'Festering Britain':
The 1951 Festival of Britain, decolonisation and the representation of the Commonwealth

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The 1951 Festival of Britain has been re-imagined and resurrected in many different guises. For commentators on the left it has been a symbol of the last, flamboyant, gasp of social democracy before the onset of 1950s conservatism; as the festival of the left, against which the 1953 Coronation neatly becomes the festival of the right.[1] To design historians the Festival marks the emergence of self-consciously modern mass-market commodity aesthetics.[2] In social histories of Britain, it is often invoked as emblematic of post-war hedonism and of the desire to move from austerity to affluence.[3] For museologists the Festival can be positioned as part of a tradition of large, national temporary expositions - as part of a more or less cohesive Western genre stretching back to Crystal Palace, and across to the Expositions Universalles and the World's Fairs. This role, written into the plans from the start (it was in part produced as an anniversary monument to the 1851 Great Exhibition) has been elaborated more recently with the consistent invocation of the Festival as a superior precursor of the Millennium Dome.[4]

Many other Festivals have or could be produced: versions highlighting its significance in terms of modern architecture and planning; its focus on leisure; or perhaps its relationship to people's emotional lives, personal histories and secrets. What has rarely been discussed, however, and what is now only starting to be paid some attention is the relationship of the Festival to the end of empire, to the effects of decolonisation and the formation of the Commonwealth.[5] This lack of attention has in part been because the Festival did not have the graphic connection with empire of, for example, the 1851 Great Exhibition or the 1924 Empire Exhibition, with their carefully staged living history displays of subordinate natives and imperial triumph.[6] It is also symptomatic of the broader absence of attention to the effects of the 'end of empire' on British culture, which has only recently become subject to more sustained academic attention in areas such as history, politics, visual culture and cultural studies.[7]

Consisting of events held up and down the country, the Festival of Britain has now mainly and merely become synonymous with the exhibitions on the specially regenerated

area of London's South Bank which was often taken at the time to be its centrepiece. What was *defined* as 'the Commonwealth participation' in the Festival consisted of only a handful of practices; most conspicuous were the exhibitions held at the Imperial Institute in South Kensington under the banner *The Festival and the Commonwealth*, which received minimal publicity. It also involved the government graciously letting the Dominions and Colonies know that they had permission to celebrate too, and asking them for donations of raw material, alongside various sporadic forms of Commonwealth participation, such as the Trinidad All Steel Percussion Orchestra (TASPO) playing at the South Bank.

However, the reason for this limited role was not because the Empire was *not* being thought about. On the contrary, the issue over whether and how great a role the Commonwealth should play, and to what extent the Empire should be represented, was described during an early meeting of the Festival's Council as 'a matter of the highest policy'.[8] Some members of the Council argued that 'the whole purpose of the festival would be destroyed if it did not demonstrate to the world Britain's greatest contribution to civilisation – namely the foundation of the British Empire.'[9] Empire was a subject of tense consideration and negotiation for the planning committee and the government: it did not simply slide out of view.

Yet, at the same time, arguments for more representation of Empire and Commonwealth lost, and the degree to which empire was officially represented was clearly being scaled down, reflecting the moment that John MacKenzie has described as the first in a series of colonial 'implosions' from 1947 onwards. Becky Conekin's recent groundbreaking work on the Festival has shown that many involved in the practicalities of planning the celebrations wanted Empire to be absent, whether consciously or not. This was partly due to its controversial nature as a topic (Charles Plouviez, Assistant to the Director of Exhibitions, wrote that 'it would have been immensely unpopular with half our audience') and partly due to the planners' sympathies for a left-wing anti-imperial modernity (as opposed to the more imperial sentiments of the Festival Council, stuffed as it was with a high proportion of 'the great and the good'). This anti-imperialism was motivated, she indicates, mainly by an economic nationalism that had become harnessed to US interests, which saw imperial discourse as anti-modern, and felt slightly queasy about such relations of domination in the aftermath of the Second World War.[10]

As Stuart Ward has recently emphasised, 'the meanings of imperial decline were neither

uniform nor universal', and so equally as many different stories might also be told about the relationship between the Festival and decolonisation as about the Festival itself.[11] This chapter seeks to extrapolate several different discourses on British national identity which have visual currency around the Festival and which were being constructed in relation to the decline of empire and to the formation of the Commonwealth. To do this I use a variety of visual media sources, including cartoons, adverts and magazine images as well as archival records of exhibition narratives (all of which are helpful in considering the wider 'life' of an exhibition through their cross-promotional presence in the media). This also helps us consider how the Festival's relationships to decolonisation were manifest in less *officially* delineated ways, as imperial and post-imperial discourse were constructed in ways that were not necessarily prescribed by the planning committee.[12]

Drawing together a range of material and drawing out their implications, what is explored here is a hypothesis that 'Festival culture' employed three main registers to negotiate the continuing legacy of colonialism: a predominantly sublimated discourse of neo-imperial mastery, a discourse of commonwealth 'benevolence', and a discourse of insular national parochialism. This is not to say that such discourses were clearly self-contained and demarcated; nor is it to say that they did not overlap. Rather, it is to attempt to use these categorisations as a means of discussing frequently recurring sentiments, assumptions and motifs, and to attempt to understand their significance.

Imperial mastery

As Catherine Hall succinctly puts it, after 1945 'the colonial order fell to pieces and was replaced, in theory at least, by a 'world of nations' and, in the British context, a Commonwealth of nations'.[13] The entity termed 'the Commonwealth' signified both the moves towards decolonisation[14] as the empire crumbled, and the attempt to maintain and reinscribe some of the power dynamics of imperialism (Churchill for instance famously saw it as 'the means of maintaining British influence in the age of superpowers').[15]

By the time the Festival took place the British government had been forced to withdraw from Burma, (which never became a Dominion, never became part of the Commonwealth) Ceylon, and, most significantly, India. It was by no means the 'high point' of decolonisation in quantitative terms, but it was a time during which anxieties, as well as differences of opinion, over how to deal with it were apparent, and when disturbances and knock-on effects were clearly brewing elsewhere, in for example Malaya, Egypt, the Gold Coast and Kenya. By 1951 three of these were demanding

Dominion status. Decolonisation and the augmentation of 'the Commonwealth' was a process which, as Wm. Roger Louis put it, the British state aimed to present 'to the public as a result of British policy' – so that imperial loss would appear to be happening as a result of overarching control rather than being seen to involve the British 'lurch[ing] from one crisis to the next'.[16]

It is in relation to the tensions of this context that we can consider the discourse of continued imperial mastery. There was one very obvious and not particularly sublimated piece of imperial imagery at the Festival: Britannia. Britannia was made central to the entire celebration through her place in Abram Games's logo for the Festival of Britain, where she is in noble silhouette, her helmeted head firmly attached to a compass point, above festive bunting (fig.1). [17] As the personification of the country formed after the Roman invasion, Britannia had come to represent an idea of Britishness that was fashioned around white classical origins and imperial conquest. This idea was represented abstractly through the familiar trope of a woman as 'invulnerable epitome' of the nation rather than an image with which women were invited to identify.[18]

In the Festival's main logo, then, the Britain being signified was an imperial nation. This has received remarkably little comment, mainly, I think, because the stark modernity of this iconography is not quite so readily associated with imperialism. As Bill Schwarz has pointed out, whilst it is easy to draw divisions between the style and politics of old imperial England and new consumer aesthetics at this time of decolonisation we also need to consider how memories of empire did not simply neatly disappear but could be reactivated in more modern environments.[19] The logo is a perfect example of this, as imperialism is divested of some of its heavy grandiose swagger and portrayed instead through clean modern lines. The preliminary sketches for Games's initial design accentuated its militarism, being, to use his own description, 'starker': the military helmet on Britannia's head was larger, and the sharp angles of the logo were more pronounced without the softening and more jaunty curves of the bunting that were added later. Games had previously worked for the Army Bureau, producing posters such as *Your Britain – Fight for it Now!*, and had been invited along with eleven other designers into the closed competition to invent a logo for the Festival. His design won the competition, and the Festival Committee asked him to soften its image a little in order to indicate the pleasurable and celebratory aspects of the Festival, exemplified by the Festival Pleasure Gardens in Battersea.[20] The bunting was added: and so, replete with aesthetic reminders of white classicism and militarism, the imperial connotations of the logo were tempered

through colour and curved lines.

Similarly, the brightly coloured space-age futurism of the South Bank site - represented most iconically through the Dome of Discovery and the Skylon - not only represented post-war relief and an aesthetic shift from an aesthetically monumental imperial tradition but also the continuation of some elements of imperialist expansionism. The Dome of Discovery included large murals by John Minton on the theme of 'Exploration' and by Keith Vaughan on 'Discovery', a large replica of Captain Cook's ship *Endeavour*, and a giant telescope.[21] In the Festival's catalogue the Dome is described as the part rendering 'the distinctive British contribution' to the world complete. It acts as

> a memorandum on the pre-eminent achievements of British men and women in mapping and charting the globe, in exploring the heavens, and investigating the structure and nature of the universe.[22]

And in an accompanying leaflet, visitors were told:

> Here is told the resounding story of British discovery in all spheres – from the extrem[ity] of outer space down into the depth of the earth itself. Here it will be made plain how much of modern civilisation has sprung from these discoveries, and how the old spirit continues, the mantle of Drake being worn by the technologies and men of science today[23]

Whilst the prosaic names given to sections of the Dome and other parts of the South Bank display (such as 'The Land' and 'The Living World') were, as William Feaver pointed out in 1976, 'a far cry from the lordly titles (The Great Circle, Drake's Way and Aussie's Way) Kipling had thought up in 1924 for the Empire Exhibition at Wembley', legacies of empire lingered on.[24] Imperial expansionism continued to be validated through and to symbolically reside in science, and attempts to find new places to be known, possessed and mapped marked the perpetuation of imperial narratives of discovery. Such a discourse was not confined to the Festival, also appearing in, for example, children's books of the time.[25] The imagery of the heroic adventurer discovering new lands drew on older colonial discourses of conquest. Nicholas Dirks has discussed the now well-established historical link between such the emergence of the disciplines of cartography and science and colonialism

the siting, surveying, mapping, naming, and ultimately possessing - of new regions that science itself could open up new territories of conquest: cartography, geography, botany and anthropology were all colonial enterprises'.[26]

Imperial mapping is extended in and through scientific discovery: British imperial expansion on the earth naturally progresses into the exploration of space. That these expressions of charting and colonising territories were now confined to outer space was in itself an expression of the end to colonising land outside Britain, registering the loss of its grandiose imperial ambitions whilst it tried to extend them.

So the perpetuation of imperial narratives of discovery and the heroic adventurer discovering new lands continued, only now it resided in 'science'. Such conquest imagery was overtly phallic, and the imagery of pioneers was mainly, though not always, directed at men. At the same time as being an extension of imperial rhetoric, as intimately bound up with it, the type of exploration being imagined was also a demonstration of national progress and post-war reconstruction. As Gavin and Lowe point out, 'Such new roles for pioneers as these were matched by an heroic piece of rescue work in bringing the nation back together again.'[27] The visual and verbal rhetoric of British male pioneers exploring and mapping outer space can be read as an attempt to provide a type of consolation by projecting lost power and status out, as a fantasy, into the stratosphere, by probing through space.

This space-age imagery, then, was an imagery which not only looked to a post-imperial future but also harnessed a discourse of imperial expansionism to its rocket engines. Discourses of imperial expansion were present at the Festival in coded ways which might not have been immediately apparent, which might not announce themselves as 'imperial'. In addition, the exhibitionary space inside the Dome of Discovery was designed to offer an impression of impressiveness which was achieved by being truly mind-boggling. The Festival's Director of Architecture Hugh Casson said of the Dome that there was so much displayed that 'comprehension was impossible': '[o]nly a general memory of creditable British exploration, invention and industrial capacity remained in the mind of the most devoted caption-reader and exhibit-viewer.'[28] The exterior of the Dome of Discovery, Mark Crinson has suggested, offered the closest typology to London's later Commonwealth Institute, a refashioned Imperial Institute which emerged from 1958 as one of the few other post-war and 'popular modernist' public buildings in London.[29] However, as Crinson argues, whereas the interior of the Commonwealth Institute was

structured to facilitate specular dominance for a British visitor over the world of the Commonwealth through a variety of techniques including a centralised visitor's route, the interior of the Dome of Discovery was by contrast more dispersed. The interior exhibitions within the Dome offered specular disaggregation combined with a visual overload of 'mind-boggling' detail that cumulatively emphasised national greatness. Its reconfiguration of national and imperial prowess operated on a less strident, and at times more subtle, but still significant level.

Benevolent partnership

Whilst we have seen how some of the more explicitly colonial discourse remained and was re-channelled at the festival, barely sublimated dreams of expansionism and control were not the only ones on offer. There was also a register of imperial benevolence, which of course often in its own way continued such dreams of expansion.

Raphael Samuel pointed out in *Island Stories* that post-war Britain 'adopted the paternalist idiom of trusteeship with enthusiasm, and indeed claimed (in 1947-8) to have given 'new life' to the empire. The 'enlightened self-interest' of the mother country, and the development of the colonies, were conceived as marching together hand-in-hand.'[30] The very name 'The Commonwealth' suggested a new order of common interest that was a step away from enforced subservience. But the fashioning of Britain as first among equals and the continuation of the missionary imagery of benevolent help or trusteeship meant that Britain was often fashioning this relationship as one which should remain within the confines of its control.

This is apparent in the narrative offered by the exhibitions at the South Bank. *The Land* section inside the Dome of Discovery featured displays of maps and agricultural machinery alongside themed sections about 'British explorers' and 'Commonwealth links'. It figured the Commonwealth as inheriting imperial communications systems which benevolently altered social geography, playing a primarily 'enabling' role:

> The great witness of British exploration by land is the Commonwealth of Nations. By now its strongest binding force is common ideas and ideals, and visual evidence of this is the vast communications system which came into being as a result of British enterprise - sea-lanes, air routes, railways, cables, and now, radio. […] Our sons and daughters have left Britain and set up their own homes overseas; our adopted children are coming into their own estates.[31]

The imagery of Britain allowing the colonies to become independent might perhaps in part be read as progressive as well as patronising, in that it at least conceives of a way in which colonies can exist apparently without 'the mother country'. But such a discourse was, whilst being partially re-articulated to a more liberatory paradigm, still powerfully resonant of earlier, more gung-ho colonial moments. The idea of the mother country, as Catherine Hall writes, naturalises and domesticates colonial power relations.[32] In creating a moment of separation between parent and child, colonialism is rehabilitated, re-inscribed and retrospectively performed as a necessary measure for the infantilised country out of which a justification for the action of the present can be created.

Colonialism was also being justified in retrospect at the same time by recourse to a narrative that it was no longer necessary because it had been done so well. It had 'done the job'. Similar discourses of benevolence are at play in other sections of the exhibition. The agriculture section of *The Land*, which exhibited British equipment in order to show how it was dealing with the world's food shortages, offered a benevolence steeped in decades of missionary zeal and imperialism:

> Our own Kew Gardens plays a vital part in all this, for it is here that new crop plants are tried out and, if successful, distributed to new growing areas, It was Kew, in fact, that reared wild rubber plants from Brazil, reproduced them and sent the seedlings out to found a new and great industry in Malaya.[33]

In this story of the formation of a biological-industrial complex, the seeds of the rubber plant and of genius and success are of course British, but again become the 'inheritance' of the Commonwealth. Again the language invokes that of a parent-child relationship, although here the child-plant is a 'wild' savage seed to be tamed in the nursery of Britain and allowed to mature overseas where it will become great, with the degree of British care ensuring its triumph.

Constructing the rest of the Commonwealth as consisting of infantilised countries which would survive through benevolent British technology was a view that not only indicated residual assertions of colonial superiority but also an extremely rose-tinted view of Britain's current power status. Britain was clearly not as strong as the image of all-powerful benevolent empire suggests, even though it wanted to be, at a time of dependence on American aid and an increasing adherence to a US-led economic agenda.

Moreover, whilst the images are of Britain being benevolent to the Commonwealth, it was more the case that the Commonwealth was being forced to be benevolent to Britain. At a moment when Britain was relying more rather than less on trading within the empire, the Commonwealth's wealth was not so much held in common as being commonly channelled to Britain. As Raphael Samuel puts it, 'in desperate times, when dollar earnings appeared to be the very hinge of national survival, it was Malayan rubber, Rhodesian copper and middle eastern oil which allowed postwar governments both to keep the economy afloat and to maintain Britain's claim to world-power status.'[34]

In other words, the Empire and dominions were being modernized and mined to try and compensate for Britain's financial situation - for Britain had emerged from the Second World War as 'the largest debtor in history'.[35] In this post-war period, as Nicholas Owen puts it, 'the British state took control of colonial development and attempted to force a programme of rapid modernization on the economies of the depend Empire, in part through investment in agricultural production.'[36] Buoyed up by dollar aid, Britain pushed through 'modernizing' reforms to obtain wealth from the empire and Commonwealth. It was possible - in a way which is still only too familiar - to appear 'modernizing' whilst perpetuating profoundly unequal power relationships. That this process only functioned in tandem with US aid also indicates the (culturally scapegoated but still enormously significant) increasing and extended dependency on the US economic system, and, on a more global scale, something of the transition from the predominance of European colonialism to the predominance of US economic imperialism that remains with us today.[37]

This idea of Britain's 'benevolence' to the Commonwealth was frequently articulated by recourse to a language of 'partnership' together with an emphasis on how Britain was helping to manage or engineer peace. Indeed, the festival as project had been downsized the course of its planning from being conceived of as an international festival like the 1851 Great Exhibition at Crystal Palace to one which celebrated 'Britain in the arts of peace', a title which came to look both more ironic and more necessary as Britain, supporting America with troops and equipment, became drawn into the Korean war.[38] The 'partner', 'benevolent' and 'peacemaker' roles fitted well with post-war rhetoric and do in part signify the attempted construction of a less gung-ho variant of imperialism and attempts to move away from such imbalances of power altogether. Yet it is also important to highlight that they were also vague and malleable sentiments which were able to be used by a Britain which was economically enfeebled and threatened by

decolonisation to construct a global identity of some purport. They were roles that could be used to provide a moral justification for continually extracting resources on unfavourable terms.

The complex and uneven power relationships and economic dependences of this 'partnership' can be seen in the traces left of the exhibitions held at the Imperial Institute in 1951, *Focus on Colonial Progress* and *Traditional Art from the Colonies.*[39] Emphasising 'partnership' rather than paternalism or maternalism, *Focus on Colonial Progress* portrayed colonial peoples as ethnographic spectacle. The exhibition claimed it 'introduces the visitor to the colourful lands and diverse peoples of the Colonies and traces the story of their association with Britain and of their development and progress in partnership with the British people.'[40] The Imperial Institute was at this time moving from an emphasis on economic activity to stories about the 'otherness' of the people of the Commonwealth.[41] *Focus on Colonial Progress* combined both, featuring life-size models of colonial peoples alongside an exhibit of live locusts used to dramatise 'the Enemies of Progress', and a concluding exhibit on 'the two-way flow of trade'. The chief modes of display included offering the natives as flamboyant primitivist spectacle – producing, for the visitor, a potential specular dominance over the Commonwealth which segues with Crinson's account of the later Commonwealth Institute, which the Imperial Institute was to become. Britain was implicitly placed as the facilitator, the aid which mobilised this progress from primitivism to industrialisation, against the 'enemies' posed by the realm of Nature, and so offered a discourse of missionary benevolence diluted into the story of 'partnership in progress'.

Such shifting narratives, of economic benevolence producing peace, and the role of partnership, were also apparent in the advertisements for various companies lining the pages of the Festival's handbook. Many used metaphorical visual descriptors to perform the global availability of their produce, to present it as serving the people of the world, or even as helping to fight poverty. The 'Ferguson system', for example, consisting of tractors and farming implements, was personified as a knight on horseback trying to save the poor feudal masses, its equipment a charitable force which 'fights hunger and poverty', rather than the corporate profit-making concern it undoubtably was.[42] As Anandi Ramamurthy has pointed out, British corporate advertising in the 1950s often conveyed the values of 'modernisation' theory through a gloss of caring humanism, presenting images of African and Asian citizens in particular as 'helpless creatures dependent on the bounty provided by corporate conglomerates', which 'enabl[ed] the

ideology of neo-colonialism to continue to appear as benign and almost altruistic'.[43] Similarly, in the advertisements in the Festival Guide, companies adopted a range of narratives expressing their global role and status, ranging from the assertion of export capacity and role as a global industrial player to a role of charitable provider. This took a different register from that of self-consciously aggrandising imperial expansion, and as part of this shift the tone is often one in which Britain seemed to be persuading itself that the rest of the world was interested in its exports. Smiths Industries, for instance, promoted themselves with the slogan 'the Smiths of England serve the peoples of the world'.

In the *Catalogue of Exhibits* there is an advert for industrial manufacturer the Owen Organisation in which the company's factories in England and Wales are mapped and linked together with lines. Above the map of factories is the grand heading 'An Industrial Commonwealth…'. The map makes a visual correlation between the Commonwealth overseas and industrial activity at home; it attempts to expand British industry by relating it to the size of the Commonwealth. In part it might also be read as an attempt to render the Commonwealth legible for those 'at home', as reactivating and annexing older meanings of 'the Commonwealth' to newer ones. In these terms, this map works to 'bring the empire home' in a different way, to map lost power and status back onto the body of the nation. The industrial map provides a similar type of consolation to that offered by the visual and verbal rhetoric of British male pioneers exploring and mapping outer space. Only this time it is marked, not through colonising the stratosphere, but through a return to 'home'.

National parochialism

A third discourse that I want to discuss is that of national parochialism. The Britain being represented around the Festival was often portrayed as whimsically small: a little country with a big history. Such quaintness appeared in many places, such the Lion and Unicorn pavilion on the South Bank designed by Laurie Lee (the very name stages these terms: the lion is imperialism, the unicorn the fanciful frivolity);[44] and the Festival Pleasure Gardens at Battersea with its anthropomorphised Far Tottering and Oystercreek Railway (which featured signs saying 'Do Not Tease the Engines') and other various exercises in cute whimsy.[45] The smallness was reinforced on the South Bank by its restaurant cafeteria banning 'foreign foodstuffs' and only selling 'British' fare.[46]

'The Festival' pronounced an article in *Picture Post* magazine, 'Begins at Home'. It is

noticeable that many articles about the Festival emphasise how Britain's identity was 'home', a construction formed in relation to an Other of the big wide world. The 'home' that this article in *Picture Post* specifically focussed on were three villages in Essex which were 'interpreting the Festival idea in their own neighbourhood activities' by turning themselves over to public show for the duration of the festival.[47] Here, 'the audience can walk among the players, and the players will be village people going about their daily work, or continuing in their normal recreation'. Such displays dramatised a continuation of a rustic past in contemporary life. On the first page of the article, an image of a straw dolly maker of Bardfield dominates, the straw dolly looming large over proceedings, with a photograph of a village pond (captioned 'Lovely Villages Will Be Open to All') below. Similarly rustic images follow on the following pages: a handloom weaver, a thatcher ('Whose Lovely Craft is Flourishing'), and a smith ('Survivor of a Dying Ancient Art') are depicted alongside musical activities and village theatricals.

Not all the Festival's regional celebrations demarcated Britain in this way: Bristol emphasised imperial mastery, and the celebrations in Dumfries 'incorporated pride in Scotland's struggle for independence'.[48] But many examples round the country were used to stage 'small' traditions which were fast becoming quaint. This particular example had its currency enlarged through coverage in *Picture Post*, a magazine which, as Stuart Hall has argued, had by this time departed from its left-leaning origins to become an altogether more conservative beast.[49] The villages of Finchingfield, Thaxted and Bardfield had been singled out by Essex Rural Community Council to be put on display because they had a 'community spirit lively enough' and because they were deemed to be 'beautiful in setting and style' as well as being close together. If such activity, where people were recurrently described as 'playing their part', indicated the participative nature of the Festival (accompanying its equally vehement emphasis on top-down planning), it also indicated the 'littleness' of Britain under construction - a Britain most often depicted in the national press as English, despite the activities going on in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. It created a Britain of a nation of villages, the whole as the sum of very small and very picturesque parts.

The activities on display in the village were part staged as 'everyday life' and partly special events put on for the festival, such as historical pageants and Women's Institute exhibitions. As such, the open village displays were, like the Live Architecture exhibition in London's Poplar, part of a democratic urge to create a living exhibition (which we might perhaps think of as a different kind of museum-without-walls).[50] But they were

also circumscribed and clearly delineated as places to view. As such, they shared in format similarities with the imperial exhibitions of 'the natives' of the colonies in the past. Perhaps the spectacle of rural curiosity might have some parallels to the position of colonial peoples as curiosity, both being positioned for the imagined eye of a metropolitan elite. Both rendered difference by demonstrating how 'the past' (in empire exhibitions, represented by the imagined underdevelopment of colonial peoples) could still be found in parts of the present. The differences, however, lay in two key and interconnected areas. Firstly, that of location: the Essex communities were to some extent visited on their own terms, in their own location, even though they were staging their 'everyday life' in such selective and romanticised rusticity. Secondly, that of power: the 'human zoos' in colonial spectacles were examples of forced subjugation and exhibitions of 'bizarre' or 'underdeveloped' difference, whereas the Essex spectacles foregrounded 'underdeveloped' difference as a quaint example of all that was good about the past which would hopefully continue into the present.

These images are ones in which Empire and the entangled web of global relations are absent. 'The Festival Begins at Home', the *Picture Post* article tells us, and the version of 'home' creates an image of Little Britain and particularly Little England as 'as a land of villages'.[51] There is a corollary between *being* at home and *going* home, from presenting a Britain at large in its big wide world of empire to presenting the cosy counties of Little Britain. We can also see this discourse in play in the adverts for industry: in the advert for Triumph Mayflower, the car is allied to both the 'greatness' of the Festival and the 'modest' annual fairs in deepest, littlest Britain. It is the production and performance of a 'small' tradition rather than simply being a reflection of Britain's lack of connection with the world. As Bill Schwarz puts it, 'it is too easy to think of Englishness as a self-enclosed category, magically reproducing a civilisation of never-ending insularity. Despite appearances, England has never been insular'.[52] It was rather the very production, the very *generation* of discourses of insularity which became significant as they were used as defence mechanisms against the loss of empire.

Whilst the construction of insularity might be understood as a defence mechanism against loss of power in which decolonisation played a major part, heroic littleness was by no means the only discourse available. There was also the idea that this lessening of the national-imperial body meant that it was weakening: as a Britishness turning in on itself rather than renewing its power, actively rotting away. According to Hugh Casson, switchboard staff at the Festival site would apparently answer the telephone with the

words 'Festering Britain here'.[53] Such expressions of national decline were, as Alan Sinfield has eloquently pointed out, particularly prevalent amongst those sections of the leisure class who were feeling the effects of social redistribution of wealth at home alongside the loss of power in the colonies.[54] These sentiments were precursors to the more vocal voices of the 1960s in which the so-called stagnation of Britain contained implicit laments of loss of empire. Whilst to some Britain was festering away, to other the body of the nation was still, if only just, gamely alive. For example, a poem written for the *Battersea Pleasure Gardens Guide* figures London's Garden Fair as a place

> 'Where Britain, modestly, lets down her hair
> You've seen, beside the shores of Waterloo
> What solemn things the local natives do.'[55]
> […]

A self-conscious anthropological gaze is turned onto the nation, and the nation is small and racialised. The wry tone is quietly jaunty, soldiering on through its own pessimism ('There may be little, as the sad folk shout/For anybody to be glad about'), stating that everything is just 'one long worry for this island race'. Whilst in other parts of the Festival the diversity of the inhabitants was stressed, the terms this poem later uses – the island race, modesty and quaintness – constructed a racialised representation of national identity as small and insular, avoiding the issue of Britain's always already mixed heritage three years after the Empire Windrush had docked at Tilbury.

'This Island Race'
That these Pleasure Gardens, around which 'the island races'' quaint 'little Britain' is emphasised was a place in which the far right white supremacist organisation the Ku Klux Klan thought it an appropriate place to have a meeting later on in the year of the Festival (fig.2) should tell us something about what such meanings *could* signify.[56] Becky Conekin has pointed out that, even whilst 'the people' of Britain that the Festival claimed to represent were being described as a 'much-mixed race', they were predominantly imagined as white,[57] and this unmarked and uncomplicated whiteness co-existed with the circulation of a racialised discourse of an 'island race'.

Interestingly, the lack of explicit or graphic commentary or policy on 'race' and immigration from the Commonwealth at this time has been read as meaning the issues were merely or nearly 'absent'. It is the apparent absences and silences that are

themselves revealing. Delving behind the initial appearance of a lack of attention to 'race' and Commonwealth is important in order to try to understand from what basis such silences and 'omissions' were constituted, and which, in turn, can help us try to understand the connections between the racialised politics of past and present, to make sense of what happened.

Kenneth Lunn has discussed how the government's policies affecting 'race' in the period 1945-51 are rarely studied, and suggests that this is partly because of the lack of legislation on the subject. But, as he argues, many discussions took place on the subject, and 'to suggest that lack of legislation or major policy decisions is tantamount to an absence of political significance is surely too limited a perspective on what constitutes "politics"'.[58] For instance, whilst Labour generally adhered to a liberal 'open door' policy, immigration from the Commonwealth was already starting to be constituted, and racialised, as a potential 'problem' by 1951. Even though there were less than six thousand West Indians in Britain, between July 1950 and January 1951 a cabinet committee discussing the issue paid close and anxious attention to numbers and the 'problems' created by the additional numbers (including, most famously, West Indians who had arrived on the *Empire Windrush*) setting the groundwork for the later immigration controls. Such discourse, Lunn argues, 'helped construct the unhappy history of "race relations" in Britain in subsequent years'.[59]

Whilst there was little involvement or representation of the peoples of the Commonwealth at the South Bank, one interesting and little-discussed moment of participation by people from the Commonwealth was the performance there by the Trinidad All Steel Percussion Orchestra. According to music historian John Cowley, for many in Trinidad this was 'the most significant musical event of the year': TASPO's instrumentalists were elected from seventy steel bands in Trinidad and this 'acceptance in "the mother country" led to greatly improved social recognition for steelbands in Trinidad and the Caribbean as a whole'. It is however telling that funds had to be raised in Trinidad, rather than London, for TASPO to come to the Festival of Britain; and that attempts to find funding for four calypsonian singers to come over too were unsuccessful.[60]

However, the calypsonian singers Lord Beginner and Lord Kitchener were already in London, having arrived in Britain several years before on the *Windrush*, and both recorded separate tracks celebrating the Festival. Kitchener's 'Festival of Britain' hailed

it as 'one of the cleverest ideas ever planned', proclaiming it as a place where 'people are welcome from everywhere'. Abram Games's festival logo starring Britannia even appeared on the record (fig.3). Lord Beginner's similarly-titled '1951 Festival of Britain' emphasised it as a display of national pride for all the world to see, its chorus eliding Englishness with Britishness and likewise demonstrating something of an internalisation of imperial pride, repeated that 'there'll always be an England,/And England shall be free'.[61] As John Cowley has astutely put it, the lyrics 'epitomise a West Indian faith in Britain which was eventually sorely let down'.[62]

TASPO's presence is not referred to in published texts available on the Festival of Britain, and neither are images, like the one reproduced here (fig.3). Their absence speaks not only of the marginalisation of the peoples of the Empire and Commonwealth at the Festival itself, but also of the marginalisation and erasure of this subject ever since, an erasure which is only just beginning to be redressed. In addition, it indicates that whilst the Festival interpellated a white audience and represented white British subjects, there were aspects that were not as wholly white as the Festival's history is usually painted. In other words, even whilst the Festival was undoubtably insular and didn't go out of its way to include or support Empire and Commonwealth participation in any sense, aspects of the Commonwealth came to it. Even whilst the official narrative interpellated a racially exclusive, predominantly white Britain, both black and white people came to the Festival.

Conclusions

This chapter has considered several different understandings of Britain's relationship to Empire and Commonwealth that are expressed through the visual culture around the Festival of Britain. Clearly there were competing definitions at the Festival of what the relationship between Britain and the Empire and Commonwealth was and should be (as with anywhere else at that time). Equally the sources suggest that some specific ideas were in play. Taking an expanded understanding of the Festival, an understanding encompassing related media through which the festival 'lived' and had currency, through which we might conceptualise a 'Festival-machine' producing experiences or intensities beyond the South Bank, I have attempted to discuss some of these specific ideas, or discourses. The paper has suggested that a helpful framework is to consider how such images flow and connect to discourses of imperial mastery, benevolent partnership and national parochialism.

Imperial mastery, as we have seen, was visually conveyed around the Festival through a range of forms including the military modernity of the Festival logo itself. The spectacle of space exploration and scientific discovery continued to register thrusting ambitions for imperialism and greatness. Imagery of 'benevolent partnership' was mobilised through both the 'two-way flow of trade' exhibited at the Focus on Colonial Progress exhibition at the Imperial Institute and the advertising imagery used in the main festival catalogue. This pictured a 'mutually beneficial' trading system in which Britain was positioned as first among equals. Britain could also be constructed through a range of articulations, as we have seen, as heroically, whimsically or tragically small. At the same time it could also be envisaged, as in Lord Kitchener's and Lord Beginner's records, as a repository for hopes for welcome.

In one important sense, if the first three discourses are conflated together we have an anthropological gaze being turned back onto a nation which is constructed as small at home but therefore all the more impressive for its imperial legacy and current benevolence. It was exactly such a gaze which was satirised by *Punch* in its festival special issue through a series of four cartoons demonstrating 'Mistaken Views of the British'.[63] The Americans see too much royalty, quaint villages and hunting; the Russians mistakenly sees the worker being crushed by the British monopoly kapitalists [sic] who sits fat on his shoulders, and who is in turn being crushed by an American Imperialist Warmonger. The French mistakenly see a Britain that is always raining, in which many wear tweed, the food is boiled cabbage or fish and chips, and policemen direct people to the NHS.

The British view, finally, is of an upper middle-class, besuited gentleman standing underneath a huge array of framed pictures of himself triumphing in sporting achievement (fig.4).[64] He stands in front of a collection of trophies bigger than himself; their various inscriptions include 'For Resolute Refusal to Blow his own Trumpet' and 'For unique capacity for making himself understood in other languages'. Whether we read this as sharp or affectionate satire, the clear inference is that such British modesty is, at best, something of a sham. It indicates that some of the contradictions and pomposity of Britishness did not always go unnoticed at the time. Similarly, today, whilst in many ways the Festival did represent an important break with the grandiose swagger of overt imperialism that was to resurface at Elizabeth II's Coronation in 1953, it is also important not to overlook the more subtle ways in which racialised discourses of national greatness were rearticulated under the cover of introspective modesty.

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[1] For example by Adrian Forty in 'Festival Politics' in Mary Banham and Bevis Hillier (eds) *A Tonic to the Nation: The Festival of Britain, 1951*, Thames and Hudson, 1976 p.38.

[2] As celebrated in the V&A's 1976 exhibition *A Tonic to the Nation: The Festival of Britain, 1951* and in the accompanying guide book by Banham and Hillier (ibid); Becky Conekin, ''Here is the Modern World Itself: The Festival of Britain's Representations of the Future' in Becky Conekin, Frank Mort and Chris Waters (eds) *Moments of Modernity: Reconstructing Britain, 1945-64*, Rivers Oram Press, 1999. See also Penny Sparke *Did Britain Make It? British Design in Context, 1946-1986*, Design Council, 1986.

[3] See, for example, Paul Addison, *Now the War is Over: A Social History of Britain 1945-51*, Pimlico, 1995.

[4] By journalists and by the designers and publicists of the Dome. See for example Ian Parker, 'Nothing to Declare' in *Modern Review*, October 1997; Johnathan Glancey, *Great Exhibitions*, Channel 4 26 December 1999.

[5] Namely in Becky E. Conekin's chapter 'The place that was almost absent: The British empire' in her recent *'The autobiography of a nation': The 1951 Festival of Britain*, Manchester University Press, 2003. In addition to discussing very usefully the relationship between the Festival, Empire and economics (as summarised here) Conekin draws attention to the bold rhetoric of the National Book League's Festival celebrations and its missionary rhetoric (the journal of which discussed the role of 'Our Language as Missionary'). Martin Packer's website for the Festival of Britain Society includes his current investigation into Lord Ismay, who had been Mountbatten's 'man in India' acted as Chairman of the Festival of Britain Council prior to becoming the first Secretary-General of NATO. See http://www.packer34.freeserve.co.uk Accessed October 2003. This conservative appointment was primarily made to appease his good friend Churchill.

[6] Both exhibitions are still only just starting to receive the postcolonial analysis they richly deserve - although much more work remains to be done on the Empire Exhibition. See Paul Greenhalgh, *Ephemeral Vistas: The Expositions Universelles, Great Exhibitions and World's Fairs, 1851-1939*, Manchester University Press, 1988; John McKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire: The Manipulation of British Public Opinion 1880-1960*,

Manchester University Press, 1985; Malcolm Baker and Brenda Richardson (eds) *A Grand Design: The Art of the Victoria and Albert Museum,* London: V&A Publications, 1997; Louise Purbrick (ed) *The Great Exhibition of 1851*, Manchester University Press, 2001; Donald R. Knight and Alan D. Sabey, *The Lion Roars at Wembley: British Empire Exhibition, 1924-25,* D.R. Knight, 1984.

[7] See for example Stuart Ward (ed) *British Culture and the End of Empire*, Manchester University Press, 2001; Kenneth Lunn, 'Race" and Immigration: Labour's Hidden History 1945-51' in Jim Fyrth (ed.) *Labour's High Noon: The Government and the Economy 1945-51*, Lawrence & Wishart, 1993; Mica Nava and Alan O'Shea (eds) *Modern Times: Reflections on a Century of English Modernity*, Routledge, 1996; and Conekin, Mort and Waters, *op cit*.

[8] Minutes of the Meeting of the Council of the Festival of Britain, 31st May 1948, Design Council Archive, University of Brighton.

[9] PRO WORK 25/44 FB.C (48) 3 Section 2A Commonwealth Participation, Public Record Office, Kew. This memo by the Director General states, at the same time, that Commonwealth participation will 'necessarily be small'.

[10] Conekin, *op cit*, pp183-202.

[11] Ward, *op cit*. p.11.

[12] If the academic study of the relationship between the Festival and decolonisation has been little discussed, the relationship between these combined factors and visual culture is even less so. Some aspects of the visual culture of the Festival is discussed in *Block* Issue 11, 1985/6, part of which is reprinted in Jon Bird et al (eds) *The Block Reader in Visual Culture*, Routledge, 1996. However, it does not focus on the relationship to decolonisation.

[13] Catherine Hall, 'Introduction' to *Cultures of Empire,* Manchester University Press, 2000 p.9

[14] For a summary of the various definitions employed in the historiography of decolonisation, see John Darwin, 'Decolonisation and the end of Empire' in Robin W. Winks (ed) *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Vol.5: Historiography*, Oxford University Press, 1999 p.542.

[15] David Adamson, *The Last Empire: Britain and The Commonwealth* London: I.B.Tauris, 1989 p.6.

[16] Wm. Roger Louis, 'The Dissolution of the British Empire' in Judith M. Brown and Wm. Roger Louis (eds) *The Oxford History of the British Empire Volume IV: The Twentieth Century*, Oxford University Press, 1999 p.329.

[17] See William Feaver, 'Festival Star' in Banham and Hillier *op cit*. for a discussion of the popularity of the logo.

[18] See Marina Warner, *Monuments and Maidens: The Allegory of the Female Form*, Minerva p. xxi. Warner discusses the use of Britannia in general before focussing its particular role in Margaret Thatcher's image-making. She does not mention the Festival of Britain logo.

[19] Bill Schwarz, 'Reveries of Race' in Conekin, Mort and Waters, *op cit* p.204.

[20] Abram Games*, 'The Festival of Britain Symbol', *RSA Journal* 143: 5459 May 1995 pp55-6. In the form it appeared in on the official guide to the Festival, the stark four points of the compass are repeated around the outside of the piece, accentuating the military modernism of the image. One commentator at a conference I attended suggested that aesthetically this gave it something of a family resemblance to a swastika.

[21] Frances Spalding, *Dance till the stars come down: a biography of John Minton*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1992 p.156; Banham and Hillier, *op cit*, p.167; *Catalogue*, *op cit*, p.50.

[22] *Catalogue*, *op cit*, p.13.

[23] 'Festival of Britain May 3 - 30 September: Britain at home to the world' Leaflet, Museum of London archive. An advert for 'Sperry' has a similar narrative; see Cox, *op cit*, p.lix.

[24] Feaver, *op cit*, p.49

[25] See Kathryn Castle 'Imperial Legacies, New Frontiers: children's popular literature and the demise of empire' in Ward, *op cit*.

[26] Cited in Catherine Hall, *op cit.*

[27] Owen, Gavin and Andy Lowe, 'Designing Desire - Planning, Power and the Festival of Britain' in *Block* 11 1985/6 p.65.

[28] Quoted in Banham and Hiller, *op cit*, p.84. Visitor Margaret Bean's recollection of the Dome of Discovery also illustrates this rather nicely: 'The enormous theme was "the intensive exploration and development of the present time", and there were such a lot of exhibits and descriptions, the mind boggled and the feet gave out'. Margaret Bean, 'Almost Surreal Confusion' in Banham and Hiller, *op cit*, p.184.

[29] Mark Crinson, 'Architecture and Display at the Imperial and Commonwealth Institutes' in *Art History*, Volume 22 Issue 1 1999 pp120-1.

[30] Raphael Samuel, *Island Stories*, Verso p.92.

[31] Ian Cox, The South Bank Exhibition: A Guide to the Story it Tells, HMSO, 1951, p. 43.

[32] See Catherine Hall, 'Going A-Trolloping' in Clare Midgely (ed.) *Gender and Imperialism*, Manchester University Press, 1998 pp.190-191.

[33] Cox, *op cit*, p. 43.

[34] Raphael Samuel, *Island Stories: Unravelling Britain: Theatres of Memory, Volume II*. Verso, p.92.

[35] See Alec Cairncross, *Economic Ideas and Government Policy: Contributions to Contemporary Economic History*, Routledge, 1996, pp81-86.

[36] Nicolas Owen, 'Critics of Empire in Britain' in Brown and Louis, *op cit*, p.203.

[37] See Eric Hobsbawm*, The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991*, Penguin, 1994; Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Harvard, 2000.

[38] See Adrian Forty, 'Festival Politics' in Banham and Hillier, *op cit*. p.32.

[39] At the same time the Commonwealth Institute also endorsed 'the great Empire-builders of the past' in its main thoroughfare through a series of statuettes. Imperial Institute, *The Festival and the Commonwealth,* leaflet from the Museum of London archive. This outlines the two displays held at the Imperial Institute during the Festival of Britain: *Focus on Colonial Progress Exhibition* (3 May – 30 September 1951) and *Exhibition of Traditional Art from the Colonies* (25 May – 30 September 1951) alongside the more general provision of the Institute. I have not chosen to focus on *Traditional Art from the Colonies* as it is briefly and well discussed by Becky Conekin (*op cit*, pp.194-5). Conekin highlights how whilst the exhibition sought to educate its white viewer that 'primitive' was worthy of attention, it figured it as poetically irrational and from 'underdeveloped' cultures of the colonies, of 'places of radical otherness'. See also William Fagg, *Traditional Art from the Colonies: A Catalogue on the Exhibition at the Imperial Institute*, HMSO, Colonial Office, 1951.

[40] Imperial Institute, *ibid*.

[41] Crinson, *op cit*.

[42] Ian Cox, *The South Bank Exhibition: A Guide to the Story it Tells* HMSO, 1951, p.xxiv.

[43] Anandi Ramamurthy, *Imperial Persuaders: Images of Africa and Asia in British Advertising,* Manchester University Press, 2003, p.212.

[44] Robert Hewison, *Culture and Consensus: England, Art and Politics since 1940,* Methuen, 1995 pp 57-65.

[45] Banham and Hillier, *op cit*, p.125.

[46] See Adrian Forty, 'Festival Politics' in Banham and Hillier, *op cit*, p.35.

[47] 'The festival begins at home' in *Picture Post*, 6 January 1951 p.10.

[48] Conekin, *op cit*, p174. Apart from the excellent chapter in Conekin's book, there is little work currently available on the wide-ranging local celebrations of the Festival (see John Kirby, *The Festival of Britain: A List of Information Sources*, Pavic Publications, 1993), although there is some in process, namely, Harriet Atkinson, *'Spontaneous expressions of citizenship': Festival of Britain exhibitions in Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales and England, 1951* (forthcoming PhD, Royal College of Art).

[49] Stuart Hall, 'The Social Eye of *Picture Post*' in *Working Papers in Cultural Studies,* No. 2, 1972.

[50] For a discussion of open-air exhibitions more generally which focuses on their predominance in Scandinavia, see Alan Pred, *Recognising European Modernities: A Montage of the Present*, Routledge, 1995.

[51] See Judy Giles and Tim Middleton (eds) *Writing Englishness 1900-1950,* Routledge, 1995; Samuel, *op cit*.

[52] Schwarz, *op cit*, p.190.

[53] Hugh Casson, 'Period Piece' in Banham and Hillier, *op cit*, p.80

[54] Alan Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Post-war Britain* Athlone Press, 1997.

[55] Leaflet for Battersea Pleasure Gardens, Museum of London archive.

[56] The KKK emerged out of the US Civil War and is well known for its extreme racist persecution and violence. They have overwhelming existed in a US context but have had sporadic attempts throughout the twentieth century to establish a presence in Europe. See R. Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain: A History 1918-1985,* Oxford, 1987 p.78, pp90-1.

[57] Conekin, *op cit*, 100-104.

[58] Lunn, *op cit.* See also S. Joshi and B. Carter, 'The role of Labour in the creation of a racist Britain' *Race and Class* vol xxv, no, 3 1984 pp.69-70.

[59] Lunn, *op cit*, p.240.

[60] John Cowley, 'London is the Place: Caribbean Music in the Context of Empire 1900-60' in P. Oliver (ed) *Black Music in Britain*, Open University Press, 1990, pp58-76.

[61] I am extremely grateful to John Cowley for supplying me with these tracks and for transcribing the lyrics for me.

[62] John Cowley, personal communication, 27 April 2003.

[63] *The Festival of Punch*, 30 April 1951.

[64] Conekin, *op cit*, mentions Britain's presentation of itself as an international umpire; and see also Ward, *op cit*, for a variety of interesting discussions on the relationship between sport, Britishness and decolonisation.