Bond and the New Elizabethans: Tradition and Modernity in Dr No (1962)

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In 2012, the BBC commissioned a series on Radio 4 to mark the Queen's Diamond Jubilee and from suggestions from the general public selected a list of 60 people whose "actions during the reign of Elizabeth II have had a significant impact on lives in these islands and given the age its character, for better or worse." It is a disparate list that crosses racial, gender and class lines and takes in virtually every facet of contemporary British life, including as it does the Conservative politician Enoch Powell and cultural theorist Stuart Hall, ballet dancer Margot Fonteyn and the musician Goldie. Spy fiction is admirably represented by Graham Greene, a literary novelist who termed his espionage books "entertainments" as he deemed them to carry no message²; yet even those works – Stamboul Train (1932) and Our Man in Havana (1958) for example – centre on themes of treachery and moral guilt. Greene's reputation as a serious novelist established him as a writer in tune with the moral and social concerns of the era – not the sort of conversation that is usually associated with the novelist and creator of James Bond, Ian Fleming. Yet, if the list of influential New Elizabethans were to run to fictional characters it would, I think, be fair to wager that Bond would figure prominently. As "the most successful adventure hero in history," and the protagonist in the world's longest running film franchise, Bond holds a unique place in cinema history and in the British and global cultural imagination.³

While Bond is clearly descended from the clubland heroes and sons of empire that defined British heroism through the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, he is also a modern figure. The blatant sexuality and violence of the first Bond film Dr No (1962) is far removed from the more restrained cinema of the 1950s and is already looking towards the more permissive society that would emerge throughout the 1960s. Dr No embodies the Cold War preoccupations with sex and spies that would erupt spectacularly with the Profumo Affair

in 1963. This chapter looks at how *Dr No* navigates the traditional and the progressive and also at how the film's upbeat tone prefigures the ethos of the "Swinging Sixties" – that era in British cultural history that is popularly characterised through fashion, music, commerce and an ostensibly more open attitude towards sex.⁴ It is an optimism that is lacking in Fleming's novels. It is often stated that the loss of empire translates into Britain being a reduced figure on the world stage, yet the transition from the empire to the Commonwealth is part of that sense of renewal and optimism in the 1960s. It seems fitting that the film that kick-started one of the most successful franchises in cinema history should share its inception with Jamaican independence, and in this chapter I will argue how *Dr No* is not just an escapist fantasy, but captures the emerging spirit of the times.

Many scholars have pointed to the situating of the Bond novels and films in relation to the decline of empire⁵ and the specific "diminishing state of national sovereign power" that constitutes the Bondian world as providing a form of escape: a fantasy that situates Britain as being far more important on the world stage than it actually is, with the most recent films overtly acknowledging the post-imperial geopolitical landscape. This is most clearly evident in 2012's *Skyfall*, both in the film's narrative but also with the formal linking of Bond, in the person of Daniel Craig, with the Queen during the "Happy and Glorious" section of the London 2012 Olympic Games opening ceremony. It is, perhaps, a natural association: Bond made his first appearance in print in *Casino Royale* in 1953, the Queen's Coronation year. At the climax of this opening sequence, Queen Elizabeth II ostensibly jumps from a helicopter into the Olympic stadium, deploying a Union Flag parachute on the way down, while Monty Norman's James Bond theme echoes around the arena. The symbolism linking Bond, the royal family and British cultural identity is made manifest: "British communities may have lost their empire, and over the years they may have had to witness the declining status of a nation that was once

a massive superpower, but the 2012 ceremonies showed that they could nevertheless celebrate their continued relevancy."⁷

But why is this idea of empire – or the lack of it – so important to discussions around the figure of Bond? As James Chapman has pointed out, the Britain of Bond, as established in the novels, "may be characterized as a Britain at the twilight of empire." Much of it is to do with the character's origins – the template for the patriotic, upper-class, gentlemanly protagonist is laid down by John Buchan in his creation of Richard Hannay. Hannay himself has all the traits of the "Heroes of Empire" – duty, stoicism, courage, perseverance – associated with characters such as Gordon of Khartoum, Clive of India or the fictitious Sanders of the River (1935). These traits were, for much of the nineteenth and the early twentieth century, folded into constructions of national identity and national character. This national character is, therefore, the justification for empire. As Jeffrey Richards states, it stems from the "moral superiority of the British to everyone else by virtue of their commitment to a code of behaviour which involves the preservation of law, order and justice for love of those qualities." ¹⁰ Bond and his fellow adventurers such as The Avengers' (1961-9) John Steed act as signifiers of continuity and "stability." This tension between tradition and modernity has been at the heart of much evolution of cultural life from the mid-20th century onwards and could, arguably, be seen to be a defining characteristic of the New Elizabethans.

The 1950s occupies a curious space in the British cultural imagination; with its coming before the Swinging Sixties but after the upheaval of the Second World War, the decade can be somewhat overlooked and is more often the setting for cosy crime dramas such as *Marple* (2004-13) or *Grantchester* (2014-). It is a decade that still had rationing, high unemployment, housing shortages and a rising crime rate. As Heather Wiebe states:

The anxiety about a changing British society perceived to be in a state of decline, especially in London, was evident in the coverage of the second big news story of 1953, the grisly Christie murders in Notting Hill. Here was inner city decay, a morally decadent world peopled by prostitutes and drug addicts, tensions between

English poor and Jamaican immigrants living side by side in Notting Hill, all wrapped up in a narrative of shocking violence.¹²

As the decade progressed, fear around the increase of "shocking violence" was laid at the door of youth subcultures, in particular the dreaded and much vilified Teddy boys who became the by-word for delinquency. But even in the 1950s, there were calls to retract the label "Teddy boys," not least from Labour MP George Isaacs who, in a speech in 1955, stated: "Teddy boys are youngsters with youthful spirits who like to have their own kind of clothes. There are bad ones among them here and there, but you will find darn fine lads in Edwardian clothes going to the Boys' Brigade and the Sea Cadets. The name Teddy boy is beginning to stink; I would rather call them 'the New Elizabethans.'" His plea failed, but what is interesting here is the merging of the modern figure of the Teddy boy with the very traditional and solid Brigade and Cadet movements. Implicit in Isaacs' words is the idea that the combination of modern individualism and traditional institutional service is inherent to how we might define the New Elizabethan.

Against the somewhat tumultuous backdrop of the early 1950s we have the figure who gives the New Elizabethans their name. The Coronation of Elizabeth II in 1953 was both a statement of continuity and stability and assertion of youth and modernity: she was, after all, only 25 when she came to the throne and would become a figurehead not of empire but of the rapidly expanding Commonwealth. The coronation itself, "articulated an optimistic British modernity in self-consciously different terms, emphasising social hierarchy and individual achievement rather than egalitarianism, and reinvoking Empire (in the new form of the Commonwealth) rather than focusing more exclusively on Britain as an island nation."¹⁵

The 1950s had myriad social problems but the decade also had a focus on technological change, economic stimulus and, crucially, the switch from empire to the much more equitable Commonwealth of Nations. The end of rationing in 1955 and the eventual economic boom that led the Prime Minister Harold Macmillan to declare that Britons had "never had it so

good,"¹⁶ paved the way for what Diana Vreeland would later term the "Youthquake."¹⁷ The traces of the focus on youth and modernity can be seen much earlier in the emergence of Rockn'-Roll in the late 1950s and by 1962, the year of *Dr No*'s release, it is very evident. The Beatles made their first recording at Abbey Road in June 1962, while the Rolling Stones played their debut gig at the Marquee Club the following month. On 6 August 1962, after months of buildup and preparation, Jamaica became the first Caribbean island to gain independence. While this transition to Commonwealth did cause consternation and wariness in some quarters, this seemed to stem less from concerns over the end of imperial rule and more from the impact that Jamaican independence would have on the Federation of the West Indies.¹⁸ Such concerns proved valid when the Federation faced dissolution as a result of its being "deserted" by Jamaica and Trinidad, ¹⁹ which followed Jamaica to independence a few weeks later on 31 August. For many communities, however, it was seen as the ongoing and very welcome process of modernisation; a photograph²⁰ donated to the National Museums Liverpool shows a multiethnic and multi-generational ball held in the city to celebrate Jamaican Independence Day.

It was in October 1962 that *Dr No* opened in Britain. In many ways the film was visually exciting, vibrant, and fresh. The posters, with their bright red and yellow colour scheme, depict a suave Sean Connery casually wielding both a cigarette and a gun; beside him are the sketches of four women, all in various states of undress. Sex and violence are implicit before we even get to the film itself. There had not really been a film quite like it before, certainly not in British cinema. While British cinema of the 1950s is not quite as staid as its reputation might allow – the introduction of the X Certificate by the British Board of Film Classification in 1951 resulted in a steady rise of films with increased violent and sexual content – *Dr No* feels almost un-British in its sheer lack of inhibitions and unashamed glamour. There had been successful franchises centred on British gentleman adventurers prior to Bond, notably RKO's B-movie series of *The Saint* (1938-41) and *The Falcon* (1941-6); and while both characters were at ease

with gun play and had a weakness for beautiful women, the films were very much characterised by traditional notions of British upper-class mores and reticence.

On screen, despite its tight budget of \$1.1 million, *Dr No* brings a sophisticated sheen to its proceedings by leaning in to the opportunities afforded by filming on location in Jamaica, and the soon-to-be independent Jamaica at that. The film avoids any ruminations on the imminent post-imperial nature of the island's identity and still positions the incumbents of Government House as the ruling body (an untruth, even at the time of filming).²¹ Despite this some of that end of empire can be felt in the film: as a character, Bond seems modern and brash against the colonial administrators at Government House. This may also have something to do with the casting: Bond has all the trappings of a privileged upbringing, but Sean Connery brings an edginess to the role that you certainly would not have got from a performer such as David Niven, who was once considered for the part. Similarly, Bond's relationship with MI6 chief "M" (Bernard Lee) is often that of the stolid Establishment figure trying to rein-in and control the much more dynamic, youthful and modern agent.

("Figure 1.1 here" – The three assassins on the harbour road.)

Today, it easy to spot the elements that would go on to be so recognisable in every Bond film that followed: beautiful locations, an assortment of glamorous women (some allied with Bond, some not), advanced technology, nefarious villains and a hyper-competent secret agent whose loyalty to Queen and country is never in doubt. However, watching *Dr No* it is also evident how unlike the rest of the franchise it is. The superficial differences are easy to spot from the start: the lack of a pre-credits cold-open, no prancing nudes while a popular singer of the day belts out the theme tune. The Maurice Binder-designed credits sequence leans into a proto-psychedelia of flashing multi-coloured dots accompanied by Monty Norman's theme; both dots and music segue into dancing silhouettes and then eventually silhouettes of the three blind assassins who open the action with Byron Lee and the Dragonnaire's version of *Three*

Blind Mice playing over the images. From this opening, inconsequential though it may be, elements of Jamaican culture are already embedded into the film. James Robertson's exemplary examination of the Jamaican links in the production argues that the film's "engagement with some Jamaican concerns" provides one of the distinct elements in *Dr No* that is never quite replicated in subsequent instalments.

The Jamaica of Dr No is captured in glossy, beautifully lit and composed shots that show off the island's natural beauty but there is also an element of authenticity. As we follow the three assassins through the streets of Kingston there is no attempt to disguise or prettify the surroundings: cars and buses pass by, locals go about their business. As the assassins tap their way through the streets they pass women carrying oversized bundles balanced on their heads, a man having a smoke by the harbour wall (Figure 1.1), until they reach the road taking them out of the city and onto the road to the colonial all white Queen's Club where the only black faces are the staff. For an outsider unfamiliar with Jamaica, it is establishing local colour; for an islander these would be known locations that fix Dr No into a very specific geography. Similarly, later in the film when Bond receives directions from the duplicitous Miss Taro (Anglo-French actress Zena Marshall playing a Chinese character), the instructions are so precise that they would be easily recognised by the local population: "Take the Port Royal Road out of Kingston. Drive on the Windward Road 'til you pass the cement factory..." It is one of the least glamorous locations for Bond to be lured to in this or any other film in the franchise, but these locations make very visible the burgeoning infrastructure, the investment in the island's future as it headed towards independence.

The view of Jamaica in 1962 to a domestic British audience at a time before mass low-budget travel provided not just a form of escapism but also an insight into a world that they would have little hope of experiencing. The use of authentic Jamaican locations – recognisable to both the local island populace and the Jamaican diaspora – alongside a number of Jamaican

actors and the use across the film of calypso and ska music (the latter also provided largely by the popular local group Byron Lee and the Dragonnaires) grounds the film in its locale. It is a very different experience of the Caribbean to that offered in *Live and Let Die* (1973) eleven years later where the island locations merely act as a backdrop to the action and (at best) questionable representations of race and a wholly distorted version of voodoo practices. For this first film, the presence of Fleming in Jamaica, working on further Bond novels at his home Goldeneye, and his involvement in the life of the island gave *Dr No* "remarkable local entrée." Even by the second film *From Russia with Love* (1963), this sort of embedding in the setting is signally absent. Given the involvement of Jamaican locals in the production, it is disappointing that the only Jamaican character of note, Quarrel (John Kitzmiller) is downgraded to a more "stereotypical eye-rolling" and servile role as opposed to the relative agency he has in the novel. Despite this, Marguerite LeWars who featured as the photographer Annabel Chung in the film and was crowned Miss Jamaica in 1961 speaks of the excitement and pride in *Dr No* amongst local audiences and the "magic" of seeing different locations around Jamaica spliced together. ²⁵

London as a location in the film is not as showcased as Jamaica and is limited to the casino where we first encounter Bond, his apartment and M's office; taken together they signify a London of some glamour, power and tradition. There is, however, a knowingness in the presentation of an idea of traditional, privileged Britishness, with the filmmakers clearly inviting the audience to recognise and enjoy the absurdity of the story and its characters. While the film is neither comedy nor satire, it is playful and this sense of playfulness and knowingness at the expense of received ideas of upper-class Britishness contribute to the feeling of freshness and modernity in the film as a whole. In a DVD commentary, director Terence Young explains how the slow reveal of Connery in Bond's introductory scene at the casino, Le Cercle, was intended to be funny. ²⁶ This includes the lighting of his cigarette to break up the line, "Bond...

James Bond," with the timing designed to elicit a laugh from the viewers. Bond's flirtation across the gaming table with Sylvia Trench (Eunice Gayson) introduces another aspect of the Bond character – that he is not, perhaps, the best spy around given that he cheerfully uses his real name in all situations, hands over his telephone number to a woman he has just met, and his address is so easy to find that she locates his flat and is able to let herself into it with no apparent difficulty. The playful banter between Bond and Sylvia hints that they may be previously acquainted but since this is never made explicit in the film there is always the possibility that they are not. Sandwiched in between his encounters with Sylvia is Bond's briefing by M and it in these scenes that the more traditional elements of Bond's and *Dr No*'s world are most evident.

("Figure 1.2 here" – Bond at home.)

The opulence of the casino gives way to the drab corridor and Moneypenny's plain office, hidden behind the door of "Universal Exports." Beyond that is M's office which, as production designer Ken Adam explains, ²⁷ is intended to invoke tradition and stability – even if the wood panelling was actually grained paper and the padded red leather door was fake. As Bond first enters M's inner sanctum he checks himself, a glance across at his boss who has not as yet acknowledged his presence, and for an instant has the guilty look of a child caught sneaking back into the house after curfew. That is exacerbated when M, still reading his notes, responds to Bond's "Good evening, sir," with the deflating statement, "It happens to be three a.m." The briefing proceeds and while Bond is clearly a trusted and valued agent there is also clearly the disapproval of his lifestyle from M who embodies the more Victorian values of discipline and self-denial. Bond's hedonistic tendencies are much more aligned with the individualism of the 1960s. Individualism is one of the elements that form the backbone of Arthur Marwick's characterisation of the 1960s. ²⁸ It is a discernible trait in myriad heroes and anti-heroes across the decade that, according to Jeffrey Richards, encapsulates everyone from

the Dracula of the Hammer Horror cycle (1958 - 1974) to Arthur Seaton of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960): "Initially symbols of a ruthless and exploitative upper class, they soon became transformed into the heroes of an era of sex, style and 'anything goes'. Like other heroes of the 1960s, their concern was with the self – 'What I want is a good time. All the rest is propaganda'".²⁹

Individualism and tradition are also in evidence when Bond returns to his flat which has a similar décor to M's office: forest green walls, prints of vintage cars, walnut hall tables and bronze fixtures (Figure 1.2). It has a distinctly old-fashioned feel, especially when contrasted with the bright colours and clean lines of the fashionable 1950s aesthetic in the wake of the forward-looking Festival of Britain in 1951. The Festival was focused on promoting British industry, technology and design and the overall style was "Contemporary", characterised as "clean, bright and new [...] In an island hitherto largely given up to gravy browns and dull greens, 'Contemporary' boldly espoused strong primary colours." The dull greens identified here are clearly visible in Bond's apartment, visually placing him in the tradition of the British gentleman. The contrasting individualism becomes apparent when Bond, aware of an intruder, enters his bedroom and discovers Sylvia clad only in his pyjama top and her gold evening court shoes. His instruction that he has to leave "immediately" for Jamaica soon becomes "almost immediately" – Bond's devotion to duty always has the potential to be side-lined, temporarily at least, for more personal pleasures.

Once Bond is in Jamaica, the aesthetic of traditional Britain exemplified in the décor of Bond's flat and M's office is associated almost exclusively with the colonial environs of Government House and Queen's Club. But these are the places in which Bond spends little time and appears both bored with and dismissive of the officials involved in the administration and governance of Jamaica. There are some traces of tradition evident in the lair of Dr No himself (the brass lamps, bearskin rugs and artworks would not look out of place in a

gentleman's club in London) the trappings of power for a Bond supervillain reflecting the privileged power of imperial Britain – the most prominent painting on display is Goya's portrait of the Duke of Wellington, which had been stolen from the National Gallery in 1961. The hotel Bond is booked into in Kingston, by contrast, is light, airy and (again) modern, reflecting the vibrancy of the soon-to-be independent nation. His allies during his mission are not the British stationed on the island, but the local fisherman-cum-fixer, Quarrel and C.I.A agent Felix Leiter (Jack Lord) – an acknowledgement of America as the popular embodiment of modernity, as well as the growing sphere of American influence, especially as Britain continued to withdraw from its former colonies in the Caribbean. The American presence points to the wider importance of American culture on the global stage but is is also worth remembering that the image of 'Swinging Britain' was itself influenced and to some extent shaped by American culture.³¹ While this is not central to the film's narrative, the placing of Leiter as one of Bond's key associates is another example of how Bond and *Dr No* in particular engage with negotiating the end of empire, and all of its traditional trappings, and the embracing of Britain's new role on the global stage and in the Commonwealth.

Much like Isaacs' identification of the Teddy boys as "darn fine lads" with "youthful spirits", Bond holds a dialogue between tradition and modernity that runs through *Dr No* and beyond: into the franchise as a whole and more widely across the 1960s. This dialogue, which affords potential for humour as previously discussed, also highlights a more complex issue: retaining traditional elements that are still situated as sites of stability and power in the face of a changing world inevitably gives rise to nostalgia and a sense that something of value has been lost in the process of change and renewal. Wiebe's examination of the 1953 Coronation identifies the problematic tension that arises when the quest for renewal is undertaken with an eye on the past: "Loss lurks in the rhetoric of New Elizabethanism, in the obsessive talk of war and hardship that the Elizabethans and the New Elizabethans had in common. The quest for

renewal is intermingled with an awareness of loss, which is expressed through the preoccupation with the past itself; the past, after all, can be many things, but it is always lost by definition."³² This loss in the 1950s and 1960s is almost always associated with the move away from the imperial structures of pre-war Britain. The decline of empire, the end of empire, the loss of empire – all of these phrases have been used in relation to the post-imperial era and specifically in relation to James Bond: the son of empire when the empire was gone. Yet, this sense of loss is seemingly absent from Dr No: even now, the film has a freshness and a vibrancy. Today we can certainly identify problematic areas around race, gender and class and these are areas that should be and are discussed, debated and analysed. But the film is also fun and funny. It sets out to entertain and it does. In the background of the scenes is a Jamaica that is diverse, that is full of national pride and on the cusp of its independence. The empire has gone but the ever-burgeoning Commonwealth links diverse communities across the globe and the emphasis is on equality rather than subservience to an imperial centre. Bond inhabits Jamaica with as much self-possession and confidence as he does Le Cercle and his own home and with the acceleration of British technological advances, design, creativity and sexual expression that would only increase as the 1960s advanced. These characteristics do not make him anachronistic but rather a man of his times.

The 2012 list of New Elizabethans encompasses so-called high and low culture and crosses class, gender and racial lines – you have to appreciate any list that includes playwright Harold Pinter and actress Barbara Windsor as figures of equal cultural importance. It feels fitting to be writing this in 2022, sixty years since Dr No came to our screens and seventy years since Elizabeth II came to the throne. Already this year there has been much reflection on the years of her reign and the changes that have occurred. Attitudes around class, sex, gender and race have been central to much of these discussions and the change from empire to Commonwealth is spoken of, on all sides, with apparent optimism – but there is noticeably

much more clear-eyed anger and justifiable criticism about the abuses and exploitation that were endured by nations and individuals under British imperial rule. In the coverage in Britain, overall, there is no sense of decline but rather of evolution, but evolution that acknowledges and incorporates elements of tradition and continuity, very much the way that James Bond has done and probably will do for some time to come. *Dr No* does not offer any definitive resolutions to the social and cultural concerns of 1962 – increased American-Soviet tensions, the US sphere of influence spreading into the Caribbean, for example – but it does show a Jamaica that will be just fine in its independence and a Britain that will be just fine without an empire. Better, perhaps, with willing allies rather than co-opted subjects. If a New Elizabethan is someone who can recognise both the good and ill of the past, can retain what is worth keeping – even if it's as superficial as a taste in interior decoration that runs to wood-panelling and leather Chesterfields – while engaging with the modern world on their own terms, then shake yourself a vodka martini and reflect on the fact that perhaps a New Elizabethan is a pretty good thing for Bond to be.

Endnotes

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