

Week 3: James Bond, the man who consoled Britain



It's easy to mock James Bond. He's clunky, he's cheesy, he's unreal, and he's so in love with himself he's smug, slick, smirky (insecure?) He's not that good looking. However, Bond represents many aspects of Great Britain, with the emphasis on Great. Here he is in his Daniel Craig incarnation at the 2012 London Olympics. There are two elements to Bond and the Olympics that we need to consider: imperial nostalgia and parody.

The sort of heroes and heroines a nation loves tell us a lot about that nation. As Japan recovered from the Pacific War, the Japanese people looked again to their ordinary virtues and away from godlike power and heroic warriors and chose Tora-san (who was anything but a tiger). In Britain, as the nation got smaller and less significant and more broke, the hero became stronger, classier, more intelligent and more devastatingly attractive: James Bond, 007.

Why do millions of people, many of whose homelands were once British colonies, still love to watch a British spy save the world? Between the two world wars, the ruling classes that ran Britain were blithely unaware that the foundations of their privilege had been swept away by the war. To a generation of boys brought up on 'achtung Tommy' war fiction, James Bond came to represent a British future that could only be a game. Bond helped England reframe its role when the sun was setting on the British Empire. We may not be big anymore, James Bond consoled us, but we're still the best there is.

[3] *The author* of the James Bond thrillers, Ian Fleming, died of heart failure

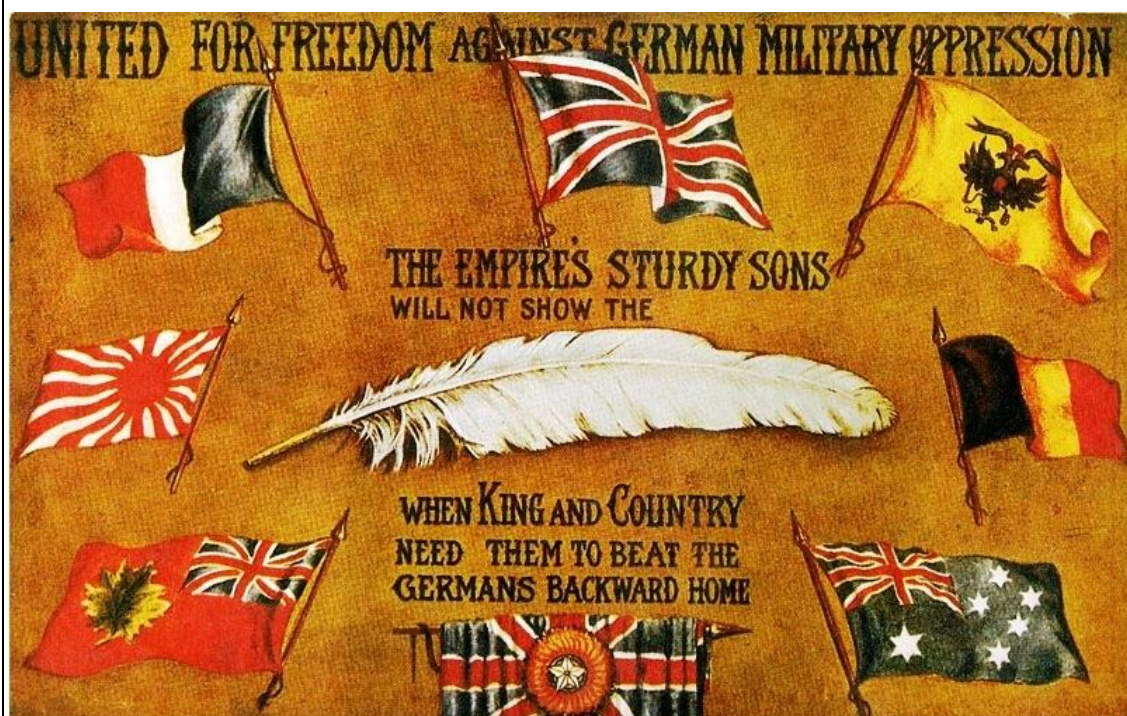


in 1964 at the age of 56, by which time he had pulled off a rare treble in English literature. He was rich, famous *and* critically acclaimed. In the year before his death, Fleming earned more than £100,000, had close to 40

million James Bond novels in print and was the darling of literary press and reading public alike. Not since Conan Doyle had a popular writer hit such a nerve, located, said Fleming, ‘somewhere between the solar plexus and the upper thigh’. After a slow start, 007 became as much a social as a literary phenomenon, a classic of post-war fiction whose place in the pantheon was assured.

Bond is, on closer examination, something of an oddball. Many of Bond’s qualities derive from his author’s fantasy life. He is the cat who walks alone, who revels in having ‘no acquaintances’ bar a few treasured male friends and a bevy of adoring, untrustworthy women. As with Graham Greene, boredom is a vice, danger is the watchword. The face he presents to the world is ‘ironical, brutal and cold’ though, deep down, 007 is, like many English ex-public-school boys, a Peter Pan with deeply romantic fantasies.

Bond lives for a world of snobbery and violence that is, at the high end, fast, glamorous and expensive or, otherwise, sinister, spine-chilling and villainous. The archetypes of evil, Bond’s enemies are all world-class. Dr No, the descendant of Fu Manchu, is the epitome of evil. Goldfinger is the richest and baddest man in England. Blofeld is described simply as ‘the biggest crook in the world’.



1914 WW1 poster Uniting Britain's Allies against her enemies. Clockwise from the top Union Jack: the Imperial Russian flag, the Belgian flag, the Australian flag, the Indian flag, the Canadian flag, the Japanese flag (Japan was Britain's ally in WW1, since the Anglo-Japanese Alliance of 1902) and the French flag.

The universe of cruelty and menace inhabited by these thrilling monsters is not found in England's green and pleasant land but in the corrupt and steamy outposts of 'Abroad', that place we know to be inhabited by foreigners. Here, Fleming's racism and xenophobia become intricately linked to his innate sense of imperial entitlement. As members of an upper class whose time is up, he and Bond treat foreigners as objects of suspicion and disdain. Germans, black people, Jews, Russians, Japanese and Koreans: none is to be trusted, all speak funny and each, in turn, is to be vanquished by 007's patriotic British steel.

For most Americans, 1945 is remembered as the year of Allied victory. But the end of the war also led to the end of Britain's imperial "commitment." If the English "understood in 1945 that Britain had won the war only because the United States and the U.S.S.R. had won it with them," Winder writes, "then they certainly did not understand that the consequence would be the demolition of the British Empire, a cornerstone of national identity, hopes, fears and opportunities." Indian independence in 1947 may have been the most scarring element of this fragmentation, but by 1960 countries from Sri Lanka to Nigeria

[5] had followed suit. Winder's achievement is to describe skillfully and viscerally the feelings of British loss, while never losing sight of the fact that the dissolution of empire was long overdue.

Fleming capitalized on two aspects of the British mentality. The humiliations of the era summoned a wistful longing for past glory among many who constituted Fleming's enormous fan base. But nostalgia was only part of Bond's appeal. British decline generated a bitterness and loss of identity that found solace in the action books of the 1950s. There were certainly less subliminal reasons for Bond's popularity: fast cars and luxurious travel in a time of economic paralysis; the fetishization of food in an era of rationing; sex. A conservative hero navigating the remnants of a colonial world and bent on restoring British centrality in the international arena was perfectly positioned to capture the spirit of the age.

The Suez Crisis, 1956: fast planes, failed invasion...



Nasser nationalises Suez Canal precipitating Suez crisis. Despite being a militarily successful venture, the geo-political fallout from the invasion forced the British and the French to withdraw. The timing was awful as it was undertaken just days before President Eisenhower had a re-election and during the Soviet invasion of Hungary. In the aftermath of

the Suez Crisis there was a run on the £ and increased interest rates. Foreign Secretary and Deputy Prime Minister Anthony Eden leaves Britain to recuperate at Ian Fleming's home, Goldeneye, in Jamaica. The entire post-imperial project collapsed because the United States refused to support Britain and France in a war against Egypt.

Fleming's Jamaican home, Goldeneye, not only gave him a base in one of Britain's last colonial outposts, but also served as a much-needed place of rest for Prime Minister Anthony Eden during the Suez crisis in 1956. So while he was writing books in which indefatigable Britain served as the smarter, wilier and in no way junior partner in the "special relationship," Fleming offered the use of his home to the very embodiment of Britain's most humiliating episode since Dunkirk. And it was all at the hands of the Eisenhower administration, which had decided to replace British imperial rule with Pax Americana.

The classic Bond novels

[6]

1953 *Casino Royale*
1954 *Live and Let Die*
1955 *Moonraker*
1956 *Diamonds Are Forever*
1957 *From Russia, with Love*
1958 *Dr. No*
1959 *Goldfinger*
1961 *Thunderball*
1962 *The Spy Who Loved Me*
1963 *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*
1964 *You Only Live Twice*
1965 *The Man with the Golden Gun*

The classic Bond films

#1 Dr. No, 1962.
#2 From Russia With Love, 1963.
#3 Goldfinger, 1964.
#4 Thunderball, 1965.
#5 You Only Live Twice, 1967.
#6 On Her Majesty's Secret Service, 1969.
#7 Diamonds Are Forever, 1971.
#8 Live and Let Die, 1973



Today more than ever Bond is a franchise, with new actors coming forward to play James Bond. The dynamic, the source of Bond's popularity, evolves and develops as

time goes on. Today, Britain is an even more isolated nation, alone outside the EU, with a currency that (in September 1916) sank to a 35-year low.

The future of Britain today is uncertain. Russian and Chinese money washes through the streets of Kensington, the Russian President Vladimir Putin mocks British (and American) peace making in the ruins of Aleppo, the United States is no longer the force it was in the world - the mischievous spirit, rough charm and technological brilliance of James Bond are needed more than ever.