“As if Empires Were Great and Wonderful Things”

A Critical Reassessment of the British Empire During World War Two in Louis de Bernières’ *Captain Corelli’s Mandolin*, Mark Mills’ *The Information Officer* and Kazuo Ishiguro’s *When We Were Orphans*

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ONE OF THE MOST APPEALING ASPECTS of post-1970s British fiction on the Second World War is its emphasis on Lyotard’s *petits récits*:¹ rather than focusing on the major events of the conflict, such as battles, invasions, strategic decisions, and outstanding military and political personalities, most of these novels focus on the private, individual lives of men and women, usually on the Home Front rather than on the scene of fighting or in decision-making hubs. The scaling-down of narrative action has the effect of raising the interest of the reader in the everyday lives of those who are exhausted by the progress of the war and its effects of rationing, bombings, uncertainty, estrangement, displacement, persecution, casualties, and death. At the same time, the work of late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century British authors reveals that a fictional engagement with the time

and thematic setting of the Second World War and its consequences on the Home Front is conducive to an analysis of the nature of Englishness and/or Britishness, of peculiarities of identity, and, in the larger picture, of the role of Britain at a time of national and universal threat. It was not only the integrity of the country itself that was at risk, but, as developments subsequent to the war would amply certify, also that of the whole British Empire. Contemporary British authors, in particular those born after the War and its aftermath, such as Louis de Bernières, Mark Mills, and Kazuo Ishiguro, deal with the topic of the dismembering of the British Empire as a consequence of the conflict and, on a more specific level, with the interaction between representatives of the British administration – officers and soldiers, civil servants, agents, tradesmen, journalists, et al. – with the native inhabitants of territories belonging or related to the empire, during specific episodes of World War Two. Details of the characters, settings, and historical contexts used by these authors are given below.

The novels analysed here, Louis de Bernières’ *Captain Corelli’s Mandolin* (1995), Mark Mills’ *The Information Officer* (2009), and Kazuo Ishiguro’s *When We Were Orphans* (2000), provide us with valuable insight into the limitations, shortcomings, and varying degrees of success of quotidian representatives of the British Empire in areas as disparate as Greece, Shanghai, and Malta at specific moments leading up to or during the War: the Italo-German invasion of Cephalonia, the siege of Malta, and the Japanese shelling of Shanghai, respectively. In keeping with the focus on petits récits, shared with many turn-of-the-century fictional narratives, these novels also offer insights into the nature of Englishness as perceived by private individuals, who were far removed from the decision-making military or administrative spheres of Britain or the countries involved in the various war scenarios. It is through the perception of these individuals that English administrators or officials are utilized in the novels as metonyms for Britain and its empire.

In some cases, examples of which we shall see below, authors writing at the turn of the twenty-first century reveal a tendency to acute self-criticism.²

² This is, interestingly, more evident in authors of mixed racial or ethnic origin (not the case of Mark Mills or Louis de Bernières, although the case of Kazuo Ishiguro will be briefly explained below): mixed-ethnicity authors analyse their “postcolonial angst” – to use Richard Bradford’s term – through often inept characters “who if created by male, white, middle-aged writers would be deemed as overtures to racism.” Richard