

The Second World War : “British decline” and “The New Britain”

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Chamberlain famously refused to engage in a war with Germany ‘from which only the United States and the Soviet Union would benefit’. As far as I know, this is an apocryphal quotation since I have never seen the source, but it provides an ideal starting-point for our theme today. With this phrase, Chamberlain appears as the great wizard who had understood everything beforehand, when lesser mortals like Churchill, that incorrigible romantic, wrongly believed that Britain would be reinforced by a defeat of Nazi Germany. Implicitly, therefore, Chamberlain conceded that the international position of Britain no longer was what it used to be – the absolute reference being of course the great ‘Pax Britannica’ of the 19th century.

Discourses of British decline were of course nothing new in 1939, and as an oversimplification we could say that they came from three broad sources : the Right, the Left and foreign observers. If we start with the latter, we can say that again criticism came from three main countries, in chronological order from the United States, France and Nazi Germany. To the taunt by Baldwin, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, in 1923, that United States politics were dominated by parochial Senators¹, American opinion-leaders retorted that never again would the United States join in a war to defend a declining British Empire². In France, the pre-war case against Britain was very powerfully summed up in 1931 by André Siegfried in *La crise britannique au XX^e siècle*³. In Nazi Germany, the theme of the old decaying democracies was of course a central one in State propaganda, and as Britain represented the archetype of these democracies, Britain de facto became the focus of attack. There is an irony in this, as the German predictions of a war which would seal the fate of the country, with its ‘brolly and bowler hat’ image, were indeed almost realized – but the important word here is almost. One of the interpretations of the ‘People’s War’ is precisely that the country had to be brought to the brink of military disaster in 1940 by the ‘Guilty Men’⁴ before the intact forces of the common man could regenerate national life. In other

¹ ‘The people in the West merely sell wheat and hogs and other products and take no further interest in connection with the international debt or international trade’. *Congressional Record*, 67th Congress, 4th Session, 64 (29 January 1923) : 2669, quoted by John E. Moser, *Twisting the Lion’s Tail : American Anglophobia between the World Wars*. New York : University Press, 1999 : 32.

² John E. Moser, *Twisting the Lion’s Tail : American Anglophobia between the World Wars*. New York : University Press, 1999 : 76.

³ André Siegfried, *La crise britannique au XX^e siècle*, Paris : Armand Colin, 1931.

⁴ ‘Cato’ [=Michael Foot, Peter Howard, Frank Owen] : *Guilty Men*. Victory Books - N°1. London : Victor Gollancz, 1940 (With a new Preface by Michael Foot and an Introduction by John Stevenson : Penguin, 1998).

words, the collapse of pre-war Britain had to be effective before the ‘sunlit uplands’⁵ of post-war society could be even dreamt of. But the collapse of pre-war Britain in the spring of 1940 did not mean the collapse of the moral fibre of the nation. On the contrary, and this is what made it so astonishing, even incomprehensible, to well-meaning neutrals and incredulous enemies alike, the near-crumbling of ‘Great’ Britain indeed marked the end of a long process of decline among the ‘Great Powers’, it did indeed, in a way, mark the terminal point of Liberal Capitalism – a British invention, first applied in the British Isles with great success in the 19th century, but in grave peril between 1914 and 1939 – and here the Fascist or Communist Dictators were right. Yet the near-crumbling of Britain in 1940 was also a springboard : since the ‘old’ Britain was dead, or at least the values on which it was founded were dead, it was now possible to reason in terms of a ‘New Britain’, a catch phrase which met with an enormous success from 1940 to 1945. Yes, Hitler was right – Britain was ‘degenerate’ in 1939 – but the remarkable phenomenon was that the factors for regeneration immediately seemed to spring up, and this what I would like to discuss now.

Decline and degeneracy

The ‘degeneracy’ of British institutions was not only denounced by the Fascists and Communists. What enabled the Dictators to predict the imminent collapse of ‘British Liberal Capitalism’ was the fact that in many older industrial areas the population was disaffected, or at least appeared to be so. The modern observer can only be struck by the gloomy picture which was given by series like the Left Book Club, on the theme of seemingly inevitable unemployment in the North unless one got rid of the London clique first (starting with *The Road to Wigan Pier* in March 1937). Even more encouraging for the totalitarian prophets of doom was the discourse of disaffiliation held by theoretical supporters of ‘British Capitalism’ : the name of Keynes springs to mind, but one should also mention journals like *The Economist*, which deplored the fact that the British market was ‘rigged’ by monopolists who ransomed the public⁶, its favourite target being the steel cartel encouraged by the National Government⁷. During the autumn and winter of 1939-1940, these ‘reformists’ enraged to see Chamberlain refuse any significant reform with the apocryphal slogan ‘business as usual’. Indeed the ‘controls’ introduced for the various essential foods reinforced the power of ‘Monopoly Capitalism’ since the controllers were chosen among the big firms which dominated the market⁸. When Keynes made his first proposals for financing the war by a system of taxes with deferred repayment in a series of articles in *The Times* in November 1939⁹, which provided the substance for *How to Pay for the War*, published in February 1940¹⁰, they predictably fell on deaf ears, showing once more if need be that the ‘governing classes’ were hopelessly split on the social and economic conduct of the war.

⁵ The expression was repeatedly used by Churchill in his war speeches. See e.g. ‘A Four Years’ Plan for Britain : A World Broadcast’ (21 March 1943) in *Onwards to Victory*, London : Cassell, 1943 : 35.

⁶ ‘Before the outbreak of war there was hardly an important price in the whole country that was not rigged by those who charged it’. *The Economist* 3 August 1940 : 147.

⁷ Notably Sir Andrew Duncan, who chaired the British Iron and Steel Federation : ‘He has devoted many of the best years of his life to restricting production’. *The Economist* 5 October 1940 : 419.

⁸ For instance, Sir Andrew Duncan was Head Controller of Iron and Steel at the Ministry of Supply, and a director of Lever Bros. was Head Controller of Oils and Fats. Here again, *The Economist* was on the forefront of the critique : ‘We are in danger of slipping, through inadvertence, into a feudalistic system of cartel control’. *The Economist* 9 December 1939 : 363-364.

⁹ *The Times* 14, 15 and 28 November 1939.

¹⁰ *How to Pay for the War : A Radical Plan for the Chancellor of the Exchequer*. London : Macmillan, 1940.

The Norway fiasco and the Dunkirk Evacuation in the spring of 1940 did not in any way diminish the disaffection of the working-class conscripts – on the contrary it seems that they reinforced it¹¹. But then, the cries of ‘Never Again’ had to be taken seriously in high places, if only because, as Churchill put it, ‘without victory there can be no survival’¹². And of course military victory could not be obtained without popular participation – hence the notion after June 1940, probably dictated by panic in many privileged circles, that whatever price there was to pay was worth paying, including the acceptance that the ‘New Britain’ should be built on new social and economic foundations. When the book *Guilty Men* appeared in July to indict the pre-war governing elites and signify the final demise of ‘their’ Britain, nobody came out to defend them in a Press which they had largely dominated, financially and intellectually, until May 1940. On the contrary, *The Times*, the ‘Yes-Man’ as *The Economist* called it in 1939¹³, entirely went along with the mood of ‘renewal’ in its now famous editorial of July 1st :

If we speak of equality we do not mean a political equality nullified by social and economic privilege. [...] The new order cannot be based on the preservation of privilege whether the privilege be that of a country, of a class or of an individual.

From then on, ‘media attention’, as we would now say, was entirely dominated by the debate on ‘Reconstruction’, with two great strands, one on moral regeneration, ‘The New Jerusalem’, and one on practical measures, ‘The Blueprints’.

The New Jerusalem

As far as I know, the expression ‘The New Jerusalem’ was not used during the war. It is an a posteriori construction by Thatcherite critics like Correlli Barnett who used the notion to denigrate the wartime daydreamers whose ideas led to the ruin of the country between 1945 and 1979¹⁴. Yet, there is no denying that there was an element of Millenarianism in all this talk of a ‘New Britain’, an element due to the exceptional circumstances of the war. Indeed, the parallel is striking between the Diggers of 1649, who believed that God had designated Revolutionary London as the City of Gold, the New Jerusalem, and the Evangelical Fundamentalists of 1939, who believed that only a Christian revival founded on the universal brotherhood of men would allow Britain to be saved, in all meanings of the term. The foremost representative of that current was of course Sir Richard Acland, who first expounded it in *Unser Kampf : Our Struggle* written in January 1940, that is even before the military disasters of May-June 1940 :

The situation which confronts us now has been brought about because we have based all our public life, both national and international, on the principle of selfishness. [...]

We have failed because of our selfishness, and we need a new standard of morality. [...] And as to those who are only moved by [economic] forces... they must accept the new morality, not merely because it is moral, but because it is the only way in which they can be saved. [...]

What we need now is the adoption, in our public and political life, of those elementary ethical principles to which we have long paid lip-service in our churches. [...] In short, that you shall love your neighbour as

¹¹ This is the central thesis of *Guilty Men*. Later examples of disaffiliation are the main theme of Grafton, Pete. *You !, You ! and You ! : The People Out of Step with World War II*. London : Pluto, 1981.

¹² The phrase is used in the famous ‘Blood, toil, tears and sweat’ speech of 13 May 1940. *Into Battle*. London : Cassell, 1941 : 208.

¹³ ‘The Yes-Man’, title of editorial, *The Economist*, 5 August 1939 : 257.

¹⁴ ‘It was Sir William Beveridge, the most important single influence on public opinion with regard to the post war era, New Jerusalem incarnate, who levitated most successfully above any practical factor that stood in the way of his full employment Welfare State’. Barnett, Correlli. *The Audit of War : The Illusion and Reality of Britain as a Great Nation*. London : Macmillan, 1986 : 45.

yourself must be made an established fact. It must be made our touchstone by which we test each political proposal¹⁵.

The succession of events of the ‘total war’ after June 1940 seemed to vindicate his views that the country had been on the brink of annihilation and that only a ‘New Britain’ would avoid the repeat of this dramatic situation. This was the theme of the Conference of Malvern in January 1941, where foremost Christian leaders like William Temple, then Archbishop of York and future Archbishop of Canterbury, denounced the consequences of materialism and called for a new conception of public life, based on Christian ethics rather than business ethics since the two had proved to be irreconcilable. During the Conference, Acland called for the abolition of private property and the introduction of ‘common ownership’ as the foundation of postwar society, and he developed his ideas in *What It Will Be Like In The New Britain*, published by the Left Book Club in December 1941. The ‘Christian revivalist’ dimension appears in the logic of the reasoning, which links the failure of pre-war society, the necessity for founding a new society on new premises, and the postulate that only Christianity can provide these new values :

But it is not political and economic machinery which will save us. We shall be saved by our determination and our ability to become different men and women from the men and women of 1939. If we have neither the determination nor the ability we shall fail¹⁶ [...]

Many people who are sincerely thinking about our war and post-war problems are not even asking themselves the right question. In the last resort it will be found that they are asking ‘What kind of organisation could be run successfully by the sort of people we were in 1939 ?’ To this question there is only one answer. No organisation of society could be run successfully by the sort of people we were in 1939 [...]

We must become new people. ¹⁷ [...]The success of all the proposals I make depends on a change in the very nature of individuals¹⁸ [...]

I believe the change which must be made will be found to be fundamentally religious in its nature. I hold the view myself [...] that in the course of this change great numbers of people will need to find, and will find, an entirely new faith in God¹⁹.

This emphasis on the spiritual dimension of the transformation required is, he claims, what distinguishes his aspirations from the materialistic preoccupations of the Labour Party :

In recent years the advocacy of Socialism in this country has lost the moral enthusiasm and fervour which it had even thirty years ago. It has laid, not indeed the sole emphasis, but, I think, too much emphasis, on the immediate economic benefits which the individual voter may expect to gain from a vote for a Socialist candidate. There is every indication that we are today re-discovering the moral and ethical basis for our case.²⁰

What makes the wartime period such an exceptional period in twentieth-century British history is that this kind of revivalist talk was translated into votes. When Acland founded his Common Wealth party in 1942, a party which was largely based on the ideas

¹⁵ Acland, (Sir) Richard. *Unser Kampf - Our Struggle*. London : Penguin 1940 : 30-34, passim.

¹⁶ Acland, (Sir) Richard. *What It Will Be Like (In The New Britain)* . London : Victor Gollancz, 1942 : 13.

¹⁷ Acland, (Sir) Richard. *What It Will Be Like (In The New Britain)*. London : Victor Gollancz, 1942 : 7.

¹⁸ Acland, (Sir) Richard. *What It Will Be Like (In The New Britain)* . London : Victor Gollancz, 1942 : 168

¹⁹ Acland, (Sir) Richard. *What It Will Be Like (In The New Britain)* . London : Victor Gollancz, 1942 : 13.

²⁰ Acland, (Sir) Richard. *What It Will Be Like (In The New Britain)* . London : Victor Gollancz, 1942 : 21.

formulated in *What It Will Be Like In The New Britain*, he immediately met with a great electoral success. Admittedly, this success at by-elections was partly due to the ‘electoral truce’ which prevented Labour from putting forward candidates in vacant Conservative seats, but this was only a partial explanation since other ‘marginal’ candidates did not benefit equally. There was a special dimension to Common Wealth which other political groups did not possess, and it is arguable that that dimension was its spiritual fervour. But what was a strength in 1943 became a weakness in 1945, because the advocacy of a ‘New Britain’ had by then found more practical exponents.

The Blueprints

The case for practical action to arrest the decline of Britain as seen before 1939 was excellently put by one of Acland’s political allies, J.B. Priestley, in the preface which he wrote for Acland’s *How It Can Be Done - A careful examination of the ways in which we can, and cannot, advance to the kind of Britain for which many hope they are fighting*, published in 1943 :

What are we in for, we British ? Some foreign observers, who are by no means unfriendly to us and openly admire our war effort, have already declared that we cannot survive this war as a great nation. We saved the world but will not be able to save ourselves. They point out that we have not the vast natural resources of our allies. Our small overcrowded island cannot compete with their huge rich continents. We do not own enough of the modern sources of power. We are now a debtor instead of a creditor nation. We are not self-sufficient. We demand a standard of living to which our own resources do not entitle us. We have not the requisite economic toughness. Our own Dominions will shortly be successfully competing against us. The era that gave us natural leadership is over and done with, and now our fortunes must sharply decline. [...]

Do I myself accept this dismal stuff? No. It is on the same level as those prophecies just before the war – often coming from the same quarters – that announced that we British were now so effete, so decadent, that we would never be able to resist the Axis. Well, we disproved that ; but only – it should be remembered – by making a sudden prodigious effort from May 1940 onwards. Without that effort, we were finished. And I believe that if we relax that effort, and if we refuse to make more changes, then the rot will set in and the dismal prophets may be proved right. But it depends on us. They are quite wrong, I hold, in thinking our decline to be inevitable. Our war production shows what we can do.²¹

Thus Priestley made the case for the application in peacetime of the receipts which had worked wonders in wartime : the organisation of society for a common purpose, based on the most efficient allocation of resources and a sense that ‘we are all in the same boat’ – a boat that is going to sink if self-interest is once allowed to prevail in it. National solidarity and collective action had thus to replace individualism and ‘the profit motive’, a favourite expression in the language of 1940-1945. The organisation of collective action was soon encapsulated in that ubiquitous catchword of the war, ‘Planning’. Priestley and most of the ‘planners’ distinguished themselves from Sir Richard Acland in that they had a lay mysticism in their worship of ‘Planning’ as the cure-all of the pre-war British disease.

Perhaps the best representative of that faith is the magazine *Picture Post*, with its very famous special issue of 4 January 1941 entitled ‘A Plan for Britain’, and it is no coincidence that Priestley wrote the final article. The editorial began by explaining that there had been no planning for peace in the First World War and that the same mistake should not be repeated :

The plan was not there. We got no new Britain, and we got no new Europe. This time we can be better prepared. [...] Our plan for a new Britain is not something outside the war, or something after the war. It is an essential part of our war aims. It is, indeed, our most positive war aim. The new Britain is the country we are fighting for.

²¹ Acland, (Sir) Richard. *How It Can Be Done - A careful examination of the ways in which we can, and cannot, advance to the kind of Britain for which many hope they are fighting*. Preface by J.B. Priestley. London : Macdonald & Co., n.d. (1943 ?) : 6-7.

And a few lines below, it came back to the theme of wartime collective action being the key to peacetime success :

The war has been not only a personal crisis for each one of us. It has been a crisis for our country's whole economic and political life. We have been forced into a knowledge of our dependence on each other.²²

The various aspects of life were covered : employment and unemployment, social security, housing, agriculture, education, health and leisure activities. The date of publication made the list remarkable in several ways. Britain had no significant allies. Most French overseas possessions backed Vichy rather than De Gaulle, as the Dakar fiasco had demonstrated in the autumn. The USSR was still supplying Germany with essential raw materials. Nobody knew whether the United States would one day abandon their neutrality. Britain was genuinely 'alone'. So far, the war had only been a succession of setbacks. And this was the moment that *Picture Post* chose to dream²³ about the features of its 'New Britain'. Also, nobody in authority had even started the process which was to lead to the appointment of the various committees which produced their reports and then led to the publication of the White Papers. For instance, Beveridge was not appointed until later in the year. In other words, the official 'Blueprints', as they came to be called, were not even a reasonable potentiality, as nobody could foresee in January 1941 what policy the Government would eventually follow. The modern reader cannot therefore fail to be struck by the visionary aspect of that issue of *Picture Post*, in tune with the millenarian discourse held by Acland – only, this time without the religious dimension. Believing in victory eventually leading to a 'New Britain' in January 1941 had to be an act of faith. What was born in these circles in the last months of 1940 was in fact a secular religion of progress which, in the particular circumstances of the war, came to impregnate most sectors of British society as the vision became less and less unrealistic as the Government produced its official Blueprints.

This is probably what made the demise of Acland's Common Wealth in 1945 inevitable : what had started as an Evangelical vision became mainstream opinion. By 1945, all parties claimed to have learnt the lessons of 1918 and the failure to plan for peace after the First World War. Though Churchill had warned his Cabinet against 'airy visions of Utopia and Eldorado' in January 1943 – a clear condemnation of 'Beveridge',²⁴ that is the Report and all the hopes it stood for, he had his own blueprint for postwar Britain to propose in the 1945 Manifesto, viz. his Four Years' Plan, announced in March 1943 on the BBC. Far more dangerous for Acland's Common Wealth and the believers in a New Jerusalem was the programme of the Labour Party, which not only accepted all the ideas for reform formulated during the war, even using the phrase 'New Britain' in its Manifesto²⁵, but promised to take the necessary steps to implement them :

The nation needs a tremendous overhaul, a great programme of modernisation and re-equipment of its homes, its factories and machinery, its schools, its social services.

All parties say so – the Labour Party means it.²⁶

The result is well known : an overwhelming victory in seats for Labour, a corresponding disaster for the Conservatives – and also a disaster for the Common Wealth party, with only one seat left and Acland defeated.

²² *Picture Post* 10-1 (4 January 1941) : 4.

²³ The word is used p.22

²⁴ See 'Note Circulated to the Cabinet by the Prime Minister, January 12, 1943'. *The Second World War. (4) : The Hinge of Fate.* London : Cassell, 1951. Appendix F.

²⁵ 'There must be no depressed areas in the New Britain'. *Let Us Face The Future : A Declaration of Labour Policy for the Consideration of the Nation.* London : Labour Party, 1945 : 5.

²⁶ *Let Us Face The Future : A Declaration of Labour Policy for the Consideration of the Nation.* London : Labour Party, 1945 : 4.

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This leads me to my conclusion : clearly, the talk of New Jerusalem in its various forms had outlived its usefulness by 1945. ‘Action, not words’ was the implicit motto of the electorate in 1945 and for the rest of the 1940s, and this is where the limits of the concept of a ‘New Britain’ began to appear clearly. It soon appeared that, for most people, the ‘New Britain’ meant the goodies of the consumer society as seen on American films, not the moral regeneration envisaged by Acland and Temple. Fielding, Thompson and Tiratsoo have very convincingly explained how the Labour leadership mistook the Labour vote in 1945 for a commitment to what they call ‘ethical Socialism’²⁷. It is therefore arguable that the national will to ‘do something’ collectively for the regeneration of Britain in all the meanings of the term, a will which demonstrably inspired everyday action in 1940, had been considerably weakened after the victories of 1945.

It seems, therefore, that in the new historiographical specialism sometimes called ‘declinism’ the Second World War occupies a very special position. For the Left, until recently, there was no doubt that the ‘People’s War’ had brought about a new will to rebuild a dynamic Britain, though as I have just suggested many more critical historians now question what Calder has called ‘The Myth of the Blitz’²⁸. For the Right, until 1979 (this is of course an oversimplification, as no hard-and-fast dates can be given for such evolutions in mentalities), the war had re-established Britain as one of the Great Powers – the symbol for all to see being its seat at Yalta and Potsdam, which less fortunate people like General de Gaulle always envied. But since 1979, the Thatcherite Right has attributed all the evils from which, they claim, Britain continues to suffer, to dreams of a ‘New Britain’ founded on the spurious values of national solidarity and collective action. Even the moderate Right now has its doubts about Britain’s ‘rebirth’ in 1945, and military historians like Richard Overy argue that the land defeat of 1940 was a watershed, which marked Britain’s final and irremediable demise as a Great Power :

Britain and France, the key actors in 1919, found their postwar international position fatally weakened by their inability to stop Germany in 1940. Without allies there would have been no way that Britain could secure her empire, let alone defeat her enemies, once the French army was out of the contest. After 1945 Britain and France became powers of the second rank. Their evident weakness during the war encouraged nationalist struggles in both the British and French empires, and within a generation the empires were mostly gone. Of the western Allies, Britain lost most from the war □ the old balance of power, the empire and a dominant role in the world’s economy.²⁹

Was therefore 1945 a national rebirth ? Did the war really bring about a social regeneration? Did the Second World War mark a pause in Britain’s decline ? Or did it actually accelerate that decline ? These remain very difficult questions to answer for the bona fide scholar, as they seem to continue to be loaded with a high degree of fluctuating emotional partisanship even sixty years after the events.

²⁷ Fielding, Steven, Thompson, Peter & Tiratsoo, Nick. *‘England Arise !’ : The Labour Party and Popular Politics in 1940s Britain*. Manchester : University Press, 1995 : 214.

²⁸ Calder, Angus. *The Myth of the Blitz*. London : Jonathan Cape, 1991 [Pimlico Paperbacks, 1995].

²⁹ Overy, Richard. *Why The Allies Won*. London : Jonathan Cape, 1995 : 327.