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## Signifying the Wasteland: Selling the “Falklands War”

I AM CONCERNED HERE with the literary treatment of the Falklands War and will analyse how the press, memoirists and political apologists for the Government’s management of the campaign employed literary discourses as a means of conditioning political response. I will also consider the extent to which these discourses deconstruct themselves, proffering a critique of the very policies they were intended to promote.

When Argentine forces invaded the Falkland Islands early on the morning of 2 April 1982, they gave the editors of Britain’s major newspapers as many headaches as the military and political leaders charged with recapturing the islands. British politicians and the media had, long since Peron’s rule, regarded Argentina—if not Latin America as a whole—as “Comic-Opera Land” (Curteis 60), a sinister Ruritania with occasional democratic interludes. David Brown, in his official history of the Royal Navy’s part in the Falklands War, summed up the political and military establishments’ disdain for the Argentines when he referred to them as “a nation associated mainly with corned beef . . . and Grand Prix drivers” (18).

Yet the portrayal of the Argentine junta as odious, if not risible, ill-suited the media’s representation of the British campaign to retake the islands as a moral and political crusade. As such, in an attempt to sell the war—and its newspapers and programming—to the public, the media

fitted Argentina into a dialectical interpretation of events. It portrayed them as an evil which the British counter-invasion, the good, was intended to resist. The media did this most often, and perhaps most successfully, through its conscious identification of the British campaign in the South Atlantic with specific incidents from the Second World War. According to Paul Fussell, "Our historical instinct about the (Second World) war, our 'myth' if you will, is that it constituted a notably moral common cause, one moment at least in our history when . . . greed, centrifugalism and jealous individualism briefly subdued themselves in the interests of virtue" (231). This myth, according to Paul Addison, enshrines the "essential purity" of a whole generation and offers a modern "parable of good and evil" (qtd. in Fussell 231), hence its repeated invocation in the accounts of apologists for the Falklands Conflict.

In the British popular memory of World War II, perhaps the most vivid and powerful representation of such commonalty in the cause of virtue is Dunkirk. Dunkirk has come to represent all that is best about, and most essentially British: selflessness, determination, courage in the face of adversity—not to mention a healthy dash of Francophobia. The favoured icons of Dunkirk, the little ships, orderly queues cracking jokes as they waited patiently on the beaches, exhausted Tommies itching to have another bash at the enemy, have been selected and memorialised into "Dunkirk," a flattering and highly literary image of national invulnerability to counter the less pleasing memories of defeat, disaster and panic, the other Dunkirk. Richard Collier's interviews with 1,070 eyewitnesses from Dunkirk and his study of the private papers of Lord Gort, Commander of the BEF (British Expeditionary Force), presents the other Dunkirk and offers few characteristically British virtues for one's commendation:

He quoted accounts of a hotel cellar in Dunkirk packed with British, French and Senegalese troops singing, weeping and screaming drunk; of groups of men, deserted by their officers, prowling the town in a mood of savage violence, of a major shot dead through the forehead by another because it was the only way of preventing him from capsizing an already overcrowded rowing boat. (qtd. in Knightley 237)

Clearly, the physical parallels between the evacuation from Dunkirk and the reinvasion of the Falkland Islands are minimal. As such, the explicit references to and more subtle evocations of “Dunkirk” in reports from and accounts of the Falklands War were intended to establish a moral equivalence between the two conflicts and convince the public of the virtuousness of the British cause.<sup>1</sup> What unites the Falklands War with “Dunkirk” is not historical or physical congruence, but a common, selective literary response to their respective events. Just as reports from Dunkirk emphasised the triumph of selflessness, courage, and national cohesion in order to evade and apologise for the colossal military blunders there, so coverage of the Falklands War invoked “Dunkirk” and its implicit associations as a means of generating a spurious sense of national unity over the Government’s handling of the South Atlantic dispute. Both “Dunkirk” and the “Falklands War” are in this sense, therefore, essentially literary images, bearing only scant relation to the historical events. Though invoked as an icon of national unity, “Dunkirk” stands as a byword for the literary laundering of dirty military and political truths, their reshaping in accordance with treasured national myths. It is in this sense that the reports from and accounts of the “Falklands War” truly evoke the Dunkirk spirit, in

their employment of literary devices—“Dunkirk” / the “Falklands War”—to manufacture an image of moral and political unanimity.

The media’s foregrounding of particular images of the physical landscape of the Falkland Islands, and its cultivation of specific, historically intended attitudes towards the land during the 1982 dispute offer an object lesson in the uses of literary symbols as a means of conditioning and manipulating political judgement. Yet, it should not be supposed that this kind of manipulation is an exclusively twentieth-century phenomenon. In 1769-70, Britain came close to war with Spain over the latter’s forcible removal of a British garrison from Port Egmont, a settlement close to the current site of Port Stanley, the Falklands’ capital. Under pressure from Chalfont’s opposition to exercise a military response to this “insult,” Lord North’s administration commissioned Samuel Johnson to write a pamphlet setting out the reasons why fighting should be avoided. Johnson’s argument covers a series of military, political, even moral reasons why war should be avoided. Yet, the point it constantly comes back to is that the Falklands are simply not worth fighting over.

Situated 480 miles north east of Cape Horn, the Falkland Islands had, until the early 1980s, enjoyed a relatively undistinguished history. Dutch, Portuguese and British mariners on their way around the Horn often passed by but rarely stopped in there. When they did, more often than not they were involuntary visitors: driven by the violent seas in those parts onto the lethal reefs and islets off the coast of West Falkland. These various sightings, and less frequent visits, brought the islands a dizzying array of names in the charts and travelogues of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries: the Sansons, the Sebaldes, Hawkins Land, the Falkland Islands, the Malouines, the Malvinas. Contention over the name of the islands symbolised and

inevitably led to disputes over their ownership. Centuries of debate over sovereignty to the islands have, however, been counterpointed by almost 500 years of international unanimity over the foulness of their weather and the poverty of the real estate. The log of an unknown ship on a voyage from Seville in 1540 recorded on landfall in the Falklands that “All this country is bare with not a bit of wood, very windy and very cold” (Hastings 13). Over four centuries later, Simon Weston, newly disembarked from the cruise ship *Canberra* with his colleagues from the Welsh guards was similarly struck by the barrenness of the islands: “There was nothing there. The Falklands are a god-forsaken place. The islands are empty, bleak, desolate, inhospitable. I never saw a single tree” (95).

Descriptions of this kind formed the basis of Johnson’s anti-war stance. The appalling climate and dismal topography of the islands, he implies, are cold, hard, and—usually drizzling—testaments to the poverty of the prize at stake and, as such, an indictment of the political zealots and their “feudal gabble” which, in defiance of the islands’ physical, strategic and economic irrelevance, would imbue them with an unwarranted international significance. As Johnson points out, the wind and rain will brook no contradiction, and no amount of rhetoric can alter the fact that the islands are little more than “a bog, with no better prospect than that of barren mountains, beaten by storms almost perpetual.” And this, he observes, with evident relish, “is summer.” Should lives be hazarded and battle joined for the islands, what spoils await the victor? “What, but a bleak and gloomy solitude, an island thrown aside from human use, stormy in winter, and barren in summer; an island, which not the southern savages have dignified with habitation” (369).

It is difficult to estimate the influence which Johnson’s pamphlet exercised at the time. What we do know though

is that war was averted, and the Falklands all but disappeared from the world stage until their reappearance over 210 years later. On this occasion, after Argentina's seizure of the islands, both the British and Argentine Governments committed their resources and their manpower to a brief but bloody struggle for the islands. What, one wonders, had happened to the Falklands/Malvinas in the intervening two centuries to make them worth fighting and dying over. What, in human and economic terms, did Britain and Argentina stand to gain from victory in the Falklands?

Had the past two hundred years seen the development of an economy worth fighting for? Lord Shackleton's 1976 *Economic Survey of the Falkland Islands* pointed out, in exhaustive detail, that this was far from the case. The economic mainstay of the Falklands is wool, and the islands' wool industry is dominated by the Falkland Islands Company (FIC), which in 1976 owned no less than 46% of the total area of the islands and 44% of its wool production. At the outbreak of the war in 1982, the FIC was owned by the Coalite group, which at the time had no directors, indeed not even a single shareholder on the islands. As such, it is no surprise that the company's central economic policy with respect to the islands was one of systematic decapitalisation. Without a voice on the Company board, and with only limited democratic facilities to express their disgruntlement—the islands were governed by an Executive Council, the majority of whose members were ex-officio or appointed by the Governor—many of the islanders lost hope and interest in the islands' future. This is marked by the steady decline in their population at an annual rate of 1.5% since the 1930s.

Two hundred years had, of course, done nothing to improve the islands' climate, which is as bleak as its economy. The first-hand accounts of journalists and

combatants who accompanied the task force to the South Atlantic are punctuated by their incredulous reflections on the hostility of the elements. In the introduction to his memoir of the campaign, the man who led the British assault on the Falklands, Brigadier Julian Thompson devoted over a page to the hardships of the terrain and the climate which his men overcame on their way to victory. "The climate," he felt,

was not as harsh as, say, Korea or Italy in Winter, but it was unpleasant enough. The combination of wet weather and around freezing temperatures can produce as many, and sometimes more, injuries as a considerably colder but drier climate. (xv)

Only then, parenthetically, indeed almost apologetically, does Thompson interject the briefest possible reference to the Argentine Army who, as he ruefully concedes, "when all was said and done" his men had to "close with and defeat" (xvii). Thompson's assessment of which of the two enemies posed the greater threat to his operation is further delineated in the index to his book which has ten entries beside "Argentine Army," and thirteen beside "weather conditions" (191, 201). Gareth Parry of *The Guardian* reporting from HMS *Invincible* conceded that the Royal Navy would much prefer to face the massed might of the Argentine military machine than the South Atlantic weather, whose offensive panoply he described in the kind of detail normally reserved for an analysis of the opposition's firepower. Aboard ship, satellite pictures were pored over, not to check the site of missile silos, or troop distribution, but the position of cloud formations and anti-cyclones. The threat of 88 and 105 calibre artillery paled into insignificance beside -15 and -20s: wind-chill factors, of course. And as

battle neared, sailors donned the appropriate protective clothing: not armour or flak jackets, but foul-weather issue and “once-only” survival suits.

The immediate prospect of battle off the Falkland Islands often seems nothing like as daunting as the possibility that some ships of the Royal Navy task force could be ordered to stand off, or into a lengthy blockade in some of the worst weather—which is already steadily deteriorating. The latest satellite reports, received directly by *Invincible* ... paints a grim picture of autumn in the Antarctic, where the depth of winter comes in July. Senior officers contemplating a stand-off say that the prospect would be ‘almost intolerable.’ (Parry 2)

Yet in spite of the islands’ economic depression, commercial and strategic insignificance and their vengeful climate, neither the British nor the Argentine administration had much difficulty in justifying their decisions to invade. This was because the Falklands had been transformed, by a process of literary and cultural association, into the “Falklands.” The barrenness of what one journalist described as “those God-forsaken monuments to desolation sometimes known as the Falkland Islands” (McGowan 9), far from standing as an indictment of the invasion, was mobilised as one of its primary motivating factors. Indeed, the islands’ “desolate and wretched aspect” was their greatest asset, as it expedited their translation from a source of political and military embarrassment into a rallying point for and a symbol of national regeneration: their transformation from the Falklands into the “Falklands.” As Jonathan Raban noted:

The very barrenness and monotony of the islands themselves, together with their tiny population, gave them the lucid purity of a symbol. Their blankness was their point: you could make them mean nothing or everything. And England had run out of symbols. Over this windy weekend (Friday April 2 - Monday April 5), it was busy writing meaning into the Falklands, making that undulating desolate land *signify*. Between Friday morning and Sunday afternoon the Falkland Islands accumulated a huge bundle of significations. They meant Tradition, Honour, Loyalty, Community, Principle—they meant the whole web and texture of being British. (113)

Raban's assertion was tumultuously borne out in *The Times's* editorial of April 5 which, without a flicker of self-conscious irony, informed its readers:

WE ARE ALL FALKLANDERS NOW.

The national will to defend itself has to be cherished and replenished if it is to mean something in a dangerous and unpredictable world . . . We are an island race, and the focus of attack is one of our islands, inhabited by our islanders. At this point of decision the words of John Donne could not be more appropriate for every man and woman everywhere in a world menaced by the forces of tyranny: "No man is an island, entire of itself. Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee." It tolls for us; it tolls for them. (*The Times*, 5.4.82, 9)

“Falklanders?” “Us?” “Them?” It is the editorial’s implicit aim to erase these distinctions, and it was able to do so effectively precisely because of the islands’ ravished rural aspect and its village-sized population. According to Anthony Barnett,

. . . the joining together of support for the Armada from distinct, and even antagonistic, sectors of the population was partially shaped by shared, historic attitudes of nostalgia towards an ‘empty’ countryside, at once as remote and as mythologically intimate as Ambridge. (102)

Ambridge, I should explain, is the fictitious country village from where *The Archers*, “an everyday story of countryfolk” has been broadcast daily since 1951. “There is some corner of the English mind that is forever Ambridge,” noted David White, who went on to claim that Ambridge, and the rural archetype which it embodies, “represents an ideal living state” (qtd. in Wiener 78). E.P. Thompson and Martin Wiener, among others, have pointed out that the idea of the countryside as a moral, spiritual, and social ideal is an immensely potent cultural myth in Britain where there is still a widely held tradition that one has to go back to nature for real values: and where there persists, what Anthony Barnett terms a “country-cottage fetish.” In the light of this, as Wiener claims, the countryside is “available for use as an integrating cultural symbol” (48), a means of erasing the distinction between “us” and “them,” which is exactly how it was used in the media’s construction of the “Falklands.”

The first pictures of the Falklands after the dispute broke out were of empty, greenish, undulating expanses, somewhat redolent of the Scottish highlands. Old ladies in camel-hair overcoats and opaque stockings, with woollen scarves tied

on their heads to keep off the drizzle, and the ubiquitous shopping bag over their arms, strode down narrow lanes choked with armoured cars and their gun-toting Argentine custodians. As Fred Halliday put it, “it was as if the Nazis had taken over the Archers” (qtd. in Barnett 101). The first photograph released to the press after the British re-invasion, though certainly not the first one available, was a nakedly propagandist shot of a Royal Marine enjoying a cup of tea, with a family of Falkland Islanders smiling behind their white picket fence.<sup>2</sup> The world policeman, it told us, could also be a friendly village “bobby.”

Back in Britain, much play was also made of the Falklanders’ common racial and cultural heritage with the British. Jonathan Raban recalled:

They were visibly, audibly, our kith and kin. A family of Falklanders, holidaying in Britain, had been exhibited on television. Even by wintry English standards, they were white. It was the way they spoke, though, that made them so evidently worth fighting for. Their voices had a tinny quality, as if they were being played through a gramophone needle with dust on it, but their accent was loudly Home Counties. They all talked in the voice which, heard across the distance of a *souk*, or a patch of jungle, in some remote quarter of the world, puts you instantly and depressingly in mind of gin and tonic, cavalry twill, the next monthly mortgage repayment, brussels sprouts, tea cosies, *Journey’s End* at the amateur dramatic society, the Magimix in the kitchen and the Queen’s head on the stamp. (101-2)

As utterly removed as they were from “the complications of substance,” the islands, noted Anthony Barnett, were “a perfect stage for the exercise of *Principle*” (69). Meaning nothing, the islands and their population could be made to signify whatever the media or the Government wished. As such, during the progress of the war, the wasteland and its occupants came to bear the imprint of the most sacred principles for which the British had purportedly gone to war: democracy, family, community. The Falklands were calculatingly reconstructed as the “Falklands.”

Yet, it is worth taking a closer look at how adequately the Falklanders and their islands lived up to the principles with which they were so readily identified. To what extent, for instance, did they exemplify the principles of family and community; to what extent did they prove *The Times*’s assurance that “WE ARE ALL FALKLANDERS NOW”?

According to Jonathan Raban “we” identified with the Falklanders less out of an inclusive sense of familial unity than from their status as an uncomfortable image of ourselves, a kind of colonial mirror mirror on the wall. The Falklands,

by a funny twist of chance, they occupied precisely the same latitude in their hemisphere as the British Isles did in theirs: at 51° 46’S, Port Stanley was the Hemel Hempstead of the southern world.

More than that, the Falklands stood anchored off the coast of South America very much as Britain stood anchored off the coast of Europe. You only had to look at the atlas to see that the identity of the Falklanders, like that of the British, was bound up in endless aggressive assertions of their differences from the continental giant across the water.

The Falklanders were us, but they were us in looking-glass reverse . . . In this miniature inverted cluster, the British had hit by accident on a perfect symbol of themselves. The Falklands held a mirror up to our own islands, and it reflected, in brilliantly sharp focus, all our injured belittlement, our sense of being beleaguered, neglected and misunderstood. (101-2)

Yet, these apparent similarities prefigured rejection of the Falklands by the British. The British and the Falklanders were, therefore, irrevocably separated by the very similarities which apparently united them. Far from it being our intention to unite ourselves with this demeaning self-image, “we” meant to violently cast it from us and, through battle, assume a new identity which would forever distinguish “us” from the Falklanders. The Falklanders were to be restored to their status as an unmistakable other—“them:” “us” as we once were but will never be again. As such, the Falklanders represented not a stimulus to family, national, or international unity, but a goad to self-assertive isolation. Our main similarity with the Falklanders was that just as they aggressively asserted their differences from their continental neighbor, so “we” asserted our differences from “them:” “us” and “them” thus remain firmly in place as polar opposites.

It was not only in symbolic terms that the Falklanders fell short of their role as symbols of family and community. Patrick Bishop and John Witherow, two of the journalists who accompanied the task force to the South Atlantic recalled their first, anti-climactic moments on the Falklands:

The first door we came to was the home of Alan Miller, the farm-manager (at Port San Carlos). Round at the back they were handing out cups

of minestrone soup to the newcomers. We talked to them for a bit. They had never doubted that the British Army would arrive sometime so were not all that surprised to see the soldiers. They quickly lost interest in the subject of the invasion and one of them went on to ask if we had ever come across his son who lived in Illminster. (78)

In the light of the publically proffered myth of military/civilian unity, it is ironic that it should be a familial reference which exposes the absence of any fellow-feeling between the islanders and the soldiers. The Falklander's enquiry about his son does not reflect an attempt on his part to ally himself with his liberators through a strategic reference to a common national or familial heritage. On the contrary, his interest in his own immediate family gives the measure of his lack of interest in the current military venture and those members of his international family risking their lives in it. He employs the image of the family not as an inclusive demonstration of commonalty, but as an exclusive expression of emotional dissociation.

Subtle expressions of coolness between troops and civilians soon gave place to more overt displays of hostility on the arrival of the troops in the Falklands capital, Port Stanley, where the local sentiment was given violent expression by Des King, the landlord of the Upland Goose Hotel. His outbursts not only articulated what seems to have been a broader consensus among the islanders but also hinted at the roots of their hostility. Robert McGowan and Jeremy Hands recalled that when they were "guests" in the hotel:

Some officers had been invited in by the £20-a-bed, three-beds-to-a-room, journalistic guests, and it was clear that this was not a popular

move. Des King, the landlord, had been drinking for some hours, and had been scowling from his bunker behind the bar. Now it was time to open fire. His face red with rage, he launched a salvo at point-blank range against the chiefs of 2 Para, Lieutenant-Colonel David Chaundler and his number two, Major Chris Keeble.

“First the fucking Argies,” he stormed, “now you lot. When are you going to clear off and leave us in peace?” (273-4).

By interrupting and eventually destroying the same isolated, rural peace that had been so carefully deployed to generate a sense of “our” community with the Falklanders, the soldiers ultimately guaranteed the degeneration of this spurious unity into mistrust, antipathy, and outright hostility. As such, it is clear that the military were the victims of the media’s mismanagement of the very discourse designed to guarantee the popularity of their venture—for in going to war with Argentina, the British guaranteed the destruction of the very rural idyll which they purported to defend.

Indeed, the extent to which the Falklands embodied the principles of a wholesome rural life—the ruddy cheeked good health, moral probity, social harmony, and community cohesion with which it was so closely identified by the British media—is open to question. How did the Falklands live up to its billing as a South Atlantic Ambridge? The image of the tranquil, rural village as an ideal is closely bound up with, if not predicated upon the urban dystopia which it offers a moral and social alternative to, yet which it also helped to create. As Martin Wiener noted: “The vision of a tranquilly rustic and traditional national way of

life (which) permeated English life originated with massive depopulation of the actual countryside'' (48-9). Significantly, Patrick Bishop and John Witherow's first description of the Falklands owed more to the urban than the rural environment and could hardly be less idyllic or less rural:

Port San Carlos was a collection of square corrugated iron buildings, painted the cream and green of old southern railway stations. The houses were surrounded by a jumble of chicken coops, sheds and vegetable patches. It looked like a seedy corner of thirties outer London suburbia. (78)

These images of urban dilapidation offer a register of dissatisfaction, a measure of the discrepancy between the Falklands and the "Falklands," a vocabulary of dissent to those whose experience of the islands exposed the falseness of the media's construction of them.

Far from symbolising an alternative to the urban malaise, the Falklands manifested many of its traditional social vices, not least poor housing, and community fragmentation.<sup>3</sup> Almost a year after the war finished, 500 relatives of British servicemen killed and buried in the Falklands, travelled to the islands to visit the graves of their lost relatives. Their dissatisfaction with what they found there is, notably, expressed in terms of the islands' failure to live up to the media image of the rural ideal, and its approximation to an urban slum: "To many of the passengers on the Cunard *Countess*, the islands were nothing like they had expected. Port Stanley had looked like a shanty town from the sea and close up it was not much better" (Carr 144). For Don Pryce, who lost his son in the war

. . . the journey held personal memories of his visits to the Falklands in the late Sixties as an engineer on the British patrol ship, *HMS Protector*. Don remembered how he had not been allowed into the Colonial Club in Port Stanley, which admitted only officers and certain Falkland families. He said he noted that the same place existed and that his son, not being an officer, would also have been ineligible, “and yet he gave his life for those people to go on living like that.” (qtd. in Carr 145)

For Simon Winchester, who had spent the duration of the war incarcerated in the world’s most southerly jail, in Ushuaia, Argentina, on charges of spying, the best way to express the contrast between the ideal, pre-war community which he remembered, and the post-war scene, racked by civilian-military tensions and internecine community strife, between the “Falklands” and the Falklands was, similarly, in the stark opposition between rural and urban:

It had been nearly four months since the little LADE Electra had dipped down through the autumn rains onto the runway. Then, Stanley had looked like a remote western Scottish village, green and windswept and rain-washed. Now, as the great transport plane bumped down through the afternoon mist, my dominant impression was that I was being dumped into some infernal scrapyard, an urban nightmare splattered, all oil and twisted black metal, in the middle of some muddy field. (214)

The rural ideal, the “Falklands, ” could not survive the war: familiarity with the Falklands guaranteed that. Nor,

for that matter, did the principles for which it was employed as a vehicle last much longer. The ideals for which the war was purportedly fought were as chimerical as the glimpse of a beautiful village through the rainswept window of a light aircraft. From a distance, the "Falklands" may have looked like the promised land; but a closer inspection revealed nothing more than the jerry-built shanties, and the barren expanses: the broken promises of the politicians writ large, and the manipulations of their sycophantic media stripped bare. □

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For references to Dunkirk see, *inter alia*, Raban 219, *The Guardian* 20.5.82.

<sup>2</sup> For an analysis of the censorship of visual images from the Falklands War see Morrison and Tumber 178-83, and Mercer, Mungham, and Williams 148-50.

<sup>3</sup> For details of social problems in the island see Honeywell 4-5, and Shackleton.

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