

# *The Literary London Journal*



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## Review

**Graham MacPhee, *Postwar British Literature and Postcolonial Studies*, Edinburgh University Press, 2011, ISBN 0748639004 (hbk) £65.00, \$104.00; ISBN 0748639012 (pbk) £19.99, \$32.00.**

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<1>Two-thirds of the way through Salman Rushdie's partially London-based novel *The Satanic Verses*, minor character Whisky Sisodia struggles to articulate a theory of The Trouble With The English. According to Sisodia, the nation's problem is that 'their hiss hiss history happened overseas, so they dodo don't know what it means' (343). His phrase neatly evokes the notion that the British have only managed to rinse the residues of their now-extinct empire from their newly whitewashed history to a certain extent ('dodo don't'). Sisodia also inadvertently seems to boo the British when he stutters out the words 'hiss hiss history'. This sense of an unevenly successful British attempt at erasure of their colonial history and of bitter, if sometimes faltering, condemnation by others of that history, are central concerns of Graham MacPhee's magisterial *Postwar British Literature and Postcolonial Studies*.

<2>MacPhee, like other excellent scholars of the emerging field of postcolonial-British studies such as Rajeev S. Patke and Ana María Sánchez-Arce, seeks to challenge the idea that colonialism is safely in the past and that its legacy is exclusively the property and influence of (probably non-white) writers from overseas. As he puts it in the Introduction:

This is not to extend the definition 'postcolonial' to all and everything, but to argue that the range of ideas, identities, histories and potentials articulated by what has been recognised as postcolonial literature needs to be understood as much more central to postwar British literature and culture than has previously been understood.  
(3)

He begins this passage with an implied swipe at critics like Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin who, in their 1989 work *The Empire Writes Back*, anticipated the present

argument that Britain has some claim to 'postcolonial' status, but for the spurious reason that the nation was once colonised by the Romans and Normans. MacPhee's approach has some productive overlap with Ashcroft et al's groundbreaking line of enquiry as he too places the multifarious experiences of post/colonialism at centre stage, but he departs from their widely acknowledged homogenisation of colonial experiences to forge a non-totalising approach to British history. By bringing together white and non-white, British-born and migrant authors and theorists without distinction, and subjecting these writers — who include George Orwell, Hannah Arendt, Mulk Raj Anand, Louise Bennett and Philip Larkin — to equally rigorous, contextually-specific criticism, *Postwar British Literature and Postcolonial Studies* at once makes an important political point and makes for fascinating reading.

<3>However, the monograph's weighty arguments sometimes translate into rather leaden prose, as is indicated even in the long quotation cited above, with its clunky repetition of the word 'understood' in the final sentence. On occasion, the writing is anxiously circumlocutory, and its claims are not always borne out by the argument that follows. When MacPhee asserts, for example, that his book 'offers an original argument and mode of critique that pursues a holistic approach to literary texts and cultural shifts by insisting on their location within a multilayered nexus of political, social, economic and military histories' (3), it reads like a marketing blurb. The interdisciplinary framework so proudly trumpeted here turns out to be a blend of cultural studies and historical and political research in the cultural materialist tradition; it is adept, to be sure, but not as 'original' as the quoted PR-speak would have us believe. This is a shame, because at its best, MacPhee's writing is succinct, vivid and full of justified anger at racist policy in Britain (the text opens with discussion of the police killing of Joy Gardner in Crouch End and closes with a reminder of Powell's infamous 'Rivers of Blood' speech).

<4>The book is structured very well, comprising a snappy introduction followed by three substantial chapters. The first, 'Rethinking the End of Empire', sets out to answer the discombobulating question as to why the British empire unravelled at such breakneck speed and with such near entirety between 1919 and 1970 and, crucially, how Britain's unceremonious break with its colonies has impacted on literary and cultural production. MacPhee's transnational approach to Britain and emphasis on the ongoing impact of empire is important because he questions the singularity of life in Britain, suggesting instead that the nation 'depended on the very "elsewhere" in which it participated, yet from which it sought at another level to separate itself' (106).

<5>The second, 'Decolonizing the Discipline', is probably the strongest chapter and at the heart of the book's argument, because above all this monograph is an account of the hitherto discrete nature of British and postcolonial studies and of the pressing need for the two fields to become just as closely intertwined as is their subject matter. The analysis here of postcolonial studies' disciplinary precursor, Commonwealth Literature, and its Ethnocentric liberal humanist limitations is interesting, but the ground has already been covered by Bart Moore-Gilbert, John McLeod and Gail Low. The account here of Commonwealth scholars such as Norman Jeffares would have been enhanced by direct interaction with the latter's critical works, rather than coming at them second hand via Moore-Gilbert's fifteen-year-old book *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics*. More positively, *Postwar British Literature and Postcolonial Studies* serves as a useful corrective to the overemphasis on Indian subcontinental history in many British

accounts of empire. The monograph provides searching analysis of other aspects of de/colonisation, such as the Suez Crisis, the 'second colonial occupation' of the immediate postwar period and the often-forgotten British atrocities in Cyprus and during the Aden Emergency. And MacPhee's critique in this chapter of the term 'authenticity' via a sprightly reading of Rushdie's essay "'Commonwealth Literature" Does Not Exist' (76-9) is worth the cover price alone.

<6>Closing the volume with Chapter Three, 'Rewriting the Nation', MacPhee provides accomplished close readings of a wide range of texts, including two very different London novels both published in 2005, Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* and Ian McEwan's *Saturday*. He deploys these books in order to contest the notion of 9/11 as a radical watershed in recent British history and to remind us of other important events, such as the inception of Thatcherism in 1979, the beginning of the Rushdie affair on Valentine's Day a decade later, and 'Britain's staunch support for President Bush's disastrous "war on terror"' (118). In addition to Aboulela and McEwan, the writers selected for critique in this chapter include figures familiar to these pages such as Sam Selvon, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Hanif Kureishi and Andrea Levy.

<7>Because I was reviewing this for the *London Literary Journal*, it set me wondering whether this is more of a London book than one dealing with British literary studies. The material on Bloomsbury in the first chapter is a particularly worthy contribution to the field of London literature because MacPhee uses Mulk Raj Anand's memoir *Conversations in Bloomsbury* as a lens through which to view what Anand describes as a quietist "'undeclared ban on political talk" in the drawing rooms of Bloomsbury' (10), showing us an illuminating outsider perspective on canonical figures like Leonard Woolf and E.M. Forster. However, one wonders why criticism of writers from the north of England is limited to Tony Harrison and John Arden, and there are no more than cursory references to Scotland and Wales. There is also no definition or discussion of terms, including the construct of the United Kingdom (as compared to Great Britain) which of course includes 'troublesome' Northern Ireland and its troubling, great body of literature. Britain is transected not just by other nations (which MacPhee is sharply observant about), but internally, by region, gender and class (the latter is the only identity component to which MacPhee pays much attention). As such, his searing evaluation of Britain's exterior entanglements is not matched by attention to heterogeneity 'at home'.

<8> Coming from Yorkshire myself, I couldn't help but notice that one of MacPhee's two examples of analysis of literature from northern England, Tony Harrison's *V* (1985), contains little on *V*'s Leeds context even though it is very incisive about Enoch Powell's legacy, Thatcherism and the miners' strike. There is only this brief discussion of the poem's skinhead alter ego figure who daubs graffiti on graves and harangues the poet figure:

[H]is aggression is directed at that which visibly alien within his own daily experience, namely the non-white population of Leeds, and especially Muslims. Racism scaffolds his collapsing sense of self, which has been cut adrift from the self-respect engendered by work and denied the relative freedom of action allowed by a regular income. But the 'I' of the poem cannot simply condemn the skinhead, because he recognises that same structure of feeling — although without the aggressive racism — in his own father. In the immediate viewpoint of father and skinhead, the social

changes that sapped the certainty of their lives and the influx of South Asian migrants into Leeds coincide, and so become linked by association. (141-2)

As penetrating as this passage is about unemployment and alienation, in the words 'especially Muslims' MacPhee somewhat anachronistically projects onto this poem of the mid-eighties the idea of Islamophobia being a greater a problem than colour racism. He fails to pick up on the muddled, politically problematic slippage of religious terminology used for South Asians within this section of the poem. A turbaned pensioner enters the 'Kashmir Muslim Club' in Beeston and a local (white) newsagent's is bought out by an 'M. Patel' (Harrison 26-7). Harrison attributes the primarily Sikh headwear of a turban to a Kashmiri Muslim (the only South Asian Muslim likely to wear a type of turban comes from Northwest Pakistan, *not* Kashmir), shortly afterwards adding in the Gujarati Hindu surname 'Patel' for good measure. He thus fails to differentiate between various South Asian religious groups living in the city, who are viewed by the poem's narrator at best from a distance, and at worst with muted suspicion.

<9>It might have been helpful for MacPhee to have considered this and to have thought through Harrison's increasing political conservatism, as exemplified in 'Shrapnel'. This poem was published in *The Independent* six weeks after the London attacks of 7 July 2005, and recalled the Second World War as well as dealing with the 7/7 bombers. Three of the extremists came from or had strong connections with Beeston in inner-south Leeds, where Harrison also grew up. For all the poem's many merits, 'Shrapnel's' publication in the news media so soon after the attacks 'incorporates it into the immediate discourse of confusion, blame, and strained assertion of particular types of assaulted national identity' in a way that is 'almost hysterical' (Herron, Dodge, Crowley and Mitchell 77). In many ways the 2005 poem represents a continuation of the issues raised in its more famous two-decade-old precursor *V*. Whereas, as MacPhee's monograph lucidly demonstrates, in *V* Harrison explores the Powellian concept of the 'enemy within' — viewed by Powell and his ideological heir Thatcher as encompassing non-white migrants and protesting members of the political left — 'Shrapnel' takes on the post-7/7 idea of the 'homegrown terrorist' which now overlays and is nested in Powell's earlier term. Yet the later poem's discomfiting final tercet: 'Our house, thanks to that humane bombardier, / still stands: and that of Hasib mir Hussain, / Mohammad Siddique Khan, Shehzad Tanweer' suggests that an apocryphal Nazi bomber, whom Harrison positions as having deliberately bombed Beeston's Cross Flatts Park during the war rather than the adjacent residential area, has a 'humane' ethic that would be an anathema to these West Yorkshire Pakistanis. MacPhee rightly draws attention to the connections made in *V* between 'international' events such as the Iran-Iraq War and 'domestic' conflicts such as The Troubles and the miners' strike. Yet in Harrison's more recent poem 'Shrapnel', there is no such attempt to break down boundaries between 'home' and 'elsewhere' and to cast a spotlight on British foreign policy.

<10>These are caveats that come out of my own research obsessions, and it would be churlish to concentrate too much on lacunae (discussion of gender is another significant one) when the monograph is by and large so readable and potentially paradigm-shifting. To adapt Raymond Chandler's famous formulation about cosy and hardboiled crime fiction, MacPhee's hope is to take postcolonial studies out of a notional ethnic alley and drop it into the Venetian vase of British literary studies. In this book, he goes a long way towards spearheading just such a disciplinary development. Alongside the publication of Patke's *Modernist Literature and Postcolonial Studies* (also Edinburgh University Press,

2013) and Sánchez-Arce's foundational series of articles over the last decade, it is to be hoped that others will soon follow suit in this exciting and politically resonant trend.

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