

ISLAND STORIES

UNCORRECTED PAGE PROOFS

MATERIAL FROM THIS COPY SHOULD NOT BE QUOTED OR USED
WITHOUT FIRST CHECKING WITH THE PUBLISHER, AS SOME OF THIS
MATERIAL MAY NOT APPEAR IN THE FINISHED BOOK.

ALSO BY DAVID REYNOLDS

*The Creation of the Anglo-American Alliance:
A Study in Competitive Cooperation, 1937–1941*

*An Ocean Apart: The Relationship between Britain and
America in the Twentieth Century* (with David Dimbleby)

*Britannia Overruled:
British Policy and World Power in the Twentieth Century*

The Origins of the Cold War in Europe (editor)

*Allies at War:
The Soviet, American and British Experience, 1939–1945*
(co-edited with Warren F. Kimball and A. O. Chubarian)

*Rich Relations:
The American Occupation of Britain, 1942–1945*

One World Divisible: A Global History since 1945

*From Munich to Pearl Harbor:
Roosevelt's America and the Origins of the Second World War*

*In Command of History:
Churchill Fighting and Writing the Second World War*

*From World War to Cold War:
Churchill, Roosevelt and the International History of the 1940s*

Summits: Six Meetings that Shaped the Twentieth Century

America, Empire of Liberty: A New History

FDR's World: War, Peace, and Legacies
(co-edited with David B. Woolner and Warren F. Kimball)

The Long Shadow: The Great War and the Twentieth Century

*Transcending the Cold War: Summits, Statecraft,
and the Dissolution of Bipolarity in Europe, 1970–1990*
(co-edited with Kristina Spohr)

*The Kremlin Letters: Stalin's Wartime Correspondence with
Churchill and Roosevelt* (with Vladimir Pechatnov)

ISLAND STORIES

AN UNCONVENTIONAL
HISTORY OF BRITAIN

DAVID REYNOLDS

BASIC BOOKS
New York

Copyright © 2020 by David Reynolds

Cover design by XXX

Cover image [Credit here]

Cover copyright © 2020 Hachette Book Group, Inc.

Hachette Book Group supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact permissions@hbgusa.com. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Basic Books

Hachette Book Group

1290 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10104

www.basicbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

Originally published in 2019 by William Collins in Great Britain

First US Edition: March 2020

Published by Basic Books, an imprint of Perseus Books, LLC, a subsidiary of Hachette Book Group, Inc. The Basic Books name and logo is a trademark of the Hachette Book Group.

The Hachette Speakers Bureau provides a wide range of authors for speaking events. To find out more, go to www.hachettespeakersbureau.com or call (866) 376-6591.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Print book interior design by name.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data has been applied for.

ISBNs: 978-1-5416-4692-6 (hardcover), 978-1-5416-4691-9 (ebook)

LSC-C

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

We have got all we want in territory, and our claim to be left in the unmolested enjoyment of vast and splendid possessions, mainly acquired by violence, largely maintained by force, often seems less reasonable to others than to us.

WINSTON CHURCHILL, 10 JANUARY 1914

Trade cannot flourish without security.

LORD PALMERSTON, 22 APRIL 1860

Unless we change our ways and our direction, our greatness as a nation will soon be a footnote in the history books, a distant memory of an offshore island, lost in the mists of time, like Camelot, remembered kindly for its noble past.

MARGARET THATCHER, 1 MAY 1979

Vote Leave. Take Back Control.

BREXIT CAMPAIGN SLOGAN, 2016



CONTENTS

Introduction: An Unconventional History	1
1. Decline	13
2. Europe	57
3. Britain	109
4. Empire	161
5. Taking Control of Our Past	211
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	243
<i>Notes</i>	245
<i>Index</i>	275



INTRODUCTION

AN UNCONVENTIONAL HISTORY

FOR MOST VISITORS from North America, the fascination of Britain lies in its sense of tradition. It's a country of castles, palaces, and country houses, of ancient churches and leafy lanes, prizing quaint institutions such as the monarchy, 'trooping the colour', and afternoon tea. Not to mention the arcane rituals of cricket. The British, in short, seem like a people who have done things the same way for centuries and can be relied on for stability and common sense.

That's why Brexit has been such a shock. In a referendum on 23 June 2016 the British electorate voted to leave the European Union (EU) after nearly half a century of membership. The margin was narrow, yet decisive: nearly 52 per cent 'Leave' and just over 48 per cent 'Remain'. No contingency planning for a vote to leave had been undertaken by David Cameron, the prime minister who called the referendum. And Theresa May, who succeeded Cameron after he abruptly resigned, never came up with a coherent and politically viable strategy for exiting an international organisation of which the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (UK) had been an integral part since 1973.

ISLAND STORIES

In the summer of 2019—three years on from the referendum and after the hapless May had been supplanted by Boris Johnson—Britain had still not Brexited. The issue split the two main political parties, Conservative and Labour, and polarised the country as a whole. Public life was poisoned by Brexitoxicity. And whether the UK eventually left the EU or remained didn't really matter, as far as most of the world was concerned. Those sensible, traditional Brits seemed to have gone 'bonkers'.¹

Yet was a historical thunderbolt like Brexit such a uniquely British phenomenon?

A few months later, a whirlwind also hit the United States. The election of Donald J. Trump as the nation's forty-fifth president signalled the start of a new American revolution. Inaugurated on 20 January 2017, the property tycoon and former reality TV personality defied virtually every norm of political behaviour—refusing to disclose his tax returns, persistently making false or misleading claims, and running a dysfunctional administration in which policy was set (and upset) by his daily tweets. Trumpeting 'America First', he has shaken the foundations of the NATO alliance, moved the US embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, attacked the European Union, and applauded Britain's vote to leave—all at odds with long-standing diplomatic policies espoused in the past by both Democrats and Republicans. Domestically, Trump has polarized the country—adored by his supporters, reviled by his critics—with his attitudes on race, immigration, and climate change being particularly controversial. In his populist attack on traditional liberal verities, Trump even made a point of aligning himself with the earthquake in Britain, talking of his campaign as 'Brexit plus plus plus'.

But it has become clear that the Trump presidency, however abrupt a break it might seem, has roots deep in American history. It echoes, for instance, earlier spasms of nativism—in the 1850s or the 1920s. It reflects a reaction against the country's post-1945 commitments to European security and a backlash

against the civil rights revolution of the 1960s, even—some might say—against the outcome of the Civil War in 1865. Making sense of America's forty-fifth presidency requires examining much of what has come before.

In the same way, getting to grips with Brexit demands a long view. Not just tracing the United Kingdom's contorted and awkward relationship with the European Community but going back much further, at least a thousand years. Because medieval England was for four centuries a continental empire, ruling much of what is now France. Because the United Kingdom is the product of centuries of English empire building across two islands: Britain and Ireland. Because, for centuries, statesmen in London had considered it imperative to manage the balance of power across Europe as whole. And because Great Britain's sense of greatness is rooted in a remarkable empire—forged in the era of sea power and slave power, commerce, and colonies—whose legacies burnish and tarnish British life to the present day.

So, in Britain, like America, the roots of present discontents often lie deep in the past. But the parallels should not be pushed too far, for there are many contrasts between the two countries. Perhaps the biggest is geography. The United States, like Canada, is a country the size of a continent. England and Wales together are comparable in area to Illinois—the twenty-fifth largest of the United States's fifty states. Scotland roughly matches South Carolina. Above all, Britain is an island, whose history has been shaped by its geography. *Island Stories* offers a fresh interpretation of Britain's extrovert insularity.

THE NARRATIVE THAT a country tells about itself lies at the core of national identity. Americans revisit their sacred story every Fourth of July—a story of a people who broke away from what we might call the original 'evil empire', Great Britain, and won its independence thanks to the combined efforts of the founders,

ISLAND STORIES

the minutemen, and divine providence. Thereafter, the United States spread ‘from sea to shining sea’, impelled by its ‘manifest destiny’ to create a new empire—an empire of liberty.

For much of the twentieth century Britain had its own master narrative: about the country’s expansion into a global empire and its dissemination of parliamentary government. In 1902, the poet A. C. Benson added words to Edward Elgar’s *Pomp and Circumstance* ‘March No. 1’, extolling the ‘Land of Hope and Glory’:

*Wider still and wider shall thy bounds be set,
God, who made thee mighty, make thee mightier yet*

But after two world wars and rapid decolonisation, the ‘ever-mightier’ imperial theme rang hollow. In 1962, Dean Acheson, the former US secretary of state, declared that Britain had ‘lost an empire’ but ‘not yet found a role’.² Over the next decade British leaders—Tory and Labour—tried to join what was then colloquially known as the Common Market. But two French vetoes from President Charles de Gaulle blocked their way and it was not until 1973 that the UK (together with Ireland and Denmark) eventually became a member of the European Community. Even though Britain was always an ‘awkward partner’³—protesting about the size of its budget contributions and the EC’s obsession with farm subsidies—for the next four decades or so the narrative did seem clear: the British had lost a global empire but found a European role.

Then, in 2016, that new role suddenly also seemed to be lost. During the EU referendum debate, various historical precedents were invoked to help frame Brexit Britain’s historical self-understanding. Much cited was ‘Our Finest Hour’ in the Second World War. Leaving the EU ‘would be the biggest stimulus to get our butts in gear that we have ever had’, declared billionaire Peter Hargreaves, a financier of the Brexit campaign. ‘It will be

like Dunkirk again . . . Insecurity is fantastic.’⁴ Developing the 1940 theme, Boris Johnson asserted in 2016 that the past two thousand years of European history had been characterised by repeated attempts to unify Europe under a single government in order to recover the continent’s lost ‘golden age’ under the Romans. ‘Napoleon, Hitler, various people tried this out, and it ends tragically,’ he asserted. ‘The EU is an attempt to do this by different methods.’ The villains of the piece, in Johnson’s view, were once again the Germans. ‘The Euro has become a means by which superior German productivity is able to gain an absolutely unbeatable advantage over the whole Eurozone.’ He depicted Brexit as ‘a chance for the British people to be the heroes of Europe and to act as a voice of moderation and common sense, and to stop something getting in my view out of control . . . It is time for someone—it’s almost always the British in European history—to say, “We think a different approach is called for”.’⁵

Also touted as a historical guide for Britain’s future was the idea of the ‘Anglosphere’—influenced by Winston Churchill’s *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples* from the 1950s—and even by the concept of an ‘Imperial Federation’ with the British settler ‘Dominions’, as proposed by politician Joseph Chamberlain in the 1900s. In 2016 Churchill biographer Andrew Roberts was one of those advocating CANZUK—an Anglophone confederation of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the UK—as potentially ‘the third pillar of Western Civilisation’, closely aligned with the United States. He argued that that ‘we must pick up where we left off in 1973’ when the ‘dream of the English-speaking peoples’ was ‘shattered by British entry into the EU’. Theresa May spoke in a similarly expansive vein when outlining her government’s vision of Brexit. ‘June the 23rd was not the moment Britain chose to step back from the world. It was the moment we chose to build a truly Global Britain.’ Although stating that she was ‘proud of our shared European heritage’, May

ISLAND STORIES

insisted: ‘we are also a country that has always looked beyond Europe to the wider world. That is why we are one of the most racially diverse countries in Europe, one of the most multicultural members of the European Union.’⁶

These various proposals offered hints of how Brexit might be seen in historical perspective: as the latest attempt to resist a continental tyrant, or as the chance to resume a global role that had been rudely interrupted by joining the EU. But neat historical analogies are not adequate. Nor are simplified benchmarks like 1940 or 1973. We need to probe more deeply what many Brits still call ‘our island story’—and to do so with greater geographical breadth and over a longer time span than are covered in most histories. In short, what’s required is an unconventional perspective on the British past.

Our Island Story: A History of England for Boys and Girls was the title of Henrietta Elizabeth Marshall’s best-selling textbook, first published in 1905 and still in print today. Spanning nearly two millennia from the Romans to Queen Victoria, it was deliberately ‘not a history lesson, but a story-book’, written to entertain and inspire preteens, and she admitted that it included some stories ‘which wise people say are only fairy tales not history’. But Marshall’s concept of history as an uplifting narrative still has wide appeal. In 2010 the education secretary Michael Gove told the Tory Party Conference that he would ‘put British history at the heart of a revived national curriculum’, so that ‘all pupils will learn our island story’. In 2014 Prime Minister David Cameron lauded Marshall’s stirring account of the country’s inexorable progress towards liberty, law, and parliamentary government.⁷

But today professional historians find such a simple, triumphalist narrative to be implausible. This, instead, is a book about ‘stories’, plural—about different ways in which to see Britain’s complicated past. In particular, about the need to move beyond the still widely held idea of a self-contained ‘island’,

which has adopted various roles over the centuries—empire, Europe, the globe—as if these could be tried on and then taken off, like a suit of clothes. In reality, the United Kingdom has been made by empire, Europe, and the world—as much as the other way around.

And the United Kingdom itself has been a shifting entity—a historically conflicted archipelago, comprising more than six thousand islands, and not a unitary space occupied by a people whom many in England still tend to call, interchangeably, English or British.⁸ Even more sensitive, the neat ‘island story’ narrative omits Ireland—*John Bull’s Other Island* as playwright George Bernard Shaw entitled his satirical comedy of 1904 about an English con man who duped Irish villagers into mortgaging their homes so he could turn the place into an amusement park. Ireland was brought under English rule in the Norman period but never really subdued, despite the Acts of Union in 1801. Its centuries of turmoil and tragedy, in turn, had a profound impact on the island of Britain.

This, then, is a book about history, framed by geography. But it is, as well, a book about ways of thinking because being ‘islanded’ is also a state of mind.⁹ The English Channel did not always seem a great divide: during the four centuries when the Anglo-Norman kings ruled a domain that straddled its two sides, they treated water as a bridge rather than a barrier. The sense of providential insularity came later, as a product of England’s Protestant Reformation and its salvation from Counter-Reformation Spain through the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 and the foiling of the Gunpowder Plot to blow up king and Parliament in 1605. There then ensued several centuries of war against a new continental Catholic ‘other’—France, from the days of Louis XIV to Napoleon Bonaparte. As the power of Protestantism waned in twentieth-century Britain, providential insularity was given a new lease on life by two wars against German militarism and especially by the way in which 1940—the story of Churchill’s

ISLAND STORIES

Britain ‘standing alone’ after the fall of France—has become inscribed in national history and popular memory.

Nor would the island narrative have proved so enthralling had medieval English kings not created such a strong state, which they tried to impose by force on their neighbours across the two islands. The Welsh were eventually incorporated in the 1530s. But Scotland was a harder nut to crack. It was only after several centuries of on-off warfare that the two kingdoms were unified under the rule of one monarch: in 1603, James VI of Scotland also became James I of England. A century later, in 1707, the Act of Union abolished the Edinburgh parliament, gave the Scots seats in Houses of Commons and Lords at Westminster and created, in effect, a common market that proved an indispensable base for Britain’s industrial revolution and global empire. During the eighteenth, nineteenth, and most of the twentieth centuries, the London government effectively directed the whole of ‘our’ island of Britain.

But making the other island across the Irish Sea British as well proved a far more difficult task. Its Catholicism was tenaciously entrenched, despite the effort to plant Protestants from Scotland and England during seventeenth century. The struggle ebbed and flowed for centuries, costing several million lives through war and famine. At points along the way the Irish Question also tested the unity of Britain itself—in the 1640s, for instance, when it was the catalyst for the English Civil War, and again in the Home Rule Crisis before 1914. In 1920, after the brutal war of independence and an even bloodier civil war, the island of Ireland was partitioned in two between an independent Catholic state and an embattled, Protestant-dominated Ulster, clinging to its Britishness within the UK.

In the mid-1960s, the rancorous issues of partition and sectarianism escalated into the three-decade-long Troubles in Northern Ireland, whose brutal violence was quelled only by the

Good Friday Agreement of 1998. This brought a ragged peace to Ulster and also redefined the political geometry of the whole island of Ireland, opening up the hard, militarised border between the two states. Yet during the EU referendum debate, the Tories—even though officially the Conservative and Unionist Party—closed their eyes to recent history. Only after the 2016 vote to leave the EU did the Tories start to grapple with the profound implications that Brexit would have for Northern Ireland, the peace process, and the unity of the UK.

By then Britain itself was under strain. The sense of Britishness—sustained by united sacrifice in two world wars—began to wane in the late twentieth century amid decolonisation and industrial decline, and the Scots and the Welsh voted in referenda to have their own devolved parliaments and executives. Created in 1999, these governments were given extensive powers—particularly the one in Edinburgh. Devolution raised profound questions about the unity of the United Kingdom—highlighted by the close result of Scotland’s 2014 independence referendum, when 45 per cent of Scots wanted to become a separate country, and then in 2016 by the 62 per cent majority in Scotland to remain within the EU.

And so, by the twenty-first century, both the Good Friday Agreement and the institution of devolved governments in Scotland and Wales presaged a different set of relationships between and within the two main islands. In England the apparent indifference of London to the socioeconomic problems of the regions, especially in the north, played a significant part in the Leave victory in 2016. The failure of the Westminster Parliament to resolve—or even seriously address—the challenges of Brexit aggravated this sense of alienation. Yet the saga of Britishness—forged by war and polished by retelling—continues to exert immense power, whether deployed by politicians or dramatised in movies. Equally potent are the individual national stories of

ISLAND STORIES

the Scots, Welsh, and Irish—even of the English without the others¹⁰—all reinvigorated by the crisis of the Union. In a struggle for the future, the past really matters.

Yet not just the past of the two islands and their tangled relations with continental Europe. The global dimension is equally important.

Developing as a seafaring nation from the sixteenth century, the English used their relative security from the Continent as both a sanctuary and a springboard. Exploiting their growing naval reach, they were able to prey on foreign rivals, profit richly from the slave trade, open up markets, and create settlements—first in the Caribbean and North America, later in the Indian subcontinent, Australasia, and Africa. The wealth thereby generated played a critical part in Britain's precocious industrial revolution; it also drew the country gradually and messily into a patchwork of formal empire that the British then struggled to rule on the cheap in the face of bigger and stronger international challengers. By the 1970s, after two world wars and an often-violent process of decolonisation, the British Empire had disappeared. But the UK remained a global economy, shaped by its commercial and financial past, and the stories of global greatness, now somehow disconnected from the empire project, still appealed to political and public nostalgia. More problematic legacies of empire, such as the slave trade or mass immigration, tended to be ignored in the grand narrative of 'our island' and its global outreach.

Those simple words—*island* and *stories*—are, therefore, worthy of close examination. To do so we need to engage with big history and the *longue durée* in ways that do justice to the English stamp on British history, without being narrowly Anglocentric. And although *Island Stories* has been prompted by the Brexit imbroglio, it reflects deeper concerns. There is now a profusion of innovative scholarly research, based on analysis of new sources and also fresh insights into old sources. But much

of this work takes the form of microhistories, addressing narrow topics for an academic audience, and a good deal of it has been shaped by the cultural turn—which privileges matters such as food, dress, and gender and often frowns on political history as being antiquated and irrelevant. As a result, big-picture narratives have been left to popular writers who tend to skim the surface or to politicians concerned mainly with advancing their own agenda. This book is an attempt by one professional historian to start filling this gap, at a time when political and international history really matter.

The four main chapters outline and probe four alternative, if overlapping, ways of narrating those island stories in the era of Brexit. In the process, they draw on some of the narratives that have been offered by political leaders from the past, such as Joseph Chamberlain, Winston Churchill, and Margaret Thatcher, and by politicians of today, including Boris Johnson and Jacob Rees-Mogg.

Each main chapter addresses an overarching theme, going back over the last millennium. The first chapter, ‘Decline’, examines how and why Britain’s place in the world has changed in recent centuries and whether the turn to Europe represented realistic statesmanship or a failure of national will. I also reflect on the country’s assets—both hard and soft power—in the Brexit era and on the formidable grip of heritage on the national culture. The second chapter looks more closely at Britain’s engagement with Europe, going back beyond the Protestant Reformation to the Anglo-Norman kings and exploring that ambiguous role of the Channel as both barrier and bridge. The third chapter considers the long history of Britain, tracing the impact of English empire building on the archipelago and assessing the two acts of union in 1707 and 1801 that brought Scotland and then Ireland into the United Kingdom. The chapter also discusses the impacts of two world wars, 1990s devolution, and the Brexit vote on the unity of the Union. The fourth chapter, ‘Empire’, emphasises the

ISLAND STORIES

role of slave power as well as sea power in making Britain great but also considers how the ideology of freedom both promoted the empire and also eroded it. The final section of this chapter offers a historical context for the impassioned Brexit debate on immigration as the empire ‘came home’ and reflects on a postimperial country in which racist attitudes coexist with multiculturalism. In the concluding chapter, ‘Taking Control of Our Past’, I consider what the political feuds since 2016 reveal of Britain’s deeper problems in dealing with Brexit and also in coming to terms with its past.

This is, of course, a personal view of topics that are highly contested, for history has become an integral part of political argument in Brexit-era Britain. *Island Stories* is a contribution to that debate. And it may help to illuminate the traumas that other countries—not least the United States and Canada—have to confront when trying to live with their own history.

1

DECLINE

Of every reader, the attention will be excited by an history of the decline and fall of the Roman empire, the greatest, perhaps, and most awful scene in the history of mankind.

EDWARD GIBBON, 1788¹

THUS BEGAN THE final paragraph of Edward Gibbon's magnum opus *The History of the Rise, Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Volume one had appeared in 1776, just as the American colonies declared independence from Britain and proclaimed themselves a republic. The sixth and last volume was published in 1788, a year before *ancien régime* France was engulfed by revolution. Its fratricidal anarchy would spawn Napoleon's continental empire.

Gibbon's chronicle of the *Pax Romana* became a literary classic during the nineteenth century, as Britain saw off the Napoleonic challenge and grew into a global power—spanning the world from India to Africa, from the Near East to Australasia. By the end of the century the term *Pax Britannica* had entered the vernacular. But there were also creeping fears of imperial mortality—captured by Rudyard Kipling, the bard of empire, in his *fin de siècle* poem 'Recessional':

ISLAND STORIES

*Far-called, our navies melt away;
On dune and headland sinks the fire:
Lo, all our pomp of yesterday
Is one with Nineveh and Tyre!*²

Britain's Victorian and Edwardian leaders sought strategies that might save their unlikely empire from a Roman fate. How best to deal with jealous rivals? By military confrontation, or selective appeasement? The first could sap the nation's wealth and power; the latter risked letting in the barbarians by the back door. They also wrestled with the Roman tension between *libertas* and *imperium*, of civic virtues supposedly corrupted by militarism and luxury. Would British imperialism undermine political liberty at home? Conversely, would a freedom-loving people have the backbone to resist the jackals of the global jungle? These dilemmas became acute during the era of the two world wars.

On a larger canvas, Gibbon's Rome has provided a template for telling the story of Britain's changing place in the world over the last five centuries in terms of a great empire's rise, decline and fall. This held a perennial, almost mesmeric fascination for a political class that modelled itself on imperial Rome. Under this narrative, however, lurk problematic notions of empire. Should it be understood as a clearly defined possession—eventually 'lost' or 'surrendered'? Or was it like an increasingly outmoded and ill-fitting suit of clothes, which was finally tossed aside? This chapter looks more closely at Britain's changing global role and at related shifts in the country's power and prosperity—arguing that the Gibbonian concept of 'decline' is deeply misleading. In doing so, it also highlights a recurrent pattern of British political rhetoric from the late nineteenth century right up to the present. Politicians have frequently couched their campaigns to change national policy within a dramatic 'declinist' narrative of the recent past. Here are a few examples.³

IDEOLOGISTS OF 'DECLINE'

Joseph Chamberlain has been described by historian Peter Clarke as Britain's 'first leading politician to propose a drastic method of averting the sort of national decline' that he 'saw as otherwise inevitable'. Chamberlain was also the first to do so in a style of populist nationalism crafted for an era of mass politics. He and his followers posed a 'Radical Right' challenge to mainstream Toryism, preaching what has been called a gospel of 'messianic catastrophism'.⁴

Chamberlain was a self-made Birmingham businessman who got rich as a manufacturer of screws, before moving into politics in the 1870s as a reforming Mayor of Birmingham ('Radical Joe') and then as a member of W. E. Gladstone's second Liberal Cabinet. His ego and energy splintered not one but two parties—first the Liberals in 1886 because of his opposition to Home Rule for Ireland, and then the Conservatives in 1903 over 'Tariff Reform'. Quite what that phrase meant was almost as elusive as 'Brexit' in our own day, but at its core was Chamberlain's conviction that the rise of competitors such as Germany and the United States must be met by abandoning the Victorian precepts of 'free trade' and imposing tariffs in order to protect British industry and to consolidate the empire. Only this strategy could save 'the weary Titan' who 'staggers under the too vast orb of its fate.' He told the colonials, 'We have borne the burden for many years. We think it is time that our children should assist us.' The alternative was decline into 'a fifth-rate nation'—another Venice or Holland. 'All history is the history of states once powerful and then decaying,' Chamberlain told a political rally in 1903. 'Is Britain to be numbered among the decaying states: is all the glory of the past to be forgotten? . . . Or are we to take up a new youth as members of a great empire, which will continue for generation after generation the strength, the power and the glory of the British race?'⁵

ISLAND STORIES

Chamberlain's aim was to shore up Britain's power base in an era of rival empires by protecting its existing manufacturing industries. For him, structural economic change was unacceptable: it would mean replacement by 'secondary and inferior' industries, causing 'individual suffering' to the working man without 'any real compensation to the nation'. 'Your once great trade in sugar refining is gone,' he declaimed mockingly in another speech in 1903: 'all right, try jam. Your iron trade is going; never mind, you can make mouse traps.'⁶ But although Chamberlain's populist crusade for tariff reform briefly caught the public imagination, it soon burnt out. The main effect was to divide the Conservatives and pave the way for the Liberal landslide of 1906. Chamberlain died, bitter and disillusioned, in July 1914—a month before the Great War began. Ironically, during the 1920s and 1930s, the very restructuring and diversification he deplored would transform the Birmingham area. Chemicals and electrical engineering, aviation and motor vehicles not only rejuvenated the Midlands economy but also prepared Britain to wage a second world war in the era of airpower.⁷

Winston Churchill was another politician who, in later life, became obsessed with Britain's decline—doing so, like Chamberlain, when in opposition and with one eye on gaining power. Conviction and calculation conjoined. After a spectacular political rise on either side of the Great War, culminating in Chancellorship of the Exchequer at the age of 50, the premiership seemed within Churchill's grasp. But then, for a decade from 1929, he was cast out into the political wilderness, regarded as a wilful opportunist too mercurial for inclusion in the National Governments of Ramsay MacDonald, Stanley Baldwin and Neville Chamberlain—Joe's son. To attract attention he campaigned loudly on various causes, from Edward VIII in the Abdication Crisis to air rearmament against Germany. It is the latter for which Churchill's 'wilderness years' are now best remembered.

But the underlying issue for him—and the one that sustained the rest of his life—was Britain’s decline as a great power.

Churchill’s crusade, however, took a very different form from Chamberlain’s. He was and remained a staunch Free Trader who had broken with the Tories over tariff reform. Churchill’s vision of Britain’s greatness centred not on the white-settler colonies that Chamberlain wanted to weld into an imperial economic bloc, but on India, which young Winston had experienced first-hand as a soldier fighting for his Queen Empress. In 1931 the Conservative party adopted a policy of giving India ‘dominion status’ within the British Empire—potentially setting it on a course of devolution and independence similar to that already conceded to Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. Incensed, Churchill broke with the party leadership and embarked on a four-year crusade against what became the Government of India Act of 1935. Now virtually forgotten in British history, this was the biggest parliamentary struggle of the 1930s—eclipsing in time and passion even the issues of Germany and rearmament—for which Churchill rolled out some of his most extravagant rhetoric.

Inveighing in February 1931 against the ‘nauseating’ sight of ‘Mr Gandhi, a seditious Middle Temple lawyer, now posing as a fakir of a type well known in the East, striding half-naked up the steps of the Viceregal palace . . . to parley on equal terms with the representative of the King-Emperor,’ Churchill claimed that India was ‘no ordinary question of party politics’ but ‘one of those supreme issues which come upon us from time to time’, like going to war against Germany in 1914. A month later he warned that ‘the continuance of our present confusion and disintegration will reduce us within a generation, and perhaps sooner, to the degree of States like Holland and Portugal, which nursed valiant races, and held great possessions, but were stripped of them in the crush and competition of the world. That would be a