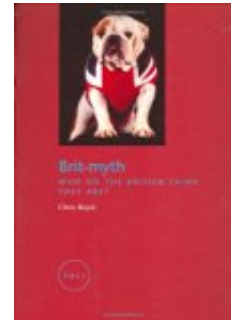


Chris Rojek. *Brit-Myth: Who Do the British Think They Are?*. London: Reaktion Books, 2007. 208 pp. \$19.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-86189-336-9.



Reviewed by David Smith

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Brit-Myth: Who Do the British Think They Are?, is a contribution to the Focus On Contemporary Issues (FOCI) series of books, which are produced for the "intelligent, alert" (inset) general reader with the express intent of being combative, adversarial, and written with passion. As such they disavow any pretence of scholarly impartiality or dispassion. *Brit-Myth*, written by Chris Rojek, professor of sociology and culture at Brunel University, is a work that indubitably encompasses both the virtues and the weakness of such an avocation.

In his analysis of who and what the British are, or at least think they are, Rojek ambitiously, if a tad recklessly, draws on myth, history, politics, law, sociology, anthropology, statistical surveys, and popular culture to construct a picture of a people (or peoples) defined by a strong sense of individualism, a respect for diversity, a tradition of dissent, and irreverent humor bolstered by common law, a tendency towards emotional reserve and even duplicity, and the survival, against the odds, of an antiquated class system that codes the individual in terms of accent, dress, vocabu-

lary, interests, and values. None of these conclusions are in themselves particularly fresh or surprising; this is, after all, well-trodden ground. Yet what adds piquancy and relevance to Rojek's interpretation is his acknowledgment that the forces of globalization, multiculturalism and multi-ethnicity, combined with Britain's loss of empire and declining significance in the global arena, have generated a crisis, wherein Britons feel compelled to create new identities for themselves that simultaneously embrace national cohesion and the acknowledgement of diversity, whether between the various historical nations that make up this island kingdom (England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland) or between its myriad of ethnic and sectarian communities. The nature of this crisis is well delineated in this book, and although its author admits that the construction of a new "imagined community," to cite Benedict Anderson's celebrated term, will inevitably prove arduous and fraught with immense difficulties he appears moderately sanguine that the ingrained habits of tolerance and common decency will ultimately prevail.

The aforementioned strengths and weaknesses of *Brit-myth* both lie in its ambitious scope. On a positive note the sheer catholicism of its sources is thought-provoking, allowing the reader to engage with the multitudinous facets that are involved in the construction of national identity, ranging from the genealogical myth of Albion with its origins in Greco-Roman civilization, to the image of the British to be found in Mike Myer's Austin Powers movies.

But even these two examples reveal the flaw in such an ambitious undertaking, as neither contributes to answering the question in the book's title, "who do the British think they are?" I would be astonished if the number of Britons who are aware of the myth of Albion could fill the seats in the Albert Hall, and as for the Austin Power films they say more about American (or possibly in this case Canadian) views of the British than they do about self-image. Rojek thus opens himself up to criticism.

If the myth of Albion is considered worthy of consideration, why not the far more famous and influential Robin Hood legends, which have endured in the national consciousness through books, comics, films, and TV series? Indeed, the recent BBC dramatizations of the Robin Hood tales offer an apposite example of reconstructing national identity through a recalibration of history and culture. The new Robin Hood has not only returned from the Crusades imbued with a respect for Islamic culture and society and an aversion to further military ventures into the Holy Land, but now includes within his merry retinue a young tomboyish Muslim woman, incongruously named Jack, schooled in the advanced medical and scientific learning of her native land.

And similarly, why cite the foreign Austin Powers films and not the various TV and film manifestations of the socially inept Mister Bean, who is, after all, a globally popular example of British *self*-representation? And why not, while on the subject, discuss the continuing success, both

within Britain and overseas, of the film and TV adaptations of the Jane Austen novels, which have had a palpable influence on formulating an image of the British as polite, reserved, witty, and class-conscious?

The second half of the book is far better than the first, which is at times marred by digressions that are so off-topic that if these chapters were compressed into an undergraduate essay they would fail to make the grade. Although doubtlessly part of the series' claim to be provocative and argumentative, I could, for example, see little of relevancy to the subject of the book in the four and a half pages devoted to the sinking of the Argentinean battleship, the *Belgrano* and the legal ramifications of Britain's participation in the invasion of Iraq, pages that occasionally approach tendentious polemic. And although the chapter delineating the "Mel Gibson View of British History," with its discussion of the films *Braveheart* (1995) and *The Patriot* (2000), is one of the most illuminating and perceptive in the book, it again deviates from the professed topic of British self-definition.

Leaving aside the book's forays into politics, popular culture, etc., what of its discussions on the influence of history on the formation of British self-identity? Generally, these are good. Rojek's interpretations of the evolution of common law, the significance of the Reformation and the defeat of the Armada in helping the English perceive themselves as an elect people, the legacy of political dissent in the context of Oliver Cromwell and Thomas Paine, the background to "Perfidious Albion" (pp. 112-113), and the debate over the iniquities or otherwise of the British Empire, which gives a balanced perspective on such dissimilar views as those expressed by Paul Gilroy in *After Empire* (2004) and Niall Ferguson in *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (2003), is valid and nuanced. He does though commit one egregious error, where he claims, apropos the cherished myth of Britain "finest hour" during the Sec-

ond World War: "Until the entry of the USA into the fray, Britain stood alone and prevailed" (p. 91). Someone should tell the Russians.

On balance then, this is an ambitious but flawed book. Nevertheless, caveats aside, and bearing in mind that it is not purporting to be a scholarly tome (there is, for example, no index), but rather a work aimed at provoking thought and debate, it succeeds in terms of being a lively contribution on an urgent issue.

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