**An empire gone bad: Agatha Christie, Anglocentrism and decolonization**

The study of the impact of empire upon British society prospers. Having been relatively neglected for many years in favour of the era of ‘high imperialism’, we now know considerably more about decolonization’s impact upon postwar British society than we did at the turn of the new century.[[1]](#footnote-2) Yet for all the excellent work on a wide range of cultural types from satire to statues, there is very little on decolonization and crime fiction.[[2]](#footnote-3) Cora Kaplan’s recent essay on Josephine Tey is a rare exception.[[3]](#footnote-4) Such an absence is possibly due in part to a sense that the early postwar era (until about 1960) was merely an interregnum of sorts for the crime genre, wedged between the ‘Golden Age’ of the inter-war years – in which Agatha Christie, Margery Allingham, Ngaio Marsh and Dorothy Sayers were pre-eminent – and what some have labelled a second ‘Golden Age’ of more contemporary crime authors such as P. D. James and Ruth Rendell.[[4]](#footnote-5) The relative amount of non-empire specific work about different eras of British crime fiction seems to bear this out.[[5]](#footnote-6) This idea that there was an interregnum is understandable. James and Rendell did not publish their first novels until 1962 and 1964 respectively, whilst Christie, Allingham and Marsh (although not Sayers) continued to write in the late 1940s and 1950s. Indeed, one scholar has gone so far as to suggest that ‘the whodunnit’s survival seemed for a while dependent’ on Golden Age authors’ long, productive postwar careers.[[6]](#footnote-7)

Nevertheless, crime fiction’s immense popularity continued after the war, and novels by Christie were the most popular of all. Selling approximately two billion copies of her collected works worldwide to date (making her the bestselling novelist ever), Christie is the acknowledged ‘queen’ of the genre. Christie was never long out of the spotlight, writing at a constant rate and for a long period of time, with 66 novels and 14 short story collections published in her own name between 1920 and 1979. Despite the common suggestion, both then and now, that the quality of Christie’s output dipped after 1945,[[7]](#footnote-8) these works remained popular with postwar British readers; she was the only Golden Age author who continued to be listed by W. H. Smith’s and trade papers as an author of ‘books most in demand’ on Britain’s postwar high street.[[8]](#footnote-9)

It is customary to justify a study on the grounds of the topic’s relative neglect, but there is a further reason why an examination of Christie’s postwar output may be worthwhile. The scholarly tendency has been to emphasize a positive self-belief powering Britain’s late-imperial culture. John Mackenzie has argued that a variety of official and semi-official sources, including politicians’ speeches, the BBC, and Pathe, asserted British pre-eminence to the point of successfully forestalling any widespread perception of imperial decline until the very end of the 1950s.[[9]](#footnote-10) This dovetails with John Darwin’s suggestion that vigorous claims about the Commonwealth’s capacity to replace the empire shielded the public from a sense of decline.[[10]](#footnote-11) Historians such as Jeffrey Richards have demonstrated how, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, other types of popular culture such as film focused on celebrating ordinary citizens’ imperial efforts.[[11]](#footnote-12) Alternatively, Bill Schwarz suggests that the coming end of empire was acknowledged, but that the ‘prevailing story’ about decolonization in the public culture of the 1950s and 1960s was that, in granting self-government, London was proactively acting with ‘beneficent far-sightedness’.[[12]](#footnote-13) Similarly, Wendy Webster has shown how the idea of Britain’s ‘orderly withdrawal’ was a prominent component of media coverage of the independence ceremonies from the late 1940s onwards.[[13]](#footnote-14) Schwarz acknowledges it is difficult to know whether anyone believed this ‘official rendering of the end-of-empire story’, but that it may have found purchase given its role as the ‘founding narrative for the Commonwealth’.[[14]](#footnote-15) At any rate, Schwarz continues, radio and newsreel ‘did not encourage the making of an informed home population’, the ritual of the independence ceremony occluding more meaningful engagement with what it meant to lose an empire.[[15]](#footnote-16)

Crime fiction is not an environment in which unalloyed triumphalist positivity or self-congratulation comes readily. Besides the simple pleasures of entertainment and complex pleasures of puzzle solving, the genre’s potency naturally derives in part from its exploitation of contemporary fears about human behaviour, morality and the precarious balance between social order and social chaos. Were this genre expansive enough to reflect on empire, the very nature of the form would suggest Christie’s work might offer a different perspective on Britain’s postwar global standing, and one engaged with by large swathes of the general public.

However, academics have detected a range of political stances in Christie’s writing. Martin Priestman suggests Christie had a ‘very conservative’ social vision, which for Stephen Knight involved a ratification of the ‘values of the English property owning bourgeoisie’.[[16]](#footnote-17) For Helen Moore, Christie’s fiction is a ‘comforting reminder of the British social system’, where order is only ‘temporarily breached’ and a cosy status quo is reasserted at the end of each work when the villain is apprehended.[[17]](#footnote-18) For Moore, the ‘world of a Christie novel is basically a good one’.[[18]](#footnote-19)

The most noted counterblast to charges of traditionalist conservatism remains Alison Light’s much-cited *Forever England*. Light suggests Christie epitomised a ‘conservative modernity’, defusing anxieties about modernity, welcoming the rise of a middle class felt a vehicle for moderation, decency and the quiet life.[[19]](#footnote-20) Others position Christie as comfortable with, or at least reconciled to, change in the modern world. Susan Rowland has gone as far as to label Christie anti-nostalgic.[[20]](#footnote-21) Christie’s response to modernity has thus been typified as either a tendency to offer readers a comforting denial of change or a welcome embrace of the new.

In contrast, this article will suggest that Christie did not shy away from Britain’s decline in her postwar fiction. Both empire and Britons’ capacity to maintain empire were central to her discussions of modernity, and that Christie gave over so much of her limited space available for broader social commentary to the topic is suggestive of the importance she attached to it. However, because Christie continued to hold to her pre-war ways of understanding race – the supposed limits of non-Western peoples’ organizational abilities in particular – it was British behaviour that lay at the heart of her depictions of profound historical change. Rather than deploying a more benign model of the loss of power – suggesting that Britain’s fate merely echoed the waxing and waning of all empires, for instance – Christie’s emphasis on a loss of British morality provided a discomfiting counterpoint to public narratives of self-congratulation.

The natural response to this might be: this is all well and good but, Christie’s popularity notwithstanding, how useful is her work for ascertaining others’ attitudes? That the presence of material does not necessarily prove engagement with such material is a methodological issue those who doubt the empire had a significant impact upon domestic audiences have been able to exploit to good effect.[[21]](#footnote-22) Addressing this issue, we might start with another basic question: would people have embraced Christie’s work if it did not chime with their own worldview? Readers came to Christie’s work for the puzzles, not the politics.[[22]](#footnote-23) It is therefore entirely possible that her audience disagreed with her ideological perspective but carried on reading regardless, or were able to ignore it altogether.

Of course, ascertaining individual readers’ responses is very difficult. Furthermore, particularly given that Christie was so guarded in interviews and produced a notoriously unrevealing autobiography,[[23]](#footnote-24) it is difficult to determine whether Christie sought either to embody what she believed were her audience’s beliefs or to try and shape them. There are good reasons for believing both to be the case. In support of the former, it is possible Christie made background detail and character motivations and actions as believable as possible in order to ground the outlandish puzzles and prevent the whole narrative spinning off into mere fantasy. Reviewers certainly felt her works lived or died by their plausibility.[[24]](#footnote-25) Secondly, Christie may have embodied her audience’s beliefs because she was driven by a desire to sell as many copies of her novels as possible. As Christie’s most recent biographer has argued, Christie was terrified of penury and only ‘very rarely could she be prevailed upon to do something for love rather than money.’[[25]](#footnote-26)

Were Christie attempting to appeal to as many people as possible, one might expect her work to be apolitical. That her novels are apolitical is indeed a prominent conclusion of analyses of Christie’s fiction.[[26]](#footnote-27) However, Christie – herself a lifelong Conservative voter – did not prevent politics from intruding. Most notably, her thrillers attempted to exploit the fears and concerns most pronounced in her more conservative readers. She wrote of the threats supposedly posed to Britain by a future Labour Government (1922’s *The Secret Adversary*), of Irish neutrality as a complicating factor during the Second World War (1941’s *N or M?*), and of a moral decay embodied by the revolutionary spirit of 1968 (1970’s *Passenger to Frankfurt*). Christie was extremely timely; *By the Pricking of My Thumbs* (1968) – published seven months after Enoch Powell’s ‘Rivers of blood’ speech – has her long-running hero and heroine Tommy and Tuppence rolling their eyes at the idea of racial integration.[[27]](#footnote-28) As we shall see, Christie used contemporaneous events as a means of making broader points about human behaviour and, going by the reviews that appeared during her lifetime, it appears as if Christie was thought an effective chronicler of her age. In 1955, the veteran novelist C. H. B. Kitchin argued that the ‘changes in the world situation and the domestic scene have left their mark [on Christie’s work] – and few writers are more aware of these change and record them more shrewdly than Mrs. Christie’.[[28]](#footnote-29)

Nevertheless, most of her novels are less didactic in tone than those by some of her peers, such as Georgette Heyer.[[29]](#footnote-30) It might, therefore, be most accurate to suggest that Christie brought to her novels just enough of a political take on contemporary events to scare or unsettle those who shared her own point of view, but not enough to make those who did not share her political beliefs reject her work. This general assessment is not, however, the end of the matter. At various points below, both critics’ responses to specific elements of Christie’s work, and Christie’s embodiment or otherwise of broader social attitudes, will be dealt with.

We shall start by examining Christie’s attitudes towards race. Before the Second World War, Christie’s work was explicitly racist.[[30]](#footnote-31) This is a world in which, according to *The Man in the Brown Suit* (1924), black South Africans are simple and stupid, speaking a ‘guttural language’, and producing crude, childlike arts, crafts and music.[[31]](#footnote-32) Travelling to Africa was akin to travelling in the Neanderthal era.[[32]](#footnote-33) In the infamous *Ten Little Niggers* (1939), set on the sinister Nigger Island, one character argues that white and black are brothers, only to be revealed as mad immediately afterwards.[[33]](#footnote-34) Shadowy racial mongrels attempt to undermine the empire and, while Hercules Poirot does not demonize other races, he does believe certain racial strains account for predictable patterns of behaviour.[[34]](#footnote-35)

It is therefore notable that after the war, Christie partially updated her depictions of race and the world beyond Calais. Inspector Bland, a decent and hard-working (if unfortunately named) detective in *Dead Man’s Folly* (1956), is deemed a good person because he lacked the local Constable’s ‘ingrained prejudice against foreigners’.[[35]](#footnote-36) In keeping with broader social attitudes, Christie depicted eugenicists as oddballs[[36]](#footnote-37) (although Christie was not averse to playing on the fears of mental deficiency and degeneration that, as Clare Hanson has shown, reinforced postwar eugenicist thought),[[37]](#footnote-38) and the success of Poirot’s investigation in *Mrs McGinty’s Dead* (1952) relies on him overcoming a village’s hostility to foreigners.[[38]](#footnote-39)

Furthermore, Christie showed a belated awareness of the changing imperial context and, much like other postwar novelists, created a greater number of colonized (or formerly colonized) characters that challenged British imperial authority, rather than simply served as a ‘primitive’ backdrop.[[39]](#footnote-40) However, Christie remained highly sceptical of such characters’ capacity for intelligence, or ability to wield political authority responsibly, or both. *Hickory Dickory Dock* (1955) centres on a London hostel for international students. Again, Christie’s timeliness is notable; from the early 1950s onwards, such hostels were lightning conductors for growing public concerns over race relations, immigration and communist activity.[[40]](#footnote-41) Christie created hostel residents who represented three different stereotypes. The first stereotype is the secret radical, the Fifth Columnist of so much Cold War culture.[[41]](#footnote-42) The West Indian Elizabeth Johnston initially comes across as ‘well balanced and competent’,[[42]](#footnote-43) but it later becomes clear to Poirot that she is arrogant, with an ‘ego of a Napoleon’, condescending towards others, and a communist; altogether an unpleasant character lies beneath a veneer of civility.[[43]](#footnote-44) Secondly, there is the backward and stupid stereotype. The West African Akibombo is, for all his talk of modernity, a highly superstitious believer in old ‘primitive’ practices’, bumbling, and easily confused, which is borne out physiologically by his ‘childlike, plaintive eyes’.[[44]](#footnote-45) Such a depiction, of course, had a rich pedigree, and the popular British idea of African custom holding back modernity would endure beyond the 1950s.[[45]](#footnote-46)

Lastly, there is the hot-headed stereotype, embodied by the Indian Chandra Lal and the Egyptian Achmed Ali. Lal is always complaining about the oppression of the ‘native races’,[[46]](#footnote-47) which leads Poirot to comment sagely that he has ‘persecution mania’.[[47]](#footnote-48) The level-headed Inspector Sharpe notes that Lal tried to turn a search of the hostel into an ‘international incident’, but Lal is all bark and no bite, possession only ‘a few subversive leaflets … the usual half-baked stuff’.[[48]](#footnote-49) Like Lal, Achmed Ali complains of police intrusion into international students’ affairs, but only because he is hiding away ‘extremely pornographic literature and postcards’.[[49]](#footnote-50) This ‘hot headed’ Middle Eastern stereotype was prominent in British cultural life in the build up to the Suez crisis of 1956, as Nasser was increasingly viewed as a serious threat to British interests.[[50]](#footnote-51) Given the convergence of Christie’s novel with broader attitudes, it is unsurprising that, for more than one reviewer of *Hickory Dickory Dock*, Poirot’s assessments of the hostel’s inhabitants were as ‘astute’ as ever.[[51]](#footnote-52) Furthermore, Christie’s clear racial demarcation of non-whites as troubling, temporary interlopers in an otherwise white Britain chimed with the growing anti-immigration anxieties of the 1950s.[[52]](#footnote-53)

When scaled up, such individual displays of supposedly naïve play-acting at being ‘civilized’ could be used to criticize the collective motives of anti-colonial nationalist movements. As the decent, moderate Dr Barron in *Destination Unknown* (1954) argues, civility is predicated upon a balance being struck between the freedom of the individual on the one hand and the security of the collective that must lead to the reduction of personal freedom on the other. Barron wisely counsels the novel’s heroine that the ‘civilized man knows there is no such thing [as untrammelled freedom]. Only the younger and cruder nations put the word “Liberty” on their banner.’[[53]](#footnote-54) Christie believed this until the end of her career; in *Passenger to Frankfurt* (1970), wise Britons reflect that anti-colonial nationalist protest in Malaya was simply ‘a good rallying cry for violence and student indignation and for many other things’.[[54]](#footnote-55) Conservatives were particularly forceful in making such points; in 1956, one *Daily Telegraph* columnist suggested that nationalism ‘deteriorates’ when exported to ‘less civilised countries’, for ‘You cannot teach parrots to discuss intelligently the ideas of Herder or Masaryk, but you can teach them to squawk slogans’.[[55]](#footnote-56)

By the end of the 1950s, Christie was prepared to admit that some postcolonial figures had noble intentions. In the short story ‘The adventure of the Christmas pudding’, Poirot assists a young Middle Eastern ‘potentate-to-be, the only son of the ruler of a rich and important native State’.[[56]](#footnote-57) The young man is certain that there ‘is to be education in my country. There are to be schools. There are to be many things. All in the name of progress, you understand, of democracy. It will not be … like it was in my father’s time.’[[57]](#footnote-58) However, the chances of such intentions becoming reality in Christie’s world are slim. The opening of *Cat Among the Pigeons* (1959) concerns the death of one Prince Ali Yusuf, the new head of the fictional Middle Eastern state of Ramat. Yusuf’s tyrannical father killed many people but was revered. In contrast, Yusuf’s pro-Western and democratic reforms spark revolution and his eventual assassination.[[58]](#footnote-59) The man’s good intentions are rooted in a Western education, but even then, Yusuf’s transformation is ambiguous; at times he ‘no longer [appeared] the modern conscientious Westernized young man’, his smile displaying his ancestors’ ‘racial guile and craft’.[[59]](#footnote-60) The move towards similarity cannot be completed.

Indeed, the failure of civilized modernity to take root in a postcolonial environment is written in Ramat’s very architecture. Christie’s uncharacteristically full description of a hotel in the capital city leaves us in no doubt as to her point. A luxury hotel with a ‘grand modernistic façade’, (‘modestly called the Ritz Savoy’), had opened three years before the revolution

with a flourish… with a Swiss manager, a Viennese chef, and an Italian *Maître d’hôtel*. Everything had been wonderful. The Viennese chef had gone first, then the Swiss manager. Now the Italian head waiter had gone too. The food was still ambitious, but bad, the service abominable, and a good deal of the expensive plumbing had gone wrong.[[60]](#footnote-61)

Christie’s Middle Eastern leaders are not denigrated in the openly hostile terms she used to describe other foreigners, but the limits of the ‘other’ to appropriate Western modernity are clearly delineated. Doubtless influenced in part by the Western media narratives that had surrounded turbulent events in the Middle East in the previous year (1958), such as the Iraqi Revolution, as well as by Christie’s extensive experience of the region due to her keen interest in archaeology, reviewers found the depiction of Ramat realistic, with one commenting that the Middle East was ‘a part of the world which Mrs. Christie knows well and depicts in a very likely way’.[[61]](#footnote-62)

If Christie’s partially-revised racial narratives underpinned no damascene conversion about colonized and formerly colonized peoples’ ability to appropriate modernity and maintain ‘civilized’ behavior, the next issue to consider is how far Christie’s depictions of those Britons who interacted with empire ‘over there’ changed across her writing career. Before and during the war, the majority of Christie’s imperial figures had been upstanding, displaying moral virtue and decency, in keeping with a broader domestic cultural tendency embodied by popular cultural figures such as Edgar Wallace’s colonial official *Sanders of the River*.[[62]](#footnote-63) Christie’s exemplars of decency include the African big game hunters Hector Blunt in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926) and Porter in *The Mysterious Mr. Quin* (1930), the ex-Indian policeman hero and detective of *Murder is Easy* (1939), and the Indian administrator Sir William Boyd Carringtonin *Curtain* (written in the early 1940s but not published until 1975).[[63]](#footnote-64) These are figures of initiative, sagacity and action. They are also, of course, all men. Despite the occasional plucky heroine, Christie explicitly subscribed to the common belief that it was men who should, and did, uphold empire.[[64]](#footnote-65)

Given the partial continuity in her writing on race across her career, it is all the more jarring that Christie’s postwar work took on a distinctively new tone when describing British imperial men. In her early postwar novels, a significant number of the ‘bad guys’ had imperial connections. Robin Upward, the murderer in *Mrs McGinty’s Dead*, is from Australia.[[65]](#footnote-66) Thomas Betterton, *Destination Unknown*’s murderer, was born in Canada.[[66]](#footnote-67) The murderers in 1956’s *Dead Man’s Folly* are a husband and wife. Having worked in Kenya, the husband deserts the army and ends up impersonating the head of a Devonshire country house, committing two murders to keep his real identity secret.[[67]](#footnote-68) Lance Fortescue, a charming but amoral ex-East African farmer, cuts an anarchic swathe through *A Pocket Full of Rye* (1953).[[68]](#footnote-69) Never depicted as anything other than a ‘thoroughly bad lot’, Lance kills his father for the deeds to an African uranium mine.[[69]](#footnote-70) The villainous con man Victor Drake, who has spent a great deal of time in Britain’s colonies, is the murderer in 1945’s *Sparkling Cyanide*. *They Came to Baghdad* (1951) revolves around a mysterious organization bent on setting the protagonists of the Cold War against one another. The handsome, charismatic Brit Edward Goring leads the organization, whichhas a base in Canada.[[70]](#footnote-71) Similar criminal connections to empire would later appear in Christie’s novels of the 1960s.[[71]](#footnote-72) Given her aversion to repeating herself – which, to Christie’s credit, she invariably managed to act upon across more than half a century of writing – the reoccurrence of the imperial figure gone bad is particularly notable.

A caveat should be highlighted. The transformation from a pre-war imperial virtuousness to a postwar imperial villainy was not total. Some ‘good’ imperial figures appear in Christie’s postwar fiction. Charles, the narrator of *Crooked House* (1949), is a decent and honest man who has undertaken work for the Foreign Office in the Middle East.[[72]](#footnote-73) After the war, imperial connections could still be of benefit to the metropole. The sister of Poirot’s secretary takes up a job as the warden of *Hickory Dickory Dock*’s hostel. She is judged perfect for the role because time spent in Singapore meant ‘she understands racial differences and people’s susceptibilities.’[[73]](#footnote-74)

The other reason the transformation was not complete is that some of Christie’s pre-war characters with imperial pasts *had* committed major crimes. The murderer in *The Sittaford Mystery* (1931) is the Boer War veteran Major Burnaby.[[74]](#footnote-75)The villain of *The Man in the Brown Suit* is the veteran MP Sir Eustace Pedler, who has extensive imperial experience.[[75]](#footnote-76) *Ten Little Niggers*’ Philip Lombard had spent time in East Africa in an undefined capacity, and was responsible for the deaths of 21 Africans when, in an act of self-preservation, he left them without food in the bush.[[76]](#footnote-77)

However, there are two main characteristics that differentiate what might be termed Christie’s postwar ‘imperial villains’ from her pre-1945 ones. The first is age. Christie was not always precise on details when providing character outlines, but Major Burnaby and Sir Eustace Pedler (though not Philip Lombard) are middle-aged or older. In contrast, as far as can be determined, her postwar villains are all under the age of forty or so. Where their ages are not specified, they are clearly defined as belonging to a younger generation, taking role as sons, newly-weds, and the like, against which retired characters are contrasted. Edward Goring is a ‘good-looking young man, cherubically fair’.[[77]](#footnote-78) Robin Upward is a budding young charismatic playwright.[[78]](#footnote-79) Victor Drake’s position as a young ‘black sheep’ son is key to understanding his actions. And so on. These villains are of a similar age to Christie’s upstanding pre-war figures such as Luke Fitzwilliam and Porter.[[79]](#footnote-80)

Christie went out of her way to emphasize a generational divide in her imperial characters to indicate the passing of an old imperial guard. A disquieting juxtaposition between old/good and new/bad had been apparent as early as *Sparkling Cyanide*. One of Christie’s recurring detectives, the intelligent, ‘out-of-door, essentially of the Empire builder type’ Colonel Race, eventually unmasks Victor Drake as the murderer.[[80]](#footnote-81) Christie had previously played with the idea of the clash of generations, but had gone out of her way to have the schism mended by a novel’s conclusion. As recently as *The Body In The Library* (1942), Christie created Basil Blake, an ill-tempered, flamboyant young man whose early rudeness to senior police figures appears to support one character’s statement that he has ‘that silly slighting way of talking that these boys have nowadays – sneering at people sticking up for their school or the Empire’.[[81]](#footnote-82) Nevertheless, Christie took great pains to exonerate Blake. His rudeness is down to his nerves at being suspected of murder, and he is revealed as a hero (rescuing children from a burning building when working as an ARP warden, no less).[[82]](#footnote-83)

The sense of generational divide that emerged in Christie’s early postwar works was enhanced by the fact that none of the many middle-aged and retired characters with imperial pasts commit murder.[[83]](#footnote-84) This was despite both *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* having infamously proved that, theoretically, nobody was incapable of the ultimate crime, and the existence of numerous older villains elsewhere in Christie’s postwar fiction who were without imperial connections.[[84]](#footnote-85) Christie was not above poking fun at older imperial characters – the harrumphing retired colonial military figure was a stock recurring stereotype – but it would not be until 1972’s *Elephants Can Remember* when an older imperial figure would once again commit murder.[[85]](#footnote-86)

The second difference between Christie’s culprits before and after the Second World War is morality. Christie provided mitigating circumstances that diminished the villainy of her pre-war imperial villains. Major Burnaby murders for money, having accrued bad debts thanks to poor investments.[[86]](#footnote-87) Burnaby is depicted as a desperate fool, having been won over by mining prospects couched ‘in terms so blatantly optimistic that it would have aroused suspicion in any heart but that of a widow or a retired soldier.’[[87]](#footnote-88) Christie made efforts to partially redeem the villain of *The Man in the Brown Suit*, Sir Eustace Pedler, rendering him something akin to E. W. Hornung’s lovable rogue gentleman thief Raffles by the novel’s conclusion.[[88]](#footnote-89) *Ten Little Niggers* appears to suggest that Philip Lombard’s abandonment of Africans is a relatively minor crime compared to those committed by every other character in the novel. The book’s aforementioned ridicule of racial equality appears to validate Lombard’s point that ‘natives don’t mind dying, you know. They don’t feel about is as Europeans do.’[[89]](#footnote-90) This is in keeping with Christie’s broader pre-war willingness to flirt with the idea of imperial transgression, only to pull her punches, a tendency best illustrated by villains who initially appear Australian or Anglo-Indian, but who are unmasked as imposters.[[90]](#footnote-91)

In the novels of the postwar period, Christie’s older imperial figures retain a moral code. *A Murder is Announced*’s retired colonial club bore is bribed to lie to confuse the murder investigation, but the ensuing guilt leads to his suicide. Even *Elephants Can Remember*’s murderer General Ravenscroft, a retired army figure who has spent his life working in various imperial military posts, kills the psychotic woman he loves to prevent her from harming anyone (the woman having already fatally injured Ravenscroft’s wife and a child in Malaya, where Ravenscroft had once been stationed) before committing suicide.[[91]](#footnote-92) A strictly utilitarian defence of the murder, but a defence nonetheless and, once again, the general’s suicide demonstrates Christie’s intention to highlight his awareness of, and guilt at, his own transgression. Right until the end of her writing career, Christie would not fully divest her older characters of an emotional and moral engagement with the consequences of their own actions.

In contrast, Christie’s younger postwar villainous men are less wedded to a moral code, and have no compunction about, for instance, co-opting upright citizens into their evil schemes. The charismatic Victor Drake seduces a hard-working, efficient and respectable secretary to act as his accomplice. Lance Fortescue charms a maid to do some of his dirty work.[[92]](#footnote-93) *They Came to Baghdad*’s messianic Aryan fantasist Edward Goring plots a New World Order, using his magnetism and looks to convert impressionable young women into fanatics for his cause, before attempting to murder the protagonist to avoid his schemes being revealed.[[93]](#footnote-94) Patricia Highsmith’s *Strangers on a Train* (1949)is sometimes held up as unusual for its time in its refusal of a Manichean dichotomy between good and evil, but Christie at least suggested that different shades of evil existed, and it was these younger men who were the blackest.[[94]](#footnote-95)

The problem was not merely defined along age, race, and gender lines – young white male villains – but class lines too. Christie’s villains were not working class but, in keeping with the social concerns of her novels, upper class and, particularly, middle class. Her postwar murderers include a playwright (Upward), an African farmer (Fortescue), and a scientist (Betterton). Even when not writing about murderers, Christie conveyed the idea that the colonies were no longer destinations for upstanding gentlemen seeking to play ‘empire builder’ roles, but for the dissolute seeking to avoid ‘real world’ responsibilities and leech off daddy’s success (such as the West Indies in the case of Thomas Eade, a banker’s son in *4.50 From Paddington* (1957)) or to institute hair-brained ‘get rich quick’ schemes (such as East Africa in the case of the same novel’s solicitor’s son Ronnie Wells).[[95]](#footnote-96) Christie clearly articulated a sense of crisis of upper-class and, to a greater extent, middle-class masculinity.

Christie did not treat such villains as isolated cases. Instead, she had her wiser figures frame the problem as the result of a broader loss of character. *They Came to Baghdad*’s gallant and charismatic – if arrogant – explorer Sir Rupert Crofton Lee, who has spent a lifetime undertaking surreptitious missions for British intelligence in remote parts of the empire, argues that modern man does not usually have guts.[[96]](#footnote-97) The plot of *Destination Unknown* bears out a member of British intelligence’s suggestion that ‘Self pity is one of the biggest stumbling-blocks in the world today.’[[97]](#footnote-98) Britain had to pull its socks up, for it cut a rather apathetic, low-energy figure, having adopted a fatalistic or defeatist attitude. In *They Do It With Mirrors* (1952), Miss Marple suggests that whilst time spent reforming society’s poorest and most unfortunate was ‘noble work’, Britain’s problems could be solved by young people ‘with a good heredity, and brought up wisely in a good home – and with grit and pluck and the ability to get on in life – well, they are really, when one comes down to it – the sort of people a country *needs*’.[[98]](#footnote-99) Miss Marple rarely gives forthright speeches, which is perhaps indicative of the urgency with which Christie felt this particular problem needed to be addressed.

That Christie made the success or otherwise of an entire global system the result of morality and ‘character’ would naturally strike most today as unsatisfactorily reductionist, but in her focus on personality, Christie was not unique. Donald Lammers has demonstrated it is ‘unimaginable’ that Nevil Shute (one of Christie’s bestselling peers) ‘would have disputed the proposition that Great Britain’s imperial ascendancy depended in the first place on the unremitting, organized efforts of generations of his kinsmen who shared … [Shute’s] fundamentally moralistic attitude to work.’[[99]](#footnote-100)

Christie provided a number of reasons why younger Britons had started behaving contrary to her ideal. One was a heightened emphasis upon the debilitating effects of the tropical climate upon temperament,[[100]](#footnote-101) although not all of Christie’s postwar murderers could have been affected in this way, because some only had connections to temperate colonial environments. Indeed, more common were *domestic* British roots to colonial figures’ crimes. The colonial evil in *Mrs McGinty’s Dead* originated with the murderer’s homicidal English mother. Therefore Christie retained her prominent pre-war belief that murderous intent could be hereditary.[[101]](#footnote-102)

The most important factor shaping these villains’ characters is therefore not necessarily their having lived in empire. Most prominent among Christie’s explanations was another domestic factor, namely a loss of passion for maintaining empire. Christie argued that, because the younger generation was not supported by cultural mores amenable to improvement, British society at large had contributed to this moral decline. In her aforementioned speech in *They Do It With Mirrors*, Miss Marple complains that even in war, the British are ‘so much prouder of their defeats and their retreats than of their victories. Foreigners never can understand why we’re so proud of Dunkirk. It’s the sort of thing they’d prefer not to mention themselves. But we always seem to be almost embarrassed by a victory – and treat it as though it weren’t quite nice to boast about it.’[[102]](#footnote-103) Christie was not the only public voice at this time concerned that, where the youth of the day was lacking the ‘virtue’ of a previous generation, broader social mores were part of the reason.[[103]](#footnote-104)

Nevertheless, Christie laid the majority of the blame at the feet of young adults themselves. A common enough phenomenon for the era of the ‘Angry Young Men’, but it is interesting that, for Christie, the turning point was the end of the Second World War and the early postwar years, rather than the mid 1950s to early 1960s. It is the latter period – with the emergence of rock and roll, the Notting Hill riots of 1958, and the apparent narcissism of an individualist American-influenced consumerism – that is frequently believed pivotal in generating panic about younger generations.[[104]](#footnote-105) Of course, all periods are a period of crisis for someone, and evidence of a later era’s transformative power is not proof in itself of an earlier era’s unimportance, but the extremity of the transformation in Christie’s writing suggests that something shaped her attitudes more powerfully than these broader socio-cultural anxieties. Christie certainly did not appear intent on reproducing any particularly popular cultural tropes of the day. For example, Christie’s villains do not conform easily to any of the four principal criminal types in postwar mainstream cinema – the spiv, the delinquent boy-next-door, the gangster and the maladjusted Second World War veteran – with the partial exception of the last.[[105]](#footnote-106)

Neither does Christie’s critique appear to have been rooted in anxieties about threats to the middle-classes’ socio-economic status, such as an usurpation by an upwardly-mobile working class. If any group is losing out in Christie’s early postwar novels, it is the upper classes, with the decline of the stately home a common motif.[[106]](#footnote-107) Instead, Christie’s middle classes continue their daily routines of commutes and office work and, increasingly, they move to new housing developments.[[107]](#footnote-108) Christie’s continuing evocation of a relatively sustainable middle class is in accord with the modern historiographical tendency to view the late 1940s and 1950s as an era of middle-class confidence. Such confidence was rooted in rising prosperity and a continuing gap between the middle and working classes in terms of income inequality, life-chances, and geographical and associational separation.[[108]](#footnote-109) As noted sociologist Mark Abrams wrote in 1962, ‘for most working-class families even the modest contemporary middle-class style of life is still a very long way off’.[[109]](#footnote-110)

Instead, it appears that it was Christie’s sense of this younger generation’s political attitudes, rather than their socio-cultural actions or economic situation, that lay at the root of her disquiet, even though these naturally overlapped. Privately, Christie believed that the end of the war also represented the end of an era, with the Attlee government embodying a disquieting break with the political past.[[110]](#footnote-111) Consequently, Christie’s fiction suggests a lack of character had emerged because anti-imperial attitudes had become the normalized result of a connection between youths and left-wing politics. Christie’s pre-war younger left-wing characters were not marked out as threats to Englishness. The communist Oliver Manders in *Three Act Tragedy* (1934)is not guilty of particularly egregious behaviour (although he does have a sneering manner) but, crucially, is ‘othered’ on account of being Jewish (or ‘un-English’ as the narrator puts it, and a ‘Shylock’ as one of Christie’s characters puts it).[[111]](#footnote-112) Alternatively, the young Englishwoman, and ‘red hot socialist’, Bundle in *The Secret of Chimneys* (1925) and *The Seven Dials Mystery* (1929) is ‘effervescent and hyperactive’, smart and rather frivolous. It is tempting to suggest Christie, as a lifelong Tory voter, was being generous in her depictions of a young woman of a different ideological stripe, although there is something in the character which suggests Christie felt Bundle’s political naïvety could be ‘cured’ with a good dose of reality and common sense, most likely administered by a more sensible husband.[[112]](#footnote-113)

In contrast, after the war, and even before the Cold War had begun to seriously intensify, Christie’s young left-wing characters became more dislikeable. 1946’s *The Hollow* concerns a murder at the house of the retired governor of the ‘Hollowene Islands’, Sir Henry Angkatell, whom Poirot looks upon as a ‘upright, responsible, trusted administrator of Empire’, and whom Poirot’s assistant Inspector Grange considers a ‘good-looking, distinguished man, the kind of man he would be quite pleased to serve under himself’.[[113]](#footnote-114) One of the visitors to Henry’s home is a distant relative, the repellent young left-winger David Angkatell. David had visited ‘in a spirit of considerable unwillingness. Until now, he had never met either Sir Henry or Lady Angkatell, and disapproving of the Empire generally, he was prepared to disapprove of these relatives of his’.[[114]](#footnote-115) Similarly, *A Murder is Announced*’s Edmund Swettenham is a grumpy left-wing intellectual, the son of a colonial official who had served in India and Hong Kong, and someone hostile to ‘empire builders’ more generally.[[115]](#footnote-116)

Christie’s overarching conclusion is clear. The colonies – both the old ‘white dominions’ and otherwise – have failed to contain threat. They lack a younger generation with both sufficient powers of vigilance and a willingness to be vigilant. The outposts (and, increasingly, ex-outposts) of empire no longer maintain their old positions as bastions of righteousness, and are now riddled with youthful intrigue and ne’er-do-wells. Both Victor Drake and Lance Fortescue had previously evaded capture passing from colony to colony.[[116]](#footnote-117) The scale of the problem was indicated by the fact that the empire was now not simply home to individual criminals, but the cradle of larger global conspiracies, as the bases in *They Came To Baghdad* demonstrate. The speed with which Christie turned imperial spaces into dangerous places exemplifies the vociferousness with which she held that British imperial decline could only be explained by a lack of vigorous upstanding men by whom the old order might be upheld. Here, Christie tapped into a broader contemporaneous strand of early postwar conservative thought. In 1947, the historian and journalist Arthur Bryant contended to his readers in the *Illustrated London News* that a latent corruption in humans had to be continually countered by the fostering of an active citizenry committed to its civic duty, but that this was increasingly difficult for the present generation, which was becoming ‘passive’ in the face of a ‘rigid and delegatory’ centralising state.[[117]](#footnote-118) In such an environment, it is easy to understand why young adults who volunteered for VSO in the late 50s were celebrated as ‘heroes’ for apparently bucking the tendency to reject overseas ‘improving’ work.[[118]](#footnote-119)

Christie’s early postwar work nevertheless suggested corrupted youths could be redeemed.[[119]](#footnote-120) At the end of *The Hollow*, it is revealed that David Angkatell’s disposition is not due to any inviolable set of political principles, but the product of a difficult homelife, and therefore something that could be cured if only the effort were expended.[[120]](#footnote-121) At the start of *A Murder is Announced* we find Edmund Swettenham scoffing at the older generation and empire over his morning copy of the *Daily Worker*, but by the end, he is more pleasant. Marriage has reined in the worst in him. This is symbolised by his now reading not only the *Daily Worker* and the *New Statesman*,but the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Spectator*.[[121]](#footnote-122) These men are not redeemed like Basil Blake in *The Body in the Library*, although by making their political stance the result of an emotional problem, Christie suggested solutions to troubled private made individuals more healthily moderate.[[122]](#footnote-123) The upstanding Inspector Curry in *They Do It With Mirrors* argues that

there are plenty of good decent lads about, lads who could do with a start in life … I’ve seen boys – and girls – with everything against them … and they’ve had the grit to win through.[[123]](#footnote-124)

That Christie’s readers were presented with such a clear sense that the path back to greatness was there for the British taking was made possible not merely by Christie’s low regard for colonized peoples, but also her lack of acknowledgement of the relative rise of the United States and the Soviet Union.[[124]](#footnote-125) In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Christie suggested, British youth retained a latent potential, but that the act of realizing any such potential still needed undertaking.

Then, as the 1950s gave way to the 1960s, Christie adopted a more defeatist attitude. She finally acknowledged the rise of the USA.[[125]](#footnote-126) Christie also adopted a pessimistic and paranoid worldview, sometimes matched in tone by a more hard-boiled writing style, and sometimes by words reminiscent of Joseph Conrad. In *The Pale Horse* (1961), Christie has a character state that

All life is dangerous. We forget that, we who have been reared in one of the small pockets of civilization. For that is all that civilization really is … Small pockets of men here and there … they have beaten the jungle – but that victory is only temporary. At any moment, the jungle will once again take command.[[126]](#footnote-127)

The character, Mr Venables, is kind and intelligent. Significantly, Venables has a great deal of imperial experience, having travelled to Africa and Borneo, for instance, but is now confined to a wheelchair by polio.[[127]](#footnote-128) At her most far-fetched, Christie concocted a resurgent Argentina-based Nazi Party attempting to create global chaos by having youths agitated into promiscuity, drugs and protest.[[128]](#footnote-129) A far cry from a naïve ‘red hot socialist’ happily whizzing about the English countryside in a motorcar, but much more in keeping with the general tone of Christie’s later work. In 1960, Christie had Poirot declare one ‘cannot go against the sprit of the times’, only to suggest a little later that ‘times change … [I] find it sad sometimes.’[[129]](#footnote-130)

Let us turn to some conclusions. Christie is commonly misremembered. Some of her characters were indeed spinsters gossiping over tea at the vicarage, but Christie’s novels are not mere celebrations of an insular, atemporal domesticity. They were timely, reflecting and reinforcing broader social attitudes across her career. The example of such timeliness that has been the focus of this article, namely Christie’s postwar use of the imperial figure ‘gone bad’ to make a connection between masculinity, morality and Britain’s global decline, might strike us fanciful today. However, Christie’s contribution to public ideas about the state of Britain on the world stage built upon pre-existing beliefs common amongst conservatives in particular. For those who shared Christie’s high regard for an earlier generation of imperial servants, her low regard for indigenous peoples, and her displeasure at a younger generation of men supposedly emasculated by a welfare state and consequent rejection of nobler imperial pursuits, making the connection between morality and the decline of empire required no great leap of imagination. Indeed, for those attuned to the narratives of social decline articulated by figures such as Arthur Bryant, and to Churchill’s political accusations of Labour ‘scuttling’ empire in pursuit of a radical domestic agenda, there was an ineluctable logic to the idea that Britons were engineering their own downfall. It was not anti-colonial forces that were dismantling the empire, but the British (or, to be more precise, given the regional focus of her novels, the English) who were losing it. Young middle- and upper-class men – so long identified as the heart of imperial service – had abandoned their posts.

Focusing on this collapse in such a sustained manner, Christie therefore did not buy into the positive ways of framing the end of empire outlined by historians such as Schwarz and Mackenzie. Before the 1960s, Christie’s fiction did not offer an enthusiastic portrait of a nation’s imperial success, nor of a public reconciled to the idea of decolonization as an act of British beneficence. Thus, just as Jordanna Bailkin has highlighted early postwar Britain’s absence of a ‘shared vision’ over how decolonization was to be managed, there was an absence of a shared vision over what stories could be told about Britain’s imperial decline.[[130]](#footnote-131)

It would be tempting to frame Christie’s resistance to more positive visions as opposition to male-authored official and semi-official narratives, but such resistance was the result of her maintenance of older ideals of imperial masculinity. Christie remained trapped by her own past, honouring an archetypal outward-bound, go-getting male empire builder as the model modern-day Britons would have to emulate were Britain to return to success. An imperial Britishness – conflated with whiteness by Christie as by so many others – had faltered not because of a rise in non-white potential, but because Britain had turned away from the pride, steadfastness and proactivity thought necessary for the re-realization of its own latent white potential. That it was the British who were allowing the empire to fall into decay nevertheless opened up the possibility of reform in the early postwar years. Thus, at least in Christie’s fiction, Britain’s imperial connections with the wider world were not an automatic cause for reassurance, but neither were they a lost cause. Instead, the late 1940s and 1950s were a limbo era defined by anxious uncertainty. Christie’s hugely popular crime fiction complicated public narratives of Britain’s late-imperial global standing.

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111. Christie, *Three Act Tragedy* (London, 2003), pp.19, 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
112. Christie, *The Secret of Chimneys* (London, 1956), pp.25, 189. [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
113. Christie, *The Hollow* (London, 2002), pp.169, 253. [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
114. Ibid., p.197. [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
115. Christie*, Announced*, pp.111, 180-1, 234, 326. [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
116. Christie, *Sparkling*, p.103; Christie, *Rye*, p.142. [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
117. Bryant, ‘Our notebook’, *Illustrated London News*, 11 October 1947, p.394. [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
118. Jordanna Bailkin, *The Afterlife of Empire* (Berkeley, CA, 2012), p.55. [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
119. Christie, *Hollow*, pp.111, 197. [↑](#footnote-ref-120)
120. Ibid., p.246. [↑](#footnote-ref-121)
121. Christie, *Announced*, p.11, 380. [↑](#footnote-ref-122)
122. Christie even had a communist Jew ‘redeemed’ at the end of *Three Act Tragedy*; Christie, *Three Act Tragedy*, p.205. [↑](#footnote-ref-123)
123. Christie, *Mirrors*, p.160. [↑](#footnote-ref-124)
124. Although see Christie, ‘The Plymouth Express’, in *Early Cases*, p.115. [↑](#footnote-ref-125)
125. Christie, *At Bertram’s Hotel* (1965; London, 2002); Christie, *Endless Night* (1967; London, 1986). [↑](#footnote-ref-126)
126. Christie, *The Pale Horse* (London, 2002), p.182. [↑](#footnote-ref-127)
127. Ibid., pp.61, 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-128)
128. Christie, *Passenger.* [↑](#footnote-ref-129)
129. Christie, ‘Pudding’, in *Pudding*, pp.24, 55; see also Christie, *Funeral*, p.193. [↑](#footnote-ref-130)
130. Bailkin, p.237. [↑](#footnote-ref-131)