

The (Mostly Imagined) Empire Strikes Back
Myths, Memories, and Populism in Brexit Britain

Short Biography

Douglas Peers is professor of history at the University of Waterloo and has just completed two terms as Dean of the Faculty of Arts. He has published widely on the nineteenth-century British Empire, focusing particularly on military influences on the ideologies, practices, and characterizations of colonial rule in India. He is the author of *Between Mars and Mammon Colonial Armies and the Garrison State in Early-Nineteenth Century India*; *India Under Colonial Rule, 1700-1885*; and co-edited with Nandini Gooptu, *India and the British Empire*, a volume in the Oxford History of the British Empire. He is currently writing a book on how war has configured the development of South Asia since 1750 as well as another that explores the lived experiences and imperial legacies of the siege of Lucknow.

Short Summary

Brexit is both a very British – yet tellingly English – event and an example of an increasingly common global phenomenon, namely, nostalgia-laden populism. The 2016 referendum plunged Britain into political turmoil which has been marked by a populist backlash against political and social elites, intellectuals, public figures, and outsiders. Critical to any understanding of the Brexiteers is an awareness of how history has been conceived and reconceived in recent debates and discussions.

Summary

In 2016 then Prime Minister David Cameron gambled and called for a referendum on Britain's membership in the European Union. Intended as a means of strengthening his negotiations with Europe, as well as improving the Conservative Party's position in the UK, the results revealed deep divisions in British society, not only with respect to Europe, but also with regards to how Britain's past was understood and what kind of future lay ahead. Most experts and commentators were caught by surprise, particularly following as it did on the heels of an era that had come to be labelled, or at least marketed, as 'Cool Britannia', the image of an outwardly confident, cosmopolitan, and creative United Kingdom epitomized by the 2012 London Olympics. Yet this was a vision from which many felt excluded, and the so-called Brexiteers voted to leave Europe for many reasons: anti-immigration, anti-austerity measures, suspicions of European intentions, anti-globalization, and anti-cosmopolitanism, to name just a few. The referendum exacerbated fractures in British society and exposed new fault-lines. In particular, it pitted a nostalgia-laden vision of English exceptionalism against an unstable and arguably untenable sense of Britain-within-Europe nationalism. This

resurgent English nationalism rested upon an implicit consensus that things were getting worse. Forty-three percent of those who responded in a 2012 UU survey felt that conditions had deteriorated over the course of the past sixty years. Only thirty percent thought things had gotten better. The popularity of *Dunkirk* and *Downton Abbey* speak to this longing for an age largely defined, if not dominated, by English distinctiveness. An important theme threaded through much of the Brexit language draws upon a particular reading of Britain's Imperial past which is not merely nostalgic but in its very selectivity strengthens English exceptionalism. Ironically, much of the nostalgia is for a nation that never was.