Preface

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The title of this book, *Rule, Britannia!: The Biopic and British National Identity*, makes a reference to the imperial past of the United Kingdom, and, in particular, to the popular hymn, written by James Thomson in the 1750s, that most famously celebrated with unabashed jingoism the country's expansionist "mission" as it was then taking shape. The chorus predicts perpetual national independence, while issuing a call to arms in order to further the global domination assured by the will of heaven. The starkest of existential differences separates the governed from the governors, "us" from "them":

> Rule, Britannia! Britannia rule the waves!
> Britons never, never, never shall be slaves!

This book's readers should take our invocation of this famous piece of patriotic music as an ironic comment on one of the major themes of the essays collected here: how screen portraits of the country's great and notable might be understood as involved, if unofficially, in the shaping and promotion of an ever-protean national identity.[1]

National identity is an aspect of shared public sentiment about which *Rule, Britannia!* expresses the strongest of opinions, unlike the less straightforward and more subtle messages that can be decoded in the films under discussion here. Echoing Jupiter's famous prophecy in *Aeneid I* that Rome will excel in the arts of government and lawmaking, Thomson proclaims a global purpose for Britannia that was only just in the process of taking shape; the nation he addresses as the Britons is commanded to "rule" all the lands touched by the oceans of the world. In turn, this people will be perdurably resistant to enslavement by others.

These are huge claims, and they anticipate the Eurocentric imperialism of the next century and what came to be its central notion: the "white man's burden," Rudyard Kipling's ironic rationale of its often murderous racialist core. A citizen of the contemporary UK, even one with scant enthusiasm for this mission of global domination, can only look back with nostalgia that there were once such cultural certainties. Much has changed and is changing. And yet, as Thomson himself surely recognized, his vision of Britannia and the Britons was even in a period of expanding empire as much fantasy as reality.

The purpose of this preface is to acknowledge, and briefly outline, the difficulties of long-standing about the peculiar status of the UK as a nation, and what identity is now offered to its citizens, topics that British filmmakers could hardly escape negotiating in biographical pictures devoted to public figures of cultural importance and worthiness. The contributors to this volume, as well as the editors who conceived the plan for it, have in their own ways engaged with the various issues involved. In our view, in the current UK resolution of the key concepts of "nation" and "identity" is certainly not anywhere on the horizon. Important questions about the nature and future of the country are only now being properly formulated, problematizing any shared sense of self-awareness. Surprisingly, as the chapters of this book were being written, these fundamental uncertainties were rendered more vexing by Brexit: the decision taken by the UK establishment, following a national referendum in June 2016 in which the "Leave" position achieved a clear majority, to drop out of the European Union. For a variety of political and economic reasons, the imminent prospect of Brexit has inspired heightened interest among nationalists in Ireland, Scotland, and Wales to advocate secession from the UK, making the dissolution of the nation into its constituent parts an increasingly imaginable possibility (for the lesser-known recent developments in Wales see http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2017/03/23/the-debate-on-welsh-independence-has-begun-for-good/).

One of the most discussed contributions to the current debate is Michael Kenny's *The Politics of English Nationhood*, which bears a title that would have seemed chimerical only a decade or two ago as would its subject, namely that "an avowedly English sense of national identity has gradually become more keenly felt . . . over the last three decades and begun to acquire a powerful set of political connotations" (ix; see also Kumar 175–224 and, for a somewhat different view, Colley). Kenny opines that this emergence of English nationalism into the public sphere reflects "the intrusion into high politics of issues and concerns at the popular level that are driven by questions about recognition, place and identity" (xvii). The resulting controversies have only recently even been

recognized by the country's ruling elite (cf. the shocked surprise of the Tory PM, David Cameron, and the globalist professional class generally, at the success of the "Leave" campaign). As of this writing, it remains unclear how the subaltern nationalisms will sort themselves out in terms of public policy recommendations for the futures either of the UK or of such (semi?) independent states that might emerge from its reconfiguration or dissolution.

In our view, the Thomson hymn usefully invokes the very difficulties that are still involved in conceiving Britain as a sovereign nation in the modern, post-Westphalian sense, indicating sociopolitical problems that have long gone unsolved. Chief among these is that the United Kingdom is only partially structured by the constitutional liberalism characteristic of other Western European states, in which vexing issues of ethnic majoritarianism ("blood and soil") also play a more central, and acknowledged, role. In the United Kingdom, the post-feudal institutions of the *ancien régime* have never been finally and decisively rejected, even though, ironically enough, in terms of institutional development, the country has been in the forefront of developing political modernity. As historian Tom Nairn tells the story, the civil wars of the seventeenth century did not lead to constitutionalism in the modern sense. Instead, "state power was appropriated by a self-regulating elite group which established powerful conventions of autonomy . . . these in effect came to function as a civil substitute for the state" (Nairn 1977: 16). For our purposes, the result of this unusual form of modern political development has been the emergence of a "politically-inert nationalism" that "would become useless outside imperial conditions" (Nairn 1977: 28, 29). In fact such a nationalism would, Nairn suggests, be of little use in resolving questions of civic identity and belonging because it is "bound by a suffocating paralytic pride in its own power and past glories" (Nairn 1977: 29). It is here that Thomson's hymn shows its relevance to the continuing crisis of both nation and national identity. For, sadly, it seems true enough that the "whole bias of the British imperialist state has led the English people to feel themselves as something naturally bigger, more open and more important than just another nation-state. In reality, this museum-piece has dragged them from empire to something less than a modern nation-state, without letting them become one" (Nairn 1977: 59).

Since the publication forty years ago of Nairn's *The Break-Up of Britain*, the prediction of thoroughly disruptive national change announced in his title, backed up by his substantial and sophisticated argument, has aroused a furor among academics and the leaders of political parties. That furor hardly abated when Nairn's prediction did not come to pass in the first decade of the current century: that was because the national

political crisis he detailed had palpably worsened. In a series of similarly polemical works that followed *Break-Up*, Nairn focused on the anti-globalist English nationalism that, it seems clear, proved decisive in the EU referendum (see Nairn 1988, 2001, 2002, and 2006). Other recent commentators, especially Kenny and Krishan Kumar, have refused to endorse the pessimism of Nairn's argument, but reluctantly concur with its central thesis: that deep change, both political and cultural, is on the horizon for the UK (see esp. Kumar 175–273). In particular, the emergence to prominence of a powerfully developing English nationalism now poses a serious threat to the continued existence of a "cultural" rather than "ethnocentric" nation in which "Whiggish" notions of progressive constitutionalism can still be defended, Kenny hopes, as "uniquely valuable qualities" (13). Whether this tradition survives depends on the outcome of the "vital struggle over the political soul of Englishness [which] is steadily emerging as the most important of the various English questions that now need to be faced in British politics" (Kenny 243).

Kumar agrees with this measured alarmism. He worries that ethnic nationalism, long recognized as the *bête noire* of European culture since it is an "ugly and murderous thing," might exert a malefic influence on the continuing history of "Britain" as a century of disconnection runs its course. So he calls upon "England" to "show the world that nationalism need not mean only narrowness and intolerance," but rather might show "what a truly civic nationalism can look like" (273). For him also, the future of the country is deeply uncertain. Will the English in years to come somehow constitute themselves as a separate polity? Or, less likely, will they discover some satisfying way of expressing their newly discovered ethnic pride from within a multinational confederation that requires additional allegiance to a supersedent identity? Such a channeling of nationalist energies would mean the survival in some form of the Whiggish progressivism at the heart of the UK constitutional tradition that Kenny and Kumar, along with many others, admire deeply.

And yet does it really seem possible that some less-threatening form of nationalism might square the circle of its presumed connection to a continuing sense of Britishness? Could this happen even after the long-established unity of the UK has been problematized by secession of the various kinds that have been bruited as desirable, including thoroughgoing forms of devolution that might grant the "nations" of the Union substantial opportunities for independent action (and self-definition)? As political scientist Robert Hazell soberly concludes, in an essay that sketches out the institutional possibilities, "the English Question is a shorthand title for a problem (or set of problems) which is not susceptible to an easy solution" (Hazell "Conclusion" 220). In many ways, it seems

more likely, as Welsh historian Gwyn Williams has asserted, that "Britain has begun its long march out of history" (qtd. in Kumar 226). But what precisely might it mean for Britain to exit the world stage? Could it even be something as thoroughgoing as the fate suffered by the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which in 1918 dissolved precipitously and completely following military collapse? Though in his subsequent works some sense of a post-Britain emerges, Nairn stands by what he wrote in 1977: "the fall of the old system must force a kind of national re-definition upon all the British peoples" (61). In contrast, less than three centuries ago, James Thomson imagined the Britons embarking on a collective voyage to make history, in some sense perhaps to be history. This proved to be an ever-expansive sense of their collective, cohesive self from which, according to commentators like Nairn, they have yet to escape into a functional national identity. If it is true, as Nairn argues, that all modern states require "some forceful myth of the entry of the masses into history," then the UK has been constructed on an inadequate cultural foundation on imperial expansion because "England does not possess" such a myth (Nairn 1977: 252). And how exactly might that failure of cultural evolution be made good at this juncture in history?

With no concept of the masses and no narrative that makes them actors in their own history, Thomson's mythmaking is vague at best. The Britons will have "manly hearts" as well as a strong business sense, and so "their commerce will shine" (for the full text of the hymn see http://lyricsplayground.com/alpha/songs/r/rulebritannia.shtml). The poet sketches that identity with a few brief strokes, extolling a version of Britishness that endured until postwar decolonization rendered it, at first, thoroughly anachronistic and then in recent years politically poisonous. Even so, it is surely true that the vast majority of the country's adult inhabitants have heard *Rule, Britannia* and know at least some of the lyrics. Thomson's imperial sentiments, and the aggressive and entitled national unity they construct, live on, if increasingly vaguely, in twenty-first-century popular memory, evoking a not quite forgotten way in which the country, its future unstable, might be understood as central to a global political order sanctioned by God, one that eschews connection to ethnicity.

During Thomson's lifetime, the first generations of Hanoverian rulers were invited, by the official styling then coming into use, to recognize themselves as Britannic (not British) majesties. There is a certain appropriateness to this that goes beyond a cultural preference for anachronism. The same mode of address is still in use for the current royal dynasty, which also has deep foreign roots and whose current seeming Britishness (the house of Windsor) is in some sense a calculating fabrication, instituted in 1917 during the Great War against Germany with the intention

of obscuring the connection of the royals to their extended family, the House of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha. Purchased at the price of financial debility and social exhaustion, victory in World War Two spelled the end of that complex web of economic and political relations, redefining what a world-embracing "Britannia" might be understood as designating, although semi-feudal arrangements—such as that of the "dominion" and the "bailiwick"—still continue in force as connections between the "mother country" and its erstwhile overseas territories. A handful of the smallest and most insignificant of these continue to be possessed directly, and in a premodern fashion, by the Crown (e.g. British Antarctic Territory, South Georgia, and the Sandwich Islands, as well as the Channel Islands—these ancient communities within miles of Britain's coast are legally not part of the UK, being governed by charters that date from the early thirteenth century).

Taking shape gradually during the early twentieth century, the British Commonwealth has provided a looser framework for accommodating former imperial territories. Now styled as the Commonwealth of Nations (with the erstwhile "Commonwealth" polities still under the sovereignty of the Crown), it has begun to admit new members outside the traditional British orbit such as Mozambique and Rwanda. The Commonwealth thus continues something of the imperial tradition. Despite the efforts of Queen Elizabeth II to promote its importance (following her influential Christmas Day 1953 radio address on the subject), the Commonwealth has never been of the essence of the United Kingdom, failing to endow the mother country with the resources and power that the unalloyed mercantilism of the imperial era provided (see the text of the Queen's address at https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Christmas_Message,_1953). The notion of a unitary Britannia ordained by God to rule the world has, of course, always been an elaborate fiction, one with roots in the Elizabethan era, as historian Norman Davies demonstrates in his masterfully revisionist history of the country he cannily refers to as "The Isles," avoiding its several problematic modern designations (see Davies 659–879 for a detailed account of the "British Imperial Isles" era, which in his view dates from the Act of Union in 1707 to, in 1922, the founding of the Irish Free State following the War of Independence).

Interestingly, it was a Scot who penned the famous lyrics of *Rule, Britannia!* Though as an author he was eager for commercial success, the work deeply reflected James Thomson's political views. Born in Roxburghshire, he was a strong supporter of the Act of Union that had created the United Kingdom in 1707, though many of his countrymen were still bitter about the decisive defeat only a few years before (1745) of the most successful of the several Jacobite revolts that had followed

the Glorious Revolution (1688). English victory in what was in effect an intermittent civil war had been followed by the brutal suppression of the Highland clans that Parliament authorized in the Act of Proscription (1746). While Thomson's stirring paean to imperial liberty was being regularly intoned on the London stage, supporters of the Jacobite cause, and the pretender to the British throne, Charles Edward Stuart, were conspiring in exile for yet another attempt to overthrow a dynasty they considered illegitimate (this final attempt collapsed in 1759). For some years, the Jacobites remained eager to press the claims that Scotland for dynastic reasons was the superior partner in the union of kingdoms, but the movement had spent its force by the time that Charles died in exile of a stroke in 1786.

With its several "kingdoms" joined to England since the Middle Ages more by military conquest than negotiated settlement, "Britannia" in the sense that Thomson evokes her might well have proven to be more audacious hope than sociopolitical reality. That the country has survived intact until the present day is an issue requiring more detailed examination than it has yet received (see Kenny 27–49 for interesting comment, as well as the essays collected in Hazell). In any event, dissolution into its constituent parts yearning for independence was a constant threat in the eighteenth century. We might presume that Thomson would have been pleased by the Acts of Union 1800 that gave constitutional force to the incorporation of Ireland in what he thought of as Britannia, the Latin geographical term for what we now call the British Isles, perhaps out of a sense of *faute de mieux* exacerbated by then recent political events. But this political solution to the status of Ireland would endure for only a little more than a century, revealing its inadequacy when challenged by a resurgent, and eventually armed resistance. In its modern, unitary form, the geographical Britannia ignores the migration of Roman Britons to the Armorican peninsula following the Anglo-Saxon invasion, constituting what has become known as the province of Brittany (or, in medieval parlance, Little Britain as opposed to the "Great" Britain from which these people had been driven into exile). Are today's Bretons also Britons, with the southern precincts of the island of Britain their *terra irredenta*?

The problem of nomenclature that Thomson circumvents has endured. Political theorist Bernard Crick recently observed that "I am a citizen of a country with no agreed colloquial name," which makes his "nation" unique within the European community. Such a failure of consensus, the outer sign of more serious internal troubles, can only unconvincingly be explained away by commentators such as historian A. J. P. Taylor, who says it is "fuss over names, not things" (both qtd. in Kumar 1). Well, not really since the nature of the union itself continues

to be open to serious debate and, potentially, divisive partisanship. In referring to his country, Thomson follows a medieval tradition that had reemerged in response to the expansionist politics of the Elizabethan era, which also witnessed the increasing prominence in British culture of what has since become the national personification (equivalent to the U.S.'s Uncle Sam and France's Marianne). This helmeted and trident-wielding female figure (something of a cross between Neptune and Minerva) made its first appearance during the Roman era as a pagan deity.

Unlike the American and French personifications, which boldly break with the cultural past through rejecting classical iconography, the "goddess" Britannia allegorizes a thoroughly unhistorical continuity of political unity (the isles understood as an inherent collectivity) and a unitary national *ésprit* that, its origin apparently Roman, makes no reference to the Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic *ethne* that in fact had constituted the peoples of this country since Rome abandoned its colony in the early fifth century CE. It is certainly impossible to imagine an English Delacroix painting a grand canvas of a Britannia in dishabille, leading an armed and righteous mob of "enfants de la patrie" in their assault on some establishment bastion.

In contrast, the origin story of France is thoroughly ethnic and cultural, celebrating struggle and accomplishment, but involving nothing like this territorial uncertainty. As its schoolchildren have been instructed since the nineteenth century, France as a Christian country begins with a barely civilized Clovis becoming king of the Franks, founding a dynasty known to history as the Merovingians after solidifying his power with a series of impressive victories over enemies within and without, and finally connecting his people to post-Roman Christian Europe by accepting Catholic baptism and an important role for the Church in Frankish society (c. 486). France is called France because Clovis lent the kingdom his tribal name, superseding but also incorporating the ethnic past (including those distant ancestors the Gauls) through his embrace of the dominant religious form of late *Romanitas*, having been fortunate enough to avoid the institutional dead-end of Arianism.

Not surprisingly, this story is at best an oversimplification that reads events against their contradictory grain (Germany also claims Clovis as an important founding figure), at worst a denial of the complex history that over the course of the next seven centuries yielded a recognizable form of the modern French nation that was much different from Clovis's assemblage of territories that would be divided among his sons at his death. The relevance of the national story for the continued health of a well-established French national identity has recently been challenged by historian Patrick Boucheron and his team of mostly younger scholars,

who contributed to a multi-authored "world" history based on a "pluralist conception of history in opposition to the narrowing of identity that today dominates public debate" (Boucheron 7; all translations from this text are our own). This pluralism (and the room it makes for identity politics) does not challenge the essence of the semi-sacred *récit national*. Boucheron insists that all involved in the project have been "less interested in writing another story (*histoire*) and more in telling that same story in a different way" (12). Clovis continues to claim a place of honor in the *Histoire mondiale* in the article devoted to the year 511 because he chose Paris as the capital of his kingdom and solidified relations with the Church that served his successors well (Boucheron 86–90).

That a work suggesting a new angle on the national story has become a *cause célèbre* suggests the solidity of the French conception of national selfhood. One searches in vain for a comparable controversy in the UK. Among the few candidates for such a national discussion about the past is the 2002 BBC poll that gauged the interest of the general public in their shared past. The aim was also to promote a popular history (at least of sorts) based on major figures and raise interest in that tradition by identifying and ranking the "100 Greatest Britons." Sixty of these turned out to have been born in the twentieth century, with popular entertainers and celebrities generally finishing ahead of political and literary figures: Diana, Princess of Wales, ahead of Charles Darwin, William Shakespeare, and Elizabeth I; Boy George preferred to Henry VIII and Thomas Paine; John Lennon ranked higher than either Horatio Lord Nelson or Sir Francis Drake. The final standings were announced on live TV, followed by a debate of sorts about the project by a panel of broadcasters and academics. The project cannot claim to have been much of a success, no more than the similar rankings of people, films, novels, etc. that are such a feature of a contemporary culture obsessed with assessing value by survey.

Our point is that the UK lacks a truly persuasive yet ethnically based origin story of its emergence and flourishing, focusing on images of the great and notable whose virtues and actions can be said to have formed the national character. The nation that proves difficult to name properly is simply not a linguistically and culturally distinct country on the model of the other modern European nations. It possesses no *récit national*. Alfred the Great might have become a foundational figure similar to Clovis, but that never happened. In part, this is because, unlike the French, the British have never faced and resolved the difficulties posed to national unity by the existence, even flourishing, of long-established, ethnically distinct, and linguistically diverse communities within their borders. Kumar usefully surveys the various issues involved in formulating even an academic version of such a foundational narrative.

As Kumar gloomily observes, most historians have been afraid to grasp (in a phrase no French citizen would ever utter) "the nettle of national identity" for a country whose very name he finds interestingly problematic (see esp. 1–38). Speaking of English nationalism, Kenny observes that "the major intellectual divide" is "between the vision of England as a perpetually regressive form of imagined community and . . . a once great political nation which might yet be regained" (20). It is his hope that the UK is "an old country now being discovered afresh" (20). In any case, there is no denying that the national culture (including the film industry) is increasingly dominated by a nostalgia for something like Thomson's fanciful imagination of a Britain that first took shape in God's plan for world history. The result for the cinema has been, according to Belén Vidal, "the transformation of the national past into a cultural commodity," with a pronounced focus on "pastoral, upper-class lifestyles and a largely uncritical use of images of empire" (4; see also Higson 191–219). The films in this ongoing production series only gently if at all take hold of a prickly national identity, and in so doing offer little hope for the regaining of whatever made the UK "great" as a "political nation," an issue that might well be of little importance to the general public in their everyday lives (see Skey 9–36).

A fundamental question that Thomson's brief mythological story fails to answer is what exactly is the country inhabited by this superior race. For Thomson, Britannia "arose out the azure main," seemingly as a self-evident unity safely insulated from historical change because appearing in response to the divine will. And this was no truer in his time than in our own. The actual geographical extent of the United Kingdom as now constituted, however, prompts a series of political questions about the independence, relative (to be established by the devolution of governmental power) or absolute (leading to separate nationhood) of its constituent parts. Are these constituencies nations, and, if so, in what sense? The turbulent civil history of the country (then known as England) since the beginning of the seventeenth century reminds us that these questions are hardly being asked for the first time, and more often than many would like to remember have been provided with bloody answers. Since the Good Friday Agreement (1998) ended (forever, it is to be hoped) the military campaign of elements of the Irish Republican Army to force the "return" of the three Northern counties to the Republic of Ireland, agitation for secession has been conducted exclusively through democratic processes. Referenda (the first was held in September 2014 and endorsed the status quo) could determine if Scotland might re-embrace the independence it enjoyed until the early modern period. Through a similar process, prompted by the largely unforeseen consequences of

Brexit for the status of the border between the two sections of the island, the Irish might well be persuaded for economic as well as cultural reasons to reconstitute their country as a political unity separate from both England and Scotland. Their island kingdom was annexed after conquest by Tudor armies following an act of the Irish Parliament that confirmed England's Henry VIII as king in 1541. In some quarters Irish reunification and independence would be seen, and not inappropriately, as the final acts in the decolonization that dismantled the British Empire and put an end to Britannia as James Thomson had understood her.

More surprising perhaps, now being seriously interrogated is the long-established and widespread (at least in the "Home Counties") sentiment that Englishness and Britishness are the central elements of the same national identity. For many among the English, this has made the terms more or less synonymous, with a sort of purposive amnesia throwing a cloak over the political difficulties raised by such elision. To be sure, the concept of this cultural mix, as many have recognized, slights the UK's Irish, Welsh, and Scots communities, whose sense of separate ethnic identity has undoubtedly heightened as a result. But now many of those who see themselves as English question whether such a composite identity serves as effective social glue for their own community, no matter that it gives cultural priority to specifically Anglo-Saxon traditions (see Langford for a useful historical survey of how these took on a definite shape in the course of the nineteenth century, aided by the same kind of nostalgic cultural archaeology then prevalent throughout Western Europe; cf. the Indo-European hypothesis). As Kumar observes, "Englishness has for centuries slumbered unconsciously, and uncaringly, in the arms of Britishness." The question then becomes in his view whether "an English identity can be excavated, or invented" (262). To an increasing number of the English, an informal acknowledgment that to be British is also in some senses to be English seems in the current political climate an inadequate, perhaps misleading way to understand the social force and cultural particularities of Englishness, whose claim on proper recognition as itself is believed to have been an important factor in the victory achieved by anti-globalist voters in the EU Referendum.

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Collecting the work of well-known scholars on a topic interesting to many in the field of cinema studies, *Rule, Britannia!* offers itself as a sequel of sorts to an earlier, multi-authored volume published by SUNY Press: *Invented Lives, Imagined Communities: The Biopic and American National Identity*, which was edited by William H. Epstein and R. Barton Palmer,

and to which Palmer and Homer Pettey contributed chapters. The present volume completes for the two major Anglophone cinemas a selective survey of the genre, officially known as the biographical picture, that has played a key role in the production strategies of both industries since the silent era. The appeal of the genre to viewers is political in the broadest sense. Reflecting on current cultural interests, the biopic contributes to the always-evolving recovery of the past in both American and British culture, while constituting an important, because predictably profitable, production type. It is evident enough that images of the great and notable, as well as the narratives that define them, can play a key role in determining the way that the "nation" itself finds a conceptual shape for individuals. If the biopic by definition takes up history-making, then it is perhaps unnecessary to emphasize that the genre contributes to the continuing process in the present of self-understanding with which no nation can dispense. As an institution, the cinema is committed chiefly to the profit-making provision of screen entertainment, so we feel it is important to acknowledge how the films it produces shape or promote a national identity in its different aspects, though the chapters in this book naturally engage with a variety of other approaches as well—aesthetic, institutional, political, and critical.

Only informally, and as it were accidentally, can the American and British cinemas be understood as taking up this project, except naturally when some kind of propagandizing is involved (see the chapters on *First of the Few*, intended as a morale booster during World War II, and *The Man Who Never Was*, a nostalgic postwar tribute to British craftiness, sacrifice, and stiff-upper-lip control of self). The introduction and postscript to *Invented Lives* engage at some length with the considerable and complex tradition of scholarly work on life writing and the nature of national identity. Hollywood's place within U.S. culture is also a focus of discussion there, which traces in some detail how the "national" in terms of character and values finds a place in films that reconstruct the lives of those who are unarguably "American." It would have been ideal if a similar discussion of such matters could have been adopted for this volume in order to please readers interested in the more theoretical aspects of life writing studies and the theorizing of identity. It has proven necessary, however, to discuss at some length the current political and cultural realities that have made unrealizable such an approach to the elucidation of those forms of shared identity that might be understood as "British," as well as those individuals, celebrated on the screen, supposed to share that national affiliation. Rapid change has meant that much of the not inconsiderable literature devoted to the British biopic has been in the last few years rendered out of date.

A case in point is noted film scholar Jeffrey Richards's *Films and British National Identity*, published in 1997, but difficult to imagine as a possible intervention in the present context of the way in which issues of nation and identity are currently being discussed, not to mention the roiling political environment in what that discussion has taken place. What Richards wrote in 1997 is a fine book, especially sensitive to the various question of national destiny raised by Thatcherism and the Falklands conflict, and one that remains immensely useful in what it has to say about the representation of Britishness in the era before nationalist and secessionist tensions put the various concepts in jeopardy. He confidently asserts that what he calls Britain can be called a nation because it consists of a "population that collectively occupies a defined territory" and also shares a singular vision of itself, what theorist Benedict Anderson calls "an imagined community" (Richards xiii; see Anderson). Richards admits that in the course of the postwar era "an intellectual and emotional crisis of national identity" emerged to trouble the people of Britain (xi). He observes as well that there is something of a tension between the terms "British" and "English." And yet, in a manner that would in 2017 seem politically incorrect, even insensitive to many in the country, he understands these designations (are they national or ethnic, political or cultural?) as more or less interchangeable. In dealing with the question of Welsh, Scottish, and Irish nationality, Richards is inclined to dismiss their significance as "regional," as elements, however independent in the distant past, that have become elements of an overarching Britishness whose essential cultural unity, though seen as the product of historical changes, is beyond question.

As our brief survey of academic work on the issue has revealed, formulations of the UK's current nation-ness by historians and political scientists are unsatisfactory, even contradictory. What the immediate future holds is uncertain, as well as troubling to those who would like the UK to have a continuing future as a viable political unit. What might the term national identity designate in such circumstances? How could screen biographies of notable personages from the cultural past be enlisted in shaping or promoting it? The films discussed in this book all belong to a "usable past" that could in various ways be enlisted in the ongoing struggles over the future of the United Kingdom. What Kenny carefully terms "a contemporary sense of national awareness" is, in his view, being "most fully and creatively" explored "within the realms of culture," and that would presumably mean the national cinema and one of its most enduringly popular forms, the biopic (26). We would disagree slightly with this account of cultural work; in the current climate, marked by a multiplicitousness of self-understandings, surely the cinema reflects

and promotes complexly related "senses of awareness" since anything like a singular national identity is palpably absent, a fact of which critical work on the biopic going forward, including the essays collected here, is increasingly sensitive. Much existing scholarship from the last three decades has simply gone out of date.

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Biopics attempt narrative and representational structures that coincide with images, not the reality of their ostensible subjects that have a factual basis as social, cultural intersections of fiction, myth, rumor, and cinematic creation. Biopics, then, are not authentic illustrations of history or even historical moments. Instead, they function much like a Marcel Duchamp ready-made: a reality now repurposed as art; a history now retold as drama; a biography now transformed into spectacle. Biopics are reproductions of life, exhibitions of a biographical and national history that require both a critical and aesthetic distance to understand the cinematic techniques that alter both the historical facts and also the popular sense of the reality of the life on screen. To assume that biopics express a static, monolithic national identity is to misunderstand how a urinal can be a fountain. As Octavio Paz claimed, a ready-made is "criticism in action," a "jibe at what we call valuable" (22).

Translated from the ready-made lives of biography, then, a biopic calls attention to itself as existing between, on the one hand, history (in the sense of a culture's understanding of how and what it came to be) and, on the other, the art of the cinema, filmmaking being a "popular" form designed to offer pleasure by appealing to broadly shared tastes and expectations. To ascribe value to one pole is to lose sight of the fluctuation characteristic of this in-between state, which is characterized by the subject/object tension characteristic of all representations. Such tension is especially intense in this instance because as a cultural product the biopic, willy-nilly, is judged not only as entertainment but also by the distinct, if related, criteria of authenticity and verisimilitude. Even as they look forward to enjoying the narrative unfolding in shadow and light on the theater screen, viewers expect biopics to tell a kind of truth in reconstructing a life and evoking the world in which that life played out. In fact, in conformity to one of the central paradoxes of so-called "fiction," their pleasure depends to an important degree on how faithful to "real" character and events they assess this cinematic resurrection to be. The biopic demands a particular approach to this kind of historical drama, difficult to achieve and thus only rarely realized. For example, in Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln* (2012), Daniel Day-Lewis's impersonation of

America's utterly sui generis great man is both masterful and reverential. Universally praised was the thoroughness and depth of the actorly self-transformation he managed to achieve after much study and hard work. At the same time, his performance utterly eschews *sprezzatura*, that is, any acknowledgment of its own virtuosity, even in the scenes that require him to perform "in character" by being ostentatiously declamatory in the nineteenth-century traditions of speech-making and stage performance (especially of Shakespearean tragedy), a rhetorical skill for which the president was justly famed. Even so, his Lincoln, much like the film itself, seems thoroughly conscious of an irremediable failure to escape its presentness, embracing anchronisms of different kinds, and displacing viewer attention toward the subject, which is the always unrealizable past that, as many have observed, exists only in terms of some contemporary desire to memorialize.

Biopics also exist between two conflicting histories, the period of the subject's life and the contemporary moment of film production. In this sense, then, biopics reflect national identities rather than a single set of cultural values. A biopic engages in a process of memorializing and omitting essential moments, while still suggesting a narrative of national consciousness. And so a number of issues suggest themselves as topics of discussion to critics who are theoretically inclined: the ambiguities and intricacies of biographical and historical fidelity; the privileged medium of film and how it dictates supposed popular consensus; how ideology constricts familial events as allegories of national sentiment and expanding lives to symptomatic portrayals of a national identity. Such critical views share the problems of high-low art dichotomies of literature v. film, the adaptation problems of fidelity v. artifice, and the theoretical obsessive need to identify contradictions, hegemonic disparities, ideological displacements, and interpellations of national values. And this is to say that the biopic indulges in a history-making that is not essentially different from other formulations of a country's sense of itself. However, it is no doubt true, as president Woodrow Wilson is said to have remarked about the Civil War epic *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), that the biopic, because it is cinema, makes use of a "lightning" that is unavailable as a representational trope to those historians confined to the more limited reconstructive and affective powers of the written word. Devoted to lives, the biopic offers a deceptively living form of history in which reconstruction and resurrection (at least of a sort) centrally figure.

Critics have classified the biopic an agent of modernity, an underpinning of a contemporary cultural psyche, a cultish appropriation of an historical figure (or, indeed, sometimes one still living), a mythologizing and demystifying of that figure, and a sociopolitical commentary on both

the inclusion and exclusion of contemporary attitudes. It might be best to express biopics' national identities in terms of national personalities that recognize, as they artistically transform, the content, mood, and narrative arc of national biographies. The subjects of these films are both exceptional (possessing a particularity worthy of detailed remembrance) and also typical, in that they embody and express, if usually with provocative complexity, qualities thought to be constituent elements of the national character.

The life images are constituted not only formally through acts of research and informed speculation that culminate in published texts of greater or less authority. These stories of the great and famous also take shape trans-subjectively, through what might be best, if inadequately, called popular memory, a continually evolving feeling about the past that speaks, sometimes eloquently, often disturbingly, to the present. This memory produces a national narrative in which figures that emerge as significant are assigned particular roles in a collective history usually imagined as Whiggish, that is, as progressing toward its assumed bright destiny through the realization of shared values and cultural proclivities. Of course, some ways of life and forms of accomplishment might elicit neither universal nor unalloyed approval. In fact, because they contest the establishmentarianism of the Whig paradigm, the lives of those who transgress accepted norms often prove compelling material for the biopic. The introduction that follows this preface offers a rich example of this contrarian approach to cinematic forms of memorialization and their contribution to a national identity interestingly riven by contradictions.

Struggles over the national narrative, and the forms of shared identity it comes to express from one era to the next, are inevitable. And these determine what significant events and figures are either memorialized or, alternatively, consigned to amnesia. Just to take an example from the not distant past, popular memory about World War II holds that the Royal Air Force played a key role in helping Britain defeat Germany in the Second World War. This victory has become an important part of the national story, remembered, in fact, as one of the few events of the country's experience in the twentieth century that are worth celebrating, including in the form of the biopic. World War II films constituted what was arguably the most expansive, and generally profitable, series of the quarter century following the cessation of hostilities. Yet the country's successful resistance to the powerful German war machine and eventual triumph has its darker, more problematic aspects. Many Britons now find it regrettable that the "success" of Bomber Command in laying waste on a hitherto unimagined scale was achieved by a strategy of "area bombing" that was designed less to destroy the country's military infrastructure and more to kill or (to deploy a protective euphemism) "de-house" substan-

tial numbers of enemy civilians. The strategic aim was to undermine the authority of National Socialist rule by showing the government's inability to offer protection against unpredictable nighttime assault. The mass raids brought a unique kind of ruin to German cities. Incendiary munitions set huge fires that were designed to be difficult to bring under control. Subsequent waves of planes then continued the attack with the aim of killing rescue workers and firefighters. Bombing of essentially civilian targets was pursued with vigor even in the closing months of the war as Germany's defeat became certain. The most controversial bombing operation is the series of raids on Dresden (February 13–15, 1945) carried out in cooperation with the United States Army Air Force; as many as 25,000 civilians were killed in the onslaught and almost eight square miles of the city reduced to rubble.

The bombing campaign took shape and was sustained through the indefatigable efforts of an organizational genius, General Arthur "Bomber" Harris. Harris was undeterred by growing proof that enemy morale had not been undermined, while the production of war materiel actually increased. He dismissed concerns about appalling losses in crews, not to mention obvious ethical problems about the campaign's overall aims, including violation of the Geneva Conventions. More than seventy years after the end of the war, Harris still holds a place of sorts in the national popular memory, though a biopic that would make him "live" even more vividly is difficult to envision, despite the central role he played in one of the most important events of modern British history. Michael Darlow's TV film *Bomber Harris* (1989) was seen by few and did nothing to alter the widespread and growing rejection of the public of his "legacy." Biopics produced by the British film industry are routinely celebratory, in line with the consensus national narrative, but perhaps more important also with the need of the cinema to make its stories emotionally engaging by deploying sympathetic characters at their centers.

In developed societies, popular memory is a concern of those institutions such as the educational system that are invested in crafting and relating the national narratives with a view toward sustaining a certain model of informed citizenship. The lives of the great and famous figure as touchstones of what a people purports to believe and value, while providing easy to grasp *entrées* into selected portions of the national story. These narrative tranches are often imagined as a series of crises or turning points (not just political, but artistic, scientific, intellectual, or religious) construed as having required for their successful resolution the inimitable intervention of exceptional citizens who are "of the hour." Knowledge of the great figures from the national past can be understood as a personal asset that can be described somewhat neutrally as "cultural literacy." But

the details and overall trajectory of the national story can become mat-
ters of bitter and sustained dispute. "History is war," as French political
theorist Éric Zemmour has remarked: "Not just the history of war, but a
war over history" (Zemmour 15). In the contemporary UK, however, it is
difficult to imagine what precise shape a war over the past might assume.

Life writing and these other forms of continuing trans-subjective
speculation about the past constitute the material of the biopic, an
enduringly popular film genre that performs some of the functions of
history-making (see Custen). Their sources, and the complex protocols of
truth-telling and related institutional traditions that govern the represen-
tation of lives on screen, differentiate the biopic, as is the case with all
the "historical" genres, from other types of cinematic narrative, which are
permitted freer forms of fabulation. For it is against the widely accepted
"facts" of the stories that a culture tells itself about the past (which are
never unriven by contradictions and provocative silences) that biopics
find their value measured, a form of assessment that the different chapters
in this book all exemplify in one way or another. Culturalist readings
of biopics, we believe, are *de rigueur*, displacing from analytic focus for-
malist, performative, and industrial approaches, though of course these
different ways of looking at the textualizing process remain important
areas of interest for all the contributors.

The introduction that follows this preface explores this issue at
length through an example of bio-cinematicization that challenges the
customary Progressiveness of the screen memorialization of national fig-
ures. Whig history stresses forms of institutional or cultural progressive-
ness in their life stories. Such stories offer serious approaches to serious
issues, and a number of the films, largely "prestige" productions that are
discussed in this volume can usefully be understood as falling into this
category. Readers of the introduction, however, will find it useful to recall
historian Michael Kenny's admonition that "national cultures are forged
from a rich mixture of elements that traverse the increasingly irrelevant
distinction between high and *low* cultures" (26 our emphasis).

Note

1. Who exactly might be numbered among the great and notable might be is,
of course, a matter of public opinion, measured most fairly, perhaps, by a national
poll, such as the one conducted a decade or so ago by the BBC. See further http://
www.npg.org.uk/business/publications/great-britons.php. Unconvincing is the case
made by the editors of the inevitably coffee table book based on the series that their
list of the 100 worthiest Britons is the subject of a "great debate," as we discuss.
In any event, this list includes many of the figures whose screen biographies are
discussed in this volume.

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