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Untidy Kingdom: A Reply by the Author

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Abstract

Author's response to the issues raised in the contributions to The Common Room round table on *Untied Kingdom: A Global History of the End of Britain* (2023)

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There is an episode in *Untied Kingdom* that goes right to the heart of the argument. It is January, and an unruly white mob have converged on the capital, their sights squarely set on the seat of executive power. What had started as dim conjecture has snowballed into an unshakable conviction. Something precious was not just being taken from them but removed by stealth by the cynical agencies of their own government. The paltry police presence assigned to keep them in check proves woefully inadequate as they set about illegally penetrating the inner sanctum of sovereignty itself.

This is not the United States Capitol in January 2021. It is January 1953, and the scene is the forecourt of Government House in Nairobi where, seventy years ago, hundreds of white Kenyan settlers in a state of high agitation took it upon themselves to break into the official residence of the British governor, Sir Evelyn Baring. It was not a 'stolen election' that fired their indignation, but a string of violent attacks on white homesteads by Mau Mau insurgents that compelled them to take matters into their own hands.

The burden of their grievance was unmistakable. When a cordon of African troops was hurriedly assembled to reinforce the barricaded doors, a wave of visceral anger spilled forth. 'There, there, they've given the house over to the f—n—s, the bloody bastards,' cried one particularly frantic woman, capturing in a single stream of invective the raw racial resentments on display.¹

¹ Stuart Ward, *Untied Kingdom: A Global History of the End of Britain* (Cambridge, 2023), 152–4.

As Wendy Webster's pathbreaking work has shown, the settler home had long served as a potent symbol of the struggle for colonial order.² In the local idiom, 'giving over the house' was tantamount to the wholesale abdication of white authority, exposing the fragility and indeed absurdity of the settlers' claim to East Africa as an extension of Britain overseas. For these nervous stakeholders at the edge of empire, getting the house in order was not just about stiffening the resolve of an irresolute British government. It was a matter of shoring up the frontiers of Britishness itself.

In her lead essay in this fascinating 'Common Room', Webster affirms that race was a key driver of the drawn-out sequence of events that sealed the fate of Britishness as a global civic idea. The unedifying spectacle at Government House Nairobi in January 1953 was in no sense an isolated occurrence, but an early flashpoint in a wider existential challenge to the empire's intricate web of privilege and patrimony.

Webster further suggests that 'writing by elite and powerful white men' provides the dominant register in *Untied Kingdom* – perhaps a little too dominant – which she ascribes to the book's over-reliance on skewed archival collections that have allowed such material to 'pile up' at the expense of a more diversified historical record.

I would put it down to more calculated considerations arising from one of the book's key claims. If 'the exaltation of the "British race" was to be Britain's undoing', then serious engagement with its widely dispersed constituencies was always going to be a major part of the undertaking.³ Making meaningful connections across disparate parts of the globe meant tuning in to a certain bandwidth – and not just that of 'powerful' men (as the fleeting example above suggests).

But the book aspires to do more than that. Many of the episodes documented in *Untied Kingdom* are concerned, not just with white British subjectivities per se, but with dynamic patterns of white reaction – constantly in dialogue with the unnerving implications of non-white challenges to racial authority. This could take the form of forthright assertions of the right to inclusion, such as Gurdit Singh's resounding claim to British subjecthood as he sailed into Vancouver harbour in May 1914 (ch. 2). It could also comprise the more mundane matter of Learie Constantine's right to stay in a London hotel in the 1940s (ch. 6).⁴ But it also included moments of outright disenchantment with the promise of British rights and freedoms, such as the dramatic pivot to universal norms among Indigenous activists in the 1950s and 1960s (ch. 7), or the more direct resort to violent 'confrontation' among all manner of dissident groups (chs. 9, 13).

These are the fault lines that determined the source selection in *Untied Kingdom*, where each chapter is animated by the politics of 'misrecognition' between rival claimants to land, status, self-determination or simply belonging. What makes the Nairobi episode so emblematic is the triangulation of

² See especially her *Englishness and Empire, 1939–65* (Oxford, 2005).

³ *Untied Kingdom*, 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 48, 159–63.

black agency, white reaction and the overburdened expectations of Greater Britain. The irony is hard to miss: a settler community so incensed by Mau Mau farm invasions that they mount a makeshift home invasion of their own – discarding the very homely precepts of ‘order’ that underpinned their paradigmatic status.

What interested me most about these moments was the divisions and hesitations they invariably laid bare. For days afterwards, the letter pages of Nairobi’s *East African Standard* churned with controversy over whether the Government House protest had gone too far. ‘This is a British Colony’, wrote one wary correspondent, ‘and it is expected that the high ideals and principles of the British Way of Life should flow from the British people in this country.’⁵ As with many other similar episodes, subtle cracks were revealed whenever lobbying for white interests became too fervent or forthright.

Saima Nasar’s piece commends the ‘centring of Kenyan Asian voices and experiences’ in what was arguably the paradigmatic post-imperial encounter – the Wilson government’s panicked move in March 1968 to close off Britain’s entry gates to non-resident holders of British passports. The Kenyan Asians were far from the only British subjects to assume this precarious status. But as Nasar rightly points out, the unique circumstances in which they found themselves ultimately ‘served as a driver to remap and tighten the criterion of Britishness’.

Had I been forced to cut just one chapter of *Untied Kingdom*, this one would have been the last to go – because it so vividly captures the deep entanglements between British identities abroad and their metropolitan variants, right down to the level of local politics (in this case, the fierce local objections to Kenyan Asian arrivals in Leicester). Just as white Kenyans became even whiter (and less British) under pressure, so too the legitimate claims of Kenyan Asians could weaken the hold of Britishness in favour of a reconfigured Englishness – framed by the local citizenry in narrower, nativist terms as a ‘breed’, ‘people’ or ‘nation’. Invoking England as a small, overcrowded ‘country’ became a useful rhetorical ploy for keeping offshore Britons at bay. Loopholes could be devised for returning white settlers and itinerant Australasians, but only by emphasising a personal, ‘patrial’ connection to the downsized territorial unit of England.

Such semantic slippages are a mainstay of *Untied Kingdom* because they reveal the inherent tensions between the veneration of liberal values and the founding premise of racial inequality.⁶ Packaging far-flung ethnic affinities in the language of hallowed constitutional principle was a crucial mechanism for draping Britishness in the garb of universalism – wide, capacious, inclusive – while screening out the disparities. With the influx of Commonwealth migrants, however, the wide-open spaces that had sustained centuries of outward expansion became a potential liability – and the sails were duly trimmed.

Erin Delaney’s contribution highlights this ‘conundrum of constitutionalism’, perceptively stripping my argument back to its fundamentals. She

⁵ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 481.

observes that the ‘paradox of Britishness’ was ‘also that of British constitutionalism’ – both grappling with glaring moral and legal inconsistencies in the effort to project universal ideals. She therefore wonders why the book stops short of engaging explicitly with ‘the span and contradictions of British constitutional practice’. The direct constitutional implications, she says, are largely ‘postponed’, tending to ‘lurk in the shadows’ rather than illuminate the central premise.

It is an astute observation, and my response would be to make a fine distinction. The paradox of Britishness in all its myriad forms operated at an altogether more fluid level of conceptual rigour than its more formal constitutional counterpart. One of the reasons I opted for Charles Dilke’s *Greater Britain* as a framing device was the striking imprecision that characterised his thinking – and that of many of his emulators. Though himself steeped in the myth of British constitutionalism, he chose not to enfold his theme in the language of a legislator or constitutional layer.

Legal specialists certainly could (and did) frame the issue in these terms, but for the vast assortment of laypeople who breathed life into the idea, it was about the ‘high ideals and principles of the British Way of Life’ (in the misty formulation of the *East African Standard* correspondent cited above). That is to say, it was the vaguely perceived *myth* of British constitutionalism – as distinct from the clearly adumbrated principles and practice thereof – that animated a popular sense of entitlement to an unbounded British world.

But the distinction is of course hazardous, and I accept Delaney’s point that ‘identity itself becomes quickly enmeshed in the constitutional ramifications of its demands’. This was especially apparent whenever the worlds of myth and legal measures collided. For the most part, the blurred lines of British subjecthood were perfectly primed to the needs of settler colonialism. Hazy moral categories could enjoy a wide net of legal and constitutional protection, while evading practical restraints whenever the strict application of principle threatened to impede the march of ‘progress’. Difficulties arose, however, when it came to arbitrating legal disputes – not least between settlers and Indigenous peoples – where conceptual rigour and clear demarcation lines were procedurally crucial.

As Delaney points out, this is essentially what I was trying to show in the chapter on Rhodesia in the 1960s (ch. 9), but there is of course a larger story yet to be told – about a pervasive *disenchantment* with British constitutionalism itself in the long aftermath of decolonisation, resonating throughout Britain’s dismantled empire and reverberating all the way to the contemporary crisis of the Union.

Which brings me to the other key claim of the book – that the receding frontiers of Britishness not only put paid to the myth of Greater Britain abroad, but also punctured the long-term viability of unionism in the United Kingdom. As Ben Jackson notes in his penetrating line of questioning, it was more a ‘slow puncture’ than a sudden implosion, the full implications of which remain to be seen. But enough air has escaped from the pressure chamber to permit the fundamental question: how did the passing of empire furnish the broader context and conditions for the ‘break-up of Britain’?

Jackson recognises that *Untied Kingdom* eschews easy answers, steering clear of the correlation-equals-causation trap. But he is also left wondering precisely how political and constitutional ‘instability within the UK relates to the wider process of decolonisation’ – if not by way of direct causation. Specifically, he raises concerns that the global optics of *Untied Kingdom* run the risk of obscuring the internal political dynamics of devolution, especially since the Thatcher era – perhaps missing the crux of the matter entirely.

T. M. Devine was by no means the first to frame the question in either/or terms, but he is among the more forthright in his conviction that Mrs Thatcher had ‘an infinitely greater claim to be the midwife of Scottish devolution than the factor of imperial decline’.⁷ David Edgerton’s towering *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation* is less explicit in this regard, but it also persistently discounts the effects of ‘residual imperialism’ in the post-war era, arguing throughout that the internal dynamics of a revived British nation ‘trumped’ empire at every turn. For Edgerton, too, it was the great sell-off of national assets under Thatcher that marked ‘the end of British economic nationalism’, ushering in ‘something new, and not particularly British’.⁸

Jackson makes the valid point that my book pays scant attention to the finer details of devolutionary politics since the 1980s. Wendy Webster makes a similar observation about the simmering tensions of English nationalism in recent decades. These issues are obviously crucial for grasping the detail and complexity of the UK’s current constitutional impasse, but they are not in my main line of sight because they do not – to my mind – present themselves as alternatives to the wider, decolonising processes and pressures brought to light in *Untied Kingdom*.

Rather than dismiss all that went before Mrs Thatcher (or most of what transpired beyond Britain’s borders), my aim was to gauge the ebbing tide of Britishness over a much longer time frame, intersecting at three key junctures: empire, union and ‘a plethora of distinct localities’ around the world.⁹ No two countries or contexts followed the same causal sequence, but all shared deeper structural similarities and a remarkable capacity to influence each other’s outcomes. For my purposes, the distinctive inner workings of devolutionary politics in the UK – once the early fault lines and the political momentum had clearly revealed themselves – are but one manifestation of the inherent weakness of British sentiment worldwide since the onset of decolonisation.

Thus, the specifics of recent party politics in Scotland were never the principal ‘investment’ (as Jackson astutely puts it) – just as the contemporary legacies for Zimbabwe, say, or New Zealand never made it into the main frame. The goal was to take a much larger view of the dimensions and complexity of the social entity coming apart at the seams.

⁷ T. M. Devine, ‘The Break-up of Britain? Scotland and the End of Empire’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 16 (2006), 163–80, at 163, 166.

⁸ David Edgerton, *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation: A Twentieth Century History* (2018), 18, 25, 255, 269, 316, 385–6, 458, 471.

⁹ *Untied Kingdom*, 480.

Jackson ascribes to *Untied Kingdom* the view that ‘no plausible alternative basis for [British] identity could be found once decolonisation was underway’. I would put it differently. Any number of plausible ideas jostled for attention, from social democratic modernisation (Jackson’s preferred formula) to Thatcherite neoliberalism (as much a contender for British hearts and minds as the wrecking ball Edgerton and others make of it). Add to the mix the romance of the new Europe, the third way of ‘cool Britannia’, the restorative Britonism of Gordon Brown or even the fatuous talk of ‘taking back control’ in the Brexit era, and it becomes clear that there has been no lack of imagination or innovation.

The problem, as Australia’s Donald Horne observed of Britain in the late 1960s, was that ‘nothing seemed to stick’.¹⁰ Ideas abounded, but viable, enduring and, above all, consensual alternatives that could bind the Union in the face of the exogenous forces acting upon it were thin on the ground already fifty years ago and remain so today as the old myths of shared wartime endeavour continue to fade. But crucially, national separatism, for all its obvious advances, has equally struggled to muster a convincing majority or a coherent way forward, and not just in Britain – the running has not been all one way.

None of this diminishes Jackson’s key intervention – that ‘the politics of left and right are a necessary component of a full account of the trajectory of Scottish and Welsh nationalism’. I can only agree, but the operative word is ‘trajectory’, evoking fluctuating contingencies and shifting political fortunes over time, rather than a self-sufficient, watertight accounting for the deeper fissures themselves. These, I would argue, emerged well before Thatcher’s tenure during the long recession of imperial Britishness. Which is perhaps another way of saying that Jackson’s ‘more ecumenical’ reading of *Untied Kingdom* accords largely with my own.

Brendan O’Leary’s critique tilts intriguingly in the opposite direction. Far from suggesting that *Untied Kingdom* makes more of global decolonisation than the evidence might warrant, he considers the approach needlessly timid – at least as far as Northern Ireland is concerned. Historians ‘cannot sidestep the colonial question’, he argues, especially when it comes to the role of Ulster unionists in fanning the flames of ‘the Troubles’ in the late 1960s. As evidence mounted in these years of the UK government’s diminished commitment to holding forward positions abroad, unionists were forced to reckon with the knowledge that ‘their standing derived from past settler colonialism, of which they were palpably proud’.

For a book that makes such compelling connections, O’Leary wonders why it seems in such a hurry to get past the question of whether Ireland constituted a ‘colony’. The answer lies partly in the many narrative and structural choices that comprise such a multi-pronged study (which hares to chase, which to leave alone), combined with a certain apprehension about becoming caught in the partisan crossfire.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 344.

That is to say, if it could be shown that the eclipse of British affinities and allegiances worldwide made an immediate, measurable impact in Northern Ireland regardless of whether it be deemed a ‘colony’, a more compelling or persuasive case might productively emerge – or so I imagined.¹¹ It was to avoid becoming lost in the thicket of entrenched positions that I sought to evade the ‘conceptual logjam’ (perhaps ‘endemic disagreement’ would have been a better characterisation) – in the hope that the book might indeed be ‘read both by those who wish to preserve the Union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and those who would like to see Irish re-unification’.

Having made that conscious choice, however, I am inclined to agree that there are limits to how far a distinction can be maintained between the late-colonial *context* and the conditions of colonialism itself.¹² The book draws on an abundance of evidence of Ulster unionists readily identifying with the plight of embattled Britons offshore. Though this hardly constitutes conclusive proof of Northern Ireland’s irreducible status as a ‘colony’, there is at least a conspicuous resemblance that unionists themselves have always found deeply unsettling.

O’Leary also raises more fundamental concerns about the conceptual imprecision inherent in the subject itself. Or as he himself puts it, the ‘methodology is as loose as the empire under scrutiny’. But if ‘clear-theory testing’ is avoided in *Untied Kingdom*, it is more a matter of the unwieldy dimensions of the subject than a disinclination to consult social scientists. If ever a topic refused to conform to expectations, revealing the heterogeneity of the past and the stubbornness of historical actors, it is surely the infinite permutations and serial flaws of an expansive British compact conspicuously falling short of its own standards.¹³

My approach was to turn the terminological looseness around – presenting, not an impediment to analytical precision, but a large part of the solution as to why Britishness lost so much traction in the post-war world.¹⁴ By attending to what Saul Dubow terms the ‘fissile multiplicity of forms’ that Britishness took – traversing class, country, ethnicity, indigeneity, gender, ideology and countless localities – it became clear how imperial Britishness defied stable analytical categories, and why its shape-shifting properties could not withstand the unprecedented scrutiny of empire’s end.¹⁵

Such a resolution will not satisfy everyone, but it is adhered to rigorously throughout to make sense of a diverse patchwork of allegiances that might otherwise seem aberrant or superficial. In short, there is method in the pervasive ambiguity, allowing original perspectives to emerge that diverge from received wisdom. Whereas Linda Colley’s classic account revealed the components of a coherent Britishness ‘forged’ within the island fortress of a

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 383.

¹² Which is essentially the ploy devised on p. 386 of *Untied Kingdom*.

¹³ Sebastian Conrad, *What Is Global History?* (Princeton, 2016), 131.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁵ Saul Dubow, ‘How British Was the British World? The Case of South Africa’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 37 (2009), 1–27, at 14.

people compelled 'to look anxiously and inquiringly inwards', a far more diffuse, scattered and contingent Britain emerges from the pages of *Untidy Kingdom*.¹⁶

Untidy Kingdom might have been a better title. The rich and varied selection of critical interventions in this *Transactions* Common Room underlines the multivalent nature of British selfhood and the extraordinary elasticity of its powers of signification. That five readers could be drawn in so many directions is revealing in itself – not least of the diversity of perspectives that need to be kept in play when considering the fading resonance of Britain-in-the-world and its implications for the contemporary United Kingdom.

All of which serves as a reminder that any attempt to contain the subject in a single volume will necessarily be partial and incomplete – and perhaps itself a little untidy – leaving abundant room for further exemplification, elaboration and, of course, lively debate. It only remains to thank the contributors sincerely for their penetrating and provocative insights, and for taking the time to present them in such a stimulating format.

¹⁶ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation* (1996), 4, 18.