

## What the Olympics didn't say about Britain's place in the world

*Danny Boyle's Olympic opening ceremony left the British media swooning, with much of the international media likewise impressed, if slightly befuddled. However, [Eric Taylor Woods](#) argues that the event organisers missed a chance to show the positive and negative aspects of Britain's central role in world history.*

Since the conclusion of the 2012 London Olympics, much has been written about what this festival of sport can tell us about Britain today. This short essay is also written in a reflective mood, focusing on the opening ceremonies and producer Danny Boyle's account of modern British history. What concerns me is what the opening ceremonies didn't say about Britain's place in the world.

Following the opening ceremonies, there was debate over the centrality given to the NHS and Britain's multicultural demography. I find it remarkable that there has not been a similar debate over the rather inward-looking and parochial image of Britain that they presented. The opening ceremonies' portrayal of the history of Britain as occurring almost entirely within Britain seems to be now so widely accepted as to have become a 'fact' in the British imagination. Indeed, few questioned London Mayor Boris Johnson's assertion that the ceremonies depicted the 'truth'. Is Britain suffering from collective amnesia? How could the opening ceremonies ignore the huge span of history between the industrial revolution and the First World War, when Britain irrevocably changed the course of global history?

Britain is perhaps more deeply entangled with the world than any other country, yet nowhere was this in evidence in the opening ceremonies. It seems that the ongoing controversy over the meaning of Britain's imperial history, as to whether it should be celebrated or mourned, has led many Britons to prefer to willfully forget Britain's engagement with the world altogether. Does Britain's controversial global history mean that it must now reconstruct a hermetic image of itself? I hope not. Without reference to Britain's global history, there is no way to properly understand the contemporary world, much less Britain or its contemporary multicultural demography.

The opening ceremonies paid tribute to modern Jamaican migration to the UK. Yet, it is not by chance that the largest diaspora of Jamaicans in the world resides in Britain: it is a legacy of Britain's troubled colonial history. And while the ceremonies made much of the impact of immigration on Britain, there was no mention of British emigration. This is a baffling omission. Britons are more prone to emigrate than any other country, apart from China and India. A recent report by the Institute for Public Policy Research asserts that there are approximately 112 countries that contain 1000 or more British citizens. And where ever the British have settled *en masse*, they have left an indelible mark, bringing with them their language, traditions and symbols. Rightly or wrongly, this colonial legacy has persisted. Queen Elizabeth II remains the constitutional monarch of 16 sovereign states. Even the Union Flag cannot be said to be solely the symbol of the United Kingdom. Dozens of provincial and national flags contain variations of the Union Flag.

Perhaps I am biased because, although I have been living in Britain for six years, I was born and raised in Canada – a country whose British legacy is impossible to avoid. It is in the constitution, on the currency, and on numerous monuments. It is written into its national history and it reverberates through ongoing struggles among Aboriginal Canadians, English Canadians and French Canadians. I cannot even properly understand the history of my home city, which was founded by English temperance colonists on land that was secured via treaties between Aboriginals and the British Crown, without recourse to British history. But I am sure that it was not just Canadians that were surprised by the parochial vision of Britain portrayed in the opening ceremonies. Across the world, from Kenya to Hong Kong, there were surely others surprised by the representation of Britain as an endogenous, slightly esoteric nation.

Pointing to the hundreds of languages that are now spoken in London, Olympics chairman Sebastian Coe referred to the city as the most cosmopolitan in the world. But to define London as a cosmopolitan city because of its multiculturalism is to miss the meaning of the word cosmopolitan. London is a cosmopolitan city because it exists in the global imagination. Much as it is an important symbol in the British national imagination, it is also an important symbol in other national imaginaries. It is not by accident that I dreamed of moving to London. Similarly, it is not by accident that London is the backdrop for so many films made in Bollywood.

Britain is so much more than the circumference of the British Isles. Britain was, and is, an important part of the world. There is no way of willing this away. And I would argue that Britons should not seek to do so. There must be a way of acknowledging and celebrating Britain's place in the world without appealing to imperial nostalgia. Openness to global influences on Britain, and Britain's influence on the global, is surely better than retreating from the global altogether.

*Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

### **About the author**

**Dr Eric Taylor Woods** is a postdoctoral fellow at Birkbeck, University of London. His edited book, with Eric Kaufmann and Robert Schertzer, [Nationalism and Conflict Management](#), is now available. Presently, he is finalizing a book on the acknowledgement of the injustice, with particular reference to settler-indigenous relations in Canada as well as co-editing a book on the role of rituals and performances in the forging of national identity.

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