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Bloody old England

by [Andrew Roberts](#)

On A. N. Wilson's *After the Victorians*.

A. N. Wilson is one of Britain's most impressive, important, and versatile writers, the author of nineteen novels (including the superb five volumes of *The Lampitt Chronicles*), as well as fourteen works of non-fiction, among them biographies of Tolstoy, Milton, C. S. Lewis, Iris Murdoch, and St. Paul. He also writes penetrating and highly opinionated columns in the *London Evening Standard* and the *Daily Telegraph*, usually on intellectual themes. He is a man who must be taken seriously.

Like most highly intelligent people, Wilson doesn't stand on ceremony; he enjoys teasing, and he never thrusts his brilliance or scholarship down his readers' throats. His history of Britain's decline between the death of Queen Victoria and the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II is therefore compulsively readable. Americans who take pleasure in the fact of Britain's collapse in power in the first half of the twentieth century will relish every page, not least because so much of that collapse is attributed to the deliberately anti-British policies of successive U.S. administrations, primarily those of FDR and Harry Truman.

Long before the United States appears as Britain's scheming nemesis, Wilson has painted a powerfully evocative portrait of British life as it was really lived. The author's sheer breadth of sympathies and interests is astonishing, and his views can be accepted as wise and accurate on virtually every single facet of British political, social, cultural, and intellectual life—*except* her relations with America and Americans. In this Wilson exhibits a failing common to all too many of his (and my) countrymen: the assumption that somehow the world in general and the United States in particular owe Britain a living.

The book opens with the accession of King Edward VII—"Edward the Caresser," as he was nicknamed—after the death of the Queen-Empress Victoria. The immediate clearing-out of his dead parents' effects from Windsor, Balmoral, and other royal palaces by the new king had more than a touch of the fanatical about it, as though he'd been waiting decades for the chance to erase the unhappy memories that such bric-à-brac evoked. "Alas!" the king's wife, Queen Alexandra, wrote to his sister Vicky, the dowager empress of Germany. "During my absence, Bertie has had all your beloved Mother's rooms dismantled and all her precious things removed."

That might serve as this book's template for Britain in the first half of the century. Everything precious that had been laboriously built up by the British since 1837—as chronicled in Wilson's last book, *The Victorians*—was in the process of being dismantled and removed by the time the Queen-Empress's great-great-granddaughter was crowned in Westminster Abbey in 1953. British greatness, sapped to the dregs by the exhaustion of fighting two world wars, was on the way out even before the Suez Crisis of 1956 italicized the new geopolitical truth.

There is a rumbustious new body of revisionist history in Britain today that argues that the country didn't in fact decline at all, and that because living standards improved hugely over the period, and because Britain is still one of the top five world economies, and because we were on the winning side of both world wars and escaped invasion, that she has nothing to complain of about her post-1900 experience. To set against that cheeriness is Evelyn Waugh's contention, made at the time of the death of King George VI, that his sixteen-year reign between 1936 and 1952 had been the most disastrous for Britain since that of King Stephen. Britain's Empire, prestige, financial balances, military security, and, worst of all, her self-confidence had all vanished (although that can scarcely be laid at the door of her good-natured, well-meaning king).

As his book's subtitle suggests, Wilson inclines to the Waugh analysis—as does this reviewer. Yet he then goes on to explain Britain's catastrophic decline in terms not of a collapse in morale as a result of the bloodletting and ruinous expense of two colossal global conflicts, so much as of a deliberate campaign by successive White Houses to strip Britain of her Empire, prestige, financial balances, and so on. In fact, all that really happened in the immediate aftermath of the World War II was that the United States picked up the mantle of the English-speaking peoples once the British had shown themselves too exhausted, poor, and demoralized to carry it any further themselves. By not extending any special favors to her former ally after 1945, America did not discriminate against Britain, she merely reverted to the peacetime status quo ante.

Wilson's denunciation of the United States' leadership for dropping the atomic bombs on Japan in August 1945 is a passionate piece of sustained political and moral polemic, but it utterly fails to convince. "It took tremendous lies, of a Goebbelsesque scale of magnitude, to persuade two or three generations that instead of being acts of gratuitous mass murder, the bombardments of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were almost benign," he fumes. Racism, "Bible Christianity," a desire to show the Bomb off to the Soviets, all contributed to the "obscenity" and war crime, he states.

Yet two pages after the "Goebbels" blood libel on President Truman, Wilson records what happened a full five days *after* the Bomb was dropped on Nagasaki: "On 14 August a thousand Japanese soldiers stormed the Imperial palace in Tokyo to try to prevent their emperor from humiliating himself by announcing the surrender of the Empire to the United States." With that degree of fanaticism prevalent in Japanese Army, how can anyone not accept that the dropping of the bombs was the only possible way of ending the war, short of an unbelievably costly full-scale invasion of the Japanese mainland?

The one lacuna of the caustic presentation of American motives and actions aside, *After the Victorians* is a magnificent achievement. Read purely as a history of Britain herself, with her foibles and vanities, her sudden enthusiasms and her idiosyncratic popular culture, it could hardly be bettered. And throughout the book—as in the example cited above—Wilson always has the intellectual honesty and self-confidence to provide facts that allow one to hold an entirely different point of view from the author.

One of Wilson's anecdotes relating to British philistinism serves to sum up what many Britons simultaneously most love about our country and must despair about it too. When Thomas Hardy's seventieth birthday was approaching in 1910, Herbert Asquith's private secretary telephoned Buckingham Palace to suggest that a congratulatory telegram be sent to "old Hardy." Mr. Hardy of Alnwick in Northumberland, who made King George V's fishing rods, was soon afterwards surprised to receive royal congratulations on achieving an age he hadn't reached, on a day that wasn't his birthday either.

Of course, no one wants intellectuals for monarchs, not least because they might want to involve themselves in the political process; our two brainiest kings were Charles I and George III, and it is no

coincidence that they were also the two most catastrophic failures in politics and colonial affairs respectively. The House of Windsor, in its general repudiation of things of the mind, fits in well with a robustly anti-intellectual people. As John Betjeman put it:

Dear old, bloody old England
Of telegraph poles and tin,
Seemingly so indifferent
And with so little soul to win.

No one is more closely in touch with the soul of “dear old, bloody old England” than A. N. Wilson. Strip away his baleful view of the Special Relationship—which from his references to George W. Bush and Donald Rumsfeld has clearly been affected by the Iraq War—and this still stands as one of his finest books.

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