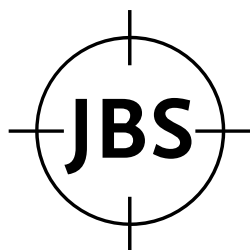


Reading the Complexity of James Bond's National Identity on Film

CIARA MOLONEY

James Bond is generally and justifiably regarded as a colonial figure. This perception spans across the Bond novels and Bond films, and from postcolonial scholars to popular discourse. Christine Berberich dubs the early Ian Fleming Bond novels as reflecting a “message of not only white but also Anglo-Saxon supremacy” (2012, 27). For Timo Müller, the Bond films are “documents of imperial nostalgia” (2015, 205-206). Cynthia Baron describes Bond as “an imperial hero, who provided a way for Britishness to continue to be defined in opposition to the ‘dark’ people of the world” (2003, 136). While promoting *The Bourne Ultimatum* (2007), actor Matt Damon called the Bond character “an imperialist and a misogynist” (qtd. in Anonymous 2007, n.p.). Bond’s reputation as a colonialist is a function, in part, of his status as a “cultural icon of British identity” (Funnell and Dodds 2015, 357). As Müller notes, the film series has played a large role in the “collective imagination of the British Empire and its afterlife” (205). As recently as 2012, Daniel Craig’s portrayal of the character was featured in a Visit Britain tourism advertisement, the caption of which used a line break and font changes to read alternately as “Bond is Great” and “Bond is Great Britain” (Bly 2012, n.p.): at once equating Bond, Britain’s alleged greatness, and Britain itself.

Yet James Bond’s national identity as portrayed in the Eon Productions film series is more complex than this would suggest: rather than solely or even



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predominantly rooted in the imperial centre of England, the cinematic Bond frequently emerges from peripheral and ambiguous spaces, whether the marginal within the United Kingdom – like Scotland or Wales – or from former colonies, like Ireland or Australia. If Bond is an icon of Britishness, he also calls into question what exactly “Britishness” consists of. If he is an icon of British imperialism, he makes fuzzy the boundaries between the imperial centre and the periphery, and between coloniser and colonised.

Conceptually, British national identity includes England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, and, indeed, the Isle of Man and Channel Islands – either erasing the differences between the various ethnic, linguistic, and cultural groups of the Atlantic archipelago, or subsuming them into a larger, overarching national identity. Britishness is a fraught and ambivalent construct. One of the chief tensions within British identity is the English-centric nature of Britishness. England, and London in particular, is framed as the national centre, with the “Celtic fringe” (Stroh 2011, 14) of Scotland, Wales, and – depending on the time period – either Ireland or Northern Ireland marginalised. In their comparison of media depictions of the 2012 London Olympics and the 2014 Glasgow Commonwealth Games, Jack Black and Stuart Whigham note that a “conflation between notions of Britishness and Englishness” remains widespread, underpinned by “inability to articulate a distinction between the symbolism of Britishness and Englishness” (2017, 1455). In a sporting context, Black and Whigham cite as examples the use of the personal pronouns “we” and “us” in British media to refer to the England international team, as well as the “co-option of British symbolism such as [...] ‘God Save the Queen’” by the same (1458).

As well as ostensibly British symbolism being appropriated for English uses, English interests are frequently presumed to represent Britishness as a whole, with the Celtic fringe nations neglected. F.C. McGrath argues that unionists in Northern Ireland are “instruments of a colonial power that has lost interest in them, or at least that has become ambivalent about them” (2012, 464). Though uncommented upon by Black and Whigham, even the Olympic team name contains this tendency towards neglecting Britons of the “Celtic fringe”: “Team GB”, short for “Great Britain”, despite its representing the UK as a whole; that is, Great Britain *and* Northern Ireland.

In the context of this marginalisation, there exist in the Celtic fringe nationalists who wish to be liberated from England’s domination and unionists who identify with Britain and Britishness. I use “nationalist” here as Edward Said does, to “identify the mobilizing force that coalesced into resistance against an alien and occupying empire on the part of peoples possessing a common history,

religion, and language” (2021, 326). Regardless, nationalist and unionist is not a strict dichotomy, by any means, and negotiating national identity in this context often involves what Silke Stroh calls “concentric loyalties” (13); or, indeed, shifting, ambiguous ones. Regarding Scottish people in particular, Stroh notes that Scots represent “both an intra-British marginalised Other and an integral part of the British mainstream and Britain’s sense of self” (ibid., 12). Stroh further writes that Scots have “occupied an uneasy position as both intra-British ‘colonised’ and overseas colonisers” (ibid., 13). While Said defines a colonial relationship’s first principle as “a clear-cut and absolute hierarchical distinction should remain constant between ruler and ruled, whether or not the latter is white” (330), Scottish, Welsh, and Anglo-Irish occupy a more complex, ambiguous position: Schrödinger’s Britons, the imperial centre can move them away from or towards the in-group identity of “British” depending on what is advantageous – for instance, Andy Murray is British when he’s winning, and Scottish when he’s losing (Bernache-Assollant et al., 2020).

Michael Denning describes James Bond as portrayed in Fleming’s novels as a character with no “particular class history, or regional rootedness” who represents “a particular image of affluence, modernity, and classlessness” (2003, 59). But as portrayed in the Eon film series, Bond has a series of different class, regional, and national signifiers: sometimes compatible, sometimes clashing, but always legible. Of the six men who have portrayed Bond in the series, two are English: Roger Moore and Daniel Craig, the latter of whom will be addressed at further length in this article. Sean Connery was Scottish. George Lazenby is Australian. Timothy Dalton is Welsh, with an American mother of Italian and Irish descent. Pierce Brosnan is Irish. All of these actors portray Bond as ambiguously English-and-not, rarely wholly departing from their own accents. As a result, Bond’s iconic Britishness is complicated by his apparent emergence from outside the imperial core of England.

The first two Bond films, *Dr. No* (1962) and *From Russia with Love* (1963), emerged from the Celtic fringe: both were directed by Irishman Terence Young, and co-written by Irish screenwriter Johanna Harwood. Lisa Funnell and Klaus Dodds highlight that the choice to cast Sean Connery as Bond in *Dr. No* was in part because Albert R. Broccoli believed David Niven was “too English” for the role (357). Subsequent to Connery’s debut in the role, Fleming wrote a Scottish backstory for Bond in the novel *You Only Live Twice*, establishing him as the son of a Scottish father and Swiss mother (1966, 178). Charles Helfenstein claims that Fleming intended Bond to be Scottish from at least 1960, citing correspondence

with Robin de La Lanne-Mirrlees at the College of Arms to help develop Bond's family lineage (2009, 8).

Yet in most cases throughout the series, Bond's Britishness is conflated with Englishness. "Bond's Britishness", Christopher McMillan writes, "is typically reinforced using conspicuously English signifiers, and since the 1980s these signifiers, or snapshots, of England's heritage have been appearing with greater regularity", including Union Jacks and London buses (2015, 194). McMillan argues that Roger Moore's version of the character re-situates him within an English-centric Britishness, in contrast to Connery's Scottish Bond (ibid. 197-198). In *The Spy Who Loved Me* (1977), when Bond is called away, the woman he's with says "James, I need you!", to which Moore's Bond replies, "So does England". Moore's resituating of Bond as English presents Britishness-as-Englishness as both natural and obvious: Britishness, here, is conflated with Englishness.

But, however far under the surface, a tension remains. This conflation of Britishness and Englishness extends even to explicitly non-English Bonds, creating an uncanny doubling effect: Bond is at once a symbol for the Union, holding the nations of the UK together in her arms; and, simultaneously, he is marked as peripheral to the imperial core. Homi K. Bhabha's theory of mimicry illuminates Bond's doubled existence: Bhabha describes mimicry – that is, when members of a colonised society imitate and take on the culture of the colonisers – as a "doubled articulation [...] at once resemblance and menace" (1994, 86). It is an indeterminate, ambivalent state which "emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal" (ibid.). As Jacques Lacan notes, the effect is "camouflage [...] it is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled" (Lacan 1978, 99).

Bond mimics the codes of the imperial centre so perfectly that he can act as their global representative. There is a subversive element to this: if, as Berberich claims, Bond reflects "not only white but also Anglo-Saxon supremacy" (27), he fatally undermines that supremacist idea by being able to pass as evidence of Anglo-Saxon supremacy *while being Celtic*. But this mimicry requires a fraught, always incomplete disavowal of his Otherness. Bond does not harmonise with the background, but becomes mottled against a mottled background. In *From Russia With Love*, Red Grant (Robert Shaw), the film's Irish villain, asks Bond for his "word of honour [...] as an English gentleman". Bond is played here by Sean Connery, and is very clearly Scottish. Red Grant's own Celtic fringe origins make this line especially pointed: his conflation of Britishness with Englishness is not an unthinking statement from within the imperial core, but a nationalist critique of Bond's mimicry. A complex look of ambivalence and conflict flits over

Connery's face. Bond does not respond, breaking eye contact as he looks at Grant's gun, which is pointed towards him. Bond's silence reflects the partial disavowal that underpins his mimicry of the imperial power, unwilling to either accept or refute Grant's framing of his national identity.

This fraught, incomplete disavowal – this “becoming mottled” – parallels Bond's role as simultaneously an agent of British imperialism and a product or victim of those who actually operate the levers of imperial power. Ruth O'Donnell argues that Bond is a victim of exploitation by the British secret services (2014). Bond is an orphan who the British establishment use, in essence, as cannon fodder, employing him to perform shadowy and dangerous labour in exchange for the illusion of a secure British identity and a personal, positive relationship with the Empire. His being “on Her Majesty's secret service” contains within it not just the idea of a personal relationship with Queen Elizabeth II but the possibility, however illusionary, of a sexual one: the Queen is, as Stephen E. Nepa puts it, Bond's “first and primary love/wife” (2015, 195).

For most of the film series, any complexity to Bond's nationality remains buried under the surface, leaving his origins unseen and his identity unaddressed. In *GoldenEye* (1995), Pierce Brosnan's Bond – despite his ambiguous, Irish-inflected accent – repeats the mantra “for England” when prompted by 006 Alec Trevelyan (Sean Bean). Later in the film, Trevelyan calls back to this, asking “for England, James?” when Bond is about to kill him. “No”, Bond responds, “For me”. Where Connery's Bond elides the villain's effort to frame him as English, Brosnan's Bond agrees with, and subsequently recants, his villain's same effort. The recanting, to be clear, is personal – not nationalistic – thereby allowing his assumed Englishness to remain intact and unaddressed, even as some subtextual ambiguity is introduced.

This underlying complexity finally comes to the surface in *Skyfall* (2012). *Skyfall* is the first film in the series to directly address Bond's national identity. Though the title sounds like a Bond villain weapon, it actually refers to Bond's homeplace: his family's estate in Scotland. Bond is played here by Daniel Craig, making one of the only two overtly “English” Bonds canonically Scottish. The Skyfall estate also has priest holes – hiding places for Catholic priests in homes built during the height of Catholic persecution in Britain and Ireland (Binczewski 2020). This establishes Bond as being from a Catholic background, and so is further alienated from the Protestant English-centric British ideal.

But Craig's Bond mimics English-centric Britishness to a tee, a mask he has worn so long that it has changed the face of the wearer. Craig's Bond at-

tempts to disavow the complexity that comprises what Stroh calls the “uneasy position” of Scots in the United Kingdom (13) in favour of simply being integrally British – and, therefore, at least implicitly English. During a word association part of a psychological test, when the examiner says “country”, Bond immediately and quite forcefully says “England”. The film avoids pinning down when he left Scotland, and how this may have shaped his national identity, raising the spectre of the periphery even for a Bond as thoroughly English as Roger Moore’s: Craig’s Bond overtly reads as English in his accent and mannerisms, but is Scottish, and so even Moore’s Bond could be Scottish and adopted his accent and affect after leaving Scotland. All that is confirmed is that Bond left Scotland after his parents’ death – and that his recruitment to MI6 followed:

M

Is this where you grew up? How old were you when they died?

JAMES BOND

You know the answer to that. You know the whole story.

M

Orphans always make the best recruits.

But *Skyfall* is about Bond’s return to his Scottishness, which he explicitly associates with the past. The association between Scotland and the past is, of course, a reflection of Bond’s personal history: *Skyfall* is where he spent his childhood, forcefully interrupted by the trauma of his parents’ deaths. It also reflects broader cultural understandings of the Celtic fringe. On one hand, associating Scotland with the past forms part of an English/British colonial view of Scotland as backward; and, on the other, it corresponds to a nationalist view that seeks to claim peripheral communities – in this case, the Scottish Highlands – as an untouched pre-colonial Eden, associating the past, peripherality, and purity. While Bond’s view of Scotland is closer to the former, this can also be read as being motivated by a self-preservation instinct: his association of Scotland with the past is also an association with his trauma, and so his desire to assimilate into an English form of Britishness is linked to, if not an expression of, his desire to outrun his personal trauma.

McMillan dubs *Skyfall* as being “an expensive promo for Britain” (194). For McMillan, *Skyfall* attempts to fold Scotland back into “Britishness” at a time of rising Scottish nationalism (ibid., 199) – coming out in 2012, just two years before

the independence referendum – and simultaneously rejects Scottishness in favour of an English-centric Britishness, with Bond being assimilated into English-Britishness and ultimately destroying his Scottish homeplace, which he states he “always hated”. But McMillan also notes, I think more accurately, that *Skyfall* can be considered “full of ambiguity” (ibid., 195). Bond’s view of his own identity and his homeplace are not necessarily the film’s view. *Skyfall* makes space for both psychological subjectivity and naturalistic objectivity, allowing the audience to follow Bond’s perspective, but to also see beyond him.

This is most clear in the contrast between Bond’s disdain for Skyfall and the camera’s loving gaze, which presents Skyfall and the Scottish Highlands in general as beautiful. Notably, the natural beauty of the environment is not interrupted or disturbed by the Skyfall estate; instead, no sharp division is made between the natural and built environment, with the estate appearing as an extension of the surrounding natural beauty. In the context of the Bond series’ conventions, Scotland takes the place of former colonies in what Christopher Holliday calls Bond’s “post-colonial travelogue aesthetic” (2018, 56). As with Bond’s mimicry, this has a double effect: at once equating the Scottish Highlands with the exotic, colonised locales Bond typically frequents, and positioning Scotland as in sharp contrast to those locales.

Said notes that anti-imperialism is distinguished by “the primacy of the geographical element. [...] For the native, the history of colonial servitude is inaugurated by loss of the locality to the outsider; its geographical identity must thereafter be searched for and somehow restored” (328). *Skyfall* at once is part of this search for post-colonial geographical identity and refuses its restoration. As McMillan notes, Bond assimilates into English-Britishness and destroys his Scottish homeplace. Yet this anti-restoration gesture does not negate *Skyfall*’s interest in the search. Despite Bond’s vocal dismissiveness, the audience can see how this environment continues to shape the person he has become. Indeed, the film’s focus on his origins reveal how much of the person Bond has become is a costume. The revelation of his Scottish origins casts a shadow: when he says “England” in that word association test, is it a little too quick, a little too forceful? When he associates Scotland with the past, is that a limitation in Scottish identity, or in his? Is this English accent a product of migration, or of careful, conscious adjustment?

Skyfall parallels its exploration of Bond’s mimicry of imperial codes and incomplete disavowal of Otherness to his status as both avatar for and, in some ways, victim of the British security state. In the film’s opening scene, M (Judi

Dench), a maternal figure for Craig's Bond, is willing to kill Bond in order to complete the mission. The film's villain, Raoul Silva (Javier Bardem), is a former MI6 agent who M allowed to be taken prisoner by the Chinese government as part of the handover of Hong Kong. Silva seeks revenge against MI6 in general and M in particular. Patrick Anderson argues that Bond and Silva are "placed in stark relief" to each other: "Bond represents a self-sacrificing loyalty to the state, while Silva represents wavering loyalty through his racial, sexual, and political ambiguities, all of which illustrate his un-Britishness" (2017, 67). However, I argue that Silva is Bond's double; a literary figure who, as John Herdman explains, acts as a device "for articulating the experience of self-division [...] contradiction within unity, and for unity in spite of division, the likeness expressing the unity of the individual, the doubleness or complementarity expressing division within the personality" (1990, 1-2). In particular, Bond and Silva are "separate characters who can be looked upon as differing aspects of a sundered whole" (ibid., 2). M is willing to sacrifice both Bond and Silva for the sake of the mission. Silva's "un-British" ambiguities that Anderson highlights are also Bond's: in addition to his ambiguous "Celtic fringe" national identity, Bond is implied to be queer in *Skyfall*. Silva, running his hands along Bond's neck and thighs, says there's "a first time for everything", to which Bond responds, "What makes you think this is my first time?"

Anderson argues that *Skyfall* "rewards characters that embody traditional understandings of gender roles, sexuality, and patriotic politics" (68). However, Silva acts as the mirror to Bond's own sexual ambiguity, national peripherality, and wavering loyalty, all of which Bond hides through his uncanny mimicry of imperial codes. "We are the last two rats", Silva tells Bond, presenting them as having an affinity to each other in contrast with M's betrayal. Bond's loyalties to M, to MI6, and to Britain itself, are tangled together, and all feel loaded and in question: even if Bond does not question these loyalties overtly, the film calls them into question all the same.

Bhabha describes cultural colonialism as involving "a process of splitting as the condition of subjection: a discrimination between the mother culture and its bastards, the self and its doubles, where the trace of what is disavowed is not repressed but repeated as [...] a mutation, a hybrid" (111). Bond, an icon of Britishness, exposes the hybridity at play within Britishness: the disavowal of Otherness that is necessary for it to have any coherence, but which can never fully take place. He makes blurry the binaries upon which the British Empire rests. Chief amongst these is the binary of coloniser and colonised, demonstrating how the rhetoric of Empire at once marginalises the Celtic fringe within the UK *and as-*

sure Celtic peoples of a superiority that undermines the possibility of solidarity with colonised peoples. And so Bond is at once a tool used to subjugate those colonies *and* is alienated from the imperial core.

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