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Imperial Nostalgia: Victorian Values, History and Teenage Fiction in Britain

In his pamphlet, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, on the seizure of French government power in 1851 by Napoleon's grandson, Louis, Karl Marx makes the following famous comment about the way in which political leaders often dress up their own ideological motives and actions in the guise of the past in order to give them greater historical legitimacy:

The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle-cries, and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language.¹

One historically contentious term that has been recycled in recent years in the public debate in Britain is that of "Victorian values". For most of the 20th century, the word "Victorian" was associated with negative connotations of hypercritical morality, brutal industrial exploitation and colonial oppression. However, it was Mrs Thatcher who first gave the word a more positive political spin in the 1980s with her unabashed celebration of Victorian laissez-faire capitalism and patriotic fervour. This piece of historical obfuscation was aimed at disguising the grim reality of her neoliberal policies of economic privatisation, anti-trade union legislation, cut backs in the so-called "Nanny" Welfare State and the gunboat diplomacy of the Falklands War. Her Conservative successor, John Major, was also very willing to continue this trend in Victorian resurrectionism by announcing in his turn a "back to basics" campaign for traditional family values. One prime target of moral opprobrium in this context were single teenage mothers who, it was claimed, got pregnant merely in order to "scrounge" off the social security system. However, this piece of patriarchal preaching did not prevent John Major himself, as he was later forced to admit, from keeping a mistress while in government, in the person of Edwina Currie, his own Junior Minister of Health.

In 1997, Tony Blair was swept into power as New Labour Prime

¹ Marx, Karl. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. In McLellan, David ed. *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. p. 328.

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Minister promising, among other things, a more ethical foreign policy than what had gone before. Unfortunately, this very quickly turned out to be another variation of the Victorian “white man’s burden”, that is, hiding neocolonial ambition behind the self-proclaimed “civilising” mission of military interventionism around the world. As George Galloway noted:

No one asks why, if war is so terrible, we have become so cavalier at waging it. In the first six years of his government Tony Blair took us in to five wars – Iraq, Yugoslavia, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan, Iraq again. More wars in fewer years than any British ruler, royal or common, before him.²

This policy of “ethical” warmongering, that has led to the continuing slaughter of civilians and soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan, has not prevented Blair from being acclaimed as “our greatest Prime Minister ever”, greater even in comparison to his colonising Victorian counterparts Gladstone and Disraeli.³ However, after listening to the Prime Minister’s famously revivalist Labour Party Conference speech in 2001, Andrew Rawnsley dismissed even at this early stage Tony Blair’s messianic brand of governmental Band-Aid as just another form of imperial tub-thumping:

The vision was of a Victorian child’s globe, two-thirds of it coloured red. Mr Blair appeared to be articulating an ambition to paint it that way again in a dusky pink. Missionary Tony will cleanse the planet of disease, poverty and conflict. The sun will never set on a Holy British Empire. The tough and tender Third Way will rule from Kinshasa to Kabul.⁴

Nor has Tony Blair been the last in this resurgent line of neo-Victorians. His successor, Gordon Brown, has also urged the nation to “be proud ... of the empire.”⁵ Moreover, the front-page headline of *The Observer* on 10th December 2006 revealed similar sentiments among today’s Conservative politicians: “Bring back Victorian values, says key Tory”. The Tory in question, Dominic Grieve, the shadow Attorney General, was also quoted as saying: “You can argue that our Victorian forebears succeeded in achieving something very unusual between the 1850s and 1900 in changing public attitudes by – dare one use the word – instilling moral codes.”⁶ A few weeks later, *The Economist* published a 14-page special report on the condition of Britain today, nostalgically entitled “Britannia redux”.

² Galloway, George. *I’m Not The Only One*. London: Penguin Books, 2005. p. 2.

³ John Prescott. Quoted in Wheatcroft, Geoffrey. *Yo, Blair!* London: Politico’s, 2007. p. 118.

⁴ Rawnsley, Andrew. “Missionary Tony and his Holy British Empire.” *The Observer*. 7 October 2001.

⁵ Quoted in Brendon, Piers. *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2007. p. 568.

⁶ “Bring back Victorian values”. *The Observer*. 10 December 2006. p. 1.

Not only did the journal recycle the Conservative Party election slogan from the 1950s, “You’ve never had it so good”, as the cover-page headline, a further Leader rubric of “Hurrah for an imperial past” was thrown in for good measure.⁷ This call for the “redux” or return of “Rule Britannia” is a reflection of a related ideological shift in the debate about the British Empire, which in recent years has translated Victorian values into an historical tug-of-war about the legacy of Britain’s colonial past. The publication of Niall Ferguson’s revisionist history, *Empire* (2003), rekindled the argument about the need to rehabilitate Britain’s imperial story. His book had for example a direct impact on Ofsted, Britain’s official education inspection body, who complained that “the history of the British empire is being neglected in secondary schools in England.”⁸ Not surprisingly, Ferguson’s bestselling panegyric on empire makes little or no apology for the crimes of Britain’s imperial past. On the contrary, as the subtitle of the book suggests – “How Britain Made The Modern World” – he gives instead another brazen, latter-day spin on the Victorian myth of the white man’s burden. In his introduction for example, he lists a number of morally redeeming virtues and practices that the British Empire sought “to disseminate”:

- 1 The English Language
- 2 English forms of land tenure
- 3 Scottish and English banking
- 4 The Common Law
- 5 Protestantism
- 6 Team sports
- 7 The limited ‘night watchman’ state
- 8 Representative assemblies
- 9 The idea of liberty

Ferguson adds that the “last of these is perhaps the most important because it remains the most distinctive feature of the Empire.”⁹ As a direct riposte to Ferguson’s claims about the benefits of imperial modernisation, John Newsinger has written a history of the struggle of the people who were on the receiving end of the imperial project: the native populations of Africa and Asia. Referring directly to Ferguson, Newsinger makes the following critical observation:

One problem with contemporary apologists for empire, however, is their reluctance to acknowledge the extent to which imperial rule rests on

⁷ *The Economist*. 3-9 February 2007. p. 11.

⁸ MacLeod, Donald. “Schools ‘neglecting’ history of British empire.” *The Guardian*. 12 July 2004.

⁹ Ferguson, Niall. *Empire*. London: Penguin Books, 2004. p. xxiii.

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coercion, on the policeman torturing a suspect and the soldier blowing up houses and shooting prisoners. It is the contention of this book that this is the inevitable reality of colonial rule and, more particularly, that a close look at British imperial rule reveals episodes as brutal and shameful as the history of any empire.¹⁰

An even more recent contribution to this postcolonial debate is Piers Brendon's *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire 1781-1997* (2007). While Newsinger tells the people's story of the British Empire, Brendon is more interested in the "empire-builders" themselves: "My stage is thronged with the British *dramatis personae* of the Empire, from the Iron Duke to the Iron Lady. There are politicians, proconsuls, officials, soldiers, traders, writers, explorers, adventurers, entrepreneurs, prospectors, missionaries, heroes and villains."¹¹ And a mad, bad and dangerous lot most of them turn out to be.

In order to illustrate the different ways in which these above-mentioned writers deal with the history of the British Empire, I want to look briefly at their discussion of one of the most controversial aspects of Victorian colonialism – the Opium Wars with China between 1839-42, 1856-8 and 1860-64. The main cause of this conflict was the British shipment of opium to China and the resistance of the Chinese to the forced import of this drug to pay for their tea, porcelain and silks. Revealingly, Ferguson devotes very little space to these embarrassing events, merely citing Victorian sources to try to explain the reason for the hostilities in terms of the necessary protection of British market and maritime interests:

The Opium Wars of 1841 and 1856 were, of course, about much more than opium. The *Illustrated London News* portrayed the 1841 war as a crusade to introduce the benefits of free trade to yet another benighted Oriental despotism; while the Treaty of Nanking, which ended the conflict, made no explicit reference to opium. Likewise, the Second Opium War ... was fought partly to uphold British prestige as an end in itself.¹²

Brendon in contrast, views such Victorian excuses as "disingenuous", and even more dubious when recycled by subsequent historians like Ferguson.¹³ While his emphasis is also primarily on the actions of the British, Piers Brendon's account of the Opium wars leaves the reader in no doubt as to their impact on the Chinese:

¹⁰ Newsinger, John. *The Blood Never Dried*. London: Bookmarks, 2006. p. 7.

¹¹ Brendon, Piers. op.cit. p. xx.

¹² Ferguson. p. 165. In a similar vein, Martin Lynn writes: "Chinese reluctance to open up their economy to the 'foreign devils' from the West clashed with Britain's ambitions for free trade and demands for recognition and equal status. Such clashes culminated in the so-called Opium War 1839-42." Quoted in Samson, Jane. ed. *The British Empire*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. p. 119.

¹³ Brendon. op.cit. p. 104.

Britain had taken ruthless advantage of China. The Opium War, the sacking of the Summer Palace and the 'unequal treaties' left the Chinese in no doubt about the true nature of the West's imperial enterprise. Ridding themselves of the bloodsuckers was only a matter of time.¹⁴

Newsinger certainly agrees with Brendon's conclusions, although his interpretation of the significance of the conflict is based on a much wider understanding of the role of opium in the whole development of the Empire, as well as the historic importance of the Chinese resistance to the imperial power of the British. Opium was in reality the ugly face of Victorian colonial trade:

The British Empire was the largest drug pusher the world has ever seen. By the 1830s the smuggling of opium into China was a source of huge profits and these profits played a crucial role in the financing of British rule in India and were the underpinning of British trade and commerce throughout the East. This is one of the little details that are often overlooked in general histories of the empire, where the opium trade is generally played down and sometimes ignored altogether.¹⁵

Newsinger shifts in fact the whole focus of the three Opium wars against the British to that of the struggle of the Chinese people to free themselves not only from the narcotic yoke of a foreign oppressor, but also from the corrupt feudal dynasty of Manchu emperors that it helped to prop up. One of the most dramatic expressions of this burgeoning process of national liberation was a huge peasant uprising known as the Taiping rebellion, which Newsinger describes as "the greatest revolutionary movement of the 19th century", yet one that "is virtually unknown in the West today."¹⁶ Unfortunately, like many previous attempts by the Chinese to combat the devastating imposition of Victorian imperialism, the rebellion was ultimately crushed with barbaric brutality: "The rebels were to come close to victory but in the end were defeated and totally destroyed by the Manchu armies, which were armed and assisted in this by the British. The war to destroy the Taipings was the most terrible in human history before the First World War, costing 20 million people their lives."¹⁷

This ongoing debate about Victorian values does not, however, only relate to the way in which we perceive the past positively or not. As I have already indicated, at a time when Britain is once again engaged in neocolonial wars, Victorianism remains a pivotal point of historical reference which, when resurrected in the public discourse, is often used to enhance all sorts of latter-day political agendas. The renewed demand

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 110.

¹⁵ Newsinger. p. 48.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 55.

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 55.

for projecting a more celebratory image of Empire can, therefore, be seen as part of a broader process of ideological revamping that both mythologizes the past and mystifies the present. Similarly conservative ideas have also percolated through to recent trends in fiction written specifically for younger readers. It is to this aspect of the return of Victorian values in children's literature that I now want to turn.

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In her essay on "Victorianism, Empire and the paternal voice", Deborah Thacker points to the didactic connection between the emergence of canonical children's fiction in the 19th century and the active promulgation of traditional Victorian values. This ideological symbiosis provided in particular an integral foundation for the genre of imperial adventure stories for boys:

Fiction of this period ... promoted the values of Empire, in the works of writers such as R. M. Ballantyne and H. Rider Haggard. Books such as Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* (1858) or Ryder Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1885) celebrated a superior definition of 'Britishness' and provided a version of the quest narrative in an unquestioning way. Similarly, school stories, such as Hughes' *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1856) or Farrar's *Eric; or Little by Little* (1858) offered an unquestioned Victorian value system for the purpose of moulding moral citizens for the future.¹⁸

While Victorian literature for young readers reflected an unequivocal sense of moral purpose, subsuming the ethos of nation and empire into the dramatic plotlines of the story, it is more surprising to find such things being so uncritically recycled today in teenage fiction over one hundred years later. In the period following the Second World War, when Britain's imperial status was more and more being questioned by liberation movements abroad and the Labour movement at home, there was a growing lack of consensus about what sort of moral message books for children should contain. As Thacker notes: "...the narrative relationship embodied in many of these texts suggests a disruption of adult confidence in providing a sense of the world for children which at times approaches a postmodern sense of fracture and decentering."¹⁹ In recent years however, this concern with the relative nature of moral judgements has taken a very different turning. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the active realignment between Britain and the U.S.A. in a more aggressively imperial "Special relationship", the resurgence of conservative values has become a ideological point of departure for a new world order of neocolonial expansionism. Moreover, this martial turn has also spawned a number of books that resurrect a range of retro-

¹⁸ In Thacker, Deborah & Webb, Jean. *Introducing Children's Literature*. London: Routledge, p. 54.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 110.

spective role models for boys. In an article recently in *The Guardian*, Tom Kelly expressed his own critical concern about this retro Victorian trend in recent teenage fiction:

The reinvention of the 'boys' own adventure' genre for the 21st century seems to have taken the media by storm. It has the hazy glow of nostalgia for a simpler world, a world where everyone knew their place in the white, male playground. Problem is, that world no longer exists, if it ever did, and in reinventing the ripping yarn genre (whose most enduring example is *Biggles*), some of the problems of the original have reappeared. Beneath the surface are racial tension and xenophobia, cultural traits that were institutionalised during the colonial era.

We are offering up a fast food menu of impoverished stereotypes to our sons, based on rigid class systems and exclusion. The thought of filling 21st century boyhood with the same stale old guff on evil foreigners and government-sanctioned assassins makes me feel tired and more than a bit concerned.²⁰

It is, thus, a sign of these troubled times that one of the most ideologically antiquated figures in postwar popular culture – James Bond – is now being repackaged and resold as “Young Bond” for today’s teenage readers. The first novel in this new Bond-for-boys series, written by Charlie Higson, is *Silverfin* (2005). It seems at first highly improbable that such an outworn, male chauvinist stereotype as Bond could ever be transformed into a younger version that would be suitable for teenage consumption. But perhaps if Fleming’s Cold War-mongering novels have now been reissued as Penguin Modern Classics, everything else is possible in the postmodern world of publishing. However, despite his newly acquired literary credentials, Fleming still remains very much a capitalist crusader, a purveyor of fictionalized sex, sadism and snobbery. Although these elements are much toned down in Higson’s *Silverfin* story, we are nevertheless back in serious Bond business, transported to the 1930s when James begins his career at Eton. Here he is pitted against rich, though unreliable Americans whose dastardly behaviour undermines the sporting ethos of the school. Young Bond is assisted in his struggle to save the world from these criminal yanks by Kelly, a subservient Irish working-class boy who calls him “the boss”²¹, and by a glamorous female sidekick (on a horse), stereotypically named “Wilder Lawless” (a budding Pussy Galore no doubt). Apart from the image of James Bond in a black top-hat-and-tails Eton school uniform (as seen in the new comic book version of the story), there is an all-pervading sense of Victorian “stiff upper lip” superiority in the story. Officially sanctioned by the Ian Fleming Estate, these Young Bond stories are clearly aimed at preparing the ground for future

²⁰ Kelly, Tom. “The wrong kind of readings lessons.” *The Guardian*. January 24, 2007.

²¹ Higson, Charlie. *Silverfin*. London: Puffin, 2005. p. 159.

consumers of the adult Bond books and films. However, there is more to this ideological grooming of prospective James Bond fans – the novels share in fact the same reassertively patriotic subtext with a whole range of other new secret agent stories for teenagers. Depicting a manichean world of good and evil, these books also help promote an uncritical view of British imperial policing in which young people are seen as natural recruits with a future license to kill. However, the question is never asked in these novels: who would really want their son to grow up to become a callous, state-sanctioned serial killer and womanizer like James Bond?

In Robert Muchamore's Cherub series of teenage novels, the first of which is *The Recruit* (2004), it is again the case that counter-insurgency is depicted as a desirable career option for a young adolescent. As the blurb on the paperback cover of the book declares:

CHERUB agents are all seventeen and under. They wear skate tees and hemp, and look like regular kids. But they're not. They are trained professionals who are sent on missions to spy on terrorists and international drug dealers. CHERUB agents hack into computers, bug entire houses, and download crucial documents. It is a highly dangerous job. For their safety, these agents DO NOT EXIST.²²

There is, however, an Orwellian twist to this glamorised image of kids being trained as young secret servants of the state, which is more disturbing. While the use of child soldiers is generally condemned around the world, these budding agents of British imperialism are portrayed in the novel as even more useful precisely because of their young age. In fact, their youthful anonymity appears to be their biggest asset. As Muchamore writes, with no sense of the sinister dystopian connotation: "Adults never suspect that children are spying on them."²³ Thus, the "war against terrorism" is given a further conspiratorial boost when James, the new CHERUB recruit, is charged with the task of infiltrating a "hippie commune" of environmentalists who are suspected of planning a biological terrorist attack on a planned "Petrocon conference."²⁴ As in all of these teenagent stories, the kids are shown to be unflinching supporters of the status quo and its forces of law and order – the police, the army and the secret service. None of the ideological doubts or double-dealings that tend to dog modern spies in stories for adults.

Another example of the more-than-willing-teenager-turned-secret-agent is to be found in Anthony Horowitz's *Stormbreaker* series. Not only have these particular stories been both shortlisted for and the receiver of the Children's Book Award in Britain, they have proven also very popular

²² Muchamore, Robert. *The Recruit*. London: Simon Pulse, 2005.

²³ *Ibid.* p. 1.

²⁴ *Ibid.* p. 306.

among young readers, spawning a film off-shoot. The dramatic transformation of the main character, Alex Rider, from schoolboy to superspy, recruited by MI5, the British Secret Service, and trained by the SAS, the elite commando force, allows Horowitz to perpetuate the same glamorous mystique in which these organisations are usually shrouded by the tabloid press in Britain. In the process, the patriotic perversion that 'you're never too young to die for your country' is also unashamedly propagated, this time on the front cover of the book. It is as though the anti-war poetry of Wilfred Owen, and especially his *Dulce et decorum est, Anthem for Doomed Youth*, had never been written.

Another aspect of Horowitz's story that harks impenitently back to the reactionary traditions of the Victorian boys' own story is the reappearance of the criminal "baddie" of dark-skinned origins. Despite the fact that there is now a veritable witch-hunt against Muslims, not least in the British press, Horowitz nevertheless chooses to pander to this collective demonization by making his fictional evildoer a Middle-Eastern multimillionaire called Herod Sayle. The description for example of his facial appearance reproduces one of the most vicious of Victorian racist stereotypes: the devious, beady-eyed Oriental:

His skin was very dark, so that his teeth flashed when he smiled. He had a round, bald head and very horrible eyes. The grey irises were too small, completely surrounded by white. Alex was reminded of tadpoles before they hatch. When Sayle stood next to him, the eyes were almost at the same level as his and held less warmth than the jellyfish.

"The Portuguese man-o'-war," Sayle continued. He had a heavy accent brought with him from the Beirut marketplace. "It's beautiful, don't you think?"²⁵

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In complete contrast to this uncritical revamping of Victorian values are the novels of Robert Swindells, whose stories have always challenged the conventional ethos of children's literature in Britain. Perhaps most famous for his harrowing portrayal of homeless teenagers being stalked and murdered by an ex-army serial killer in *Stone Cold* (1993), Swindells has recently returned to the issue of children on the streets of London in *No Angels* (2003). This tale of domestic abuse, police harassment and homelessness represents a direct fictional rebuttal of the conservative rallying cry of family, church and nation. By contrasting the fate of two teenagers – Nikki, a 21st century runaway, and Nick, a 19th century street urchin – Swindells compares the condition of children in desperate need and asks the question whether very much has happened in the one hundred years between then and now. In particular, his story attacks the sort of regressive Victorian attitudes that have resurfaced in the recent

²⁵ Horowitz, Anthony. *Stormbreaker*. London: Walker Books, 2004. p. 97.

debate about discipline and so-called anti-social behaviour. The complaints expressed in the novel by an imaginary letter-writer to the *Sunday Telegraph* provide a telling illustration of the way in which Malthusian ideas about penalising the poor are implicit in the repeated mantra about society being soft on crime:

My grandfather always used to say, you can take the family out of the slum, but you can't take the slum out of the family. How right he was! It goes without saying that wisdom such as my grandfather's will always be pooh-poohed by politically correct, trendy lefty bodies with names like *Young Person Development Project*. I'm afraid that while organizations of this sort hold sway, we will never get to grips with the problem of how to stamp out youth crime in our once great country. Sensitive, touchy-feely policing, offender-friendly juvenile courts and soft, non-custodial sentences having failed, free adventure holidays at taxpayers' expense are to be tried. As Ebenezer Scrooge once said, I'll retire to Bedlam.²⁶

An even more urgent fictional intervention, this time on the subject of asylum seekers, neo-nazism and terrorist bombings in Britain, is Swindells's novel, *Ruby Tanya* (2004). As the title suggests, the story echoes the Victorian "Rule Britannia" ideals of Britishness, which it is claimed are under threat by bomb-throwing, foreign terrorists. The plot revolves around Ruby Tanya and her best friend, Asra, who is an Afghan asylum seeker living in a refugee camp near the village of Tipton Lacey. When a bomb goes off at a local school, killing a teacher, at the same time as Prince Charles is visiting the area, a campaign is mounted by locals, including Ruby's father and his neo-nazi associates, to put the blame on the asylum seekers and close down the camp. As can be seen, Swindells's novel brings together some of the most burning issues in Britain today – the war against terrorism, immigration and the role of the neo-nazis in fomenting racism. Without doubt, it is an attempt by the author to write back at the anti-Muslim frenzy that has been whipped up in Britain ever since the events of 9/11. It is also one of the particular strengths of the story that Swindells exposes this xenophobic feeling within Ruby Tanya's own family, making it clear to the reader that the fight against racism begins on the day-to-day level of personal responsibility. Moreover, as the arguments between the parents go to show, today's racist prejudice needs to be confronted with the hard-won traditions of international solidarity in Britain's past:

Dad scowled. For goodness sake look back at history, Sarah. When this country was great, when Britannia ruled the waves, there were none of these asylum seekers or refugees or whatever you want to call 'em dossing around, making the place look untidy. Britain belonged to the

²⁶ Swindells, Robert. *No Angels*. London: Puffin Books, 2003. pp. 232-3.

British; everybody knew where they stood. A foreigner was *Johnnie foreigner*. There was none of this political correctness forcing you to call him something else.

History, said Mum. All right – why d’you think people choose Britain, Ed? When they need a refuge, I mean.

That’s obvious, Sarah. They come for the benefits, don’t they? The dole, NHS, all the other stuff we chuck at ‘em for free.

Mum shook her head. Before all that. Hundreds of years ago. Why here? It didn’t *happen* hundreds of years ago. Like I said, Britain belonged to the British.

Oh, so what about the Huguenots, the Flemings, the Irish, the German Jews, the Poles, the Hungarians, the Greek Cypriots, the Ugandan Asians. Why did they all choose *our* country, Ed? Which of them started the rot? Exactly when did we start going to the dogs?

Ha! went Dad. That’s your hippie mother talking, Sarah. You don’t know what you’re on about.

Yes I do. All those people *are* Britain, Ed. They’re us. We’re a queer mix, we British. All sorts of blood in our veins. Maybe that’s why our country’s been a byword for fairness, for tolerance. A byword for *freedom*. We’ve taken them in, treated them like parts of ourselves and life’s gone on. If we close our borders, start turning frightened people away, we throw away the very thing our country is respected for. It’s you and your lot, not the asylum seekers, who are soiling Britain’s reputation.²⁷

Taken together, the novels of Robert Swindells offer an important antidote to the siege mentality that has pervaded the political life of Britain in recent years, a condition of terrorist paranoia that also has a deep impact on young people. His stories also help to puncture the ideological mystique of the call-to-arms over the “clash of civilizations” that seeks to engulf us all in its anti-democratic attacks on people’s rights at home and warmongering abroad. This is what Victorian values always boil down to in Britain.

August Strindberg once remarked that whenever Carl XII, Sweden’s 18th century warrior king, was resurrected in the public debate, there was usually some ulterior political motive that had little to do with the historical figure himself.²⁸ The same can be said of the resurgence of Victorian values in Britain. The differing connotations that this particular historical epoch has acquired always tell us much more about the present than the past. As I have tried to show in this essay, the harkening back to the Victorians is more often than not an ideological smokescreen for the promotion of conservative family values and national chauvinism. History, as Marx said, is constantly being hijacked for all sorts of dubious political ends. As long as Britain remains in the grip of its Victorian past, the spectre of war and neocolonial conquest will continue to haunt us.

²⁷ Swindells, Robert. *Ruby Tanya*. London: Corgi Yearling Books, 2005. pp. 109-110.

²⁸ Strindberg, August. “Faraon-dyrkan”. Reprinted in *Stridskrifter*. Stockholm: Askelin & Hägglund, 1981. pp. 25-7.