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All That is Solid Melts into Air? Britishness in the Twentieth Century

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This is a pre-publication version.

The last three decades have seen a continuing sense of crisis of identity emerge in the United Kingdom. This sense of crisis has been caused by the changing position of the United Kingdom in its relationships with the world. For a nation that has seen its world position as a central part of its identity for five hundred years, this sense of crisis was bound to be severe. It is easy to list the components of change. The United Kingdom is no longer the leading power in the world that it once was: the United States has taken over as the dominant power in economics, politics and diplomacy, and in culture. The UK's response to this change has been to turn from an imperial to a European role, but this too has contributed to the sense of a loss of national identity. At the same time the changing constitutional relationship between the Westminster parliament and the sub-nations of the United Kingdom, that is Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, has been seen not as a source of flexibility and adaptability but as a component of the weakness of the whole United Kingdom. This sense of crisis is exacerbated by the continuing troubles within the Royal Family. Three out of four of the marriages of the Queen's children have ended in divorce. The sense of crisis, in some quarters, has been added to by the apparent lessening in the ethnic homogeneity (sameness) of the UK by the arrival of millions of non-white migrants from the countries of the former British Empire.

These events have been greeted by an array of books announcing the end of the United Kingdom as a continuing entity. Such books began with Tom Nairn's book, *The Break-up of Britain* (1981). First published in 1977, Nairn, a Scottish nationalist influenced by Marxism, argued that the rise of nationalism in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales marked the beginning of the inevitable end of Britain and Britishness. More recently, Nairn has argued that this process of "break-up" is complete in his latest book, *After Britain* (1999). This book is marketed as "a scathing analysis of the twilight of an ancient state: the United Kingdom".¹ There are many other similar titles: *The Rape of the Constitution?* suggests that the Labour government of Tony Blair has committed that most heinous act through its constitutional reforms, including devolution, reform of the House of Lords and its relations with the European Union. John Redwood, a one-time contender for the Conservative leadership, has written a book called *The Death of Britain?* (1999). He argues that such a death is not inevitable, if only his own brand of anti-European and Unionist thought is taken on board. (Unionism here means an attachment to the Acts that created the UK – with Wales in 1536 and 1543, with Scotland in 1707, with Ireland in 1801 and Northern Ireland in 1922). The flavour of such books is illustrated by a quote from Roger Scruton, *England: An Elegy* (2000):

Having been famous for their stoicism, their decorum, their honesty, their gentleness and their sexual Puritanism, the English now subsist in a society in which those qualities are no longer honoured – a society of people who regard long-term loyalties with cynicism, and whose response to misfortune is to look round for someone to sue. England is no longer a gentle country, and the old courtesies and decencies are disappearing. Sport, once a rehearsal for imperial virtues, has become a battleground for hooligans. Sex, freed from taboos, has become the ruling obsession.... (245)

Scruton, a conservative philosopher and experimental farmer, links the crisis of Englishness, located he argues in the collapse of respect for English law, government, character, culture and countryside, to a more general crisis based on the emergence of promiscuity and permissiveness that coincides with the ideas about the break-up of Britain (Newburn 1992; Marwick 1998). The fears for the future of the nation are therefore tied in to an anxiety over the state of the nation's morals.

These writers do not all share the same position. Nairn, as a Scottish nationalist, celebrates the break-up of Britain, while Scruton and Redwood, as English conservatives, mourn that decline. But they share the view that the United Kingdom is witnessing a crisis from which its recovery will be difficult if not impossible.

In this paper I want to argue that these writers, from a range of ideological positions are mistaken in their reading of the contemporary situation, and also that this misunderstanding stems from their lack of historical analysis. They look at the present, see diversity, and equate that with fragmentation. They see difference and variety, they see newness and change, and from this they argue that all that was solid about the United Kingdom has disappeared, and that therefore Britishness is melting away into air. It is worth mentioning that the title of this paper comes from the *Communist manifesto* by Marx and Engels and refers to the constant change inherent in the capitalist economic system. The argument of this paper is that nations too experience constant change, and it will show how the United Kingdom throughout the twentieth century has been culturally diverse, and that diversity has indeed been accommodated within Britishness, indeed that diversity has been the major source of strength of Britishness.

First, it is necessary to examine the historical reading of the British past that the pessimists about Britishness utilise. In many ways their version of the past is firmly located in particular myths about the Second World War, which continues to have iconic significance in Britishness. The war is seen as a time when people in Britain were united, determined and able to stand up to the might of the Nazi war machine when all other European nations had crumbled and been conquered. The British victory in 1945 was seen as validating British institutions and character (Calder 1992). Whilst the roles of the United States and the Soviet Union are recognised, Britain is seen as being equal to them, Winston Churchill standing in equality with Roosevelt, the US president, and Stalin, the Soviet leader.

The version of Britishness taken from the war is more complex than this brief sketch and is illustrated much better by reference to two cinema films. The first is from *Listen to Britain*, a propaganda film made in 1942, by Humphrey Jennings, a slightly left wing and poetic filmmaker, who was commissioned by the government through the Ministry of Information. This brief film of only ten minutes draws out many symbols of Britishness – a link with the British Empire (the introduction is by a Canadian), but as a voluntary association rather than as a system of exploitation; the unity of Britain as represented by focus on a map of the British Isles; the sense that victory would be achieved; the bravery of British manhood, particularly the pilots of the Spitfires (remember Churchill: “never in the field of human conflict has so much been owed by so many to so few”²); the importance of the English countryside to visions of the nation; the role of the BBC as a source of news, indeed truth; the importance of the sea, but also of the popular culture of ordinary people, shown here in dancing and laughter, but overwhelmingly also in the homogeneity and harmony of the people, across classes and generations. The sameness of the ethnic composition of the people in the film might also be noted.

That clip saw Germany as the enemy, against which national characteristics of the British could be projected. The second film has become a classic of British cinema, and was also a

response to a foreign threat, though this time, in *Brief Encounter* (dir. David Lean 1946), the threat was the unrestrained emotions of women portrayed in Hollywood cinema. *Brief Encounter* sensitively carries us through the meeting and (non-sexual) relationship of Laura Jesson (played by Celia Johnson) and Dr Alec Harvey (played by Trevor Howard). Together they decide not to go through with the affair, to think of their families, and to conform to British behaviour of stoicism and emotional restraint (Richards 1997: 123-5). In this film, both men and women, because they are British, have stiff upper lips, however much they might quiver.

I do not want to denigrate such representations of Britishness. They have much to admire, but the point is that the pessimists (a shorthand phrase for Scruton, Redwood and the other commentators) see that version of Britishness as the only version, and that since 1945 and victory both in war, restoration of the Empire and the ability of ordinary people to restrain themselves, everything has gone down hill.

They see the causes of decline as consisting of a range of factors about which Britain's political leaders have either been too weak to resist or have specifically chosen not to act upon. Different commentators have focussed upon different areas. One school of commentators, in line with the politics of Margaret Thatcher, saw the central problem of the post-war years as the enlargement of the state, through social welfare, which was to the detriment of British entrepreneurship and self-reliance (Barnett 1986). Others saw the problem as stemming from the collapse of Britain's global power. If Britishness had been based on the imperial role, then what was left after that role was gone?³ In 1947 Britain gave independence to India and Palestine. This shored up the empire for a time, but between 1960 and 1964 African states achieved independence. By the end of the 1960s Britain controlled only a few islands and outposts, including many that would show the potential of British weakness in the future, not least the Falklands, Hong Kong and Gibraltar. The impact of the end of empire on British mentalities has barely begun to be considered by historians (Ward 2001).

Accompanying the end of Empire were three further areas that have caused much heartache among the pessimists. The United States took over the British role as the leader of the "free world", and while many British politicians have consoled themselves that there has been a "special relationship", this has proved to be a British rather than an American view (Orde 1996; Dimblebey and Reynolds 1988). Second, the end of Empire has seemingly unleashed the forces of Celtic nationalism within the United Kingdom. The *British* Empire had very much been a joint venture. It had been run by Scottish and English administrators, and guarded by Irish and Welsh soldiers. It had been a force for Britishness, holding the UK together in a joint partnership (MacKenzie 1998; Finlay 1997). Some commentators have seen the end of the Empire signifying the beginning of the end for the unity of the United Kingdom (Nairn, 1981). The final point I would like to raise in the "what went wrong" category is the legacy of Empire. Some commentators have seen the gravest threat to Britishness as being posed by the mass migration of black and Asian people from the countries of the former Empire (or New Commonwealth). In 1948 the SS Empire Windrush arrived from the West Indies with nearly 500 men aboard who saw opportunities for employment and adventure in the mother country. For many in Britain, this date has been marked down as the beginning of the problem of immigration (Layton-Henry, 1992; Webster, 1998).

A succession of MPs, of all parties, has suggested that Britain and British culture are unable to cope with the numbers of migrants and their descendants. In 1968 Enoch Powell, a leading member of the Conservative Party in opposition, suggested that within a couple of decades, "the black man would have the whip hand over the white man" (Sterling Times 2001). In 1978, Margaret Thatcher, leader of the Conservative Party said in a "World in action"

television interview that, “People are really rather afraid that this country might be swamped by people with a different culture” (Kushner 1994: 422). This has suggested an exclusive notion of Britishness to which migrants who are too different cannot be allowed entry. Enoch Powell remarked, more than once, that while it was easy to get a United Kingdom passport, it was much more difficult to become culturally British (Kushner 1994: 422).

So these commentators believe that British society has changed from a stable, coherent and homogenous society to one that is threatened from all aspects – from the loss of the world role, from the dominance of the USA, from the experience of mass black migration, from devolution of power to Wales and Scotland, and these processes have been accompanied by a decline in the moral behaviour of the British people.

Such a view is really only tenable if Britain had ever been the static and stable society that these commentators suggest, that Britishness had once been unquestioned and unproblematic. But that is not a tenable position to take. Britain in the twentieth century has certainly been more stable than many of its continental neighbours, but it has never been without social and ethnic diversity. Many commentators noted that Britain was “the most class-ridden nation under the sun” (Orwell 1970: 87) but this is something that the pessimists skirt over, since the primary myth of the Second World War entails the coming together of all classes to face the external enemy in the experiences of rationing and bombing.⁴

The United Kingdom was of course four nations whose relationships were constantly changing (Kearney 1995; Black 1996). These were different nations, even if they shared the same state, even if they shared many similarities of culture and since they had formed a single political entity since 1800, they had a shared history. Of course here, Ireland took a different route as its nationhood outgrew the subordinate relationship to the United Kingdom, and twenty-six counties of southern and western Ireland emerged as the Irish Free State in 1921, as Eire in 1937, and the Republic of Ireland in 1949. But in the rest of the United Kingdom – England, Wales, Scotland and northeast Ireland, the majority of the population both shared characteristics and celebrated differences. It is worth looking briefly at Wales – perhaps the most contentedly integrated nation of the United Kingdom. In the sixteenth century Wales had been annexed by England, its language banned, its nationhood dismissed. Yet within Wales a distinctive and national culture emerged, different and separate from that of England and Scotland. This national culture emerged from its nonconformist Protestant religion and the Welsh language. In 1901 50 per cent of the Welsh population (930,000 people) could speak Welsh. These two forces, the chapel and the language, constructed a range of national events unique in the world that celebrated and carried Welsh culture. These were the *eisteddfodau* (singular: *eisteddfod*): local, regional and national competitive festivals of literature and music that contributed enormously to Welsh culture and identity (Price 1992; Morgan, 1982: 97-9).

Likewise in Scotland was a distinct national identity celebrated. The Act of Union with England had been passed in 1707, but Scotland had retained some of its own institutions, particularly those associated with the law, religion and education. Scottish people saw themselves as Scottish, as different from their other neighbours, with a culture emerging from a historical reading of the past based on a separate history from England and Wales. This too was associated with a cultural distinctiveness, based on a combination of symbolism from the rural Scottish Highlands but also on a pride in the industrial achievements of urban Scotland. These were celebrated for example at the 1938 Empire Exhibition held in Glasgow, visited by 11 million people (MacArthur 1986).

Such distinctiveness in Wales and Scotland did not threaten the stability of the United Kingdom. In both cases there were nationalist parties formed in the 1920s, out of concerns about economic and cultural decline during the interwar depression, but they remained electorally marginal. Before the 1960s only a single nationalist MP was elected. The vast majority of Welsh and Scottish people saw no incompatibility between being Welsh *and* British, Scottish *and* British. Indeed, many historians have argued that the Scottishness saw the United Kingdom and the British Empire as an arena for stressing their distinctiveness. For example David Livingstone, nineteenth-century Scottish Protestant missionary and explorer, was celebrated in Scotland and supported by Scottish subscriptions, but was buried in Westminster Abbey as a British religious and imperial hero (MacKenzie 1998; Finlay 1997).

In addition, people from Wales and Scotland contributed to the personnel of the government of the United Kingdom. Gladstone, four times Liberal prime minister in the nineteenth century, had connections to both Scotland and Wales. The leaders of the Labour Party in the first part of the twentieth century – Keir Hardie, James Ramsay MacDonald and Arthur Henderson – hailed from Scotland. Lloyd George, the man who won the First World War, was known as the “Welsh wizard”, and within the Conservative Party, prime ministers A.J. Balfour and Andrew Bonar Law were both of Scottish origin. The government of the United Kingdom was therefore British rather than English (Robbins 1998: 270).

Even those within the unionist parties, who believed that the United Kingdom consisted of one nationality, recognised that there were substantial differences of identity from Edinburgh to Exeter, from Dublin to Dundee, from Belfast to Betws Y Coed.⁵ These differences were accommodated within the notion of regional identities, so that the Scottish were seen as British but different, as Yorkshire was seen as British but different. The second major source of diversity was that Britain was not as ethnically homogenous as it seemed at first sight. In the nineteenth century there had been substantial migration from Ireland to British cities, particularly in the west of Scotland, Liverpool and Lancashire, as well as parts of London. These Irish migrants, while legally British, were seen as very different, particularly because of their Catholicism, but also because of their recent transfer from rural Ireland to urban Britain. These migrants were substantial in numbers. In 1891 there were 650,000 Irish-born people in Britain, and in 1961 the figure was 870,000 in England and Wales. In the earlier period they were subject to an immense amount of hostility from a host nation that still prided itself on its own Protestantism, but the Catholic Irish were to some extent politically integrated into the Liberal and Labour parties, because those parties did have a pluralist idea of nationality within the United Kingdom. The Irish stopped being seen as a “problem”.

Another important ethnic group were Jews from Eastern Europe. Escaping from anti-Semitism in Tsarist Russia, the Jewish population in Britain rose from 60,000 to 300,000 between 1880 and 1914. These immigrants were readily identifiable by language, dress and religion (Englander 1994; Feldman 1994). Again there were problems associated with the integration of foreign Jews into British society, but it does suggest that the break-up of the ethnic homogeneity of the United Kingdom after 1945 should not be seen as an unprecedented novelty. In addition to the Irish and Jews there were also Germans, Italians, small populations of black people in many of Britain’s port cities, and various visitors from the Empire, such as students (including for example, Gandhi, leader of Indian nationalism). The United Kingdom was, all through the twentieth century, ethnically and culturally diverse (Fryer 1984; Panayi 1996, 1999).

In this fourth section, I want to return to one of my opening arguments that diversity can be seen as a source of strength rather than weakness by examining the multitude of ways in which cultural diversity has been accommodated within Britishness since the Second World War.

This accommodation of diversity emerged out of two linked concepts. The first is a pluralistic version of Britishness that had existed in the Liberal and Labour Parties, both of whom had significant political support in Scotland and Wales, and had believed it was possible to the United Kingdom to consist of four nations (Biagini 2000; Ellis 1998). The second is a notion of Britishness that is inclusive rather than exclusive. Whereas Powell suggested that immigrants could get citizenship but could not become British, this inclusive version argues the opposite, that Britishness does not need to be ethnically homogenous. So for example, Roy Jenkins, as Labour Home Secretary in the 1960s (the minister responsible for immigrants) argued that immigrants did not need to assimilate or conform, that integration did not mean blending or uniformity, but instead that it meant “equal opportunity accompanied by cultural diversity in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance” (Robbins 1998: 328).

So to return to the first concept of a pluralist version of Britishness. The pessimists argue that the demands for devolution from Scotland and Wales have signified the break-up of Britain, as the demands of the Irish for Home Rule (which entailed devolution rather than independence) from the 1870s to the First World War inevitably led to demands for separation and independence, resulting in a war of independence (Boyce 1995; Cronin 1999). It is worth considering though that while these demands have certainly been well supported and do signify a desire to assert national distinctiveness, they do not necessarily suggest the success of political nationalism.

Certainly in the 1960s the Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru (the Welsh nationalist party) made significant electoral breakthroughs. These had a range of causes, some common to both nations, some unique. Both countries were experiencing economic decline worse than that of England, both had been dominated at the local level by Labour parties that had become stagnant and sometimes self-serving, and this combined with disillusion with the Labour government of Harold Wilson (1964-1970) (Harvie 1994: 177-194). Additionally in Wales there were concerns about the future of the language; by 1961 the proportion of Welsh speakers were down to a quarter of the population, that is 650,000 Welsh speakers (Bourke 1994: 191). This led to a concerted campaign to defend the language, which mobilised the enthusiasm of many young Welsh people (Morgan 1982

The response the Labour government to this resurgence of political Welshness has often been seen as implying panic and therefore expedient responses undertaken without conviction. In 1967 the Welsh Language Act made Welsh a language equal in status to English. In other words it recognised the cultural diversity of the United Kingdom. In 1969 Prince Charles was “invested” as Prince of Wales at Caernarfon castle. Here the government and monarchy combined to encourage the acceptability of dual identities in Wales – of co-existing Welshness and Britishness through loyalty to the monarchy. Faced with the continuing threat to their parliamentary majorities from nationalist MPs, the Labour governments of the 1970s introduced devolution bills for Scotland and Wales. It was in this context of Labour crisis that Nairn forecast the break-up of Britain. The half-hearted nature of Labour’s commitment to devolution meant that they pushed the onus on to the Scottish and Welsh people through referendums. In 1979 the majority of the Welsh people rejected devolution and an insufficient majority supported it in Scotland. It could be argued here that the “failure” of the referendums was in fact the success of Britishness, that the pluralist approach had integrated sufficient numbers of the Welsh and Scottish to prevent the success of calls for a re-negotiation of the constitution.

This might be the opportunity to look back to the position of Ireland at the beginning of the twentieth century. As I have mentioned, Ireland fought a war of independence against the British state between 1916 and 1921. This, it can be argued, was not due to the failure of the

pluralist approach to national identity within the UK adopted by the Liberal government, but was instead the result of the obstructionism of the monolithic approach to Britishness of the Unionists, in Britain and Ireland, who adopted a strategy of potential armed resistance. This takes us back to the 1980s. The election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979, an arch-unionist, believing in the unity and indivisibility of the British state encouraged a growth of separatist nationalism in Scotland and Wales. In the latter, this involved serious terrorist activity against property. But it was to the Labour Party rather than the nationalist parties that the electorates of Scotland and Wales looked for the resolution of problems, and in 1997, the election of the Labour government under Tony Blair brought back into power the pluralist conception of national identities within the United Kingdom. In September 1997 referendums in Wales and Scotland supported the government plans for devolution (though only just 50.3 per cent of the Welsh voted for change, the figure in Scotland was 75 per cent). This readjustment of the constitution of the United Kingdom to accommodate diversity may well mark the continuing success of Britishness rather than the break-up of Britain. (As an aside, it is worth mentioning that Tony Blair seems also to have a centralising tendency, which seeks to impose his own people into positions of power in Wales and Scotland. This seems to defy the spirit of the devolution project. It is worth also mentioning that the government continues to suspend the Northern Ireland Assembly with alacrity). Blair's commitment to devolution may well be an electoral strategy for a party that continues to rely on substantial support from Wales and Scotland, but the ease with which the programme has been carried through suggests a substantial change in attitude towards the diffusion of power from the centre within the wider party. But it is I think possible to say that devolution may have enabled Britishness to continue successfully into the twenty-first century. Even Margo Macdonald, leading member of the Scottish National Party, which supports independence of Scotland, has argued that "there's enough Britishness to keep the people who live in these islands together because I think Britishness should be a thing of the spirit ... you will only maintain it if you have the proper political expression and proper community expression for the different nation as which exist inside the British Isles" (BBC 1995).

The new atmosphere of devolution has certainly led to a situation in which Welsh and Scottish cultures are celebrated at all levels of society. One cannot imagine for example the success of so many Welsh pop bands proud of the Welshness among English and British youth in the past. The Manic Street Preachers, Stereophonics and (the now defunct) Catatonia positively celebrate their Welshness, with Catatonia declaring in a song mostly in Welsh that, "Everyday that I wake up I thank the lord I'm Welsh" (Catatonia 1998). There is the emergence of a renaissance in Scottish literature and filmmaking too. Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* (1997) and other films by Danny Boyle celebrate Scottishness in an oblique way, and *Braveheart* (1995) a Hollywood film starring the Australian Mel Gibson, sought to signify Scottish distinctiveness on a world stage. In literature an example comes in the work of the novelist Iain Banks, author of *The Wasp Factory* (1984) among other shocking but certainly Scottish located works.

The next area I want to look at is the second concept that I invoked, that of an inclusive version of Britishness that believes there is no incompatibility between ethnic origins outside the United Kingdom and the acceptance of Britishness. As we have seen before 1945 Britain was more ethnically diverse than presumptions would suggest. What differed after 1945 was that the UK, like many other western countries, became the point of entry for many people from the southern hemisphere. The legacy of Empire for the British was not immigration itself, but that many of the non-white migrants had come from the former colonies of the British Empire. In 1948 the Nationality Act provided clarification of the position of nationality in relation to inhabitants of the British Commonwealth and Empire as British (Paul 1997). During the 1950s, encouraged by the affluence of Britain, but also by a sense of adventure perhaps, large numbers (by which I mean more than before, rather than any judgement) of people migrated to Britain

from the India subcontinent, particularly from the Punjab and Gujarat, and from Pakistan. In the 1960s, many ethnic Asians migrated to Britain not from India but from former British African colonies where they had provided a mobile imperial labour force. In addition, many West Indians migrated to Britain from the 1940s onwards (Layton-Henry 1992).

In the 1960s, first a Conservative and then a Labour government sought to limit black and Asian immigration (the wording of the Acts made it clear that the problem was being framed as one of black immigration rather than immigration as such). And by the 1990s Britain has come to have some of the most restrictive immigration laws in the world. It is clear that the racist response to immigrants and their descendants has been on a large scale. The Stephen Lawrence murder and the inept handling of the police investigation resulted in the Macpherson report, which clarified and accepted the extent of institutional racism in the police force and elsewhere.⁶

In 1958, 1962, throughout the 1970s, and again in the last year or so (2001), there have been racist riots against black and Asian people in London, the northeast, and the towns of Lancashire. The popular refrain of the neo-Nazi National Front and British National Party has been the “send them back to where they came from”, but given that as time passes an increasing proportion of black people in Britain are British-born such slogans are increasingly anachronistic.

Britishness has always been able to accommodate the national diversity of the United Kingdom, so has it been able in part, certainly more hesitantly and less confidently, to accommodate its broadening ethnic diversity. Sam Selwyn, a Trinidadian novelist of South Asian descent, utilised the phrase “black British” to describe all non-white Britons, and while its use is disputed, particularly among those young black people alienated by police and state racism, it has also been taken up with pride by a range of prominent figures including sportspeople like Linford Christie, who consciously wraps himself in the Union Jack, and politicians such as Lord Taylor and the late Bernie Grant, Conservative and Labour respectively (Keough 2001). Jenny, 15 year old black girl, commenting on identity summarised the ambiguities of identity for black people living in Britain: “Well, I am British, I was born in London, but I am not the same as English people, it’s like I’m a different kind of English – a different way. I mean we have different ways – a different culture. But I am still British” (Sewell 1998: 109). The adoption of the description “British Muslim” also signifies integration with a sense of difference. It is also clear that many, probably the majority, of people see that cultural contact between different ethnic groups in the UK leads to cultural trading rather than cultural contamination. Most white Britons do not feel swamped by “foreign” cultures, but embrace them in a huge variety of ways. In many northern cities for example the traditional galas are now joined in the civic calendar by Asian-inspired melas and Afro-Caribbean carnivals. The Notting Hill Carnival, held annually in London in August, is the largest street festival in Europe.

Britishness is not therefore the static, immobile and homogenous force described by the pessimists. It is not located forever in the Second World War, however important that event remains in British national mythology. It is also about the accommodation of multiple identities. Hence it is able to absorb but not assimilate, because this inclusive view of Britishness seeks to allow space for the expression and affiliation to a never-ending range of identities. As it is possible to be a British woman, so it is possible to be black-British, Chinese British, as it has been possible for most in Wales to be British and Welsh. Cultural diversity is therefore cultural strength and not cultural weakness. The sociologist Robin Cohen has written of “The incredible vagueness of being British” (Cohen 2000). This vagueness is strength, not a weakness, a means to survival, not a cause of disintegration. If we look back across the twentieth century we find that Britishness is not a stable concept, it is constantly changing, and as American (but native in the UK) sports writer Mike Marqusee has put it, “the unresolved conflicts within the nation are the

nation, and the only vigorous nation is one that is in formation, merrily borrowing from all and sundry” (Marqusee 2001: 130).

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¹ <http://www.amazon.co.uk/exec/obidos/ASIN/1862073228/o/qid=1006167611/sr=8-1/ref=sr_aps_b_1_1/026-8588873-6599602>, synopsis of T. Nairn, *After Britain*, London, 2000.

² 'Complete speeches of Winston Churchill', <<http://www.winstonchurchill.org/fewc.htm>>, 5 February 2002.

³ For differing conclusions about the centrality of imperialism in British thought, see Robbins, 1998, 299-307, and MacKenzie, 1984.

⁴ Waters (1997) argues that this was an essential prerequisite of the process of constructing black people as other to a homogenous 'national' community.

⁵ "Unionist" here means those parties who formally embraced their commitment to the Union, that is the Conservative and Liberal Unionist parties, which merged in 1912.

⁶ The Macpherson Report of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry can be found at <<http://www.archive.official-documents.co.uk/document/cm42/4262/sli-oo.htm>>