The Foreignness of foreigners
The Foreignness of Foreigners

Cultural Representations of the Other in the British Isles (17th-20th Centuries)

Edited by
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Illustrations ................................................................................................. viii
Acknowledgements ................................................................................................. x
Foreword ................................................................................................................... xi
Vanessa Alayrac-Fielding and Claire Dubois

**Part I: Fashioning Englishness in the 17th and 18th Centuries**

Chapter One ........................................................................................................... 2
Otherness and English Identity in the Colony of New York in the 17th Century
Anne-Claire Faucquez

Chapter Two .......................................................................................................... 16
"Null'altra Musica è qui gradita che la nostra"? Cultural Politics, Anti-Catholic Anxiety, and the Italian Operatic Community in London in the 1720s
Xavier Cervantes

**Part II: Picturing Orientalisms**

Chapter Three .................................................................................................... 34
Robertson’s Studio. Contradictory Orients: A British Photographer in Constantinople in the Mid-Victorian Period
Daniel Foliard

Chapter Four ....................................................................................................... 52
“Never the Twain Shall Meet”: The Impossible Encounter of Self and Other in the Illustrations of Nineteenth-Century British Travel Books on Egypt
Caroline Lehni
Chapter Five .............................................................................................. 74  
Beyond the Screen: Encountering Otherness in W. Somerset Maugham’s  
*On a Chinese Screen* (1922)  
Xavier Lachazette

**Part III: Encounters with the Other, Exotism and Identity**

Chapter Six ................................................................................................ 90  
(Per)forming the Self through the Other: Gender, Transgression,  
Writing in Anna Jameson’s *Winter Studies and Summer Rambles in Canada* (1838)  
Anne-Florence Quaireau

Chapter Seven .......................................................................................... 105  
The Role of Missionaries in Forging British Identity: The Church  
Missionary Society and the London City Mission, 1870-1900  
Maud Michaud

Chapter Eight ........................................................................................... 125  
Men of Aran, Strangers on the Fringe of Europe: Authentic or Aesthetic  
Forms of Otherness?  
Valérie Morisson

**Part IV: Articulating Difference, Negotiating Identity**

Chapter Nine ............................................................................................ 148  
An Army of Invisible Men? Pakistani Workers in Britain (1945-1968)  
Olivier Esteves and Philippe Vervaecke

Chapter Ten ............................................................................................. 163  
*Schadenfreude* and Anglo-French Relations in the 20th Century:  
Knocking *Pauvre* France, Building up Great Britain: A French  
Foil for British Identity  
Richard Davis

Chapter Eleven ........................................................................................ 176  
Markers, Borders, Crossings: On the Representation of a Divided Space  
in Northern Ireland  
Gabriel N. Gee
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This collection of essays gathers articles revised from the conference “The Foreignness of Foreigners: Cultural Representations of the Other in the British Isles” held at the University of Lille 3 in 2011. It aims at examining how the various figures of the foreigner have been constructed in Britain through representations and discourses in the political and literary fields, as well as in the visual arts from the 17th century to the contemporary period. These essays focus in particular on the way Otherness has participated in the shaping of a national, religious or regional identity, through ambivalent relations of domination or admiration, integration or rejection, idealisation or demonisation. Thus the question of cultural transfers is addressed to explore the particular ways in which British identity has been enriched by contacts with the Other. The relationship between the British and foreigners/others has played a crucial role in Britain’s search for a national identity and in its construction for centuries, and is still relevant today.

British identity has always been forged through contacts with various cultural influences or through encounters with other nations. Those contacts, however, were often perceived as potentially threatening the supposed “essence” of the British nation. In 1785, an essay published in the Lounger n°19 bemoaned the heterogeneous, composite and hybrid nature of Britishness, seeing foreignness already oozing out of British identity.

A well-educated British gentleman, it may be truly said, is of no country whatever, he unites in himself the characteristics of all the foreign nations; he talks and dresses French, and sings Italian; he rivals the Spaniard in indolence, and the German in drinking; his house is Grecian, his offices Gothic, and his furniture Chinese. He preserves the same impartiality in his religion; and, finding no solid reason for preferring Confucius to Brama, or Mahometanism to Christianity, he has for all their doctrines an equal indulgence. (The Lounger n°19, 11 June 1785.)

Of course, what the author criticises here is British identity expanding beyond geographical linguistic and religious boundaries and consequently being contaminated, so to speak, from outside, not only from Continental Europe, but also from much more distant Oriental countries. Of great
concern here in the text is the influence of foreign models and manners on the British self, the seeming lack of insularity in constructing the socio-cultural, political, artistic and even religious identity of Britain.

What the essay reveals is the increasing presence of cross-cultural transfers and contacts between Britain and other parts of the world from the 18th century onwards. This tells us how much British national history must be approached not just from a domestic inward-looking perspective but from a global one. It tells us that national histories cannot be understood without looking at the circulation of ideas and the various forms of friction that emerge from discoveries of and encounters with the Other, be they confrontational or leading to imitation, appropriation, cultural syncretism and combinatorial processes of identity-building. This implies the need to encompass European, as well as colonial, imperial and post-colonial histories.

Anti-gallican, anti-Italian and anti-Catholic feeling; the fear of Jacobitism; the fascination for and also fear of Orientals; the tensions within the empire, then its disintegration; the UK’s relationship with Europe, or the new multicultural landscape of British society today constitute some of many phenomena that raise issues about what it means to be a British subject or citizen or to be considered foreign, alien, and why foreigners can be perceived from without the British isles but also from within. Cultural exchange can also occur through rejection and fiction mediated by the construction of difference, or by the attempt at negotiating one’s identity. As revealed by Edward Said’s seminal work on Orientalism, the Other is always “a construction”, but as Homi Bhabha showed, from this seemingly monolithic construction stems the Other’s voice sending contradictory signs of resistance.

From the foundation of the East India Company in 1600 with its profound desire to travel eastwards through, to give a few examples, the Act of Union of 1707, the creation of the British Empire, the impact of the arrival of the Empire Windrush in 1948, Enoch Powell’s Rivers of Blood speech in April 1968, to the more recent suggestions made by former Prime Minister Gordon Brown to define and celebrate Britishness as a sum of differences yet to be united under a common sense of belonging through the emblematic Union Flag, it seems fair to say that the history of Britain has always had to face anxieties over what defines and constitutes identity, underlining the aporia of essentialist theories to move towards a more recomposed kind of identity.

This volume aims at examining why and how Otherness was thus fabricated and used. It looks at the performance and staging of foreignness
The Foreignness of Foreigners

and selfhood through visual practices and discourses with their possible effects of distortions and stereotyping. This demands at times that we should decenter ourselves, even tropicalise ourselves or endorse the position of tropicopolitans, to use Srinivas Aravamudan’s words, to engage in a double optic – that of distance and proximity – to study the relationship between race, ethnicity and nationality.

The concept of Otherness is abstract and fluctuating. Its indeterminacy allows for various modes of representation which blend myth and reality. More often than not, the perception of the foreigner spawns a feeling of strangeness, unease, even defamiliarisation when the “native” is confronted with geographical, cultural and linguistic differences. In the 17th and 18th centuries, voyages of exploration, together with commercial and colonial trips from the West to the East Indies led the English to discover other peoples and territories. 19th-century British imperialism and colonisation, 20th-century decolonisation and the rather strained British relationship with Europe raised many issues that beg the question of how the Other has been perceived and represented in Britain.

These essays provide relevant case studies to explore the notions of Englishness and Britishness where the integration or the exclusion of difference plays a significant role. Although tackling specific issues related to Britishness and Otherness, they all contribute to mapping the many reactions in Britain and of Britons to the encounter with the Other, and help to identify similarities in these modes of encounter throughout the centuries. Starting with the modern period, two essays investigate how the notion and idea of Englishness came to be defined, and provide historical interpretations for a surge in Englishness. Anne-Claire Faucquez investigates the building up of a sense of Englishness in the colony of New York in the 17th and 18th centuries, whilst Xavier Cervantès analyses how Englishness and Britishness were further defined and strengthened in Britain in the 1720s in the context of the marked opposition to Italy, the Italian operatic community in London and Catholicism.

The essays all draw on different theoretical approaches, among which are cultural history, colonialism, post-colonialism, orientalism and feminism. Anne-Florence Quaireau proposes a post-colonial and feminist reading in her analysis of the encounter between Anna Jameson and Canadian natives. She uses Mary-Louise Pratt’s concept of the “contact zone” to investigate how gender shapes Jameson’s account of the encounter with the Indians in Winter Studies and Summer Rambles in Canada (1838). Orientalism is tackled in three articles which examine the British presence in various Orients in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Daniel Foliard studies the Orient through photography, with the analysis
of British photographer James Robertson’s work in Constantinople. Caroline Lehni investigates the British perception of Egypt through illustrations in 19th-century travel books. Finally Xavier Lachazette adopts a cultural and literary perspective of the British perception and representation of China through Somerset Maugham’s writing *On a Chinese Screen* (1922).

Imperialism and the decline of the empire are both studied from various angles in this volume, looking at the perception of others from outside Britain but also from within. Maud Michaud examines how British missionaries shaped British identity and defined the contours of Otherness by analysing case studies of missionary work in Uganda and in the Great Lakes region in the last decades of the 19th century. Olivier Esteves and Philippe Vervaecke look at the perception (and rejection) of the Pakistani community in Britain after the Second World War, whilst Richard Davis analyses the complex position of Britain within the European Union and especially vis-à-vis France after the loss of its empire.

Two articles in this collection also examine the perception of Ireland from the perspective of exoticism and that of representing division. Valérie Morisson offers an original study of the British perception of the inhabitants of the Aran Islands, whilst Gabriel Gee analyses the theme of the division of space in Northern Ireland in the visual arts by focussing on works evoking borders, passages and markers.

Over the course of the volume, readers will discover the myriad ways in which the themes of cultural contacts and encounters allow us to understand the politics and aesthetics of cultural identity and difference.

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PART I:

FASHIONING ENGLISHNESS
IN THE 17TH AND 18TH CENTURIES