Pakistanis are beaten up or, less dramatically, routinely pushed and jostled. The group suffering most from the high unemployment rate are young men of Afro-Caribbean origin, who also emerge least qualified from an educational system that educates fewer persons past age sixteen than that of any other developed country. Yet Afro-Caribbean women gain more qualifications than white working-class men, and South Asians of Indian origin enter university in numbers disproportionately higher than their representation in the population. The extent of peaceable social mixing—the numbers of mixed race couples (of all sexual orientations) visible on the streets, mainly among younger people—has changed strikingly over the past twenty years, since the period discussed by Chris Waters. Racist groups have notably failed to gain votes or substantial support. There are tensions, but there are no no-go areas in London, or

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exclusively black,[1] Asian, or other ghettos. Contrary to what visitors often expect, Brixton, for example, is a mixed-race district that looks much like the rest of inner south London.

The picture in the 1990s is complicated—no unproblematic melting-pot, of course, but no site of endless tension. The change over the century is dramatic. How it has come about, the effects, and the contrast over time lead into some of the key themes in the study of twentieth-century British history, many of which are developed in this issue of the *Journal of British Studies.*

Probably the most important, and certainly a welcome and exciting, change currently emerging in the study of modern British history is that historians of Britain are at last recognizing that the empire has something to do with them, that empire is in fact integral to their enterprise, rather than something offstage, safely left to "imperial historians," or impinging upon us just occasionally. Empire, decolonization, and what has followed have influenced British consciousness, society, and culture to an extent that we still hardly understand and are only beginning to explore, just as colonization influenced the colonies in complex ways that were not uniformly disadvantageous. As awareness of gender has transformed our approaches to history in recent years, an awareness of empire is beginning similarly to enrich it.

An important theme discussed by all three authors in this issue is that of the nature of British national identity and patriotism. Thompson describes how this consciousness developed at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries as an essentially imperial identity. Both he and Waters, and implicitly Nicoletta Gullace, emphasize that this identity was indeed *British*, not English. Scots played a major role as colonial administrators, businessmen, missionaries, and settlers. The relationship of Irish people to empire was different. Many of them migrated to the colonies but disowned British nationality and felt, with good reason, that Ireland itself was a colony, not (as it was formally designated) an integral part of the United Kingdom.

But as, increasingly from the later nineteenth century, the characteristics of national cultural identities were being more explicitly defined, the symbols of "Britishness," for example, John Bull, were far more likely to be recognizably English than Scots or Welsh. As "race" and "nation" came to be more closely aligned in specialist and popular discourse, the slippages and complications in the definition of British iden-

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[1] I prefer not to adopt Waters's inclusive use of "Black," which I fear subsumes and subordinates linguistically the variety of South Asian communities, other large groups such as the Turks, and many smaller ones such as the growing number of Iraqi refugees.

tity multiplied. In common law since at least the seventeenth century British nationality extended to everyone born within the empire. They were subjects of the crown and, in principle, shared identical rights.[2] As Thompson describes it, this notion became problematic once nations began to be equated with races that were assumed to differ in their cultural characteristics. When some of the British began to imagine the empire as a racial rather than a political unity, as a "family" with an assumed common genetic inheritance, all members of a British "imperial race," a barrier was raised between the colonies of white settlement, mainly of British and Irish origin, and those—India above all—which were not.

At the same time, in the early years of the twentieth century the elites of the white dominions were evolving national identities of their own which blended association with Britain with a sense of the distinctiveness of their South African, Australian, and other identities, while excluding from those identities groups such as the black inhabitants of South Africa, Aboriginals in Australia, and the Inuit in Canada.[3] This assertion of distinct national identities within the empire was potentially dangerous for Britain. The size of its empire was essential if such a small country was to hold its own against competition from the much larger Germany and the United States, but it signalled the threat of break-up.

After years of negotiation between Britain and the white dominions the tensions were uneasily settled in the British Nationality and Status of Aliens Act, 1914, which affirmed for the first time in statute law that a "British subject anywhere is a British subject everywhere," but enabled each self-governing dominion to decide to whom each would grant citizenship. A black West Indian might, in principle, be a British subject, but that was certainly no guarantee that he or she could settle in Australia or South Africa or, increasingly, in Britain itself.[4]

So, already before 1914, as Thompson points out, British nationality was coming to be racially as well as culturally defined and, as Gullace shows, national characteristics were divided by gender. In the 1920s and 1930s the British empire was at its largest as a result of the postwar settlement. It also experienced persistent rebellion, most obviously from

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[2] A. Dummett and A. Nicol, *Subjects, Citizens and Aliens: Nationality and Immigration Law* (London, 1990).

[3] For an introductory discussion of this, see Pat Thane, "The British National State and the Construction of National Identities," in *Borderlines: Genders and Identities in Peace and War, 1870–1930,* ed. Billie Melman (London, in press).

[4] Laura Tabili, "The Construction of Racial Difference in Twentieth Century Britain: The Social Restriction (Coloured Alien Seamen) Order, 1925," *Journal of British Studies* 33, no. 1 (January 1994): 54–98.

the Indian independence movement, but in reality in a very high proportion of colonies that were not dominated by white settlers.

Waters accurately describes how in the 1920s and 1930s "British" culture was described in new ways, emphasizing not imperial glory but the domestic and private, the world of the "common people," again with images whose English resonance is stronger than that of Scotland and Wales—images of withdrawal from a hostile world outside Britain. Further contribution to this definition of a national identity built from the experiences of everyday life came from Mass Observation, which was established in the late 1930s specifically to explore and to give value to the lives of "ordinary people" and to encourage national cohesion around this core. Historians also played a role. The Liberal G. M. Trevelyan's *English Social History* (London, 1942) was purposefully written at the beginning of the Second World War to convey—to the "English" this time—a sense of a national culture and what formed it, one which incorporated the masses not just the elite, which it was worth fighting to preserve. To Trevelyan's left, G. D. H. Cole and Raymond Postgate's *Short History of the Common People,* another interpretation of the national culture, was first published in London in 1938 with a second edition in 1946. We need to remember something of which these intellectuals were well aware: it was only twenty years since all adult males and only ten years since all adult females had obtained the vote.

This cultural definition of British/Englishness ran alongside another, racialized, discourse. A major concern for all developed countries in the interwar years was the falling birthrate. Hence, the unsuccessful efforts of Hitler and Mussolini to encourage fertility.[5] This was widely discussed as a symptom of racial degeneration, as vigorously in Britain as anywhere. The Liberal William Beveridge wrote in 1924: "The questions now facing us are how far will the fall go; whether it will bring about a stationary white population after or long before the white man's world is full; how the varying incidence of restriction among different social classes and creeds will affect the stock; how far the unequal adoption of birth control in different races will leave one race at the mercy of another's growing numbers or drive it to armaments or permanent aggression in self-defense."[6]

Concern about the falling birthrate and its effects continued and

[5] Maria-Sophia Quine, *Population Politics in Twentieth Century Europe* (London, 1996).
[6] W. Beveridge, "Population and Unemployment," in *Essays in the Economics of Socialism and Capitalism: Selected Papers Read to Section F, The British Association for the Advancement of Science, 1886–1932,* ed. R. L. Smyth (London, 1964), p. 270.

intensified in Britain through the interwar years.[7] In 1938 the social radi-
cal Richard Titmuss published the widely read *Poverty and Population:
A Factual Study of Contemporary Social Waste.* He argued that the de-
clining birthrate and the aging of the population amounted to "national
suicide" and would lead to a "decline in the mean intelligence quotient
of the nation and a reduction in social competence." "Can we," he
asked, "maintain our present attitudes to India while we decline in num-
bers and age . . . (and India's population expands)? Can we in these
circumstances retain our particular status in the world, our genius for
colonization, our love of political freedom and our leadership of the Brit-
ish commonwealth of nations . . . are we to bring to such a pathetic
close, to such a mean inglorious end, a history which with all its faults
still shines with the lights of our gifts to mankind and still glows with
the patient courage of the common people?"[8]

Such fears were expressed equally insistently, if less picturesquely,
in the "Report of the Royal Commission on Population" in 1949. A
possible answer, of course, to the declining numbers of persons of work-
ing age was immigration. The Commission concluded: "Immigration on
a large scale into a firmly established society like ours could only be
welcomed without reserve if the immigrants were of good human stock
and were not prevented by their religion or race from intermarrying into
the host population and becoming merged with it. . . . There is little or
no prospect that we should be able to apply these conditions to large-
scale immigration in the future and every increase of our needs . . .
would tend to lower the standards of selection."[9] The imagined postwar
community was not multiracial, and the perception of national identity
embodied in these quotes from influential sources was thoroughly ra-
cialized.

Such racial thinking conflicted with the parallel, if increasingly
hopeless, dream that the empire could evolve into a cooperating multira-
cial commonwealth. Thompson describes the contradictions and limits
to the radical liberal view of empire. Radicals at the beginning of the
century did not want an oppressive empire, but neither could they visual-
ize a process of reform leading to independence for the colonies. The

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[7] See Pat Thane, "The Debate on the Declining Birth Rate in Britain: The 'Menace'
of an Aging Population, 1920s–1950s," *Continuity and Change* 5, no. 2 (1990): 283–
304.
   [8] R. M. Titmuss, *Poverty and Population: A Factual Study of Contemporary Social
Waste* (London, 1938), p. 53.
   [9] "Report of the Royal Commission on Population," *Parliamentary Papers, 1948,*
vol. 19, p. 124.

empire was so integral to British identity and to Britain's still powerful position in the world that few dared imagine the empire detached from it. The radical hope for a commonwealth of self-governing states as a unique multiracial grouping in world politics was real but impotent because it could not confront (still less defeat) the racial divisions within the empire. The last gasp of this ideal was the British Nationality Act of 1948, which conferred common nationality and theoretically equal rights with the inhabitants of the United Kingdom on citizens of Commonwealth nations. Thereafter they might describe themselves either as "British subjects" or "Commonwealth citizens." The Bill, and the idea of a Commonwealth, were generally applauded in the Labour-dominated House of Commons. The Commonwealth ideal remained strong and sincerely held among Conservatives as well as Labour Party supporters and Liberals. An undervalued feature of the postwar welfare state was Labour's increased investment in the development of the colonies despite Britain's own economic difficulties. It was not sustained by their Conservative successor after 1951. In 1948 right-wing conservative critics of the Nationality Act were very few, though Waters is right to point out that they expressed views that were later to become prominent. A great deal of right-wing sentiment, which was later to come to the fore, lurked beneath the surface of the postwar "consensus." Given the length and depth of racial thinking in Britain it is perhaps surprising that racial conflict has not also been more intense.

The 1948 definition of citizenship was soon to lose whatever meaning it had as a succession of colonies became independent and some, such as Ireland, left the Commonwealth, and as British governments responded to growing Commonwealth immigration by restricting rights to full British citizenship. Yet, as Waters describes, even as the empire crumpled, still the British could not imagine a new identity but tried with increasing desperation to cling on to the old one. Our imaginations still have not caught up with the creative possibilities of being a multicultural society within Europe.