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Reading Brexit Backwards: British Eurosceptic Fiction from the European Coal and Steel Community to Maastricht

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The post-war years were a period of introspection for British society as the nation endeavoured to remain fiercely insular yet became increasingly troubled by geopolitical relations reshaping the war-torn continent. Britain swiftly assumed the role of the reluctant European; their opposition to integration hindered by a destructive nostalgia for the past, the perceived erosion of cultural heritage and a sense of English exceptionalism. Beginning with a brief contextual analysis of the events leading to the 2016 EU Referendum, this article will argue that early warning signs of British antipathy were evident in literary responses to integration from the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) to the signing of the Maastricht Treaty which established the European Union.

Through a close reading of selected fictions by key figures in this period, including Kingsley Amis, Nancy Mitford, Angus Wilson and Malcolm Bradbury, the article identifies how early warning signs of British antipathy to European integration were clearly evident in post-war literature. By reading Brexit backwards, the article excavates the historical roots of Euroscepticism implanted in the cultural imaginary.

Introduction

In his first year as British Prime Minster, David Cameron was asked to name his favourite children's book. He selected *Our Island Story* (1905) by Henrietta Elizabeth Marshall, claiming 'It is written in a way that really captured my imagination and which nurtured my interest in the history of our great nation' (Houghton, 2010). Marshall's text, which covers the history of England from Roman occupation to the death of Queen Victoria in 1901, famously obscures the dark underbelly of British imperialism and accentuates the union of England and Scotland as a necessary arrangement. Cameron's subsequent Bloomberg speech, delivered on 23 January 2013 as a last-ditch attempt to confront and settle what he termed the 'European question in British politics', would unwittingly recall Marshall's exceptionalist rhetoric, gesturing to the island mentality that had defined Britain's post-war relationship with Europe (Cameron, 2013).[1] By committing the Conservatives to an in/out referendum on Britain's membership of the European Union (EU), he adopted a different stance to his predecessors, who had avoided the issue by 'simply hoping a difficult situation [would] go away […] asking the British people to carry on accepting a European settlement over which they have little choice' (Cameron, 2013). Given that Cameron delivered his appeal as a party political manoeuvre, without the support of the Liberal Democrats with whom he was in Coalition government, the speech can be interpreted as an early indication that the referendum would divide an already fractious nation and resurrect the Eurosceptic spectres that had haunted Britain's post-war political arena.

Beginning with a reminder of the devastating impact of the 'twin marauders of war and tyranny' during the Second World War, he acknowledged the origins of European supranationalism to stem from 'a resolve never to revisit that dark past' and a commitment to securing peace across a 'great Continent' by placing a break on future nationalist ambitions (Cameron, 2013). Although Cameron's assertion that the speech was designed to focus the public's mind on remaining within the EU and reforming it from within, his isolationist oratory contained nostalgic echoes of Churchill's infamous 4 June 1940 speech: 'we shall prove ourselves once again able to defend our island home' (Churchill, 1940). His words reconjured the image of a defiant imperial Britain encircled by a Shakespearean silver sea: the most potent form of defence in the cultural imagination. His motivations were immediately dissected and derided in the European press; it was clear to several commentators that his decision to commit Britain to a decisive referendum—a defensive tactic designed to appease disgruntled backbenchers

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[1] Cameron, and later Johnson in his designs for a 'Global Britain', would borrow remarks from Anthony Eden's explanation for British exceptionalism, 'Britain's story and her interests lie beyond the continent of Europe' (Eden, 1952).

and strangle nascent populist support for the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) in order to secure a parliamentary majority in the approaching 2015 General Election—would not only prove to be a political overreaction but a gross miscalculation of the public mood.

Cameron's determination to suggest Britain was united in its political stance towards Europe also betrayed a neglect of its constituent countries and their respective histories. Later in the same year, an Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) poll would find that Euroscepticism operates as a distinctly *English* phenomenon: '72 per cent of those who say they are exclusively English and 58 per cent of those who say they are more English than British would vote to leave the EU respectively' (IPPR, 2013). At moments in the speech, Cameron seemed to recognise the uphill struggle he was facing, accepting that British popular consent to the EU had grown 'wafer thin' and was in need of further endorsement, while the political and economic entity was perceived 'as something that is *done* to people rather than acting on their behalf' (Cameron, 2013). Indeed, the speech was littered with contradictions and inconsistencies, reflecting Britain's own troubled and mercurial relationship with the EU: after conceding the Continent constituted Britain's 'geographical neighbourhood', and claiming that 'ours is not just an island story, it is also a continental story […] I never want us to pull up the drawbridge and retreat from the world', Cameron went on to accentuate how 'Britain' and 'Europe' operated as distinct political entities (Cameron, 2013). The nation's separation from the Continental landmass was suggested to reflect a symbolic incompatibility with contemporary European culture: 'We have the character of an island nation; we are independent, forthright, passionate in defence of our sovereignty. We can no more change this British sensibility than we can drain the English Channel' (Cameron, 2013). This reiteration that Britain enjoyed more 'practical' than 'emotional' ties to the union, viewing integration as 'the means to an end […] not an end in itself', was the continuation of a deeply rooted history of Euroscepticism that defined the post-war period (Cameron, 2013).

As Menno Spiering identifies, though much attention is given to political and economic considerations when discussing Euroscepticism, a crucial 'cultural component' is often neglected (2015: 74). Britain's 'Grand Island Narrative' is 'a story' more than an issue of geographical positioning; it functions as a 'cultural construct' reinforced by decades of political nationalist rhetoric and is designed to evince Britain's so-called exceptionalism (2015: 42). As this article will demonstrate, though Cameron's speech was intended to identify and improve opportunities for reform within the EU, it unintentionally revealed pre-existing latent insecurities and cherished signifiers hidden within Britain's cultural imaginary. A reasoned analysis of Britain's Leave vote in the

2016 United Kingdom EU membership referendum can only be reached by considering the nation's long-standing apathetic stance towards post-war integration and the internal fractures scarring the face of a seemingly 'united' kingdom. Such a reading is buttressed by the noticeable continuities between the forceful British Euroscepticism of the immediate post-war years and that evidenced in the EU referendum campaign.

And yet, despite such widespread cultural Euroscepticism, British literature failed to engage with the various incarnations of the EU with the same vigour as the decline of Empire or the idiosyncrasies of Commonwealth rule. British antipathy towards Europe was manifested as indifference, and failed to stimulate the imagination of the literary scene; this exposed the ways by which Britain continued to view itself as exceptional, refusing to *feel* European. However, a minor strain of British Eurosceptic fiction does exist, charting the period between the initial stirrings of post-war supranationalism to the introduction of the Maastricht Treaty. This brand of fiction tracks Britain's distracted engagement with the European Economic Community (EEC), which the British would term the 'Common Market'. Such pre-Brexit fictions—the first stirrings of what I have termed elsewhere the 'Brexlit' genre (Shaw, 2018; 2021)—anticipate the socio-cultural and ethno-political concerns that would be re-energised by the 2016 EU referendum, which include 'the nostalgic appetite for (an admittedly false) national heritage, anxieties surrounding cultural infiltration and a mourning for the imperial past' (Shaw, 2018: 18). It is only by re-evaluating these works in light of recent political events that their anticipatory power can be fully appreciated and can attain a logical piquancy.

Through a detailed textual analysis of selected fictions in this period, this article will read Brexit backwards in order to diagnose Britain's Eurosceptic symptoms. It will suggest that certain authors misidentified external factors as reasons for the nation's decline and neglected crucial endogenous ailments crippling the body politic.[2] Documenting Britain's previous struggles both within and outside of the European project, such fictions challenge the prevailing perception that the vote to leave the EU was unprecedented or unforeseen. They become acute monitors reflecting the British stance towards Europe from the formation of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) to Britain's subsequent entry into the EEC. In this sense, the article will follow Ben Wellings in treating Brexit as an 'extended' and 'protracted' political event, excavating the roots of cultural Euroscepticism in the process (2018: 147). The intrinsic

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[2] My 2021 study *Brexlit: British Literature and the European Project* provided a broader overview of the response of British literature to various attempts at European integration from 1945–present. This article draws extensively on that research but focuses more intently on the specific political developments shaping the post-war landscape and British literature's immediate response to such events.

Anglocentrism of these literary works illustrates how an ingrained sense of English superiority contributed to Britain's exceptionalist attitude towards Europe, as well as underlining the coterminous usage of Britishness and Englishness. Beginning with a consideration of Britain's history within the European project, the article will then examine novels by key authors including Kingsley Amis, Nancy Mitford, Angus Wilson and Malcolm Bradbury, drawing on their personal comments relating to European integration to indicate how literature holds the capacity to comment upon and feed into political debates.

Reluctant Europeans

David Cameron's admission that Britain has often functioned as the 'argumentative and rather strong-minded member of the family of European nations' was an understatement (Cameron, 2013). Britain's determination to play the role of awkward partner is immediately evident in its initial cultural responses to European integration. Kingsley Amis was an early critic of the ECSC, unsure if a turn back towards Europe, 'a place we have spent much of our history trying to extricate ourselves from', was the right move for a diminished Britain seeking post-war futures (1962: 57). In a special edition of the literary journal *Encounter*, titled 'Going into Europe', Amis reflects that though 'closer economic union' may be sensible, the resultant 'inevitable progression' to cultural and political union paints a 'disturbing' vision of a 'Continentalised Britain' (1962: 56). His comments appear to mirror Britain's political stance towards integration since the Second World War. Despite championing the merits of a 'United States of Europe' in 1946, Churchill envisioned that Britain would assume a paternal role, overseeing but not participating in the project (Churchill, 1950). Throughout the 1950s, Britain remained 'disengaged and sceptical' of any European multinational bloc, and 'few politicians of any persuasion, or government officials, showed much interest in it' (Bennett, 2013: 69).

In his 1958 novel *I Like it Here*, Amis communicates some of his initial resistance to European integration. For Amis, closer economic links with the Continent or even stronger cultural ties made pragmatic sense; it was the implied eventual political union to which he was opposed. His seriocomic novel follows the trials and tribulations of Garnet Bowen, a parochial journalist and occasional lecturer, who is confronted with the horror of going abroad for work, clinging to the sacred values and customs he associates with his home nation. Finding himself in Portugal on assignment, Bowen simply hopes 'not to be addressed in a foreign tongue' and wonders why any fellow Englishman would ever think of moving abroad: 'Why can't he live in England like everyone else?' (1968: 20, 19). He swiftly discovers that 'trying to pronounce even a few

syllables of French set off […] a most complex and deep-seated network of defensive responses' (1968: 11). Bowen's neuroses, satirical or not, reflect Amis's own misgivings about closer cultural alignment with Europe. Amis repeatedly articulates his preference for stronger ties with the 'English-speaking' Anglosphere as a cure for Britain's post-war decline (1962: 57). Indeed, given the numerous semiautobiographical elements of the novel—not least Amis's own trip to Portugal following the success of *Lucky Jim* (1954)—Bowen gives voice to his author's own Europhobic anxieties, his initials betraying an immodest manifestation of a proud if fearful 'Great' Britain, belatedly creeping into the European arena.

Yet it is the novel's curious connective threads between the undesirable qualities of Europe, London and the academic realm that best anticipate the debates which would be resurrected during the EU referendum. Bowen's wife discerns her husband only *pretends* 'to like beer because he thought it was anti-foreign, anti-upper class, anti-London, anti-intellectual', critiquing Bowen's perception of European travel and culture more broadly as an elitist practice, enjoyed by those who believe they possess 'the right to knock the English' (1968: 73, 32). In a 1963 article, 'What's Left for Patriotism?', Amis lambasts this European assumption that post-war Britain is no longer a major political player and reiterates his desire for a rejuvenated Anglosphere as a counter to the 'complicated arrangements' of European federalism (1963: 23). Though he would later qualify his remarks and claim that the novel was an attack on Europhilic attitudes rather than Europe itself, Amis's novel would spawn a number of similar Eurosceptic fictions over the following decades in which predominately English protagonists find themselves dislocated, in unfamiliar European spaces, unwilling to negotiate the enforcement of a more Europeanised cultural identity (qtd. in McDermott, 1989: 89).

For Amis, the word 'Europe' itself conjured up images that shared one common thread: 'they could not be conjured up by the word England' (1963: 53). Brexit is often referred to as an English revolt, with England returning a strong 53.4% Leave vote, and even at this early stage in European integration we can identify the familiar stirrings of a crisis of Englishness in the British constellation. Nick Bentley identifies a formal and ideological link between Amis's writing and the crisis of national identity in the period, which involved 'an attempt to reclaim Englishness as part of a masculine, Anglo-Saxon, lower-middle-class authenticity' (2007: 136). His use of realist modes to offer a social critique of national identity, evident in the wider literary efforts of the Movement and Angry Young Men, was intended as 'a celebration of a nostalgic and insular construction of Englishness' and a rejection of the 'foreign intervention' of modernism (2007: 130). These claims are supported by both Amis's commentary on the state of post-war British poetry in which he states 'nobody wants any more poems

about […] foreign cities' and his protagonist's objection to visiting the Continent: 'All those rotten old churches and museums and art galleries' (qtd in Enright, 1955: 17; Amis, 1968: 10). Like his author, Bowen adheres to an abstract and narrow patriotism that is tied less to British culture than to nostalgic principles, regulations and traditions that he associates with his nation. Though Bowen mistakenly comes to consider himself 'a citizen of the world', his prevailing Little Englander mentality betrays a resistance to European cultural engagement that mirrored Britain's own apathetic engagement in the period:

> the place is located abroad and the people are foreigners, which […] means that they and I belong to different nations, so we can't understand each other or get to know each other as well as chaps from the same nation can. I'm all for international co-operation and friendship and the rest of it, but let's be clear what we mean by it (1968: 153; 185).

In a 1971 edition of *Encounter*, 'Going into Europe – Again?', the escalation towards stronger supranational arrangements during the 1960s only strengthened Amis's misgivings. He takes particular umbrage with the process of 'harmonisation—that new and dreadful euphemism for the projected ironing-out of national differences in every department of life', and suggests that cultural Euroscepticism is intimately connected to an entrenched British exceptionalism which perceives any dilution of the national character as further evidence for the nation's ongoing decline on the world stage (1971: 20).

As Krishan Kumar rightly identifies, 'British national identity was forged through a series of powerful contrasts with Britain's continental neighbours', particularly its tumultuous relationship with France (2003: ix). Nancy Mitford's *Don't Tell Alfred* (1960) builds on the Europhobic sentiments of *I Like It Here* by satirically positioning Europe as a space of homogenised otherness, antithetical to British ways of life, which can be exploited for comedic effect: 'going abroad in itself would be hell to me' (1963: 16). The novel follows Lady Fanny Wincham, the wife of the British ambassador to France, who finds herself entangled in humorous Anglo-French rivalries that expose a lingering post-war tension between the two nations, primarily blamed on the 'pretended superiority' of the British and their refusal to enter the European arena (1963: 102). Basil, Fanny's son, identifies that British tourists wish to travel but are discouraged by the thought of European cuisine and champions package-holidays that allow Britons to visit a country without venturing beyond the safe sanctuary of their coaches: 'When they gets to the place they've come to see—the Prado, say, or some old-world hill town in Tuscany, they just sits on in the coach and views the 'ole thing comfortable on TV while eating honest grub, frozen up in Britain' (1963: 127).

Mitford goes further in diagnosing a cultural anxiety which would become central to British Eurosceptic fictions in the subsequent decades: imagined threats to the post-war security of an already beleaguered island nation. Referencing plans for an English Defence Community (EDC), designed to prevent the re-emergence of national hostilities following wartime, *Don't Tell Alfred* suggests Britain was more concerned with placating American interests and safeguarding the 'special relationship' than contributing to European supranationalism. By drawing on evolving political events, Mitford identifies the crucial role played by Eurosceptic media discourses in shaping public opinion with the *Daily Post*—a satirical parody of the *Daily Mail*—which staunchly outlines its opposition to 'foreign countries' and 'cultural bodies' that dare to propose a pan-European defence force or interfere with British parliamentary sovereignty (1963: 25). As Robert Dewey argues, the 'notable success in grafting a host of emotive and enduring patriotic meanings to a foreign policy issue for the purposes of domestic consumption' would continue to be the media's most potent tool in opposing the EEC, foreshadowing the implementation of similar tactics during the EU referendum (2009: 214). Anthony Eden's decision to back out of the EDC, in contradiction to Churchill's support for a European army at the Council of Europe in 1950, may well have been crucial in excluding Britain from further integration and dictated the manner and timing of its eventual entry into the European project.

Like Amis, Mitford initially expressed several reservations regarding the EEC and federalism, yet Britain's economic decline during the 1960s forced her to concede the nation 'can no longer stand alone' with the risks of further exclusion proving too great (1962: 64). In this sense, Mitford's paradigm shift was in line with that of the Macmillan government, whose first application to accession symbolised 'a more general reassessment of Britain's place in the world, and the need to modernise British institutions' (Gamble, 1998: 16). Rather, Mitford came to perceive a Churchillian 'United States of Europe' as the only viable alternative, offering Britain the opportunity to once again take a leading role as opposed to a reduced standing as a 'neglected appendage of North America' (1962: 64).

Nostalgic Conservation

Threats to Britain's post-war security are augmented in Angus Wilson's *The Old Men at the Zoo* (1961): an early literary example of how readily *dys-eutopic* sentiments were attached to the European Question. Published in the same year that the Conservative government began to reconsider Europe as a safe destination, Wilson's novel emerged in the tense period following the 1957 Treaty of Rome, which established an EEC dedicated to 'ever closer union'. *The Old Men at the Zoo* documents the invasion of a

pan-European federation, revealing the protectionist fears that continued to linger in the national psyche when faced with the continental integrationist project.

Narrator Simon Carter, administrative secretary for the London Zoo, documents his time spent serving a series of directors; the vision of each serving to illustrate the divergent perspectives on European integration and the parameters of national identity in this period. While Dr Leacock bemoans the antiquated and claustrophobic atmosphere of the zoo, which repeatedly casts a backward glance towards its golden Victorian heyday, his adversary Sir Robert Falcon espouses a staunchly post-imperial and jingoistic mindset, and asserts the need for the zoo to retain a residual British identity, the coordinates of which are determinedly fixed in the romantic national past. As Deborah Parsons identifies, '[h]eritage culture remains a means for nostalgic reassertion of national myths, and any postmodern self-reflection on the construction of these narratives has rarely addressed the promotion of the continental alternative' (2000: 7). Appropriately, Falcon's attacks on the commercialism of 'Modern Europeanism'—outlined in a series of nostalgic articles published in newspapers to further his cause—reach a climax in his performative 'British Day' celebrations, which recalls British empire exhibitions of old (1992: 31).[3] Falcon's suggestion that 'European animals' should be relegated to the margins of the enclosure, while a 'British lion and an Indian elephant' take pride of place, underpins the reading of Wilson's fictional zoo as a microcosm for an apathetic Britain, dismissive of international developments at the European level (1992: 253). However, Falcon's event is disrupted by Federated European Forces, who invade the zoo and enforce a Continental embargo on British goods across the country, before installing a new Uni-European government to remove the last vestiges of British political sovereignty. The failure of Britain to adequately defend itself against these European incursions provides further evidence of a prevailing declinist narrative predicated on the belief that Britain was becoming little more than a 'Greater Sweden' (with whom they set up the European Free Trade Association in 1960 as a feeble counter to the EEC) on the world stage that would persist in the British cultural imagination for decades (Wall, 2013: 81).

By subtly associating the Uni-Europeans with a lingering fascism, marching under the same patchwork flag, Wilson exposes the dark underbelly of British isolationist rhetoric which strives to connect legitimate anxieties surrounding supranationalism to affect-memories of the Second World War. Following this successful annexation, a third director, Dr Englander, punishes Falcon for his British Day theatrics and proposes a

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[3] The announcement of a UK Museum of Sovereignty on 11 April 2018 indicates a continued effort to memorialise British exceptionalism.

European Day that accentuates the 'interdependence of European insects and European flora' and the eradication of native British species (1992: 316). Englander's efforts to memorialise London Zoo, not 'as an old landmark in a single capital city of a now vanished empire, but [...] playing its part in the revival of *European* learning', gestures to the wider analogy of the erosion of post-war sovereignty, in that the integrationist project somehow symbolised the loss of a distinct and rooted British identity: 'They'll change it. They'll do something terrible with it' (1992: 322; 324). Subsequent nationalist revolts under European rule, 'Don't shut up the animals, let England loose!', anticipate the ways in which British politico-media discourses would later play on the supposed degradation of the nation within the European project (and the aggrandizement of a narrower, more racialised Englishness), manipulating the electorate to view the present as a lamentable period of diminishment which would compel them to turn longingly to the comforting securities of the past (1992: 323).

Though *The Old Men at the Zoo* does contain initial dys-eutopian elements that would later become apparent in speculative post-Maastricht novels, such as the tendency to depict Europeans as villains infecting a hallowed British institution, it would be a mistake to label either Wilson or his novel Europhobic, particularly given his vocal support for the benefits of EEC membership. Rather, Wilson's Euroscepticism stems from a distrust of characters like Englander, whose unwavering support for the Uni-Europeans is predicated on the potential for federalism to further his own neoliberal and corporate interests, rather than an outright rejection of integrationist policies 'substitut[ing] prosperity for patriotism' (1992: 305). As Wilson comments following the release of the novel, though entry to the EEC potentially 'frees us from false provincialism', it may also 'reinforce an arrogant European contempt for American or other non-European cultures' (1963: 56). In this sense, he communicates the reservations of the British political elite in the early 1960s for whom the Commonwealth or the Anglosphere still retained dominance, and casts his eye forward to the emergent superpowers who would soon override the combined strength of Old Europe. Indeed, Englander's brutal displays of the 'Russian Bear in Difficulties', its foot tethered to an iron stake, and the 'American Eagle taught a lesson [...] trying impossibly to spread its wings' reflect Wilson's assessment that, though the post-imperial Commonwealth had failed, Europe was not the only 'lifeboat' capable of saving 'the sinking Titanic' (Denman, 1997: 233; Wilson, 1992: 325). That such fears surrounding pan-European developments worm their way into his narrative intimates an understanding that Britain was beginning to give up on its pretensions to be a global power and recognised its diminished post-war standing.

Following the publication of Wilson's novel, the economically vibrant EEC continued to outperform Britain, particularly following a decline in Commonwealth exports. This led former US secretary of state, Dean Acheson, to famously remark: 'Great Britain has lost an empire and not yet found a role' (Acheson, 1963: 163). While this remark could be made about many post-war nations, it is certainly true that a post-imperial mindset continued to shape the national imaginary even as the success of the EEC pressured the Conservative government to reconsider Europe as a safe destination for a flailing and etiolated Britain. This period of supranational reappraisal was not limited to the Tories; by the mid-1960s, Harold Wilson (initially sceptical of integration) would come to perceive Britain as a 'fading beauty', while the EEC symbolised a 'go-ahead young man with very good prospects' (qtd. in Parr, 2006: 30).

British economic decline ensured public opinion was also becoming more open to the possibility of membership. However, French President Charles de Gaulle would go on to veto British accession attempts in 1963 and 1967, labelling Britain's volte-face an act of economic opportunism and declaring the nation had proven it was not *Communautaire* ('communityminded') (de Gaulle, 1963). De Gaulle's negative impact, influenced (according to Macmillan) by his bitterness regarding France's occupation during the Second World War, would ensure that when Britain belatedly entered the EEC on 1 January 1973 under Ted Heath, it was forced to accept unfavourable terms and costs of entry that would sour public and political attitudes towards integration for decades.

All Aboard!

Joining the EEC on such disagreeable terms strengthened the perception that Europe was simply 'a last resort, a final resting place for a country which had run out of options' (Bogdanor, 2005: 693). Indeed, only two years after accession, a new Labour government came to power on a manifesto promising to hold a referendum on the recent membership. Although the 1975 referendum gave popular consent to remain in Europe by two-to-one (67%), the result was not a significant declaration of pro-Europeanism, rather it masked Britain's resignation to the process. As David Butler and Uwe Kitzinger observe, the verdict was 'unequivocal but it was also unenthusiastic. Support for membership was wide but it did not run deep' (1996: 279). Vernon Bogdanor notes how the result masked Britain's debilitated position as 'the sick man of Europe' in the mid-1970s, which suffered heavily from 'stagflation': the combined effects of rising unemployment, the highest inflation rate ever recorded in the country, industrial strife, low productivity, and bleak economic prospects on the horizon (2016: 349). The

Continent, on the other hand, was performing well economically and seemed a brighter destination. However, in Roy Jenkins's words, though Britain was soon likely to enter 'an old people's home for fading nations', it was not likely to be 'a very comfortable old people's home. I do not like the look of some of the prospective wardens!' (qtd. in Bogdanor, 2016: 349). Even at this early stage, Britain's approach to European integration was 'characterized by a pragmatic and utilitarian element—stripped of a normative commitment to a European ideal of ever closer union' (Glencross, 2016: 7). Involvement with Europe, then, has always been an act of cautious containment as opposed to willing expansion. After all, it was not pro-Europeans that sought the 1975 referendum but Eurosceptics that aimed to limit and dictate the terms of further integration: 'popular enthusiasm on European matters has been noticeable in Britain only in its absence' (Bogdanor, 2005: 700). Despite the seemingly dominant public support for continued membership, there were 'strikingly familiar' continuities in British Eurosceptic thought following the 1975 referendum, resulting 'in a 40-year "neverendum"', characterised by increasingly strident calls for a new vote on EU membership and a defiant resistance to a 'normative commitment to a European ideal of ever closer union' (Glencross, 2016: 2).

Britain's early struggles within the European community find fertile ground in Malcolm's Bradbury's *Rates of Exchange* (1983). The novel emerged following government revolts over a proposed European Monetary System (EMS) in 1978–79, which sought to coordinate the exchange rates of member states. In the period between the publication of Wilson's *The Old Men at the Zoo* and Bradbury's novel, the EEC's buoyant economic success had slowed and weakened. Accordingly, *Rates of Exchange* not only alludes to the instabilities of Common Market membership with falling rates of growth but explores fears regarding the expansion of the European community, forecasting the eventual 2004 EU enlargement which saw the incorporation of Eastern European countries. Bradbury's subsequent 'television novels', *The Gravy Train* (1990) and *The Gravy Train Goes East* (1991), continue this storyline, and expose the obstinate behaviour of British officials in curtailing proposed harmonisation policies of fellow member states.

Finding himself in Eastern Europe on a lecture tour for the British Council, Professor Angus Petworth, the nervous protagonist in *Rates of Exchange*, clings to a fictional guidebook for British businessmen to cope with his new cultural environment. Though Petworth is a linguist, his specialism is in dead languages; European words 'still do not manage to yield a sense' (1983: 287). In turn, the inability of his acquaintances and employees of the Europa hotel to correctly pronounce his surname—'Pitworthu'; 'Petwurt'; 'Petworthi'; 'Petwit' and the glorious 'Pervert'—appears to suggest that

economic pragmatism determined integration: no common European identity was in development (1983: 116, 185, 187, 195, 84). Retreating into a defensive disposition, Petworth exasperatedly whines, 'Doesn't Britain count anymore?', as his European adventure triggers a nostalgic longing for the safety of his island nation (1983: 149). His simple and resigned observation that 'travelling abroad is confusing' thus recalls the Anglocentric mindset of Amis's Garnet Bowen, and indicates the Eurosceptic continuities that continue to permeate the post–war British novel (1983: 97).

Bradbury's television novels retain this Eurosceptic sensibility and direct their attention towards the emergence of obscure pieces of minor regulation from Brussels, which serve as further evidence of unwelcome Continental bureaucracy. *The Gravy Train* charts the rise of Dr Hans Dorfmann, a German diplomat whose romantic naivety cuts a sharp contrast with the parochial Petworth. Dorfmann's peripheral department serves as an overt microcosmic analogy for the EEC; his integrative idealism is soon quashed by opaque bureaucracy and corrupt financial dealings of the European Commission. Upon arriving in Brussels, he is initially refused entry and errors in translation further compound the situation, hinting at the struggles faced by the eastern bloc in seeking accession (at the time of writing, the EEC was still only 12 members strong and certain member states were resistant to Eastern European expansion).

Bradbury's subsequent series *The Gravy Train Goes East* continues this seriocomic concentration on the linguistic barriers that continue to prevent the European project from achieving greater cultural coherence and cohesion. It details the move to force Slakan citizens to embrace English as the primary spoken language in order to strengthen their cause. Given their feeble economic record and fluid exchange rate, Slaka's case for accession is doomed from the beginning, but Britain openly supports Slakan membership in the begrudging hope that it will 'drain the EU dry' (Bradbury, 1991b). The second series picks up the threads of Dorfmann's rise as an EEC advisor and utilises Slaka's botched attempts at accession to deliver a critique of French blueprints for a 'Super Europe! Soon we will be not 12 but 15, 20, 30!' (Bradbury, 1991b). Bradbury's British characters assail France's efforts to spearhead this federalist framework, appearing perplexed and mistrustful of these emergent geopolitical transformations: 'I don't understand the map of Europe anymore? I suppose because they keep changing the bloody thing everyday' (Bradbury, 1991b). Rather than acknowledging themselves as recalcitrant Europeans, however, the Thatcherite British both mock the trade agreements of EEC membership and continue to perceive Britain as the dominant player in Europe. When forced to contemplate, 'Aren't we the odd one out?', British diplomat Michael Spearpoint arrogantly retorts: 'Not from our point of view. From our standpoint the other eleven are the odd one out' (Bradbury, 1991b). Although Bradbury

clearly demonises and ridicules EEC institution-building, he exposes the hesitant and obstinate behaviour of the British in curtailing valid policies of fellow member states, which results in the inharmonious implementation of proposed *harmonisation* policies. In encouraging further Eastern expansion of the EEC by granting economically weakened nations entry, the British perceive a means of compromising 'the entire history' of the European project and a move towards more intergovernmental decision-making: 'Cornerstone of our policy. Bring in Eastern Europeans and mess up the whole issue of European Federalism' (Bradbury, 1991b). While both miniseries reiterate the thematic sensibilities of *Rates of Exchange* in ridiculing the aloof and insular sensibilities of the British when forced to converse in 'Eurobureaucratese', they also signal a more direct authorial dissatisfaction with the opaque, administrative apparatus of the EEC and expose 'the popular prejudices of the Euro-myths (rampant bureaucracy […] faceless government by dictat or directive)' (Nixon, 1999: 139). Bradbury's suspicions in this period reflect a wider public apprehension concerning an emergent democratic deficit that stems from the Europeanization of British politics. This deep-rooted desire to cling to more cherished national discourses that relate to political sovereignty was clearly at odds with the accelerated pace of the integrationist project, as EU policy seeped into UK law-making and institution-building.

In a 1991 article, 'All Aboard for the New Europe', Bradbury reveals the ways in which his literary outputs project his own reservations concerning greater economic union with, and the expansion of, the European community. He accuses the European Commission of trying 'to administer a unity that does not yet exist', bemoans the development of an acronym-driven 'Eurospeak' by unelected bureaucrats (appropriately ridiculed in his *Gravy Train* series) and questions the impact of permitting Eastern European countries to join the community (Bradbury, 1991a). 'It was now for Britain to decide', he concludes, 'whether it wished to be in the driver's cab or the rear compartment, and whether it should move forward or backward' (Bradbury, 1991b). Bradbury's works would prove to be startlingly prescient. The accelerated evolution of the EEC into an ever closer political and economic union not only resurrected the spectre of British political sovereignty but stimulated spasms of discontent in the British public, which provoked a more vehement hostility to the possibility of an emergent federal superstate. The Single European Act, which Margaret Thatcher signed in 1986, would set the goal of a single market and embed freedom of movement into the framework of economic union. This final pillar of European integration would prove to be particularly undesirable for Britain as an island nation, and resuscitated fears of the dilution of national identity. As Thatcher argued:

> To try to suppress nationhood and concentrate power at the centre of a European conglomerate would be highly damaging [...] Europe will be stronger precisely because it has France as France, Spain as Spain, Britain as Britain, each with its own customs, traditions and identity. It would be folly to fit them into some sort of identikit European personality (1988).

Thatcher, then, may have initially contributed to the pace of integration by offering her support for the European Single Market, but soon came to distrust the federalist designs of Jacques Delors, the reformist President of the European Commission. Her infamous 1988 Bruges speech contained the same hesitations, contradictions and hints of British exceptionalism that would later be expressed in Cameron's Bloomberg speech. Despite her claim that 'Britain does not dream of some cosy, isolated existence on the fringes of the European Community, our destiny is in Europe, as part of the community', her Bruges speech marked the point at which Thatcher turned away from closer European integration. Indeed, in the same speech, Thatcher also signalled the nation's desire to look towards 'wider horizons', emphasising her distaste for the centralising, federalising machinations of Delors: 'We have not successfully rolled back the frontiers of the state in Britain, only to see them re-imposed at a European level with a European super-state exercising a new dominance' (1988). As Stephens argues, her rhetoric gave 'a license to the hardening Euroscepticism in her own party and also for the right-wing media to turn their criticism of the Community into a crusade' (2021: 250).

Britain would go on to withdraw from the Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM) following a collapse in the pound sterling and reject Delors's attempts to impose a single European currency. For Robert Tombs, the proposed 'Euro' was 'the single most disastrous policy in the history of European integration', while Joseph Stiglitz (the Nobel-Prize winning economist) labelled it 'Europe's underlying mistake' (2021: 42; 2017: 5). In this sense, the British desire for a more gradual form of economic integration—expressed in Bradbury's metaphorical critique of rates of exchange (cultural, monetary or otherwise)—seems to be well grounded. Thatcher's resistance to monetary stability across Europe, designed to accelerate political and economic convergence more generally, would prove to be her downfall when faced with increasingly Europhilic elements in her party. The 1992 Maastricht Treaty immediately followed Thatcher's removal from office and forged a new European Union (EU) from which there was no immediate turning back, a union that introduced shared European citizenship and greater levels of pooled sovereignty. Though Maastricht could be perceived as a success from a British standpoint in that it allowed Britain to secure opt-outs and remain in

the slow lane of European integration while at the same time retaining its influence, it marked the point at which the European question began to consume the Conservative Party.

Subsequent post-Maastricht concerns that Germany would once again be the main beneficiary of the Euro, its low value boosting German exports, emerged in a new strain of 1990s counter-factual, dys-eutopian fictions which combined visions of German renascence with a cruel nostalgia for wartime resistance movements. Robert Harris's *Fatherland* (1992) would echo Angus Wilson's reservations, eliciting fears over Germany's renewed financial and political ascendancy within the European constellation and the potential for union to incite rather than ameliorate further post-war conflict. Indeed, Angus Wilson initially intended for *The Old Men at the Zoo* to project 'a triumphant German invasion of England', reinforcing how a wartime mentality impacted British culture's opinion of integration from the outset. Harris's *Fatherland*, depicting an alternative history influenced by German unification, offers the most damning indictment of the EU. The novel's protagonist, detective Xavier March, wanders past the European Parliament in Berlin, casually noting how 'the flags of the twelve member nations were lit by spots', before concluding 'the swastika which flew above them was twice the size of the other standards' (2012: 288). Though such impulsive Germanophobia was overdramatised in these fictions, their predictive power would be substantiated by comments made by the Leave camps during the EU referendum campaign, not least those made by future Prime Minister Boris Johnson: 'Napoleon, Hitler, various people tried [unifying Europe], and it ends tragically. The EU is an attempt to do this by different methods' (Johnson, 2016).

Conclusion

As the introduction theorised, the prevailing perception that the vote to Leave the EU was unforeseen not only neglects the role of Britain as an awkward partner in various incarnations of the European project but also ignores the role of writers and intellectuals in giving voice to a particular strain of British exceptionalism and Euroscepticism. Helen Thompson goes further in signalling the inevitability of the result, claiming 'Britain's membership could be sustained only so long as British governments could avoid holding any EU referendum. A "no" vote would have been likely whatever the question on the ballot paper' (2017: 435). These selected literary fictions, published in the post-war period between the formation of the EEC and the signing of the Maastricht Treaty, signal how the rapid pace of integration, combined with fears of a European superstate and the resultant loss of sovereignty that implied, troubled the British electorate and worked against the exceptionalism writ deep in the cultural imaginary.

The public simply did not trust political attempts to transmogrify the EU as 'the last best hope of humanity' and instead linked declinist narratives of British cultural and economic history to the invasive and obstructionist machinations of a bureaucratic EU elite (Cunliffe, 2020: 115). British writers were anticipating and responding to Britain's struggle 'to reconcile the past she could not forget with the future she could not avoid', wrestling with the desire to cling to the past, which often obscured the constructive role Britain could have played in the European project (Young, 1998: 1).

The EU suffered a series of unexpected blows in the years preceding Cameron's Bloomberg speech—from the Eurozone debt crisis to the emergence of populist parties across Europe, to the Syrian refugee crisis—all of which aroused the re-emergence of Eurosceptic political discourses evident in these selected post-war British fictions. However, Cameron's fateful concession in 2013 would not only have devastating repercussions for British society, but also for European and world economic relations. In attempting to answer 'the European question', Britain was faced with more questions than answers. In February 2016, Cameron acknowledged his dubious negotiation tactics had failed, accepted that 'the game was up', and resigned himself to accepting the referendum result (qtd. in Shipman, 2017: 189). Having failed to reform the EU and finding himself in the midst of a tumultuous referendum campaign, he once again fell back on his mercurial, contradictory stance towards integration. But his warnings came too late: 'Whenever we turn our back on Europe, sooner or later we come to regret it. We have always had to go back in, and always at much higher cost' (Cameron, 2016).

English writers were clearly the driving force of cultural Euroscepticism. With this in mind, it is hardly surprising that subsequent literary responses to the growing autonomy of a post-Maastricht EU would address the inherent threats to stable, traditionalist notions of a specifically *English* national identity and critique the increasing politicisation of Englishness by conservative forces. Novels such as *The General Interrupter* (1994) by Alex Martin, *England, England* (1998) by Julian Barnes and *Speak for England* (2005) by James Hawes would go on to document how a regressive, anti-multiculturalist agenda resistant to an inclusive *Britishness* began to take shape, motivated by the sense that a quintessential English cultural imaginary was being undermined by external developments at the European level. Given that Brexit was arguably an English revolt—a 'sore tooth problem […] that deeply disturbs the entire body politic'—these novels accurately interpret the delusional desire to slide into Anglospheric isolation as the last spluttering gasps of imperial dreaming (O'Toole, 2019: 191).

The Brexit vote did not have one root cause, but was instead the product of interrelated economic, cultural and political factors that festered in the post-war

era. This article has examined one specific strain of early British Euroscepticism in post-war British literature, as the nation negotiated and tentatively entered into an increasingly tempestuous relationship with its continental neighbours. However, the impact of devolutionary dispensations, debates over immigration, and distrust of the British political system are equally crucial to the discussion of Europe in literature (see Shaw, 2021). What we can recognise in these early works is a process of *literary euro-deconstructivism* as writers began to channel an anti-Market rhetoric reflective of wider public anxieties that concerned Britain's changing role on the world stage and diminished influence as a leading voice in post-war European affairs.

Competing Interests

Kristian Shaw is an editor of this Special Collection but has been kept entirely separate from the review process for this article.

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