Cultural promotion and imperialism: the Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council contesting the Mediterranean in the 1930s

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Citation for published version (APA):
CHAPTER 3

CONSTRUCTIONS OF ‘ITALIANITÀ’ AND ‘BRITISHNESS’

Both the Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council intended to promote an image of their national culture. How this image was constructed and communicated, differs greatly between the two organizations. The way in which concepts of italianità and ‘Britishness’ were defined, reflects the role that culture was given within the internal national politics of Italy and Britain. Not surprisingly, given that the nation-state Italy had only been created in 1861, ‘Italianness’ remained an abstract idea, described in terms of spirit and genius. With Mussolini’s rise to power, ‘italianità’ also began to embody specific values and a model of society, the corporatist state. Yet the Italianness that the Dante Alighieri Society divulged remained very much defined by the Romantic ideal of the national soul expressed through the arts. Despite the totalitarian nature of the state that the Dante was functioning in, its Italianness never showed the same degree of consistency as the idea of ‘Britishness’ held high by the British Council. We see from the publications of the British Council that it had a very consistent representation of ‘Britishness’ and, unlike the Dante, sought to promote particular British institutions, such as its parliamentary democracy, its justice system or its educational system.

In this chapter we shall have a closer look at how italianità and ‘Britishness’ were represented by the Dante and the Council respectively, taking into account a number of aspects. What kind of national characteristics were emphasized? How were the national cultures positioned with respect to modernity or tradition? How did the Dante and the Council respond to the emerging mass consumption of culture in their choice of image? The italianità of the Dante will be studied using the case of the cruises that the Society organized for its members and a number of articles in its internal review, the Pagine della Dante. In the case of the British Council, we will analyse how it gave shape to ‘Britishness’ through its internal review Britain Today.

Cultural pilgrimages across the Mediterranean

The italianità of the Dante Alighieri Society presupposed a special focus on the Mediterranean as Italy’s natural and age-old sphere of influence: its Mare Nostrum. One of the ways in which the Dante manifested Italy’s relationship with the Mediterranean area, was the organization of yearly cruises for its members. These cruises, starting in 1927, poignantly illustrate how the
nationalism embodied by the Society showed many traits of a secular religion. They also underlined the hierarchy implied in the relationship between Italy and its Mediterranean neighbours and show how modern tourism could serve to consolidate national identity.

The President of the Society’s Committee in Milan, Filippo Mezzi, was the main organizer of this initiative and he always accompanied the participants. Reports of each trip appeared in the Society’s bi-monthly review, *Pagine della Dante*, and the cruise was a regular item on the agenda of the Society’s Annual Congress. Consequently, the messages that were to be conveyed through these cruises were not only transmitted to those who participated and the people they encountered on their journey, but also to the readers of the *Pagine* and the Annual Congress attendees, thereby enlarging the scope. In most cases it was Mezzi himself who spoke at the Congress or wrote the account. The number of participants was generally between 150 and 200 persons. The account of the 1934 cruise mentions that on that journey members from 30 different Local Committees were present, although the majority came from Rome, Milan, Turin or Bologna, making it likely that these people mainly belonged to the urban, well-to-do classes of Italian society.

Various benefits were attributed to the Dante cruises, both practical and ideological ones. Under the former, we can see the creation or revitalisation of local Dante Alighieri Committees abroad. For example, not long after the Dante travellers had visited Cyprus (1930), a new Committee was formed there.\(^1\) Similarly, an account of the group’s stop in Fez (1931) mentions that a first seed was laid for the setting up of a Committee in this city.\(^2\) One can also imagine that the preparations leading up to a cruise aided the Dante Central Council’s efforts to have a better grip on the various foreign Dante Committees. Arranging the visits to the foreign Committees required contact between the Dante headquarters in Rome, the Milanese Committee and the foreign

\(^1\) ‘Per l’insegnamento dell’italiano all’isola di Cipro’ in: *Pagine della Dante* 1 (1931) 22.

Committee in question, possibly giving this contact new impetus. As was the case with the Dante Alighieri Society as a whole, the economic advantages were not forgotten either. Ensuring the Italian spiritual prevalence in the world (“prevalenza spirituale nel mondo”) was seen as a key instrument in obtaining a greater economic foothold in the area.³

Such practical arguments were seldom explicitly referred to. At the forefront were the ideals of national brotherhood and spiritual expansion. Mezzi believed that it was in foreign territory that an Italian felt himself to be more Italian than ever. He remembered seeing an Italian man who had stood by the railway track in a deserted area between Oudjda and Oran, just because he had heard that a train with Italians would pass – in casu the participants of the Dante Alighieri cruise – and wanted to be there to greet them. We may conclude from this very plausible thought that whilst cruise participants themselves may have been the ones feeling more consciously Italian as they travelled around in foreign countries, at the same time the Italian emigrants they met on their way would have both reinforced that sentiment and recognized it as being their own. In this process, the nationals abroad would confirm the nation’s legitimacy and identity. Furthermore, the journeys brought participants into contact with new horizons, with the lives of Italians abroad and the ‘natives’, giving them the opportunity to compare the Italian spiritual values with local ones.⁴

The Italian government fully endorsed this activity of the Dante Alighieri Society.⁵ At each location the travellers were welcomed by the Italian consul or ambassador, invited to a reception at the Italian Legation or an Italian club, introduced to the secretary of the local Fascist bureau and proudly presented to the Italian ‘colony’ and the local authorities. In a number of his accounts, Mezzi tactfully addressed words of gratitude to Piero Parini, the head of the Scuole Italiane all’Estero (the department of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in charge of Italian schools in foreign countries). Undoubtedly a certain prestige was gained from the fact that the third cruise had close family members of the Duce among its participants: the wife and son of Arnaldo Mussolini, the Duce’s younger brother.⁶ Governmental endorsement, however, also meant extra security. There is evidence that the Ministero dell’Interno was prepared to grant passports to the participants of the 1929 cruise, but not without first checking these members’ political history (“dovrà però subordinarsi ad accertamenti circa precedenti politici richiedenti”). The validity

⁴ Ibidem.
⁵ ACS, PCM, 1931-1933, Busta 1519, Fasc. 3/2.4, Anno 1931-1932, N. 3858, Crociere indette della Società Nazionale Dante Alighieri. This file contains correspondence between Mezzi and Mussolini regarding the official “nulla osta” for the itiniraries of the cruises.
of the passports would be limited to the period of time needed for the cruise.\(^7\)
This is a reminder of the controlled freedom of movement inherent in
Mussolini’s by now dictatorial government: a reality that the Dante, like all
organizations, willingly or unwillingly had to take into account.

*Reviving the Roman heritage*

Significantly, the initial seven cruises altogether covered the Mediterranean
area, in accordance with the priority that was given to strengthening the
“coscienza mediterranea” (Mediterranean consciousness) of the Dante Alighieri
members.\(^8\) It began in 1927 with a cruise to Tunisia, Malta and Tripoli, shifting
to the east the following year to cover Rhodes, Constantinople, Athens and
Zante. Having covered Tripoli, in 1929 the cruise returned to the Southern coast
of the Mediterranean to introduce its participants to Cyrenaica (Benghazi,
Cyrene, Derna and Apollonia) and Egypt (Cairo, Alexandria, Luxor, Aswan
Dam). The Holy Land was one of the next destinations. In 1930 the group
stopped at Jerusalem, Bethlehem, the Dead Sea, Jericho, Nazareth, Lake
Tiberius, Damascus, Baalbeq, Beirut, Magugust, Nicosia and Larnaca. The
cruise of 1931 covered Morocco and Algeria. The following year, the focus
partly shifted away from the Mediterranean to Vienna, Spielberg, Budapest,
Sinaia, Bucharest, Sophia, and back again to Constantinople and Athens. After
that the cruises moved on to northern Europe, Scandinavia, the Baltic States and
across the Atlantic to the United States and Brazil.

What is the symbolical significance of those sites that were chosen for
the Dante Alighieri Cruises in the Mediterranean? The most obvious locations
were those connected to the Ancient Roman Empire, Roman heritage that
appeared to prove the age-old Italian spiritual influence in the Mediterranean
area. In Baalbek (Lebanon), the cruise participants were impressed by the
extraordinarily imposing pre-Roman stone constructions and the Trilithon
monoliths; raised stones of such size that until this day the building techniques
employed remain a mystery to archaeologists. Yet it was the grandness of lines
and the refined detail of the Roman temples and propylea built above these
giant stones that drew their attention.\(^9\) In the Bay of Tangiers, those on board
thought of the legend of the sweet-smelling Garden of Esperides, but Mezzi
especially recalled the four centuries of triumphant Roman domination in this

\(^7\) ACS, SPD, Carteggio ordinario 1922-1943, Busta 1199, F. 509641/509644, F. 509461/1,
Società Nazionale Dante Alighieri, Roma, Varia: Telegramma, Ministero dell’Interno ai
Prefetti del Regno, Ufficio Cifra, 10 dicembre 1928, ore 21.15.

\(^8\) ‘Una nuova crociera mediterranea’ in: *Pagine della Dante* 6 (1927) 133.

region. The Roman past left a promise for the future. On top of the Roman ruins of Djemila and other traces of Roman domination of Numidians and Mauritanians in Algeria and Morocco, which were an invaluable document testifying to the Italian nation’s roots, Mezzi felt that the Italian community in Algiers represented the new Italy that would pave the way to the future.

Secular pilgrimages

Given the symbolic significance that was attached to the Dante tours and the choice of destinations, I would argue that these travels ought to be interpreted as secular pilgrimages. Parallels between pilgrimages and modern-day tourism have been frequently drawn. As has been well illustrated elsewhere, it is the experience of the visitor that makes the difference between the two polarities between pilgrims and tourists. The pilgrim experiences the place visited as a holy site, a site of metaphysical significance, and travelling to the site is felt to bring about an internal, spiritual change. In the case of the Dante Alighieri cruises, during each of these journeys a number of the places visited were obviously meant to inspire a certain reverence and to strengthen the sense of ‘Italianness’ and of ‘Mediterranean consciousness’ among the participants.

Mezzi himself repeatedly wrote about the cruises in terms of “peregrinazioni”. Regarding his decision to include the Cyrenaica in the programme for 1929, a destination usually left aside by tourists, Mezzi explained that the Dante Alighieri Society in its pilgrimages had to be inspired by what emblazoned or roused the Society and not by ordinary tourism criteria. The following year, upon the company’s return to the ports of Naples and Genoa, Mezzi’s reflections were centred around even deeper spiritual motives. The fatherland seemed more sacred and cherished when the participants were abroad, where they found so many brothers who held up high their sense of patriotism. There they felt the voice of duty calling them to fulfil Dante’s mission, to engage in the “beautiful and glorious battle” for the expansion of the Italian language and the Italian genius as expressed in science, arts and in the way of living. In the case of these nationalist cruises, the spiritual benefit was felt not only by the pilgrim but also by the co-nationals he or she encountered on the way. In making the presence of the Italian language and culture felt, the cruise participants - according to Mezzi - were contributing

to a spiritual action, meant to reinforce the patriotic soul of the faraway brothers.\textsuperscript{14} Not only the visited sites and the mission were given a pious significance; so were the travellers themselves, who Mezzi described as being above all a symbol, the embodiment of the Dante Alighieri Society with its shining halo of its ideals (“la Dante coll’aureola fulgida delle sue idealità”).\textsuperscript{15}

It is not a peculiarity of Mezzi’s to have written about the Dante Alighieri cruises in terms of pilgrims and spiritual missions. Senator Ettore Tolomei, who took part in the 1931 cruise to Morocco and Algeria, referred to the voyage as “that African and Latin pilgrimage of ours” (“quel nostro pellegrinaggio africano e latino”).\textsuperscript{16} Writing about how his eight years of teaching at Italian schools in the Levant made him personally feel more like a veteran than a pilgrim during the cruise, Tolomei described those years as being “the apostolate of the teacher abroad” (“apostolato del professore all’estero”) which he exercised “with sincere passion” (“con sincera passione”).

\textit{Paying homage to the dead}

Another element that gave the cruises the quality of a pilgrimage, whilst subtly conveying the idea of a legitimate Italian rootedness in the Mediterranean area, was the visit to Italian burial sites.\textsuperscript{17} The modern imperial conquests had required the sacrifice of Italian men and the monuments to these heroes were part of the itinerary. In the Cyrenaica, at Marsa Giuliana, a bronze wreath was placed at the Monument to the Fallen, a tribute to those who fought for the military conquest and to the brave pioneers in the agricultural colonization of the area.\textsuperscript{18} At Derna the cruise participants were welcomed by a dense crowd of people, authorities, associations, schools, members of the Fascist youth movement (“gagliardetti fascisti”) and “indigenous people in their fantastic costumes” (“indigeni nei loro fanstastici costumi”) carrying gaudily coloured local flags, and by the sound of Italian national hymns being played. Again, this time presumably accompanied by the lively crowd, the Dante members made a long procession to the Monument of the Fallen.\textsuperscript{19} A third such commemoration during this cruise took place in Cairo, where a bronze wreath was deposited at the memorial stone for the Fallen Soldiers in the building that housed the Italian schools. Balilla, Piccole Italiane, Avanguardisti and all the schoolgirls

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{14} Mezzi, ‘La «Dante» nel Marocco ed in Algeria’, 30-33.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Mezzi, ‘La «Dante» nell’Oriente Mediterraneo’, 59.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Ettore Tolomei, ‘Con la quinta Crociera della «Dante»’ in: 	extit{Pagine della Dante}, 2 (1931) 34-35, 34.
\item \textsuperscript{17} George L. Mosse, \textit{Fallen Soldiers. Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).
\item \textsuperscript{18} Mezzi, ‘La terza crociera mediterranea della “Dante”’, 51-52.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Ibidem, 52.
\end{itemize}
attended the ceremony. The cruise to Morocco and Algeria in 1930 was less laden with commemorations. It seems that only in Algiers, during a reception in the Casa degli Italiani, flowers were placed before the memorial stone for the Fallen of the Great War and the Martyrs of the Fascist Cause. A stop in Bucharest during the cruise of 1932 allowed a group of representatives to pay homage to the two thousand Italian soldiers buried around a monument at the Genchea cemetery.

Occasionally the travelling Dante members paid their respects at less likely monuments, meant apparently to express solidarity with other nations who had fought for independence. In Budapest they stopped at the Monument for the Unknown Soldier and at what was referred to as “the Square of Liberty”. Probably the latter was what is officially called the Heroes’ Square, the location of a monument for the leaders of the seven tribes who founded Hungary as well as other national heroes. The square had only been completed in 1929 and in 1932 there still may have been some confusion about its name. Mezzi in his account mentioned a plaque quoting Mussolini’s words about peace treaties not being eternal. When cruise participants sojourned in Istanbul, which Mezzi called by its older name of Constantinople, Hakki Pasha had just returned from talks in Rome that had revived the Italo-Turkish relations. Hence the Turkish press was reported to have paid friendly attention to how the group of Italians laid a wreath of flowers at the Republic Monument at Taksim Square. This monument to the creation of the Turkish Republic that had only recently been unveiled - in 1928 - was commissioned by Kemal Atatürk and designed by an Italian sculptor, Pietro Canonica. The fact that an Italian had created a central symbol of Turkish nationalism was no doubt an important additional incentive for including it in the Dante travellers’ itinerary.

In these latter cases we find again the Mazzinian ideal of Italy as a nation among nations who all deserved their own place. Hence, the President of the Dante Alighieri Society, Paolo Boselli, in his farewell message urged the participants of the 1928 cruise to carry the tri-coloured flag.

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20 Ibidem, 53.
23 Ibidem.
24 Ibidem, 240.
with the effigy of Dante as a sign of brotherly union with all people who work for national rights, for the victories of civilization ("segnacolo di fraterna unione con tutte le genti che operano per i diritti nazionali, per le vittorie della civiltà"). De Marchi too was not immune to this idea of solidarity between nations, writing about the 1928 cruise that the hearts were united in wishing well for the future of the Adriatic nations.

*Cultural crusades*

Given the frequent references to pilgrimages in the report on the Dante Alighieri cruises, it is not surprising us that the Crusades also featured in this context. Boselli, in his above-mentioned farewell at the start of the 1928 tour which included Rhodes, made allusions to the Knights who vindicated Christian culture. The visit of the island inevitably included the Palace and the Hospital of the Knights of St. John, who later in history sought refuge on Malta and are hence also known as the Knights of Malta. However, an unambiguous admiration for the Crusaders transpires: De Marchi spoke of the Mediaeval architecture being so evocative “as to make us suddenly live once again in the age of the heroic defence of Christianity in the Orient” (“da farci rivivere di colpo nell’epoca dell’eroica difesa della Cristianità in Oriente”). Symbolically, the Local Committee of the Dante Alighieri Society was housed in the Palace of the Tongue of Italy, properly known as the Inn of the Order of the Tongue of Italy, where a copy of the old flag of the Italian Knights still hung.

The fourth cruise, in 1930, had as destinations Palestine, Syria and Cyprus. The biblical sites of Jerusalem, Bethlehem, the Dead Sea, Jericho, Nazareth and Lake Tiberius were all on the programme. A smaller delegation met with the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Monsignor Barlassina, and with Father Marotta, Father Custodian of the Holy Land. It may well be that the decision to visit the Holy Land was inspired by the concern about the custody of holy places in that region. In the May-June 1929 issue of the *Pagine della Dante*, an extensive article by the prominent member Eugenio Coselschi (as of 1933 director of the Fascist Action Committees for Roman Universality) called attention to this issue, focussing on the custody of the Room of the Last Supper

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27 Boselli, ‘Messaggio alla Crociera’.
28 De Marchi, ‘Echi della Crociera mediterranea’, 29. The Knights of St. John had been organised in eight Langues (Tongues), namely Provence, Auvergne, France, Castile and Leon, Aragon, Italy, England, and Germany, each of them housed in separate buildings, known as Auberges (Inns).
(or Coenaculum) in Jerusalem. The Italian government claimed to be the rightful custodian of the Room of the Last Supper, on the basis of the site having been bought in 1333 from the Sultan of Egypt by the King of Naples, who left it in the care of the Franciscans. The Treaty of Sevres (1920) had foreseen the creation of a special Commission charged with taking into examination the various claims made by religious communities in Palestine. However, due to the many controversies surrounding the issue, the commission was still not officially formed. Coselschi was particularly bitter about the British role in this process, which he considered extremely biased.

The grievance makes clear there were possibly reasons for a special visit of the Dante Alighieri to Jerusalem, even if Mezzi in his report made no mention of the group going to the Room of the Last Supper. But, above all, the Lateran Accords of 1929 must have been crucial for the timing of this cruise. With these accords the Vatican as a sovereign state was recognized by the Italian State, bringing an end to a conflict that dated from 1870, when the Papal States were made part of unified Italy. This reconciliation between Church and State marked a growing use of Catholicism within Mussolini’s internal cultural propaganda. It is striking, but not surprising, that in the Dante Alighieri Society, with its original reputation of having many Freemasons and atheists among its members, gradually strengthened and even preached the relationship between Italian national identity and Catholicism.

**Missionaries of modernity**

Besides treasuring the traces of their national past, the participants of the Dante cruises appear to have been missionaries of modernity in the Mediterranean, presenting Italy as the bringer of scientific and cultural progress. The travelling group, when not on board of a steamer was being transported with speed by a string of cars. Repeatedly, there was mention of the building of a Casa d’Italia having just been completed. Near Benghazi, the group went to see the experimental fields and the Park of the Littorio, where Italians were bringing about an agricultural rebirth of the area. Know-how was being provided in Egypt too. Mezzi boasted that the Aswan Dam was a huge modern operation, which owed its success largely to the knowledge and manpower of the Italians involved. Crossing over Morocco by car from Fez to Taza and Oudjada, close to the border with Algeria, the Dante voyagers came into contact with Italians who were employed to build a railway within three years, in order to improve the agricultural development of the area. During a long car race from Sinaia to

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31 Mezzi, ‘La terza crociera mediterranea della «Dante»’, 52.
Bucharest, a planned stop at the Agenzia Generale Italiana Petroli (AGIP) oil-rigging site had not taken place. But after an excursion in the Rila Mountains near Sofia, the cruise participants were surprised in the open countryside by a large banner with the words: “Viva la Dante Alighieri!” and an Italian crowd offering refreshments. These were the managers and workers of the Società Generale di Costruzione, who were building a large aqueduct for bringing water from the Rila Mountains to the capital city.\(^{33}\)

All the pride and excitement about Italy’s achievements of modernity seem to have been concentrated in the euphoria surrounding Italo Balbo’s transoceanic flight in 1933. Balbo, at the time a very young Minister of Aviation, flew between 1 July and 12 August with a team of 25 aeroplanes from Rome to Chicago and back. The Dante ‘pilgrims’ were crossing the Mediterranean Sea from Spain to Morocco just as Balbo and his team were on their way home aboard the ocean-liner Conte Rosso. At midday on deck, the cruise participants spotted the passing Conte Rosso and immediately the ship’s siren was called, the flag was hoisted and everyone waved handkerchiefs at the heroic pilots sailing by.\(^{34}\)

*Italy’s widespread presence across the Mediterranean*

After 1933, the itineraries of the Dante cruises concentrated on the northern part of Europe, but the particular attention for the Mediterranean remained. Much of the symbolism and importance given to the Mediterranean during the cruises was reflected in the official view of the Dante Alighieri Society, as expressed in the articles and the reports of the Annual Congress published in the Society’s periodical *Pagine della Dante*. Throughout the interwar period, strong opinions were voiced through the *Pagine* about the question of the Italian language in Malta and in Corsica, and about Italy’s colonial ambitions along the North African coast. Taking a closer look at a number of representative articles that appeared between 1929 and 1937, we can see how the Dante Society’s

\(^{33}\) Mezzi, ‘Con la «Dante» dallo Spielberg al Bosforo’, 239.

\(^{34}\) Mezzi, ‘La «Dante» nel Marocco ed in Algeria’, 30.
Mediterranean policy became evermore geared up towards the re-establishment of a Roman Empire.

The larger role Italy was expected to play in the Mediterranean is vividly illustrated by a speech given at the 36th Annual Congress in Siracuse, in October 1931. There to pronounce this speech was the archaeologist Giulio Quirino Giglioli. In his extensive report on the state of affairs of the Italian cultural presence in the Mediterranean, in particular there where the Dante Society was taking the lead, Giglioli mentioned a wide range of historical arguments to support the idea that Italy was destined to dominate this corner of the world. The opening of his speech, touching upon a document he saw many years before in the Historical Museum of Athens, set the tone. The document in question was a passport that Lord Elgin, the British Ambassador in Constantinople, had issued for a Greek patriot more than a century ago. Although the British Empire had been at its peak when this document was made, it had been written in Italian, here and there with traces of Venetian dialect. Italian was then the common language in the Mediterranean, as was also illustrated – Giglioli pointed out – by Chateaubriand’s description of his travels through the Middle East in 1806.35

Giglioli regretted that this age-old cultural dominance had come to an end by the beginning of the 20th century. But he was proud to say that, after some first positive steps with the occupation of Libya and the Dodecanese Islands (settled with the First Treaty of Lausanne in 1912), the decline was definitely reversed with the rise of Fascism. Giglioli described Tripoli as having become one of the most enchanting cities of the Mediterranean, with all of Tripolitania benefiting from the new roads the Italians had made and the agriculture that they had revived. Cyrenaica too was to have a great future, both in terms of production and of Italian population. Freed from the nomadic populations that opposed civilisation, the land was expected to rapidly regain civilized conditions.36

However, there were also many cities in foreign states where large numbers of Italians, members of “our prolific race” (“la nostra razza prolifica”) were living. Giglioli quoted figures from the census taken by the Directorate General for Italians Abroad (Italiani all’Estero) halfway through 1927. The numbers of Italians then registered in Greece were 7964, with a strong nucleus on Patras, where 2,880 of the 3,650 Italians were born locally; proof of the tenacious nationality of the families, Giglioli added. On the European side of Turkey, mainly in Constantinople, 9,500 Italians were counted, and on the Asian side 5,306. Egypt was home to a far larger group (49,106), as was the case in Algeria (28,528) and Morocco (10,402). The greatest colony was in Tunisia, the land regarded as a continuation of Sicily, “enriched by blood of our blood,

36 Ibidem, 150.
by very noble Italians against which in vain the oppressive foreign enemy”, i.e.
the French, had tried to fight. There 97,000 Italians resided of which 57,000 were
born on African soil and were “no less Italian in blood, language and heart”. 37

Teaching Italian language and culture

According to Giglioli, the Dante Alighieri Society had realized from the start
how important it was to support the teaching of Italian to its co-nationals
abroad, especially in the Mediterranean. The Committees in Tunis, in
Alexandria and in Constantinople were among the most active, soon followed
by many others, he recounted. Italian language and culture had to be spread
not only among the co-nationals, but also among the elite of the local
population, for whom Italian could be the means of connecting to western
civilisation. 38 Looking at the data in the Annual Report of Italian Schools Abroad
(Annuario delle Scuole Italiane all’Estero), Gigliogli concluded that the
Government, the Dante Alighieri Society and other bodies had done much to
increase teaching abroad but that still very much more could be done. In
Tunisia, for example, only ten thousand pupils had been to an Italian
government or Dante Alighieri school, as many as in Egypt where half as many
Italians lived. In Greece, where many hundreds of Greeks were following
courses, attending lectures and using the library of the Dante Alighieri Society
in Athens and Thessalonica, admittedly among the cultural elite French was
still more widespread. Hope was expressed for the rapid setting up of a centre
of advanced learning on Rhodes, which would function as a lantern of Italian
science and civilisation to irradiate the whole Orient. 39

Totally undisputable was the status of the Italian language and culture
in Malta and Corsica. Giglioli considered these lands undeniably Italian, by
way of geography, lineage, language, tradition and history. It was therefore
natural that people in these areas wished to be reunited to their Fatherland.
Giglioli made sure to underline that the Dante Alighieri Society fully respected
the political state of affairs and was embarking on a peaceful mission to merely
favour and defend the Italian language and culture everywhere, both in areas
that belonged geographically to Italy and those that didn’t. The Maltese had
always been faithful to the British Crown and did not deserve to have their
language and culture taken away by the anger of “a maniac”, as Giglioli
described Strickland, the British governor of Malta. In Corsica, the French rule
had long ago removed the Italian from official usage but the language had
taken refuge in the dialect spoken inland, which was thought to be one of the

37 Ibidem, 150.
38 Ibidem, 150.
39 Ibidem, 152.
purest Italian dialects, with generally a noticeable Tuscan influence. To convince the audience, Giglioli quoted the local poet Santu Casanova, writing about the loss of language being worse than the loss of liberty, whereby it was made clear how similar the Corsican dialect was to Italian.\footnote{Ibidem, 159-160.}

Giglioli clearly disapproved of the anti-Fascist circles in Paris, in his view the only ones to have denied their Fatherland. The vast majority of Italians, Giglioli claimed, were patriotic and grateful to the National Government and to Mussolini for having renewed the prestige of Italy and for not having forgotten them. He dreamt of a day when every Italian child abroad would have not only an Italian school, but also maternal care, when every sick Italian would have an Italian hospital, every community however small its own Italian church where to pray to God in Italian, and a Casa d’Italia to nurture his soul and maintain his own language, his own nationality.\footnote{Ibidem, 163.} According to Giglioli’s prediction, as Italy grew to its full power, there would also be more foreigners gathering around its cultural institutions and Italy would be once more what he felt it deserved to be: the centre of civilization. The Dante Society was placed squarely at the head of this movement.

Finally, Giglioli gave an example of what he considered to be a praiseworthy initiative: the holidays in Italy organized for the children of Italians abroad. In a phrase that echoed the Parable of the Prodigal Son, Giglioli described these favoured children of the Nation (“figli prediletti della Nazione”) as being redeemed. Having seen Rome and heard the Duce, they would return to their foreign countries with Italy in their hearts forever, aware of belonging to a great nation and decided on being its faithful soldier in war and peace, for an even greater Italy.\footnote{Ibidem, 163.}

**Promising a Pax Romana**

By 1937 the rhetoric within the Dante Alighieri Society definitely took over the triumphant imperialist tones of Mussolini’s propaganda apparatus. Italy had invaded Abyssinia, a move condemned by the League of Nations and punished ineffectively by means of sanctions. Abyssinia had been merged with Somaliland and Eritrea to form Italian East Africa. Public indignation about this war meant the British and the French could no longer try to keep Italy on their side, thinking of a possible German offensive. While Mussolini’s image abroad changed from that of a strong and necessary leader for Italy to that of a dangerous aggressor, the idea of a Pax Romana that would reign once Italy could play its natural leading role in the Mediterranean became ever more
prominent in the pages of the Dante Alighieri Society’s review. A speech held in 1937, at the Annual Congress in Naples, by Gaspare Ambrosini, professor at the Royal University of Palermo, and subsequently published in the *Pagine*, portrayed Italy as the mediator of the Mediterranean, naturally predestined to lead the cooperation between the countries in that area.\(^43\) Not only the geography of the peninsula and the history that connected it to all Mediterranean cultures, but also the Italian temperament was seen as the most ideal one. No people had a temperament like that of Italians. According to Ambrosini, it was the most suitable temperament to bring other countries closer to each other and to understand their needs, their mentality and their material and spiritual necessities, and respond to them. The Italian temperament had what Ambrosini called the sense and the character of universality and of harmonising the opposites. Commercial influence and military power were not enough to sustain this role. This task required a captivating superior idea and more “intimate human factors, spiritual factors”.\(^44\) Now, thanks to Fascism, Italy had both the ideal and the power to fulfil this spiritual need, Ambrosini triumphantly asserted.

As in previous speeches, the large numbers of Italians living in the other countries around the Mediterranean Sea were listed, the investments of the Fascist Government and the Dante Society in schooling abroad was praised, the Italians in Egypt and Tunisia were encouraged to continue keeping their patriotism alive and the ‘Italianness’ of Malta was reaffirmed. A special mention was made of the Course for High Culture that was by now being given on Rhodes, meant to illustrate past and present relations between Italy and the Levant, and to teach foreigners about Italian culture. An alleged Bulgarian course-participant was quoted as being “grateful to this Sacred Institute, true hearth of this luminous culture” destined to lead the world.

Interestingly, Ambrosini paid particular attention to the issue of Italian custody of those places in the Holy Land that were vital to what he called


\(^{44}\) Ibidem, 39.
‘Latin-Catholic’ civilisation (“civiltà latino-cattolica”). Since the British had been making proposals for a division of Palestine, the focus had been on the Jewish-Arab relations in the area. Ambrosini viewed the Italian custody of the Holy Places as a problem that still needed to be solved with justice.\footnote{Ibidem, 37.} An aspect of Ambrosini’s rhetoric that was not referred to so outspokenly in previous issues of Pagine, was the decidedly anti-communist position he took. The pacifist declarations of the Soviet government were accused of being deceiving. To launch a universal revolution and establish a worldwide soviet republic could not but mean infringement of international law. The Bolshevist propaganda in Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria incited class struggle and local nationalisms, causing unrest and danger. Libya, by contrast, where the Italians kept out such propaganda, was described as a scene of harmony, where the local populations were grateful to their Italian rulers for being so well taken care of. Throughout Ambrosini’s speech an emphasis was put on the non-aggressive rule of the Italians, who did not oppress other civilisations or religions but harmoniously brought them together, offering them understanding and justice. The publication of Ambrosini’s speech in the Pagine was followed by another one of Giglioli’s appraisals of Italy’s role in the world. As one of the organizers of the Mostra della Romanità in Rome, Giglioli spoke about the Augustan traces throughout the world. The second empire of Rome was thereby implicitly compared to that of Augustus, suggesting the advent of a new Pax Romana.\footnote{Giulio Quirino Giglioli, ‘Orme augustee nel mondo’ in: Pagine della Dante 4-5 (1937) 40-41.}

The mass emigration of Italian labourers having by now been recast into a symbol of Italy’s abundance and its generosity towards the world, in the late 1930s the Dante Alighieri Society published the first volumes of a series entitled Civiltà italiana nel mondo. Each volume would show what Italian ingenuity and labour had created abroad. The initiative was intended as a contribution to the series that Mussolini had launched in 1931: L’opera del genio italiano all’estero. This series was published by the Ministero degli Affari Esteri and was meant to comprise more than sixty volumes.\footnote{The only twelve volumes to be appear were published between 1933 and 1962, meaning that the project continued after the Second World War.} Among the countries that the Dante’s more modest scheme would focus on were Argentina, Brazil, England, France, Germany, Malta, Poland, Russia and Tunisia. Volumes on Italian civilization in Austria, Corsica, Czechoslovakia, Dalmatia, Egypt, Hungary, Romania, Spain and the United States of America were also being planned. By way of prelude, the series began with Avanguardie d’Italia nel mondo (Italy’s vanguards in the world), written by the anti-Semitic Fascist writer Paolo Orano.\footnote{Paolo Orano, Avanguardie d’Italia nel mondo (Rome: Dante Alighieri Editore, 1938).} The list of content mentioned Saint Francis of Assisi, Marco Polo, Italian art in France, Leonardo da Vinci, America as an Italian name, Giacomo
Quarenghi as the architect of the Russian tsars, Bernardino Ramazzini as the creator of social hygiene, emigration as creative source and Italy’s Fascist mission. Several of the authors that contributed to the series were not convinced Fascists, such as the slavicist Ettore Lo Gatto and the writer Mario Puccini. As the Pagine announced, every Italian reader was expected to feel profoundly touched and extremely proud upon reading books from this series. This was because they would show how no other people on earth had given so much to the civilization and the wellbeing of others.

A Christian soul with a Mediterranean conscience

All the above examples illustrate how the Dante Alighieri Society was primarily infused with a Romantic national ideal, whereby the arts and the products of Italian ‘genius’ were thought to embody the national soul. As we have seen, this nationalism had the traits of a secular religion. The attention given to ritual, which the Dante may also have inherited from its Masonic roots, seemed to give the national identity an almost transcendental value. Italianness became even more of a spiritual matter when, parallel to Mussolini’s reconciliation between the initially modernist Fascist movement and the Roman Catholic Church, the Dante’s anticlerical element waned and the notion of Italianità became bound to (Latin) Christianity.

By attaching particular importance to the Mediterranean conscience (“coscienza mediterranea”) as part of Italian citizenship, the Dante gave Italian identity the semblance of belonging to a ‘natural’ habitat that historically and geographically stretched across the Mediterranean Sea. It was common among contemporary Italian scholars to write about Italy’s primordial leadership in the Mediterranean and even to draw parallels between on the one hand the high ideals that motivated the imperial Ancient Romans, equated with Italy, and on the other hand the egoistic ‘Semitic mercantilism’ of the Phoenicians, now embodied by Britain.49 These theories rested on ideas of the Mediterranean already invoked during the Risorgimento but could just as well serve Fascist imperial propaganda. Gradually the nationalist mission of the Dante coalesced with the guiding principles of Italian Fascism, although even then much of the rhetoric remained abstract, filled with ideals that were open to different interpretations. For example, the Dante did not systematically promote corporatism as a concrete socio-political model that Fascist Italy could offer. Because of the interconnection and abstractness of ideals it is difficult, if not

pointless, to seek clear distinctions between between cultural and political propaganda, and between Dante’s Risorgimento ambitions and Fascist world views. Hence, in the second chapter the process of ‘fascistization’ is investigated in terms of the evident changes in the decisional structure of the Dante, rather than in its rhetoric.

In recent years academic research into the appropriation of the Middle Ages and Renaissance by the Fascist regime has demonstrated that an amalgam of these two periods of history was also instrumentalized – in festivals, urban planning and architecture - to suggest a continuity between this past and modern, Fascist Italy. An example of such appropriation is the never-realized plan to build a so-called Danteum in Rome, that would have served as monument, museum and library dedicated to Dante, symbol of national unity.50 Once the Dante Alighieri Society accepted Christianity as being a fundamental part of Italian civilization, it would have been logical for the Dante to take advantage of the Fascist revival of the Medieval/Renaissance past by also emphasizing this element of *italianità*. Yet in the Dante’s activities abroad, Italy’s Roman heritage was more frequently referred to than its Medieval/Renaissance legacy, with the exception of the figure of Dante himself who was however ‘lifted’ out of his historical context.

**The Projection of Britishness**

‘Britishness’ was no less a complex idea to promote than *italianità*, even if Great Britain as a political unity had a longer history to speak of. In 1707 the Act of Union formally united Scotland with England under the Kingdom of Great Britain. Ireland, which had been incorporated in 1801, had in 1922 regained independence with the exception of Ulster. Although internal tensions existed, as proven by Ireland’s nationalist aspirations and Scottish attachment to its own judicial and education system, the Kingdom had to some extent managed to create an idea of ‘Britishness’. In the Victorian age this had become closely intertwined with the Empire. Given the fact that the Empire too was being threatened by emerging nationalist movements, what specific image of British culture did the British Council promote? This is a question that has remained untouched in much of the research on the Council done so far.51


For an organization that repeatedly claimed not to be engaged in propaganda but to merely “make the life and thought of the British peoples more widely known abroad; and to promote a mutual interchange of knowledge and ideas with other peoples”, the British Council presented a remarkably consistent image of what it considered to be Britain’s essential qualities. The icons of this constructed imago can be traced in two of the British Council’s publications: the review *Britain To-day* and the series *British Life and Thought*. What were the recurring themes? What values were praised? Englishness as a distinct cultural identity, not automatically equated with Britishness and Empire, had been elaborated since the 1880s and received a boost from the Great War. How interchangeable did the concepts of Englishness and those of Britishness nevertheless remain? And how were Britain’s international position and its relationship with its empire portrayed?

**Format and circulation of Britain To-day and British Life and Thought**

The first issue of *Britain To-day* appeared in March 1939. The purpose of this review, as expressed in the foreword of its first issue, was “to bring the friends and, for that matter, the critics of Great Britain into closer touch with current happenings in our country”.

As the title suggests, its prime focus was on the current developments in British society, from innovative approaches in industry and in local or central government, to cultural movements. Providing this information was beneficial for the world at large, for were not all nations facing similar challenges of the modern world? In spite of political and cultural difference, *Britain To-day* argued, did not all countries have the task of:

> [...] improving and adjusting the civilization handed down to us by our ancestors: a civilization which has a common basis although its expression takes different forms suited to the genius of particular peoples.

It was a question of sharing best practices and of offering the fruits of British civilisation to its Dominions, Colonies and the world at large. In giving such

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54 Foreword, *Britain To-day*, 1 (17 March 1939) 1.
55 Ibidem, 1. Note that this quote seems to suggest there was some influence noticeable of the Boasian anthropological idea of the uniqueness of each culture, as opposed to the more traditional British concept of different stages of development in a universal human civilization (Mandler, *The English National Character*, 157-159).
information, *Britain To-day* claimed to be providing a background to the ordinary news.\(^{56}\) In the foreword there was also a clear invitation to send comments and suggestions for any subjects that readers wished to see further explained.

*Britain To-day* generally contained three articles and a number of photographs or drawings: in total sixteen pages of reading-matter and four pages of illustrations. The articles were free of copyright, presumably with the intent of encouraging the reprinting of the content by foreign press. Initially it was a fortnightly publication, but as of January 1942 it became an extended monthly publication. Rex Leeper himself, the mind behind the creation of the British Council, wrote some of the anonymous articles in the initial phase.\(^{57}\) After the first year, the name of the author was more often added to the article.

To start with, *Britain To-day* had a print run of five thousand and was distributed for free to “carefully selected mailing lists”.\(^{58}\) With 68,000 copies in 1941 and more than 120,000 in 1934, the circulation reflected a steady increase in popularity. The review was (in some cases intermittently) published in several languages besides English: French, German, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese. Most of its readers were located in Europe’s neutral countries, the United States of America and South America.\(^{59}\)

The projected series of brochures on *British Life and Thought* was first mentioned in February 1938.\(^{60}\) Stanley Unwin, a member of the Council’s Books and Periodicals Committee created the series. He was a publisher, well-opposed to censorship and concerned about the rise of Nazi Germany. The brochures were meant to be easily readable, informative essays, written by experts on the subject matter, richly illustrated with photographs, and to be sold singly, at a shilling per booklet. In 1940 the first ten booklets appeared, all of them devoted to specific British institutions: *The British Commonwealth*, *The British System of Government*, *British Justice*, *British Education*, *The Face of Britain* (about its geography and geology), *British Sport and Games*, *British Ships and British Seamen*, *British Aviation*, *The Englishwoman* and *The Englishman*. Each booklet, as described on the back cover, was to be:

complete in itself, and taken together they provide a unique account of the life and work, the ideas and ideals, of Britain today. The English reader will find them as informative as they are stimulating. For the foreign reader who has never visited Britain they are the best substitute for such a visit, and they will

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\(^{56}\) Ibidem, 2.


\(^{59}\) Ibidem, 59-60; Byrne, “Boosting Britain”, 85-97.

\(^{60}\) TNA, BW 70/1, Minutes of the 7th meeting of the Books and Periodicals Committee, 3 February 1938.
go far to make plain to him how life is lived in this country, how the British
Commonwealth of Nations is organised, and in what spirit Britain now stands
for liberty and justice throughout the world.  

Admittedly, these two publications give only the official view within the British
Council of how the British culture was to be presented to the outside world.
Enough has been written about the propagandist nature of the review and
about the controversies that this occasionally led to among the Council staff.
However, though the archival sources do not give a complete picture of how
the content of the publications was decided upon, we must assume there was
some degree of consensus both among British Council staff and at the Foreign
Office on the proposed image of British culture or else it would not have been
so consistent. My question is not how far beside the truth this ideal image of
British culture was. I will also leave aside the reception of the image by foreign
readers of Britain To-day, something that requires an entirely different corpus of
source material. My central question is what the ideal image consisted of and
how it justified promoting British language and culture across the world, giving
it a global relevance.

In a thesis by Alice Byrne on Britain To-day defended in 2010, three
different phases are identified in the image of Britain portrayed by the review
between 1939 and 1945.  
While recognizing that this adds further nuance to the
topic, I will here concentrate on a more continuous idea of Britishness formed in
the 1930s. As argued elsewhere, in this period the new mass media as well as
influential literary figures helped lay the basis of a common culture that would
endure throughout twentieth-century British society.  
In 1937, a Ministry of
Information was created, from which the Council managed to remain
independent. Though being two different organizations, both had to appeal at
least in part to the predominant ideals of the 1930s if their proposed icons were
to be convincing. Hence it is not surprising that much of the imagery used by
the British Council to be projected abroad, coincides with depictions of
nationhood and Britishness used by the Ministry of Information to motivate the
British home front during the Second World War. In the summer of 1939, just
before the war, the British Council had been able to reverse initial plans for it to
be absorbed by the Ministry of Information.

Ltd., 1940).
63 Byrne, “Boosting Britain”.
64 D. L. LeMahieu, A Culture for Democracy: Mass Communication and the Cultivated
66 Sonya O. Rose, Which People’s War? National Identity and Citizenship in Britain 1939-1945
(Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Wendy Webster, Englishness and
2007) 19-54.
Britain and European or World Civilization

One recurring idea was that of Great Britain being the custodian and beacon of European civilization. As was emphatically stated in a 1939 issue of Britain To-day:

It is not too much to say that, with the increasing pace of modern life, the people of Great Britain have become increasingly aware of the value to their own and to European civilization of maintaining the standards and the inheritance received from their forefathers.67

Such references to the way Great Britain was to engage itself in defending European civilization stressed the tradition that it had to preserve but also called for the constant interaction with external cultural influences to maintain the dynamism of the civilization. This seemingly contradictory mission was, for example, illustrated by an editorial entitled ‘In the Defence of Culture’ which appeared in Britain To-day in April 1943, in the middle of the Second World War. It explicitly spoke of the rival claim among nations for primacy in creating what could be named European culture, Western culture or modern culture.68

The author went on to say that this European civilization had always been subject to a rapid circulation of ideas and that it was indeed important to stimulate this openness. Such cultural dynamism coincided with the cultural mission expressed by the renowned Victorian poet Matthew Arnold, paraphrased in the editorial as “a disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world, and thus to establish a current of fresh and true ideas”.69

European cultural heritage – defined as being based on the Roman conception of law, the Greek conception of freedom of thought, and the religious conception of love and the sanctity of the individual soul – could benefit from contact with the new worlds of North and South America, as well as with the ancient worlds of Russia and China.

By the end of the war, the literary scholar Benjamin Ifor Evans in an article entitled ‘Great Britain and Western Europe’ regretted the wartime isolation between countries in Western Europe and praised pamphlets such as Britain To-day that had tried to break through this isolation by making known the new cultural climate in Britain.70 It was in this crisis of Western civilization that, according to Evans, Great Britain had discovered her unique role. The

67 Unnamed author, ‘Preserving the Past’ in: Britain To-day, Number 7 (9 June 1939) 10-16, 16.
68 The Editor, ‘In the Defence of Culture’ in: Britain To-day, Number 84 (April 1943) 1-4, 3.
69 Ibidem, 3-4.
70 B. Ifor Evans, ‘Great Britain and Western Europe’ in: Britain To-day, Number 112 (August 1945) 10-14.
“prolonged stay within her shores of distinguished representatives of all the occupied countries” had made many British men and women, more than ever before in their lives, aware of “their common heritage with Europe” and of the “conception of Western Europe as a community with common spiritual origins”. Wherein in peacetime the cultural agencies in any country would usually be in charge of presenting their own national history and cultural inheritance, a different task was now required from them.

Rather than the discovery and the emphasis on what is best in the national tradition, there should be the exploration of what the common European inheritance possesses. [...] England, by the very fact that its internal problems are momentarily less severe than those of other European countries, can serve Europe by being one of the prime participators, and the depository for the European idea.

The British proposals for the setting up of a Conference of Inter-Allied Ministers and an Association of University Professors of the Allied Countries were to be seen against this background.

It was not only Europe that was seen to benefit from Great Britain’s endeavours in the defence of European civilization. Humanity at large was expected to be a grateful recipient of the fruits this would bear.

Let us therefore look at the man who will take his stand for civilisation, not of his own country but of Europe: not of Europe, as will one day be recognised, but of the world.

Evans sketched a world where technological advances had so greatly increased international contact that a mental and spiritual transformation towards worldwide cultural understanding was needed. Western European culture was not to be exclusive. Certain European principles, deriving from Christianity, such as the “supreme value of the individual man” were considered by Evans as being by now so universally accepted that they could serve as a basis for humanity as a whole. However, part of the consistent image of Britain spread by the British Council was the belief that it did not wish to export abstract ideological principles, but rather good practice that had proven to be such through experience.

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71 Ibidem, 12.  
72 Ibidem, 13.  
73 Ibidem, 10-14.  
75 Evans, ‘Great Britain and Western Europe’, 13.
He [the Englishman] has instructed other races committed to his charge in the only school with which he is familiar, the school of self-government, not from any high moral motives, but for purely practical reasons.

Self-government is the Englishman’s ideal because it seems to him more likely to work than government imposed from above. The Englishman is not interested in theories of government; he wants results. [...] The English are varied in their practice, but uniform in their aim. They are the least ideological nation in the world, but they are the most consistent in pursuing their ultimate aims.76

And so with this same practical sense, the British “preached” to other countries the “cult of games and pastimes”77 and through the British Admiralty Charts put their hydrographic information to the service of the whole world.78 Similarly, it was seen as wisest in Britain’s relations with the Commonwealth to offer means by which the Dominions and the Colonies could learn to govern themselves and reach greater prosperity. The African ‘native’ had to be encouraged to “rise in the scale of civilization” or else he would be doomed to an even more hopeless condition.79 The British Colonies would through self-government grow stronger in character and become more self-reliant, learning from their mistakes as they went along.80 Nevertheless, although the Council publications underscored the image of Britain being “the least ideological nation in the world”, after a critical analysis of the themes they dealt with a number of values can be identified that were evidently considered typically British yet exemplary worldwide. We shall now have a closer look at these.

Freedom, Democracy and Peace

One of the essential values that British culture was felt to represent and that was considered of supreme importance for all civilization was freedom. It was portrayed as the guiding principle both within Britain’s own system of government81 and in that of the British Commonwealth.82 In Britain To-day it was emphasized that the communities of the British Commonwealth of Nations

76 ‘The English Way of Life’ in: Britain To-day, Number 7 (9 June 1939) 1-3, 2.
79 Unnamed author, ‘British Rule in Tropical Africa’ in: Britain To-day, Number 3 (14 April 1939) 1-8, 7.
82 ‘Commonwealth’, the author felt, was as term more preferable than Empire because it underlined the aspect of voluntary choice. (Keith, ‘The British Commonwealth’, 1 and 8)
were “freely and closely associated with one another” and that there was free co-operation but no compulsion.\textsuperscript{83} Thereby the policy of the British Commonwealth was contrasted to that of the French, characterized as aimed at making the Africans adapt where possible to the social and cultural institutions of French civilization.\textsuperscript{84} The Commonwealth was said to be built on the willingness to benefit from British cooperation, not on brutal conquest like the Empires of Alexander, Charlemagne, the Ottomans or Napoleon.\textsuperscript{85} In the \textit{British Life and Thought} booklet \textit{British Ships and British Seamen}, glossing over many a historical fact, it was candidly stated that after having erroneously upheld the Mercantile Theory, Britain discovered Free Trade and the concurrent need for Freedom of the Seas. The Pax Britannica had henceforth defended trade and worldwide freedom. Great Britain had become the “policeman” of the seas, “big and good-tempered” such as British police were, there to protect the public and prevent evil deeds.\textsuperscript{86}

According to this picture of reality, Great Britain invested in the Pax Britannica not just in its own interest but in the interest of all nations.\textsuperscript{87} Great Britain’s global commitment to freedom was said to be demonstrated among other things by the leading role it played in the abolition of slavery, thereby giving its Navy the task to patrol the seas as more countries agreed to renounce slave trade.\textsuperscript{88}

What the opening-up [of the ‘Dark Continent’] would have meant, not only to millions of coloured people who inhabit it, but also to world-civilisation as a whole, had slavery remained the normal procedure of the white pioneers, it is terrible to contemplate.\textsuperscript{89}

\textsuperscript{83} Unnamed author, ‘The British Commonwealth of Nations’ in: \textit{Britain To-day}, Number 2 (31 March 1939) 1-7.
\textsuperscript{84} ‘British Rule in Tropical Africa’, 6.
\textsuperscript{85} Lewis, ‘British Ships’, 334.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibidem, 334-6.
\textsuperscript{87} Ibidem, 340.
\textsuperscript{89} Lewis, ‘British Ships’, 349.
Britain saved the world from this “by making the discovery, on the nick of time, that the Black Man has a soul.”\textsuperscript{90} Besides mentioning the aid given to freedom-fighting Greeks and Italians seeking national independence, British love of liberty was also projected on the contemporary dislike for dictatorship. Subtle references were made to the way in which British freedom was totally incompatible with dictatorial state systems. The *British Life and Thought* booklet on British education, in stating that the mass production of ideas was entirely foreign to British culture, portrayed its education system as one of “genuine freedom” and with which “the State has no axe to grind.”\textsuperscript{91} Elsewhere, over-government was considered detrimental for the initiative of the individual and for a nation’s capacity to adapt to changing circumstances.\textsuperscript{92}

The best safeguard for the freedom of the individual and the nation was held to be democracy. *The British System of Government* made very clear how central democracy was to what the British Council considered as being British. The sovereignty of Parliament was presented as “the corner-stone of the British Constitution”. The ultimate sovereignty within Parliament belonged to the House of Commons, of which almost anyone could become a member. The author conceded that the House of Lords, with its privileged members, was something of an anachronism, but explained that no alternative to this body had so far been found that would suit all parties, thereby reiterating the positive notion of compromise.\textsuperscript{93} In underlining the importance of debate and openly expressed criticism in Parliament, there was an overt reference to totalitarian states, where dictators were made to appear infallible and the media were prevented from voicing any criticism.\textsuperscript{94} Even more explicit was the assurance that, unlike in totalitarian states, the citizen in Great Britain was free from fear of arrest by secret police, imprisonment without trial, unformulated

\textsuperscript{90} Ibidem.
\textsuperscript{92} ‘Democracy in a Changing World’, 5.
\textsuperscript{94} Ibidem, 61.
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offences and political censorship. Similarly, the Civil Service was described as possessing integrity and a commitment to the public interest, without any of the partisanship that would be demanded of it in an authoritarian state. Local government’s relationship with central government was essentially one of partnership.

Again, as in other institutions, the adage in democracy was that it was based on experience and not on an intellectual theory, and the result of a compromise between ancient forms and modern needs. Hence, as was stated in an issue of *Britain To-day*, it was not because of some abstract theory that the British had chosen their political system but on the basis of present experience. It was hereby repeatedly added that there was no wish to impose British views on others or to disparage other systems, but that it was simply “from the evidence of fact” that British people knew that a democratic government had created the best opportunities, giving them the habit of enterprise and self-help.

[... we speak for ourselves without wishing to impose our views on others – we have been brought by the facts of to-day to a reaffirmation of our fundamental democratic liberties.]

By not being dependent on an authoritarian central power, the British had become particularly capable of coping with crises.

However great the praise was for government institutions such as Parliament or the system of justice, a deep-seated belief in the importance of private initiative underlay the way Britain was presented. In examining social services, the assertion was that “in this respect the totalitarian countries differ from democracies not in the amount of ‘social service’ provided, but in the methods by which this service is organized, the scope allowed to private initiative”. Whereas under a totalitarian system social services were frequently used “as instruments to create a servile mentality”, in Great Britain they were “the jealously guarded responsibilities of scores of democratic bodies and of tens of thousands of public spirited citizens.”

The leading idea in Great Britain was to diffuse the spirit of leadership instead of concentrating it, allowing a multitude of self-governing private initiatives to cooperate with the State or local authorities. Pioneer work was best left to voluntary organizations
before it was taken over by the State, fitting in with the preference for gradual evolution rather than revolution.\textsuperscript{101} The contribution of private organizations, with or without state help or patronage, was commended as one of the most interesting and characteristic features of British democracy. An enormous number of voluntary associations were able to participate in shaping both legislation and administration, thereby teaching individuals “a valuable lesson of self-government”.\textsuperscript{102} This room for private initiative was a longstanding tradition, but also something that was regarded as the solution to the problems of the future.

In our opinion, the future course of history in the twentieth century will be determined largely by the success or failure of this blending of public and private activity, of which we in Great Britain can show so many examples.\textsuperscript{103}

Even the most vital infrastructure for British trade and for the Empire, the Navy, was to a large extent dependent on the voluntary service of British seamen, with as notable example the role ordinary British seamen had played in the successful retreat from Dunkirk.\textsuperscript{104}

What was purportedly the objective of letting the world know about British attachment to (individual) freedom and democracy? Right from the start, the British Council justified its existence by arguing that informing people abroad about British culture and society and sharing ideas would contribute to world peace. As stated in a policy paper of 1937:

[...] the Council’s policy is inspired by their belief in the decisive contribution which the character, ideals and achievement of the British people can make to the cause of peace and peaceful trade; and by the desire that the nature of this contribution shall be understood and appreciated by the rest of the world.\textsuperscript{105}

This concept of Pax Britannica was part of the parallels that British civil servants were taught to see between the Ancient Roman Empire and the British civilizing mission in its Empire.\textsuperscript{106} There is evidence however of a preference in Council publications to emphasize the affinity with the Athenian model of colonisation, to distance itself from the aggressiveness of the Roman expansion. Hence the Commonwealth is described as having since its earliest days “had closer affinities to the Empire of Athens in the fifth century B.C. than to that of

\textsuperscript{101} Voluntary Social Service’, 14.
\textsuperscript{103} Democracy in a Changing World’, 8.
\textsuperscript{104} Lewis, ‘British Ships and British Seamen’, 331 and 356-357.
Rome”. What is more, at no times had it resembled the Empire of Rome, “the result of the subjugation of foreign peoples” and control over them by force.\(^{107}\) This Athenian ‘turn’ was probably a reaction to a revived Pax Romana Mussolini aspired to in the context of Italian Fascism’s cult of romanità.\(^{108}\)

**The harmony of hierarchy**

The British Council publications were geared to underline the social harmony of the British nation. In *The British System of Government* as well as *The Englishman*, such qualities as tolerance, justice and fair-play were attributed to the British as well as a willingness to take into account the voices of all minorities. Thanks to this spirit of tolerance and consent, the Marxist philosophy of class war had made little progress in Britain. In the field of industrial relations, for example, the voluntary negotiating between trade unions and employers’ associations was said to have prevented any clashes from arising.\(^{109}\)

> Politics in England is one long essay in the gentle art of compromise, English education one long lesson in the business of avoiding extremes of conduct or thought.\(^{110}\)

The authors touching upon the subject of class did not deny that there were huge differences between classes in British society, but nevertheless concluded that there was a fundamental harmony in this arrangement. There was in their view no hatred between classes.\(^{111}\) The upheaval of the Cromwell period had made any notion of revolution repellent to the British ever since and had created a stronger sense of community. Subsequently the middle classes had recognized the necessity of social reform for the proletariat, just as the unions had regarded the weapon of striking to be avoided at all costs. It was proudly pointed out that no major strike had taken place in Great Britain since 1926.\(^{112}\) Gradual reform had been notable in poor relief, in social housing and in education. In brief, all parties agreed that more was to be gained through constitutional means than through violence or revolution.\(^{113}\)

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110 Ibidem, 78.
111 The Editor, ‘Step by Step’ in: *Britain To-day*, Number 81 (January 1943) 1-4.
112 Ibidem, 2-3.
113 Ibidem, 3-4.
Not everyone agreed with this view of British society. For instance, *The English People: Impressions and Observations*, a book written by the Scotsman Denis William Brogan for an American public, criticized England for failing as a social democracy because of its class-divisions, each class being identified through accent, manner of speech, posture or gesture.¹¹⁴ No doubt the combination of these two factors – Brogan’s Scottishness and his American target group – explains this critical approach to British so-called social harmony. Tellingly, Ernest Barker in his review of *The English People* countered these accusations.¹¹⁵ Describing himself as “one who was born and bred, and lived for a quarter of a century, within ten miles of Manchester, among cotton-factories and coal-pits (in which, by the way, his mother and father worked)”, Barker put forward quite a different experience, that of an “industrial democracy” where masters and men regarded one another “as being of the same stuff.”¹¹⁶ Furthermore, Barker wrote favourably about the new, professional aristocracy that had emerged in the nineteenth century. It comprised of “the old and established families of civil servants, lawyers, doctors, school-masters, clergy, university teachers, and the like” which according to Barker were now largely in charge of running the country and did so “as a matter of an honourable professional job which is a matter of simple duty”. The social structure was based on mutual respect and acceptance of each individual’s specific position. Barker did not see this as being hierarchical or snobbish but in fact “genuinely democratic”. Each had his or her pride in sticking to the position he or she naturally fell in, be it that of a domestic servant or that of a scavenger. These positions were part of “the pageant, or solemnity, of English life”, as old as the sixteenth century and as old as the English Book of Common Prayer which taught that each person had a duty assigned to him or her by God.¹¹⁷ *The British System of Government*

¹¹⁵ Ernest Barker, ‘The English People’ in: *Britain To-day*, Number 87 (July 1943) 15-19.
¹¹⁶ Ibidem, 15-16.
presented a less roundabout way of resolving the issue of class differences. While conceding that enormous inequalities of wealth, birth and opportunity existed in Britain, the conclusion drawn by the author was that the “truth of the matter appears to be that the people of Britain do not care greatly for social and economic equality.”

Besides this idea of harmony between social classes, British society was also portrayed as having peacefully incorporated different nations. Officially the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland encompassed English, Welsh, Scottish and Irish populations. Did the British Council publications make its readers aware of the internal cultural diversity of what was frequently simply referred to as ‘Britain’? We have already noted that the terms ‘British’ and ‘English’ were more often than not used as interchangeable qualifications, as if ‘Englishness’ was unquestionably the essence of ‘Britishness’. This tendency to equate ‘Britishness’ with ‘Englishness’, whilst reducing the Welsh, the Scots or the Irish to the peripheral status of Celtic ‘other’, has already been signalled as part and parcel of identity building in the British imperial context. We also recognize in the Council’s publications the idea of Britain being a racially-mixed nation, combining the racial virtues of Britons, Romans, Danes, Saxons and Normans to forge a united Britain, in which the English appear to have been the prime inheritors of Roman civilization. However, the impression that the British Council was intent on presenting to the world “this false idea of Britain as a ‘homogeneous’ nationality which was, of course, entirely English in concept” needs a certain nuance.

Even if nearly all articles of Britain To-day either dealt with British or with English matters, this review by no means presented Britain as a monolithic phenomenon. There was also occasional attention for the specifically Scottish, Welsh or even Irish heritage. For example, one article opened with the recent publication of the official biography of W.B. Yeats, arguing that it was hard to make a clear-cut distinction between English and Irish literature. Yeats’ “imagination in youth” was described as being “fi red by the Irish scene and Irish legend” and his concentration on Ireland undeniable, but it was added

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119 The Act of Union of 1707 had unified the Kingdoms of England and Scotland, including also Wales, and was followed by another Act of Union in 1801 that added Ireland to this United Kingdom. Since 1927, the year in which the partition brought about by the Irish War of Independence was recognized by Parliament, this political territory became known as the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.
122 Peter Berresford Ellis, ‘When was the United Kingdom?’, Lecture under the auspices of the University of Reading’s Town Hall Lecture Series on The United Kingdom, Reading, 19 January 2004.
that he owed much to English poetry and the English writers he interacted with.\(^\text{123}\) The Irish literary movement, in the words of the editor, was “an expression of the distinctively Irish genius,” which contributed in its own way to British literature, yet would never have emerged without the background of English literature and in a way discovered itself through the awareness of being different, of having a separate individuality.\(^\text{124}\) The author then went on to argue that just as there were rival claims among the English, the Irish, the Scottish and the Welsh regarding certain elements of British culture, so too different countries claimed their contributions to the creation of European culture. There was recognition of the fact that Great Britain was a composite of parts.

Admittedly such an article still implied that the English culture stood above the rest. Rather like the different classes each had their own position within England, so too the different nations fitted into Great Britain. It is well imaginable how such thinking in terms of a harmonious hierarchy of classes or countries could easily be transposed to the Empire and the Commonwealth, justifying in noble words what was in fact cultural domination. Yet there are equally examples of Council publications that recognized difference without obviously reducing it to a subjugated ‘otherness’. For example, in *British Sport and Games* the author described rugby football in South Wales as giving vent to intense local patriotism and producing “an almost religious enthusiasm”, thereby confessing that he too having some Welsh blood in himself became wholly Welsh whenever he was at a match the Welsh team was playing in.\(^\text{125}\) It is perhaps useful to recall that the Scots are until this day unusually well represented in Britain’s Foreign Office and its diplomatic service.\(^\text{126}\) The effects of this phenomenon as well as the fact that Charles Bridge, the Council’s Secretary General, was of Irish origin may have made it harder for the Council publications to ignore the ‘Celtic fringe’ entirely.

Contrasts between past and future, as well as between rural and urban life, are also ably reconciled by Council publications to form an impression of harmony. In British war propaganda the Southern English countryside was often conflated with Britain and made to represent ‘authentic England’ unchanged by time.\(^\text{127}\) In a *Britain To-day* article tellingly entitled ‘Preserving the Past’, the English countryside was described as being “studded with the remains of every period from prehistoric times onwards” and village names, their buildings and their boundaries as “redolent of the past”.\(^\text{128}\) This was attributed to the insular character of the nation and its relatively peaceful

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\(^{123}\) The Editor, ‘The Defence of Culture’, 1.

\(^{124}\) Ibidem, 1-2.

\(^{125}\) Darwin, ‘British Sport and Games’, 293.


\(^{128}\) ‘Preserving the Past’ in: *Britain To-day*, Number 7 (9 June 1939) 10-16, 10.
internal history. Concern was voiced about the damage caused by the industrial revolution and the modern urbanisation. A remedy was sought in educating town-dwellers to a greater degree about the unspoilt character of rural districts and in protecting the landscape through private as well as government initiatives.\textsuperscript{129} To interpret the portrayals of the English landscape in \textit{Britain To-day} as pure nostalgia would be to ignore the actual response to the changing of times that is expressed in Council’s combined attention for urban and rural planning.\textsuperscript{130} Plenty of triumphant articles were dedicated to modern urban planning projects, to the development of new, functional housing and public buildings. For example, \textit{Britain To-day} took the opportunity to present innovative projects in urban planning and reconstruction that had been executed or were intended for after the end of the war. Already in 1941, one could read that a new era in housing development would begin once the war ended. The destruction caused by the bombing of London and other big cities had “provided an opportunity for creative town-planning and reconstruction unequalled since the aftermath of the Great Fire.”\textsuperscript{131}

\textit{Truth will triumph}

The British Council’s motto was “Truth will Triumph”. Propaganda was allegedly not needed; the facts would speak for themselves. Hence there was no wish on the part of \textit{Britain To-day} to focus on the organization of defence in Great Britain, on the resources it possessed in its Empire and on its military endurance. Generally the review would provide “a description of the more positive and fruitful developments in spheres of other activity than those of preparation to defend [...]”.\textsuperscript{132} Nevertheless, articles on military subjects and photographs of munition factories, the British Navy and women involved in military activities were certainly not lacking.

The Council strongly condemned the relentless German propaganda in the Middle East, which was spreading false rumours and news to discredit the British. An article in the 1941 edition of the B.B.C. Handbook by Harold Nicolson, Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Information, was referred to as source. In this article, Nicolson insisted that there had to be British propaganda too, but that it would be of a completely different nature from that of a totalitarian regime. Instead of creating slavish, unthinking opinion and appealing to the lowest in human nature, as was the case with the deceitful

\textsuperscript{129} Ibidem, 11.
\textsuperscript{130} In the 1930s and 1940s the campaigns for what was a modern experience of rural life went hand in hand with those for modern urbanity (David Matless, \textit{Landscape and Englishness} (London: Reaktion Books, 1998) 32-33).
\textsuperscript{131} Owen, ‘British Social Services’, 205.
German propaganda, the British democratic propaganda would be a long term one “seeking gradually to fortify the intelligence of the individual.” British propaganda would rest on truthfulness.

It must seek to build up an unshakable edifice of ascertained fact which will defy falsification and rumour. [...] Concealing nothing that can safely be disclosed, it invites the free-minded men to whom it appeals to form their opinion in the light of realities [...].

According to Britain To-day’s editor, an excellent example of this kind of propaganda was the “Open Letter to Hitler” recently published in the Greek newspaper Kathimerini, signed by the editor, G.A. Vlachos. It was a reminder that Greece had wished to stay outside the war and a defence of the help from British airmen that the Greeks accepted once the Italians attacked. This defiant message was effective because of what Greece had meant for civilization and because of the epic battles the country had fought in the past. Here Greece had defended what in British eyes was all that its ancient cultural heritage stood for.

At the end of the Second World War, reflecting on how the age of internationalism had begun in 1935-9 and how more than ever people of all countries had found themselves talking about the same issues and challenges, the editor of Britain To-day concluded that the cure for the post-War world “lies not in less but in more internationalism”. The press had to be free, intellectual, social and economic barriers removed and the “malignant giants of ignorance” destroyed. This attitude implied a great confidence in the capacity of the individual to evaluate facts and in the notion that worldwide communication benefited from open cultural exchange. The example of a totalitarian state in Germany had shown that spiritual slavery could be imposed whereas spiritual freedom could by no means be enforced. Although totalitarianism had been militarily defeated, its evil had not yet been entirely extinguished and “complete victory remains to be won, not by force of arms, but by reason, by right thinking, by the persuasion of sound example.”

133 Nicolson as quoted in: The Editor, ‘Propaganda’, Britain To-day Number 50 (4 April 1941) 1-3, 2.
134 Ibidem.
135 Ibidem, 3.
136 The Editor, ‘Before War, And After’ in: Britain To-day, Number 111 (July 1945) 1-4.
137 The Editor, ‘The Mind of a Nazi – The Nuremberg Trials’ in: Britain To-day, Number 122 (June 1946) 1-4, 4.
Conclusion

The images of *italicità* and Britishness spread by the Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council show that in the Italian concept of national identity the spirit was held to be central whereas British identity was embodied by institutions that were thought to express underlying British principles. The emphasis on the British system of government, of justice and of social order which can be traced in the national image that the British Council was presenting abroad, was part of an elitist preference for thinking in terms of civilisational progress, manifest in the institutions and the persons shaping these, rather than cultivating a feeling of Englishness that could rouse the masses.\(^{138}\) Indeed, it was the attachment to social stability and harmony, expressed in Britain’s determined avoidance of the unrest caused by the French Revolution, which remained influential in the British construction of national cultural identity throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century. By contrast, the Italian spirit diffused by the missionaries of *italicità* issued from the tumultuous Italian Risorgimento.

Ironically, while *italicità* was meant to come across as fully embracing twentieth century modernity the Dante still used fairly old-fashioned instruments of communication, whereas Britishness was represented as conserving a democratic tradition but promoted by a Council that used more modern means. The *Pagine della Dante*, the review of the Dante, was a rather plain bulletin of events when compared to *Britain To-day*, the Council’s review, which always had several pages of pictures and consciously contained articles of general interest that could easily be re-used by the foreign press. It is in that respect worth noting that the Council very soon had a Film Committee, whilst the Dante remained primarily concerned with the printed word. At the Dante’s XXXII Annual Congress in Ancona (1927) a delegate from the Committee of the same city proposed to make more use of radio broadcasting and cinematography. The Italian spirit and culture was not only to be spread through books. All instruments for diffusion that modern civilization offered could be put to use, of which the delegate thought cinematography to be the most effective because it easily reached all classes of society.\(^{139}\) This difference of approach was in part the result of the Dante having nineteenth-century origins whilst the Council as a relative late-comer was created at a moment when mass-communication through modern media had become an undisputed tool in the influencing of opinion. The concept of Italianness held high by the Dante was too tied to the classical products of ‘national genius’ to be rapidly converted into a different discours.


\(^{139}\) *Pagine 5* (September-October 1927) 102.