

Title—Enoch Powell and the Making of Postcolonial Britain

Author—Camilla Schofield

Year—2013

Categories: Politics, Migration, (Post)colonialism, Race, Empire

Place: Britain

Time: 1940-2000

Argument Synopsis:

Schofield's book is focused on the rhetoric of Enoch Powell and its relation to the shaping of British society and culture after the Second World War. Powell is known for his outspoken opposition to the rights of entry of Black, New Commonwealth immigrants into Britain and his insistence that Britain needed to rid itself of its commitments to a long-dead empire. She asserts that Powell must be read as a historical figure, as contained within a different historical moment from the contemporary present. The book builds on the vast scholarship that investigates the changing political valences and collective and individual memories of the Second World War in Britain. For Powell, remembering the war remained a crucial means by which to define Britain's political community after empire. She argues that immigrant communities represented the consequences of an unsettled postwar settlement. The making of postcolonial Britain occurred in conjunction with the unmaking of the postwar settlement.

The book is organized into five chapters. The first chapter tells the story of the development of Powell's commitments to the unique structure of power of British rule. She argues that Powell's conservative commitments were born in the context of a deep cynicism regarding the new world of Australia and the growing recognition of the challenges of American political hegemony. The second chapter investigates Powell's initial turn away from Britain's imperial ambitions and the immediate consequences of decolonization for the conservative party. The third chapter discusses how it is essential that historians work to place the maintenance and decline of the liberal race relations settlement in the context of Cold War pressures. Schofield analyzes Powell's revolt against the reconstruction of Britain's international role and the ways in which the politics of the Commonwealth came home to Britain. The fourth chapter treats Powell's famous "Rivers of Blood" speech as a symptom of a crisis in the postwar social order, highlighting the profound preoccupation with wartime sacrifice in 1968. The final chapter uncovers the logic behind Powell's turn to the politics of Ulster Unionism against European unity. Schofield treats Powell's life as a window into the dramatic shifts in meaning that were experienced in Britain in the postwar period.

She demonstrates how Britain's existential crisis, that postwar transformation in social values, continues to be understood as the encroachment of Black culture. She posits that many of his postwar arguments can be viewed as a product of the Cold War. Powell insisted that it was historical consciousness, more than race, language, or geography, that constituted a political community—it was a shared past and expectation of a shared future that constituted the nation.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- The enduring view that Britons must face a constant crisis of national identity is one key feature to understanding postcolonial British history
- Black Britons were not new political subjects but came to embody new political forms, new commitments, and new transnational alliances that leveled a profound attack on the legitimacy of a once imperial order
- For Powell, the experience of empire underlined the essential fragility of any political order