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## How British is British? Some cultural, historical and political considerations concerng British literature since 1500

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## **How British is British?**

**Some cultural, historical and political considerations  
concerning British literature since 1500<sup>1</sup>**

Rede uitgesproken door

**Prof. dr. Richard Todd**

bij de aanvaarding van het ambt van hoogleraar  
op het gebied van de Britse letterkunde na 1500,  
aan de Universiteit Leiden,  
vrijdag 23 september 2005



## **Mijnheer de Rector Magnificus, zeer gewaardeerde toehoorders:**

Let me begin with a quotation from Oliver Goldsmith's novel *The Vicar of Wakefield*, published in 1766. In this bizarre little episode Dr Primrose's long-lost son is explaining his peripatetic adventures to his father. At one point the son has been made an offer by a ship's captain:

Take my advice. My ship sails to-morrow for Amsterdam; What if you go in her as a passenger? The moment you land all you have to do is teach the Dutchmen English, and I'll warrant you'll get pupils and money enough. I suppose you understand English, added he, by this time, or the deuce is in it. I confidently assured him of that, but expressed a doubt whether the Dutch would be willing to learn English. He affirmed with an oath that they were fond of it to distraction; and upon that affirmation I agreed with his proposal, and embarked the next day to teach the Dutch English in Holland. The wind was fair, our voyage short, and after having paid my passage with half my movables, I found myself, fallen as from the skies, a stranger in one of the principal streets of Amsterdam. In this situation I was unwilling to let any time pass unemployed in teaching. I addressed myself therefore to two or three of those I met, whose appearance seemed most promising; but it was impossible to make ourselves mutually understood. It was not till this very moment, I recollected, that in order to teach Dutchmen English, it was necessary that they should first teach me Dutch. How I came to overlook so serious an objection, is to me amazing; but certain is I overlooked it.<sup>2</sup>

The self-mockery of the speaker is something I will largely leave aside, except insofar as to indicate that on a number of levels it illuminates the sheer difficulty of cultural exchange between the what I shall, following terminological fashion, be terming the "Self" and the "Other".

## **English literary studies in The Netherlands**

Firstly, then, I want to say a few words, and to say them as briefly as possible, about the reception and development of literary studies in English in The Netherlands, and then move on to discuss some of the problems of definition that I face as I contemplate the subject defined by my own Chair, which is "British literature after 1500". Having moved on to and surveyed this second topic, I want, thirdly and lastly, to develop its implications by considering the political issues it raises, doing so with specific reference to what has become known as historical revisionism. In this way I hope to fulfil what I take to be one (at least) of the purposes of the inaugural lecture. The new ordinarius is supposed "to set up his stall", in other words to give an idea of the kind of benevolent regime that may be expected for as long as he is spared to occupy his Chair. In keeping with the times, this lecture will be fuller of history than would

have been thought appropriate from a literature professor a generation or two ago. Were there sufficient time, it would also consider current “hot topics” such as the refiguration of manuscript culture in early modern Britain, and the book trade in the era of commercial literary printing in English, from (say) the early eighteenth to the early twenty-first century.<sup>3</sup> It might also interrogate the idea that the year “1500” is some kind of watershed at which, very crudely speaking, “philology” becomes “literature” in many West European cultures. But these matters must await another occasion. What I do propose to do is to survey, and (where time permits) consider in a little more detail, some of the literature within my remit from a more politicized viewpoint than would have been thought appropriate a generation or two ago.

English studies in The Netherlands is 120 years old. It began, apparently, at the University of Groningen with the first *Privatdozent* appointed to a Chair in English in 1885. The discipline arrived not (as one might expect) from across the North Sea but from neighbouring Germany. In the German-speaking world, during much of the nineteenth century, what we now think of as literary studies had been prominently philological. In Britain itself (to oversimplify grossly), the discipline had been much more belle-lettristic.<sup>4</sup> Few nineteenth-century English intellectuals, with the notable exceptions of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and George Eliot,<sup>5</sup> knew or cared much about German intellectual life. Philology as a discipline seems more capable of importation into other cultures than are belles-lettres, where it might be argued the language is so often part of the thought. It is difficult to see how the work of a figure such as (say) Matthew Arnold could find roots in the soil of German intellectual culture. In any case, the first major crisis to assault English studies occurred as a result of World War I. The intense anti-German feeling in Britain symbolized by the renaming of the royal house Saxe-Coburg-Gotha in “Windsor”, and the re-appropriation of English studies to the political construct known as “England” has been documented by Terence Hawkes and others.<sup>6</sup> At about the same time, the influence of a number of Cambridge intellectuals grew, notably I.A. Richards (1893-1979), who pioneered heuristic (and a-historical) experiments in close reading, and Richards’ pupil, the brilliant and wayward William Empson (1906-1984),<sup>7</sup> who introduced the idea of ambiguity in literature. Strongest and most widespread of all was the anti-establishment and prescriptive influence of F.R. Leavis (1892-1978), which grew between the period 1918-1939 and peaked in the 1940s and 1950s.

These developments, together with the growing influence of the British Council, promoted a climate in which English studies began to be exported, after 1945, to countries including The Netherlands in forms that were much more recognizable to what they had become, or were becoming, to British and indeed American students, teachers and scholars. It was in this form, together with a strong admixture of the philological element that had characterized the late nineteenth-century form of the discipline, that students and teachers of English were introduced to, and themselves disseminated, the discipline in The Netherlands in the years after 1945. Many of this country’s English departments were founded, or modernized, in the first decade after

1945, and in broad terms the syllabi of many of these departments have changed little, with perhaps as far as literary studies are concerned the addition of courses in literary theory. What *has* changed is that where the cultural ambassadors have learnt how to integrate with the natives in a spirit of egalitarianism, the political agendas of these departments have matured accordingly. This is a welcome development that has been recognized, although sadly not everywhere, by practitioners of *Algemene Literatuurwetenschap*, a discipline that is much younger. ALW was initiated by an interest in literary theory that was galvanized by the avant-garde Parisian journal *Tel Quel* in 1967, appropriated by the class of 1968, and then spread like wildfire through Western Europe and the United States in the 1970s and 1980s. I would like to think of the old tensions between English studies (and other *moderne vreemde talen*) and ALW as representing a closed historical epoch, but the rapprochement must be two-way.

To drive home the point I wish to make here, I return to the Oliver Goldsmith quotation, which is actually a great deal more perceptive in retrospect than may seem. To return to the vantage point of 1945 rather than the 1960s and 1970s, then, the United Kingdom (the only major European Allied Power not to be occupied by the Nazis or become a member of the Soviet Empire) exported English literary studies as a form of post-war cultural enrichment—a mixture of Marshall Plan and missionary endeavour. It had to presuppose a “Self” (the exporters and the missionaries) and an “Other” (grateful recipients of an importation of cultural or—specifically English literary-critical—models for study that were from 1918 onwards steadily less Germanic, or (at that time) French, and increasingly coming under the influence of Britain (and in due course, and not without protest from some academics in The Netherlands, the United States).<sup>8</sup>

My least controversial claim is that this epoch of exportation is now another absolutely closed chapter, and one must recognize with gratitude the tremendous efforts the British Council has made (certainly here in The Netherlands, as well as in its annual Cambridge seminars), in a climate of steady financial retrenchment, to come to terms with the new world order post-1989; to realize—in effect—what the young Primrose describes: “in order to teach Dutchmen English, it was necessary that they should first teach me Dutch”.

### What is “British” 1500-2005?

An initial problem of terminology must be shouldered aside, and from now on I shall misuse the Roman term “Britannia” to classify what I mean when I am referring to “Britain” as understood in the description of “British literature after 1500”. (My little excursus on philology was in part intended to explain the demarcation bounded by 1500. The argument—which is attractive but manifestly incorrect—suggests that British literature after 1500 is written in one form of English whereas prior to then, and prior to the introduction of printing, many written Englishes abound. To this point we will return.) Netherlanders from outside the provinces of North and South

Holland are understandably irritated when the English-speaking world refers to The Netherlands as “Holland”. Similarly the Scots and Welsh do not care to find Glasgow or Caerdydd located in “*Engeland*”. When I use “England” in what follows I shall mean *England* not Britannia. When I use “Britannia” I shall mean whatever Britain was at a given historical moment. From a purist point of view this means that I can scarcely in practice use the term at all of any period before 1603, when the English and Scottish thrones (but not their legislatures) were joined, and James VI & I introduced the term “Great Britain” in 1604 to describe his new kingdom. Indeed, the word “Britain”, as the online *Oxford English Dictionary* assures us, was only used historically (and very rarely) before the Reformation. In the succeeding century, increasingly so after 1707, when the Holyrood parliament in Edinburgh moved to Westminster, Scotland came to be known for a while as “North Britain”. After 1801, when the Dublin parliament followed suit in relocating to Westminster, until 1921 when the Irish Free State was declared and 1937 when the Irish border was finally gerrymandered, “Britannia” included everything you can see on a silhouette of what Norman Davies calls “The Isles”<sup>9</sup> and Diarmaid McCullough “The Atlantic Isles”,<sup>10</sup> with the exceptions of the Channel Isles and the Isle of Man, which continue to be dependencies, members of neither the United Kingdom nor the European Union. Everything else, on 1 January 1801, became part of Great Britain, the United Kingdom. “Great” here means “great” as opposed to “less”. It is a geographically descriptive term, but the era of its existence co-existed with the unprecedented growth of Britannia’s second imperium. With little sleight of hand it was possible to read “Great” as “powerful” and at the same time as the prime global exporter of Western, Protestant-Episcopalian values. This sense of “Great”, though having absolutely no basis in etymology or political history, is how an historically ignorant and deeply chauvinistic British Prime Minister was able to use the word “Great” during Britannia’s last colonial adventure, the Malvinas-Falklands conflict in 1982. Correctness in language use may be notional, as Randolph Quirk and Jeremy Warburg pointed out forty years ago,<sup>11</sup> but this “evaluative” notion of “Great” is plain wrong, and symptomatic of dangerously simplistic thinking.

The period I have been entrusted with covers more than five centuries, from 1500 to the present day. It concerns an area consisting of two main islands<sup>12</sup> and many smaller ones. As I have argued, the question of terminology is complex in the extreme. During that half millennium, from 1500 to the present, two small independent island kingdoms on the larger island (Scotland; and England together with its principality Wales) and, on the smaller, a dependent “lordship” (Ireland, to become a kingdom, or rather a fiefdom within Henry VIII’s English kingdom in 1541), were gradually, complexly and often bloodily massaged into what was, for a time, between 1801 and 1921, one political entity. This process is what the revisionist historian Linda Colley has in mind when she describes “the forging of a nation”. The primary metaphor underlying “forging” is the melding together of different metals to form a whole. The secondary sense is nothing short of an act of ideological fraud. It was well

over a century after its dubiously legal accession in 1714<sup>13</sup> (and over a century after the 1707 Act of Union) before any member of the ruling (German) House of Hanover first visited Scotland, as George IV finally got down to doing in 1822. Britannia, then, remained “Great Britain” for 120 years, and during that long nineteenth century (1801-1921) the second of two imperia arose,<sup>14</sup> more quickly than any previously recorded in Western civilization. After the end of the First World War it took only just over half a century for that imperium to be lost as an imperium, although its remnants have resulted in a unique non-aligned English-speaking commonwealth, of which the British Head of State is assumed, or assumes herself, without question, to be the permanent Head. In addition, she is (for reasons that the remarriage of her eldest son earlier this year have shown to have no unassailable constitutional grounding) the Head both of the English Church, and of the tens of millions of members of the episcopal Anglican communion—of which there are 44 member churches—worldwide.<sup>15</sup>

In what follows I want to examine more closely certain defining moments in this history, from 1500 to the present. In doing so I shall continue to ally myself with those revisionist, frequently left-wing, historians, who during the past generation have begun seriously to question the orthodoxy of what used to be termed the “Whig” interpretation of British history, a view attributed to and promulgated by the British historian Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-59). The Whig view of history presupposes that all *English* and possibly all British history led, providentially or fortuitously, to the great parliamentary Reforms enacted in the middle of the nineteenth century, in 1832 and to a lesser extent 1866-7. Post-Macaulay, it finds expression in the view that no military invasion from offshore has been mounted successfully or persistently on The Isles since 1066. This view, which is unthinkingly Anglocentric, conveniently ignores the late twelfth-century Anglo-Norman invasions of Ireland, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century colonization of the island by its neighbour, from Spenser to Cromwell—and the Nazi occupation of the Channel Islands between 1940 and 1945.

Whig historiography survives, legitimately, I believe, in the results of the BBC national poll that in 2004 voted Winston Churchill the greatest Briton of all time, but not in the distortions of parochial Tory Eurosceptics who would die before seeing Britain losing her “sovereignty”. Still, the BBC poll threw up some surprises. Churchill was followed by the nineteenth-century civil engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel in second place, and Diana, Princess of Wales in third. In fourth, fifth and sixth place were such relative lightweights as Charles Darwin, William Shakespeare, and Isaac Newton, respectively. John Lennon was seventh. Whig interpretations of history are clearly deeply class-bound in Britannia. Still, by implication, they have led to what Iris Murdoch once termed “the phenomenal *luck* of the English-speaking peoples”.<sup>16</sup> I share Linda Colley’s belief that Whig historiography involved “constructing” Britannia in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, and in so doing led to distorting the British history of the sixteenth and seventeenth. I shall focus on one particular cul-



tural implication of the perceived need for historical revisionism, and that is the politics of heritage. Together with the imperium and its dissolution goes the need to disseminate the imperium's cultural values. As today we see the British Isles fragment<sup>17</sup> politically and culturally—a perfectly natural phenomenon, no more a crisis than any other suchlike phenomenon—it is easy to overlook how rapidly the cultural manifestations of heritage (in my particular area of literary expertise the literary manifestations) undergo change as well. I am not persuaded that the “common reader”, or indeed a majority of professional readers, of British literature have grasped the extent of that change. I shall end—as any literary scholar's auditory might expect—with a brief account of three novels, noting that these are recent novels and that therefore none of them were part of any literary canon of “English literature” when I was a student, thirty-five years ago, or moved to the Netherlands, nearly thirty years ago, before terms such as “Thatcherism” and “Blairite” had become part of Britain's lexicographical heritage.

If we could transfer ourselves to the year 1500 and be possessed of the analytical and prophetic powers this oration is assuming, we could make a strong case for arguing that the most auspicious event of that year was the birth of Charles V, who would from a young age become, as Holy Roman Emperor, the most powerful secular ruler of the contemporary Western world of his age. If at the same time we imagine projected in front of me a silhouette of what we now (incorrectly) term the “British Isles”, what do we find? Of course nothing has changed as far as the shape of the Isles is concerned (apart from some erosion on the East coast), but the nature of a silhouette that would become pink by 1900, that would lie (figuratively speaking) at the centre of the world,<sup>18</sup> and spread its pink over “an Empire on which the sun never sets” is—from the vantage point of 1500—unimaginable. One thing to strike us about 1500 is not just the existence of the two kingdoms that we have already mentioned, Scotland, and England (with Wales to be formally annexed to England in 1536), on the larger island, and a dependent lordship, Ireland, on the smaller, but the linguistic variety of these islands. The relevance of this observation is that it necessitates asking what we mean by “British literature since 1500”—that is, not just “what is literature” but “what is British”? Or perhaps it is the other way around.

Let us start with the languages and then move on (also in time) to the vexing question of geo-political terminology. Of what would a representative sample of British literature around 1500 consist? Probably the three greatest vernacular poets writing in and around 1500 are writing not in an “English” most of us would recognize as such at all, but in older Scots. Scots is not the Celtic (Gaelic) language but an offshoot of an Anglo-Saxon language that is cognate with modern British and American English. To the first- or second-language English speaker Older Scots is difficult, but comprehensible.<sup>19</sup> It is perhaps rather more different from standard modern British English than Afrikaans is from standard modern Dutch. It has a large and often vivid lexicon some of which still defies philological expertise. A passive but not an active command can be fairly easily gained by the native or near-native speaker.

The poets in question, to varying extents affiliated to the rich court culture of James IV of Scots until its collapse and James's death at the Battle of Flodden in 1513, are Robert Henryson (ca. 1430-ca. 1506), William Dunbar (ca. 1456-ca. 1513) (who may not, like his monarch, have survived Flodden) and Gavin Douglas (ca. 1476-1522). Probably the most influential British (and English) literary work from this period, Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*, first appeared in Latin, in 1516, not to be translated into English until 1551. The point is briefly made: there is little or no early sixteenth-century "British" literature in English in print before the second half of the sixteenth century, not even England's John Skelton (ca. 1460-1529). The most notable exception (if we are to include it as literature, which I believe we must) is Thomas Cranmer's 1549 black-letter *Book of Common Prayer*, to be succeeded by a much revised version in 1552, 1559, and again in 1662, the version with which my generation, the baby-boom generation, was probably the last to be familiar.<sup>20</sup> Ten of Seneca's tragedies appeared in English translation in print between 1559 and 1581, but these are really exceptional. The most learned Scottish writer of the later sixteenth century, George Buchanan (1506-82), James VI's fearsome tutor, wrote exclusively in Latin (and published in print); although James VI's Castalian band, which flourished in the 1580s, wrote in older Scots (and published in manuscript).<sup>21</sup> As J.W. Binns and others have shown, however, printed books in Latin in England (including what we should by any criteria call literature) considerably outnumbered such books printed in English. These Latin publications in print (chiefly intended for Oxford and Cambridge readerships) peaked in the early seventeenth century, dwindling to a trickle only by the mid eighteenth century. The only manuscript works in Latin during this period appear to have been dramatic.<sup>22</sup> In contrast, literature in English in and around 1600 right up to the last quarter of the seventeenth century was much more frequently disseminated in manuscript than is often thought: very little appeared in print in English in a given author's lifetime until the eighteenth century. Among the last English poets to participate in the culture of manuscript are Andrew Marvell (died 1678) and John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester (died 1680), more than *two centuries* after the so-called Gutenberg revolution.

What, then, were Britannia's languages in 1500? Apart from Latin, which served an international role similar to the global role served by English in 2005, we have, proceeding peripherally from the north-east and moving roughly counter-clockwise:

- Norn (spoken at least until the eighteenth century in the Orkney and Shetland islands, which had been ceded to James III of Scots at the end of the 1460s as dowry for his Scandinavian bride Margaret, the "Fair Maid" of Norway)<sup>23</sup>
- Scots Gaelic (still spoken)
- Older Scots (evolved into today's [Lowland] Scots)
- Manx<sup>24</sup> (officially "extinct" in 1974)
- Irish Gaelic (still spoken)
- Anglo-Norman (still in 1500 spoken in so-called "Old English" enclaves of

Ireland as a result of the Anglo-Norman invasion of 1169; and still to this day spoken in varying forms of patois in aetiolated form on the Channel Islands)

- Welsh (still spoken, and still as late as the 1880s the native tongue of three-quarters of the Welsh<sup>25</sup>)
- Cornish (officially “extinct” in 1777)<sup>26</sup>
- French (spoken in Britannia’s last possession on the continental mainland, an enclave around Calais that would not be lost until 1558)

What are we to say about “the rest”? We must describe it as consisting of many dialects of an English which, unlike the case two centuries earlier, exists in writing (in manuscript and then finally by the end of the seventeenth century predominantly in print) in only one major dialect form, the south-eastern language of the printer William Caxton. It is this that (as every philologist knows) is the ancestor of standard modern British English. But the occupant of a Chair in British literature after 1500 is obliged, in an ideal world, to familiarize himself with at least one and probably two Scandinavian languages, five Celtic languages, and more than one form of French and English. Norn and Cornish followed each other into extinction in the eighteenth century. The last Celtic language to go was Manx.

The literature of many of these now alas extinct British languages was, it must be admitted, largely oral and much of it must have disappeared. But this does not oblige us to ignore its ghostly presences in any account of British literature after 1500. More embarrassing for any incumbent of a Chair professing authority on British *literature* since 1500 is absence of training in how to read the significant amount of early modern poetry in Welsh and Irish. One of the most important manuscript transcribers of John Donne’s verse, though we do not know his or her identity, must have been at least bilingual or possibly even a native speaker of Welsh, for in transcribing in English he or she makes the “w” represent a vowel, which it does in that language, where it represents only a consonant in English.<sup>27</sup> In *1 Henry IV*, Shakespeare used a Welsh-speaking boy to play Lady Mortimer: we are not told what the actor says. We do know that her father Glendower (Glyndŵr), an unsympathetic portrayal of the last Welsh Prince of Wales or *Tywysog Cymru*, must act as go-between since neither Mortimer nor his wife understands the other. Having a Glendower listen in on one’s pillow-talk is a fate one would wish on very few. From the English point of view, the background to this bizarre dynastic marriage is a bloody Welsh rebellion. The War of Three Kingdoms (1642-46, 1648) (to give it its revisionist title) or the English Civil War (for the more Anglo-centrally minded) provoked in Ireland, once it was officially over, acts that can only be termed genocide. To cite Simon Schama:

[W]hat Cromwell perpetrated in [Drogheda and Wexford in] Ireland in the autumn of 1649 has been remembered as one of the most infamous atrocities in the entirety of British history, an enormity so monstrous that it has shadowed the possibility of Anglo-Irish co-existence ever since.<sup>28</sup>

Why were the Irish not galvanized into a literature of protest in their own tongue?<sup>29</sup> It is hard to avoid the cliché of Irish passivity, such as Frank McCourt has immortalized in *Angela's Ashes* (1999). And indeed in 1541 Ireland had surrendered through its Parliament to the English throne under Henry VIII, and was no longer a Lordship but a part of Henry's realm. From the later seventeenth century until well into the nineteenth, as Brian Friel's magnificent play *Translations* (1980) movingly brings alive for us, the Irish language continued to be systematically exterminated from huge swathes of Ireland by the English colonists as surely as the kulaks were later to be by Stalin. There remains a small area, the *Gaeltacht*, on the western seaboard of what is now the Republic of Ireland, where Irish Gaelic is still the native language and in many schools in surrounding areas it is the language of instruction. The action of *Translations* covers a short period in the 1830s, as an English force arrives in County Donegal, in the original province of Ulster (that is one of the nine counties, not one of the remaining six), on a program of claiming and renaming Irish geography and conscribing it into the English language. Significantly the action takes place about a decade before the potato famine, a catastrophe from which the population of Ireland, numerically speaking, has never recovered, and which has no equal on the Isles since the Black Death (1348-51).

An English-speaking professor of British literature after 1500 who is for the most part a monoglot Englishman must feel not just residual ancestral shame but a strong desire to make reparation at his present inability to master these languages: they, too, are crucially and challengingly part of any remit to claim authority on the discipline "British literature after 1500".

At this point there are two diverging directions my argument could take. I could try to sketch the troubled history of the remaining British province on the smaller of the two Isles: "Northern Ireland" if you support the Unionist cause, "the North of Ireland" if you support the Republican cause (see note 30 below). Or I could point out that if a dozen or so ethnic languages were in use in the Isles in 1500 and that half of them have since become extinct, I ought not to ignore the often-made claim that today, in London, my city of birth, it is estimated that 300 languages are spoken by 10 million citizens. The majority of these are spoken by British citizens. Gujerati, Hindi and Bengali must top the list.

However, tempting though they seem, I am going to sidestep these byways, and explain why. Enough has been said about the intractability of the divisions within the community of the North of Ireland; and the 5 May 2005 election results polarized already hardened positions still further. We need to look back past Drogheda and Wexford in the mid-seventeenth century, to the Anglo-Norman invasions of the late twelfth century, and to recognize the fear held by the English ever since the Reformation that a pincer movement by the pro-Stuart Scots and the Catholic (and thus foreign and perfidious) Irish might allow invasion of "un-English" and very likely Catholic forces on more than one front simultaneously. In various forms, this fear would persist at its most acute from the mid seventeenth until well after the mid

eighteenth century. It is this period that sees the height of demonization of Catholicism in Britannia. It is foolish to prophesy, but it is difficult to see a solution to the intractability in the North of Ireland within the next half century. An excellent article in a recent *London Review of Books* issue by Nick Laird makes any point that I could make with more authority and authenticity.<sup>30</sup> Since Laird wrote that piece, we have had the unilateral peace declaration by the IRA in July 2005, which gives cause for cautious optimism, yet more recently we have seen the thuggery of the delayed Orange Order marching season in September 2005. It may be that these events will bring the unification of Ireland nearer after all. Possibly the greatest living British or Irish poet, Seamus Heaney, was born in 1939 in a location right on the border between the province and the Republic. I don't know whether, as an Irish writer, he falls within my remit or not.

Again, there have been far too many interventions on the multiculturalism of today's Britannia and her literature and far too little creativity in those interventions. Most fail to acknowledge that British literature has always been multicultural and even polyglot. Indeed, attempting to see as unprecedented the input of the "new Britons", from the arrival of the Windrush in Tilbury from the Caribbean in 1948, to the to-ing and fro-ing of Britain's second- and third-generation post-war immigrants, not all of them from colonial backgrounds (it is enough to name Caryl Phillips, Marina Warner and Kazuo Ishiguro), is to fall *precisely* into the trap from which Linda Colley has been so anxious to extricate us. Britannia, and British literature since 1500 (and before), has *never* been monolithic or homogeneous. It has been mongrel and hybrid. Its mongrel and hybrid nature resists eighteenth-century Whiggish claims that Britannia was a single Protestant nation united against a foe that was (i) Catholic (thus Other) and (ii) implicitly foreign (and thus hostile).<sup>31</sup> The Stuart Jacobites, finally defeated at Culloden in 1746, met both these criteria, their rising put down brutally by the Duke of Cumberland, George II's third son. Yet during the period covered by the remit of my Chair, Jews were readmitted into Britannia's Republic of the 1650s by Oliver Cromwell—a direct result of his radical millenarian beliefs—for the first time since their expulsion by the Francophone English King Edouard 1<sup>er</sup> in 1290.<sup>32</sup> Oliver Goldsmith, author of *The Vicar of Wakefield*, was born in Ireland to English parents, returned to England, and travelled widely in continental Europe, including a brief visit to Leiden. From the eighteenth century on it is enough to mention Aphra Behn, Daniel Defoe, the Rossetti family, and Joseph Conrad, remembering that English was this writer's third language, after his native Polish and fluent French. Even in the seventeenth century that most militantly Protestant of canonic British writers, John Milton, visited France and Italy in 1638-39 and claimed to have met and spoken with "Galileo grown old" in Fiesole. We can only envy the fly who was on the wall during that conversation: in what language was it held?

The present perception of a phase or wash of multiculturalism seems to have begun with Salman Rushdie's Booker success with *Midnight's Children* in 1981. In the

aftermath of the 1989 fatwa, in a powerful essay entitled “In Good Faith”, Rushdie argued compellingly that

*The Satanic Verses* celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure.<sup>33</sup>

Although many cultural commentators as well as readers realized that something new was happening, few could foresee that within two decades multicultural writing in Britain would become identified with the forces of hype and what has become known as the “mediagenic”. Three examples, in the nature of things writers who are women, must briefly suffice. Arundhati Roy is in fact as far as I know still an Indian citizen, but shot to fame in 1997 when she won the Booker Prize for *The God of Small Things*. Many of her buyers and even readers quite likely assume she is a British writer with an Indian name. Zadie Smith published *White Teeth* in 2000 having received what was touted as “a six-figure advance”. Monica Ali published *Brick Lane* in 2003: here the achievement was to have made it into the third number of *Granta* magazine’s amazingly prescient “Best of Young British” on the basis of no prior publication record and not many pages of typescript—or so rumour went—but so the rumour also went, another six-figure advance. The pattern is the same: with all due respect to the achievement of these writers, they have succeeded in making the exotic comfortable. They are immensely advantaged by their good looks, as evidenced not just “live” but in press photos: soulful, doe-eyed, or just plain glamorous. The retail trade does a serious disservice to this kind of British literature in at least three ways: (a) trivializing Otherness, (b) ignoring writers who are not mediagenic, and (c) worst, ignoring writers whose presentations of Otherness make us distinctly *uncomfortable*. No wonder many of our students regard their own existence in a post-feminist and indeed de-politicized world as self-evident.

It seems fitting at this time to take a step back and conclude with some idea of what three ethnically British writers seem to be saying about these matters, which are after all matters of heritage, and can assist us in defining what “British literature” is, or could be said to be. I begin north of the border, with one of the most remarkable Scottish writers of her generation—not exactly mediagenic, indeed subversive of the attractive power of the press photo, but very present in left of centre media outlets such as *The Guardian*. A.L. Kennedy’s powerful debut, *Looking for the Possible Dance*, appeared in 1993.<sup>34</sup> Her heroine, Margaret, in progress from school in Glasgow to university in England, bitterly draws up “THE SCOTTISH METHOD (FOR THE PERFECTION OF CHILDREN)”. The second of its ten clauses reads: “The history, language and culture of Scotland do not exist. If they did, they would be of no importance, and might as well not.”<sup>35</sup> Some of you will hear echoes of James Joyce’s Stephen Daedalus: “Silence, cunning, exile,” or “Ireland [...] is the sow that eats her farrow”.

The Francophile English writer Julian Barnes published *England, England* in 1998. The central character is another young woman. Martha Cochrane becomes an assistant to the tycoon Sir Jack Pitman, whose self-imposed mission is to buy up the Isle of Wight and distil or map the essence of England as a kind of theme park onto it. Originals are removed, or plundered, and late in the novel's long first section a Wall Street journalist's description serves to render the effect:

In our time-strapped age, surely it makes sense to be able to visit Stonehenge and Anne Hathaway's Cottage in the same morning, take in a "ploughman's lunch" atop the White Cliffs of Dover, before passing a leisurely afternoon at the Harrods emporium inside the Tower of London (Beefeaters push your shopping trolley for you!). As for transport between sites: those gas-guzzling tourist buses have been replaced by the eco-friendly pony-and-cart. While if the weather turns showery, you can take a famous black London taxi or even a big red double-decker bus. Both are environmentally clean, being fuelled by solar power.<sup>36</sup>

And lastly, Jonathan Coe, whose *The Closed Circle*, sequel to his much-acclaimed *The Rotters' Club*, appeared in 2004. These two books form a diptych. The major traumatic event in the earlier novel is a fictional rendering of the 1974 Birmingham pub bombings, which were carried out by the IRA on the English mainland at the height of the late twentieth-century Troubles. The Troubles, it need hardly be said, are or were an inheritance of the colonial atrocities to which I referred earlier. In one such explosion the fiancé of one of the main characters is blown to pieces. The sequel, set in Blair's England post 1997, shows how the characters marked by this atrocity are trying to come to terms with it. In doing so they find themselves examining relations between England (Scotland is barely mentioned) and Ireland. To return to Schama: history in the form of Cromwell's interventions in 1649 has "shadowed the possibility of Anglo-Irish co-existence ever since." Beautifully plotted as it is, *The Closed Circle* touches England's peripheries: two scenes are set in various parts of the underpopulated county of Norfolk; others take place in North Wales, Normandy and Denmark. From these vantage points various characters are able to survey the fallout from the 1974 bombings as it affects their culture, history and politics. (I wrote these words, incidentally, before the London bombings of 7 July 2005.) The characters who will be most successful in understanding the Birmingham pub bombings, and the disappearance of one of the principal characters, may be recognized in the words of Oliver Goldsmith's Primrose Junior. His words we can now read in lightly allegorical fashion: Coe's "successful" characters would understand why this Anglophone standing in front of you, willing in a hybrid and mongrel world to be integrated, and with the remit to teach English and mainly British literature to a wide cultural variety of students in The Netherlands, asks them to help teach him what being Dutch is. Then, I propose, we will find ourselves working more harmoniously and productively together than ever before.

Aan het einde van mijn rede gekomen, wil ik graag enkele woorden van dank uitspreken.

Mijnheer de rector magnificus, leden van het College van Bestuur. Ik voel mij vereerd door het door u in mij gestelde vertrouwen, en neem dit ambt graag in ontvangst. Ik zal mijn best doen deze functie zo adequaat mogelijk in te vullen.

Ook gaat mijn dank uit naar het Bestuur van de Faculteit der Letteren, en in het bijzonder naar de voormalige Decaan en thans Vice-Rector. Hooggeleerde van Haaften, beste Ton: je hebt de sollicitatieprocedure voorgezeten, die geleid heeft tot mijn benoeming. Ik waardeer meer dan ik makkelijk kan zeggen de uiterst sympathieke manier waarmee je mij gedurende deze procedure en daarna hebt begeleid.

Aan de huidige Decaan: Hooggeleerde Booij, beste Geert: zoals je naar verluid hebt gezegd, heb je mij naar Leiden gevolgd. Dat beschouw ik als een grote eer. Ik heb jouw twee succesvolle decanaten aan de Vrije Universiteit meegemaakt, en ik kijk uit naar zowel een goede samenwerking als een mooie continuering van het decanaat van je voorganger.

Aan mijn *collega proximus*: Hooggeleerde Ewen, beste Colin: You have been at Leiden much longer than I, and I am deeply indebted to your welcoming presence and for quiet, but nonetheless sage and thoughtful, if occasionally a tad waspishly expressed, words of advice at crucial moments hitherto.

Aan mijn *collega praecedens*: Hooggeleerde Westerweel, beste Bart. Tussen augustus en december 2004 is er, wat jij ooit noemde, een soort dakpanconstructie ontstaan. Gedurende die periode, zijn we namelijk allebei verantwoordelijk geweest voor de vroegmoderne Engelse letterkunde hier aan de Universiteit Leiden. Mijn dank gaat uit naar jou op velerlei gebieden. Je hebt mij mijn eigen weg laten banen, door een briljante manoeuvre met sabbatical te gaan tijdens die dakpanperiode. Daardoor hebben we elkaar niet voor de voeten gelopen. Je bent “a scholar and a gentleman”.

Ook ben ik mijn nieuwe collega's in de Faculteit der Letteren en de Opleiding Engelse Taal en Cultuur heel erg dankbaar voor de vriendelijke manier waarop ze mij in hun midden hebben opgenomen. Hier noem ik het bijzonder: Ingrid Tieken, oud-voorzitter van de Opleiding, en Karin van der Zeeuw, ambtelijk secretaris van de Opleiding.

Mijn collega's in de sectie letterkunde: Peter, Joke, Jan Frans, Margu rite, Evert Jan, alsmede mijn kersverse aio Helmer staan borg voor een relatief vergaderingvrij milieu, en tegelijk een rijk sociaal leven. Ik kijk uit naar de voortzetting van onze tot nu toe aimabele en vruchtbare samenwerking, en dit geldt uiteraard de voor hele Opleiding.



Vanmiddag is de organist Casper de Jonge. *Vir clarissime!* mijn dank en waardering zijn groot.

Dames en heren studenten: de anglistiek en de letterkundestudie blijven bewegen en ontwikkelen. Zoals jullie gehoord hebben, heb ik tegen het einde van mijn betoog een aantal teksten in het kort besproken, die toen ik student was, niet eens bestonden. Maar er is meer. Het bedrijven van de literatuurstudie is ook in beweging, op allerlei manieren. Vond het onderwijs in de Engelse letterkunde in de 60er en 70er jaren van de 20<sup>ste</sup> eeuw plaats in het kader van F.R. Leavis en het “New Criticism”, tegenwoordig zijn jullie docenten veel meer geopoliticiseerd. De aard van onze conversatie, of, om mijn leermeester Kermodé te citeren, “the forms of attention” die we aan onze vak besteden, zijn ook constant in beweging. Het is de verantwoordelijkheid van zowel jullie docenten als jullie als studenten over deze veranderende situatie te waken, kennis over te blijven dragen—en uiteraard te genieten van jullie studie.

Gedurende ongeveer 26 jaar ben ik aan de Vrije Universiteit verbonden geweest, van november 1977 tot eind juli vorig jaar. Het kan niets anders zijn dan dat een kwart eeuw aanstelling aan één universiteit haar stempel op de aard van de wetenschapper drukt. Ik spreek hierbij mijn dank uit aan mijn voormalige collega's en studenten in de Faculteit der Letteren en vooral de Opleiding Engelse Taal en Cultuur aan de VU. Ik dank mijn VU-vrienden met zeer gemengde gevoelens, omdat ik terdege beseft dat de Letterenfaculteit aan de VU een zeer pijnlijke periode heeft meegemaakt als gevolg van de zoveelste, ingrijpende, reorganisatie. Velen van jullie zijn hechte vrienden geworden, en gebleven. Het ga jullie goed.

Many have contributed to my academic formation but none bears responsibility for the final product. At UCL between 1970 and 1976 I was fortunate enough to be taught by people of the scholarly caliber and personal magnetism of Frank Kermodé, A.S. Byatt, John Sutherland and the late Keith Walker among many others. My gratitude for an experience of a liberal education founded on mutual respect is impossible to convey, but I try nonetheless.

Lieve familie en vrienden, family and friends. My own family has undergone a diaspora since the time we all grew up in London NW11 in the 1960s and 1970s. Many of you have made long journeys to be here, for which my thanks. In particular I thank my parents for unfailingly sustaining one of the more rebellious of their children at a critical period lasting more than a year in his late teens, and continuing to encourage him thereafter in his chosen career. Mijn schoonfamilie heeft mij altijd bijgestaan, en heeft voor een altijd aangenaam en interessant inburgeringstraject in Nederland gezorgd.

Lieve Winnie, Jennifer and Marina. Het is vaak zo geweest dat ik mijn ambitie als excuus heb gebruikt voor minder betrokkenheid met jullie dan ons alle vier lief is geweest. Dit kan ik niet ontkennen. Ik hoop dat jullie mij zullen vergeven. Ik dank jullie voor alles wat jullie voor mij betekend hebben en blijven betekenen. Aan jullie draag ik deze rede met veel liefde op.

Dames en heren. Nog even twee voetnootjes, en dan word u bevrijd, want het is bijna tijd voor de formule van Horatius: *Nunc est bibendum*.

Maar eerst even dit: in het jaar 690 (ruim acht eeuwen voor 1500) vertrok de Heilige Willibrordus uit Britannia (hij groeide op in het vorstendom Northumbria, voordat Engeland bestond), en landde uiteindelijk aan deze kant van de Noordzee, toen Frisia, zoals iedereen hier vast wel weet. De parochiekerk in Oegstgeest, waar ik woon, is aan hem gewijd. Deze kerk heeft een Schola Cantorum, waarvan ik lid ben. Een klein aantal van mijn mede-leden (de rest is thans zeer toevallig op weg naar Rome) heeft aangeboden enkele korte “plainchant” antiphonen in het Gregoriaans voor u te zingen tijdens de receptie die zometeen volgt. Ik vind dit een fijn gebaar, en ik hoop dat u ervan zult genieten.

Ten tweede: bijna 30 jaar geleden ben ik promoveerd op de dichtkunst van George Herbert, die in 1593 geboren werd en kort voor zijn 40<sup>ste</sup> aan tuberculose overleed. Die liefde voor Herbert deel ik zowel met mijn hooggeleerde voorganger Bart Westerweel als met mijn even dierbare Groningse collega de hoogleraar Helen Wilcox. Herberts dichtkunst behoort tot de prachtigste en mooiste die de Britse letterkunde kent. Maar Herbert heeft vroeg in de 20er jaren van de zeventiende eeuw onder een andere naam, namelijk als “Georgius Harbartus”, in het openbaar opgetreden. Hij bekleedde namelijk het ambt van Public Orator aan de Universiteit van Cambridge, een ambt dat nog steeds bestaat. Drie van zijn oraties hebben inmiddels bijna vier eeuwen overleefd.

Twee daarvan zijn zeer formele gelegenheidsoraties, uiteraard in het Latijn gehouden. Van beide bestaat het laatste zinnetje uit één woord, en dat is de formule “*Dixi*”, oftewel:

Ik heb gezegd.



## Noten

- 1 This oration was given in shortened form in Dutch on Friday 23 September 2005. I am grateful to Jan Frans van Dijkhuizen for reading critically through a first draft of the English concept, and to Anna Kaal and Theo Bögels for supervising the Dutch version. I have left the opening and the concluding formulae in Dutch.
- 2 Oliver Goldsmith, *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766; London: Penguin, 1982), p. 128.
- 3 From a plethora of recent publications, see, for instance, two outstanding works: Peter Beal, *In Praise of Scribes: Manuscripts and their Makers in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), and William St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004).
- 4 It began academically with the founding of University College London under the auspices of the University of London in 1826 and the establishment of a Chair in the discipline two years later. UCL (of which I am proud to be an alumnus) was the first English university “to admit students of any race, class or religion, and the first to welcome women on equal terms with men”. Source: <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/about-ucl/history/>. The first English professor was the astonishingly prolific Henry, later Lord Morley (1822-94), who did more than any of his contemporaries to democratize the study of literature in English.
- 5 Pioneering work on this aspect of the discipline has occupied my former UCL teacher Rosemary Ashton; see, for instance, *The German Idea: Four English Writers and the Reception of German Thought 1800-1860* (1980; 1994); *Little Germany: Exile and Asylum in Victorian England* (1986; 1989).
- 6 See Terence Hawkes’ astonishing account of this, the founding of the “English Men of Letters” series by Henry Morley (note 4 above) and the search to find a contributor on Shakespeare. This search ended in 1907 when the aptly-named Walter Raleigh (in 1911 knighted in George V’s Coronation Honours and a man very certain of his fitness for the job) gained the commission (which had been turned down by Matthew Arnold and George Eliot). Hawkes documents Raleigh’s anti-German writings of 1917 and 1918; though extreme, they seem to have formed part of the ethos of the time: Terence Hawkes, “Swisser-Swasser: Making a Man of English Letters”, in *That Shakespeherian Rag* (London & New York: Methuen, 1986), pp. 55-66.
- 7 See John Haffenden, ed., *The Complete Poems of William Empson* (London: Penguin/Allen Lane, 2000), pp. xl-xciv.
- 8 Language laboratories in American English are a remarkably recent development here at Leiden University.
- 9 Norman Davies, *The Isles: A History* (London: Palgrave/Macmillan, 1999), p. xxii, admits to being reduced to considering alternatives such as “the British and Irish Isles”, “Europe’s Offshore Islands” and the “Anglo-Celtic Archipelago”.
- 10 Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation: Europe’s House Divided 1490-1700* (London: Penguin/Allen Lane, 2003): “the collection of islands which embraces

- England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales has commonly been known as the British Isles. This title no longer pleases all the inhabitants of the islands, and a more neutral description is ‘the Atlantic Isles’” (p. xxvi).
- 11 Jeremy Warburg, “Notions of Correctness”, in Randolph Quirk, *The Use of English* (1962; London Longman, 1968), pp. 347-59.
  - 12 Davies, pp. xxvii and 1092, upbraids Roy Strong for his baffling statement “Britain is an island”, which is the opening sentence of Strong’s *The Story of Britain* (1992).
  - 13 Davies’ Appendix 36, p. 1141, consists of a list arguing that had the contentious Act of Settlement (1701), which can be consulted on <http://www.worldfreeinternet.net/parliament/settlement.htm>, not been passed, George I of Hanover (1714-27) would have been 58th in succession after his predecessor Anne Stuart (1702-14), since the Act barred 57 Stuart “*rejetés*” solely on the grounds that they were Catholic. Linda Colley puts the figure of *rejetés* slightly lower, at “over more than fifty individuals” (Colley, p. 46).
  - 14 The first British Empire is usually regarded as having ended with the Declaration of American Independence in 1776.
  - 15 See <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/tour/index.cfm>.
  - 16 To my shame I am unable to trace this quotation.
  - 17 A pioneering work here is Tom Nairn, *The Break-up of Britain* (1977; rev. ed. Glasgow & Melbourne, 2003)
  - 18 At the Washington DC Conference in 1884 Greenwich, slightly to the east of London, was selected at the meridian. Among terrorist attempts to blow up Greenwich Observatory, the most famous in British literature is that described in his fragmented modernist novel *The Secret Agent* (1907) by the Polish-born Joseph Conrad.
  - 19 Colley (p. 12) argues that long before the 1707 Act of Union the cognate language Scots “had spread throughout the Scottish Lowlands and beyond, so that men and women on one side of the border could—usually—communicate with their neighbours on the other”.
  - 20 A strong case can be made for the literary character of this work, by arguing that Cranmer, Shakespeare, and the translators of the King James Bible of 1611 have exercised a greater influence on British literature than any other sources in English right up to the present time.
  - 21 For the concept of “scribal publication” in early modern English, see Harold Love, *Scribal Publication in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford, OUP, 1993), revised as *The Culture and Commerce of Texts: Scribal Publication in Seventeenth-Century England* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1998).
  - 22 J.W. Binns, *Intellectual Culture in Elizabethan and Jacobean England: The Latin Writings of the Age* (Leeds: Cairns, 1990), p. 393.
  - 23 A year ago to the day, 23 September 2004, Klaske van Leyden successfully defended her PhD thesis *Prosodic characteristics of Orkney and Shetland dialects: An*

- experimental approach* at the University of Leiden. See <http://www.wetenschap-sagenda.leidenuniv.nl/index.php3?m=&c=121>.
- 24 In his memoir *Not Entitled* (1995) my *Lehrmeister* Frank Kermode (1919) describes his upbringing on the Isle of Man in the 1920s and 1930s: “some Manx still lingered in the countryside at the turn of the [twentieth] century; as late as when I was around you might be given good-day in Manx on country roads and were expected to answer accordingly” (p. 4). The last attested native speaker was Ned Maddrell (1878-1974), whose voice can be heard on <http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/history/sites/celts/pages/languages.shtml>.
- 25 Colley, p. 13
- 26 The last attested native speaker was Dolly Pentreath, but the language may not have become wholly extinct until the early nineteenth century.
- 27 See Dolau Cothi ms. 6748, National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth, Ceredigion (Cardigan), Cymru (Wales). Eline van Straalen, who has selected this manuscript as her copytext for an edition of John Donne’s “Woman’s Constancy” and I (her one-time supervisor) owe our reaching this insight to Gary Stringer, Editor-in-Chief of the ongoing John Donne Variorum project <http://donnevariorum.tamu.edu>. The Welsh *cwm*, for instance, indicates the vowel quality of “w” and is identical to the south-western English *combe* or *coombe*, to be found in the Wessex of Thomas Hardy and indeed elsewhere, meaning a deep valley cut in moorland. The dialect words must be taken to be an Anglicization of a Celtic original.
- 28 Simon Schama, *A History of Britain 2: 1603-1776 The British Wars* (London: BBC Worldwide), p. 166.
- 29 That said, Oliver Cromwell’s Irish exploits provoked what is generally regarded as the finest political poem in English, Andrew Marvell’s “Horatian Ode” of 1650.
- 30 Dated in fact the day of the 2005 General Election, 5 May, Laird’s article is entitled “The dogs in the street know that”, *London Review of Books*, 21-25. Agnostically Laird writes “Northern Ireland (for which you may of course read ‘The North of Ireland’)” (p. 21) and “Catholic (read, if you like, ‘Roman Catholic’)” (p. 22). The parenthesized terms, as indicated in my text above, are “Nationalist” and “Loyalist” respectively.
- 31 See Colley, pp. 18-30. On p. 15 Colley cites Daniel Defoe’s “The True-Born Englishman”:
- In eager rapes, and furious lust begot,  
Betwixt a painted *Briton* and a *Scot*:  
Whose gend’ring offspring quickly learnt to bow  
And yoke their heifers to the *Roman* plough:  
From whence a mongrel half-bred race there came,  
With neither name nor nation, speech nor fame  
In whose hot veins now mixtures quickly ran,

Infus'd between a *Saxon* and a *Dane*.  
While their rank daughters, to their parents just,  
Receiv'd all nations with promiscuous lust.  
This nauseous brood directly did contain  
The well-extracted blood of Englishmen [...]

- 32 In keeping with the revisionist tone of this oration, I adopt Norman Davies' nomenclature of the Plantagenet monarchs.
- 33 Salman Rushdie, "In Good Faith", collected in *Imaginary Homelands* (1991, London: Granta, 1992), p. 394.
- 34 I am grateful to my former colleague Rod Lyall for drawing my attention to this work—and this writer.
- 35 A.L.Kennedy, *Looking for the Possible Dance* (1993; London: Minerva, 1998), p. 15.
- 36 Julian Barnes, *England, England* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1998), pp. 179-80.





