THE COMMON ROOM

Stuart Ward's *Untied Kingdom: A Global History of the End of Britain*

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Abstract

Unpicking Britishness on a global stage: a review of Stuart Ward's *Untied Kingdom*.

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British history can only be understood, as J.G.A. Pocock noted, as 'the inter-action of several peoples and several histories'.[1] Ever since its inception as a common political unit in 1707, Britain has been firmly embedded in a number of far-reaching political entities.[2] Tied to its empire, the development of the Commonwealth, and later the European Union, Britain cannot simply be described as an island nation lacking in global, albeit volatile, connections. Yet, how these political entities have shaped Britain and what it means to be British continues to be revisited by politicians, academics, journalists, and everyday Britons. From Norman Tebbit's 'cricket test' to 'progressive patriot-ism' and 'national renewal', one thing is clear: British national identity is notoriously difficult to define. Stuart Ward's *Untied Kingdom* thus importantly questions the changing historical meanings of Britishness. At a time when 'the slow death of Britain' is being declared by observers from across the political spectrum, Ward turns his sharp historical lens to 'the changing historical contingencies of being British and the deeper ruptures over time that have brought matters to a precarious impasse'.[3] In his panoramic study, Ward

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[1] J. G. A Pocock, 'The Limits and Divisions of British History: In Search of the Unknown Subject', *American Historical Review*, 87 (1982), 313.

[2] https://archive.discoversociety.org/2016/07/05/viewpoint-brexit-class-and-british-national-identity (accessed June 2023).

[3] See Gavin Esler, *How Britain Ends: English Nationalism and the Rebirth of the Four Nations* (2021). Stuart Ward, *Untied Kingdom: A Global History of the End of Britain* (Cambridge, 2023), 2.

astutely examines the linkages between the end of empire and the 'slow depletion of shared British sentiment' since the Second World War.[4]

Ward's study is organised into three sections: part one covers the overseas projections of imperial identity, part two traces the various registers of Britishness including ideas of 'home', belonging and subjecthood, and part three turns to the repercussions of imperial expansion and retreat. The disintegration of the British world-system at the end of empire is critically explored in fifteen core chapters. The chronological, geographical and theoretical terrain covered is impressive, ambitious and vital.

The book's chapter on Kenyan Asians 'Coming Home to England' was of particular interest to me given my own research on East African Asians in diaspora. The chapter is a masterclass in critically unpicking Britishness on a global stage.[5] It achieves this by embracing a wide cast of historical actors. Ward recognises the long historical relationship between the South Asian diaspora in East Africa and the British imperial state. When Kenya gained independence in December 1963, Jomo Kenyatta's post-independence government sought to redesign its citizenship laws. It asked its South Asian minority population to prove their nationalist credentials by applying for citizenship, and a cut-off date of two years was given to submit these applications. Citizenship was not therefore conferred on everyone irrespective of territorial or generational claims. Dual citizenship was prohibited, which meant that applicants had to renounce all other nationality claims. Subsequently, only an estimated 48,000 South Asians registered as Kenyan and approximately 20,000 applied for Kenyan citizenship. For a number of reasons, including fears that they might one day be made stateless should the Kenyan government revoke their Kenyan citizenship, an estimated 100,000 South Asians opted to retain their British passports. They were able to do so because Kenya's South Asians were 'Citizens of the UK and Colonies' following the passage of the 1948 Nationality Act.

As Ward notes, questions of citizenship, belonging and loyalty remained at the forefront of public debate thereafter. South Asians were, at this time, popularly conceived as a permanent, bourgeois, immigrant minority in Kenya, who had enjoyed significant economic success in an imbalanced colonial society. When, in July 1967, the National Assembly passed the Kenya Immigration Bill, it cancelled the permanent resident certificates that entitled non-citizens to work in the country. Instead, a work permit policy was instated. Then in October 1967, a Trade Licensing Bill was proposed. This meant that trade in specific goods, such as sugar and other staple items, was restricted to citizens. Skilled and semi-skilled occupations commonly held by Kenya's South Asians similarly required trade licences. The passage of these reforms deeply impacted Kenya's South Asian British passport holders. Almost 500 South

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[4] Ward, *Untied Kingdom*, 3.
[5] Interestingly, the East African Asian diaspora in Britain is remarkably dispersed. Their settlement in Britain spanned across the Four Nations.

Asians emigrated from Kenya to Britain each week. By March 1968, an 'exodus' took place, with 18 percent of the South Asian population choosing to emigrate from Kenya in the space of six months.[6]

The 'Kenyan-Asian Crisis' that ensued caused great alarm in Britain. Sensationalist claims that a group of 200,000 South Asians would 'swarm' Britain's borders failed to account for the fact that there were under 100,000 South Asian British passport holders in Kenya at the time. As Ward observes, politicians such as Enoch Powell and Duncan Sandys labelled the resettlement of Kenyan Asians in Britain as an unwelcome imperial hangover. In doing so, Ward lays bare the racialised rhetoric that shaped popular discourse on race, immigration and Britishness in the post-war years. What is encouraging to see in this retelling of the 'crisis' is the centring of Kenyan Asian voices and experiences. Ward begins the chapter with the unfortunate saga of twenty-two-year-old British passport holder Ranjan Vaid, who spent nine days travelling 17,069 miles between London, Nairobi, Johannesburg, Athens and Vienna because she was not in possession of an entry permit and did not therefore have the freedom of entry into Britain. Vaid was finally admitted into Britain by Home Secretary James Callaghan, who described this as an 'exceptional' concession.[7] Vaid's messy and exhausting journey is used to map the tremors of decolonisation felt not just in Britain, but also by global Britons.

Ward expertly explains how 'Greater Britain' was a composite structure that was forged by both internal and external factors. The end of empire in parts of Africa and Asia required a radical rethinking of what it meant to be British and who could claim Britishness. The view that the 'empire was striking back' in the form of communities of racialised subjects migrating to the colonial metropole served as a driver to remap and tighten the criterion of Britishness. Ward shows how Britain's borders were hastily renegotiated in 1968 in order to deliberately keep out Kenyan Asians. The legal concept of 'patriality' was introduced in the 1968 Commonwealth Immigrants Act, which served to exclude Britain's racialised global population, while keeping the door open for 'white Britons abroad'. Ward helpfully sketches the implications of this, especially in terms of what it signalled for Britain as a now former imperial power in East Africa. That a Labour government deliberately pushed legislation through in an attempt to curb Kenyan Asian migration – despite Labour so strenuously opposing the 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act – reflected the political climate of post-war Britain when racial minorities were often framed as a social and political problem despite being victimised by the state.[8] Britain loudly declared that she was unwilling to offer sanctuary to her own displaced

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[6] See Sana Aiyar, *Indians in Kenya: The Politics of Diaspora* (Cambridge, MA, 2015).

[7] *New York Times*, 11 Feb. 1970.

[8] See, for example, responses to the 1958 Notting Hill riots when Black Britons who were targeted for attack were then singled out by the state as incompatible with the British way of life. See Kennetta Hammond Perry, '"Little Rock" in Britain: Jim Crow's Transatlantic Topographies', *Journal of British Studies*, 51 (2012), 155–77.

passport holders unless compelled to against her will.[9] The Act certainly tested the image of Britain as a country of asylum.

There is a limited but significant body of scholarship on Kenyan Asians. Sana Aiyar and Randall Hansen provide important historical analysis of migration, mobility and belonging.[10] What is remarkable about Ward's contribution is his ability to contextualise the episode in wider local and global currents – something he skilfully achieves across all fifteen chapters of this book. Ward explains the importance of local and national dynamics by taking into account the 1967 devaluation of sterling and the 1968 acceleration of Britain's military withdrawal from East of Suez. He explains how the image of a 'defeated nation pulling up the drawbridge' contributed to a renegotiation of national belonging and identity. It is perhaps also worth mentioning Britain's turn to Europe and its attempts to join the European Economic Community during this period, but altogether Ward offers an instructive template in doing global histories. As the current prime minister, Rishi Sunak, and the leader of the Scottish National Party, Humza Yousaf, both have Kenyan Asian heritage, it is clear to see that this history has critical afterlives. *Untied Kingdom* is required reading for students and scholars of Britain, empire and its messy entanglements.

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[9] It is not uncommon for issues of statelessness to be discussed when retelling the story of Kenyan Asians. It is important to note, however, that Kenyan Asians were not altogether barred from entering Britain. A quota system was put in place that would permit 1,500 entry vouchers for heads of families. During a parliamentary debate, the Home Secretary confirmed: 'They are our citizens. What we are asking them to do is form a queue.' See J. G. Collier, 'The Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1968 – A British Opinion', *Verfassung und Recht in Übersee / Law and Politics in Africa, Asia and Latin America*, 2 (1969), 457–68.

[10] Aiyar, *Indians in Kenya*; Randall Hansen, 'The Kenyan Asians, British Politics, and the Commonwealth Immigrants Act, 1968', *The Historical Journal*, 42 (1999), 809–34.