

British culture rules the world, says author

As Britain's imperial power diminished, its popular culture conquered the world, according to a new book. Should Britain congratulate itself on being willing to push boundaries?



It was known as 'the empire where the sun never sets'. At various points, it covered land in India, North America, Africa and Australasia; its rulers even claimed it included parts of Antarctica. For centuries, the reach of the British Empire extended into every corner of the globe.

The empire collapsed after the Second World War, as bankruptcy ravaged Britain and peoples around the globe demanded to govern themselves. Britain's political and economic reach was diminished. But according to a new book by Dominic Sandbrook, the nation has subsequently extended its rule in another way: through its popular culture.

Sandbrook argues that many famous British institutions and heroes have inspired global audiences. The adventures of schoolboys from **Billy Bunter** to Harry Potter have explored themes such as bullying, school spirit and the power of teamwork. The country houses seen in *Downton Abbey* and the books of Evelyn Waugh have delighted those who appreciate

aesthetic beauty and are fascinated by traditional ways of life. The Beatles captured the rebellious mood of the 1960s, while the operatic and orchestral showpieces of Benjamin Britten explored the ways in which individuals have struggled against hostile societies.

The arts play an important part in British public life. Over three-quarters of people attended the theatre at some point between 2010 and 2013. Creative industries also raise £8m per hour for the UK economy and tourists spend £856m per year on cultural experiences.

These industries have been influential around the world. The UK exported more than 600 TV shows between 2011 and 2014, with hits such as *The Office* and *The Great British Bake Off* being remade in numerous countries. In 2012 the UK's television exports raised £1.22bn. Meanwhile enduring products, such as the plays of **Shakespeare**, mix with the new, like the music of One Direction.

Eyes on Britain

Some say that Britain's cultural success is the result of our public-service ethos. Britain's film-makers, television producers and artists place trust in their audiences. They are unafraid to explore uncomfortable themes or complex ideas; such work inevitably strikes a resounding chord with everyone. How fortunate that commercial incentives do not force us to pander to viewers or readers.

Others respond that this is typically British arrogance. Britain invented *Big Brother*, a show which plays to our basest, most voyeuristic instincts. Other countries are perfectly capable of telling compelling stories, introducing us to fascinating characters and exploring themes with universal interest. And we shouldn't forget our biggest stroke of luck — the global reach of the English language.

Q & A

Q: I'm British — will this change what people abroad think of me?

A: Culture can have a subtle impact on the way in which people of different nationalities are viewed. Studies have shown, for example, that a nation's culture influences the way business

negotiations take place across national boundaries. But much of Britain's culture may play into previous perceptions of the country anyway.

Q: I want to go into the arts — is Britain the right place to study?

A: Britain has some excellent educational establishments in the arts. For example,

students from the National Film and Television School won the prize in all three competition categories in the international film and TV association's awards in 2013. CILECT, who gave out the awards, includes 160 schools from 60 countries.

YOU DECIDE

1. Does Britain make the best films, books, TV shows or music?
2. Is Britain's culture successful because it treats its audience as intelligent?

WORD WATCH

Billy Bunter – Bunter was a 14-year-old boy who featured in books published in the early 20th century. A TV series was made about him in the 1950s.

The 1960s – This decade is closely associated with challenges to traditional social norms. It was embodied by movements such as

ACTIVITIES

1. Draw a promotional poster for your favourite British film, TV show, book or band.
2. Research and create a timeline showing Britain's best cultural exports since the 1960s. Which do you think had the most impact on the world? Explain your view.

second-wave feminism, which focused on issues beyond mere legal rights (the main concern of first-wave feminists, in contrast, had been to win rights such as the vote). The invention of the contraceptive pill was seen as a particular advance for women. It was also the decade of hippy culture, civil rights demands in the USA, student riots and the Vietnam peace movement.

The Great British Bake Off – The format for

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'Art can change the world.'

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

the show has been bought by 11 European countries and five further afield.

Shakespeare – Shakespeare remains Britain's most enduring cultural export. His plays have been adapted into films in countries including India and Japan and credited with helping to inspire the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. The 2012 World Shakespeare Festival saw over 50 companies of different nationalities perform his work.

BECOME AN EXPERT

Read this article on theday.co.uk for links to recommended videos and further reading.

SHARE ARTICLE

 Twitter

 Email

 Notes