

Abstract

For decades, scholars and public commentary have readily assumed that there is a close connection between the end of empire and a perceived crisis of contemporary British identity. This thesis turns to the era of decolonisation itself, through an examination of the fate of ‘Greater Britain’ in an African context.

Specifically, it focuses on the reaction of politicians, opinion-leaders and ordinary letter-writers in the United Kingdom and in British settler communities in Kenya, Rhodesia and South Africa to a perceived crisis of Britishness throughout the globe from the late 1950s to the 1960s. By exploring the political language and identity claims of rival communities of self-styled ‘Britons’, it raises vital questions about the irreversible failure of Britishness to resonate globally in this period. Recent works within imperial studies have shown that British identity emerged within a global and imperial context, and developed, in particular, as a result of material and cultural exchange between the imperial heartland and dispersed settler communities overseas.

Drawing on a broad range of sources – official and private archives, speeches, letters, autobiographies and print media – the main body of the thesis analyse serial crises moments in Africa, which, collectively, engaged Britons in a contentious debate about the meaning, scope and relevance of ‘being British’ in a rapidly decolonising world. The study finds that an expansive, transnational conception of Britishness unbounded by space was challenged. Thus, it is the central hypothesis of this work that African decolonisation confronted the constituent communities of ‘Greater Britain’ with dilemmas of self-definition, and that, in this process, deeply ingrained assumptions about mutual obligations were increasingly put to the test. In this way, the struggle to define what it meant to be British affected not only the constituent parts of the United Kingdom but a global assembly of competing perceptions of Britishness in the post-imperial age.