BRITAIN AT BAY
1938–1941

The Epic Story of the Second World War

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FOREWORD

This book, the first of two parts, is an attempt to understand how Britain fought the Second World War: how it became involved in it in the first place, how it fought it, why it was ultimately on the winning side and what the war did to its institutions, its culture and its society. It is a version of the story that omits the well-loved but misleading clichés that have traditionally infused it. In doing this, it becomes a story that is more interesting, more valuable, more important than ever. Britain's war can be understood, broadly, as a tale of two parts.

The first part, which this volume is concerned with, is a story mostly about defeat – diplomatic defeat followed by military defeat after military defeat. What it tries to explain is how a country that got so many things catastrophically wrong in the early years of the conflict managed not just to hold out against Hitler but, by the second anniversary of the war's outbreak in September 1941, to have apparently halted the rout, and even, perhaps, to be constructing a plausible theory of victory. It ends on a note of cautious hope. The second part will show how such hopes eventually became realities, and how the British people rallied themselves as part of a powerful global alliance to defeat Nazism, fascism and Japanese militarism – and what the cost of that victory would turn out in the end to be.

Part One

THE BRITISH WAY AND PURPOSE

1

SHIRE FOLK

In November 1949 Major Warren Lewis, brother of C. S. Lewis, wrote what was probably the first ever review of J. R. R. Tolkien's novel *The Lord of the Rings*. The manuscript he had read was in an inchoate state. It did not even have a title. But this 'New Hobbit', the long-awaited sequel to Tolkien's 1937 children's story of that name, had captivated Lewis immediately. 'Golly, what a book! The inexhaustible fertility of the man's imagination amazes me,' Lewis enthused in his diary. He was struck by Tolkien's mastery of description, his poignant characterisations and the unflagging energy of the narrative. This, he felt, was 'a great book of its kind'.

Lewis wondered, though, if critics would interpret *The Lord of the Rings* as a political satire about contemporary Europe, rather than as the timeless mythopoeic fantasy that Tolkien had intended to write. 'By accident, a great deal of it can be read topically,' Lewis thought, 'the Shire standing for England, Rohan for France, Gondor the Germany of the future, Sauron for Stalin.' He even wondered if the 'egregious' Lewis Silkin, the minister of town and country planning in Clement Attlee's Labour government, would be identified as the vandal wizard Saruman, destroyer of the novel's pastoral idyll, the Shire.[1]

None of this would have pleased Tolkien. In 1965, in the foreword to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings*, he explicitly rejected the idea that his story was intended as an allegory of any historical event, most of all the recent great war against Nazism. 'The real war does not resemble the legendary war in its process or its conclusion,' Tolkien insisted. Even so, for all such protestations, Lewis had clearly been on to something back in 1949. He had realised that Tolkien's future audience was going to see associations between events in Middle Earth and those in their own world. But then Tolkien himself, in his 1965 foreword, conceded that the absence of any deliberately embedded allegory did not preclude his readers' right

to interpret the text as they saw fit. *The Lord of the Rings* might not serve as an allegory. But it had what he called 'applicability'.[2]

Tolkien had, after all, never made any secret of the fact that the Shire, the setting of the first four and final two chapters of *The Lord of the Rings*, was modelled on the rural Warwickshire he half-remembered from his childhood in the 1890s.[3] Even the Shire's location, on the north-western edge of Middle Earth, correlated with the usual placement of the British Isles on the map of Europe. The Shire, with its drystone walls, hay wains, country alehouses and sheriffs, was an affectionate parody of the pre-industrial 'Deep England' already central to conservative (especially Catholic conservative) conceptions of English identity at the beginning of the twentieth century, through the writings of authors such as G. K. Chesterton, H. J. Massingham and H. V. Morton.[4]

And the Shire's diminutive inhabitants, hobbits – 'charming, absurd, helpless hobbits', as Gandalf the Wizard calls them – corresponded very neatly with the gentle and unassuming self-image that the English people had adopted for themselves in the years after the First World War.[5] They had not always seen themselves as such meek creatures. The brash, bumptious ogre John Bull, the personification of English virtues who had symbolised the age of High Britannic Imperialism and gunboat diplomacy, was no hobbit. But, after the slaughter of the Western Front, the English were weary of John Bull's aggressive theatricality. Now they saw themselves exemplified by the 'Little Man' – 'small, kindly, bewildered, modest, obstinate, and very loveable', as the writer and MP Harold Nicolson described him, and most famously depicted by the cartoonist Sidney Strube, in the *Daily Express*, with bowler hat, umbrella, bow tie, high collar, pince-nez glasses and bushy white moustache.[6] Strube's Little Man offered an Englishman for a new, milder, altogether more quotidian age.

Writing in 1934, the conservative historian Arthur Bryant argued that this modern Little Englishman was a 'stolid, tolerant, good-humoured, reliable kind of person, so strong withal (because he is so much at peace with himself) so gentle'.[7] W. R. Inge, a former dean of St Paul's Cathedral, said of him that he was 'humane; cruelty excites him to violent indignation. He is a bad hater, and has a short memory for injuries.' His chief vices were intemperance ('in eating more than drinking') and a 'disinclination for hard and steady work'. But he made up for these faults by 'a peculiar sense of humour [...] preserving him from fierce and cruel fanaticisms'.[8] Tolkien, writing a few years later, would describe his hobbits as 'an unobtrusive but very

ancient people' who loved 'peace and quiet and good tilled earth', whose faces 'were as a rule good-natured rather than beautiful, broad, bright-eyed, red-cheeked' and who found pleasure mainly in 'eating and drinking' and 'simple jests'.[9] Clearly, the English were the close cousins of these artless, introverted and complacent people of the Shire.

Too complacent, perhaps. Tolkien's affection for his hobbits was unreserved. But *The Lord of the Rings* can be understood, among other things, as a warning about the dangers of languorous detachment from the evils of the world. Frodo Baggins, the novel's protagonist, is, like all hobbits, a confirmed believer in Splendid Isolation at the beginning of Tolkien's story. Frodo's initial preference is to turn away from the threat emerging from Mordor rather than openly to confront it: to hide away the dangerous magical ring that he possesses, to speak nothing of it and to hope that the storm will pass by his sleepy homeland and that better times will follow. Gandalf, frustrated at this guileless wishful thinking, must chivvy him into action, force Frodo to accept that, whether he likes it or not, the destructive forces that threaten to overwhelm Middle Earth will not spare the Shire simply because it appears harmless.

Whether Tolkien recognised these parallels with the conflict against Nazi Germany is unclear. As a pessimistic cultural conservative, he had a complex attitude towards the Second World War. He was ambivalent about its outcome. He felt that it had been fought with a machine-age ugliness that would in time merely 'breed new Saurons, and slowly turn men and elves into orcs'.[10] His political views had never been straightforward. During the Munich crisis in 1938, Tolkien expressed more suspicion of atheistic Russia than of Germany.[11] Despite his origins in colonial South Africa, he was a Little Englander who had no interest in fighting to defend a British Empire he abhorred.[12] But his personal detestation of Hitler – in part because of the violence the Nazi leader had done to the reputation of northern European mythology – was persistent and sincere.

From its first publication in 1954 *The Lord of the Rings* was interpreted by many of its readers as a warning about the perils of good people failing to act in the face of a malign existential threat.[13] After all, how could a British audience that had lived through the Appeasement era of the 1930s and the terrible events that followed it not find in Tolkien's story something uncannily familiar? Here was a tale about the people of a small and peripheral land, happy in their isolation and primitive democracy, perhaps a little too incurious about events beyond their frontiers, suddenly being

faced with a monstrous, militaristic terror from the east, one that they had previously overlooked or else dismissed as none of their concern. A terror to which they would only respond at the last moment; a terror which, as a result, came very close to sweeping away their gentle, parochial civilisation once and for all, and which they were ultimately able to triumph over only because of their unassuming strength of character. To the readers of the 1950s, the applicability of this story to the events of Munich, Dunkirk and the Blitz must have seemed to jump off the page.[14]

By 1954, Tolkien's story was one the British had told themselves about the Second World War many times over already. As early as the winter of 1939, in his Penguin Special paperback *Why Britain is at War,* Harold Nicolson had insisted that 'the British people are by nature peaceful and kindly', a nation of hobbits who

> desire nothing on Earth except to retain their liberties, to enjoy their pleasures, and to go about their business in a tranquil frame of mind. They have no ambition for honour and glory, and they regard wars, and even victories, as silly, ugly, wasteful things. They are not either warriors or heroes until they are forced to; they are sensible and gentle men and women.

'Somewhat indolent by temperament', this 'sleepy, decent and most pacific race' had regrettably ignored Nazi Germany's ambitions for too long, Nicolson admitted, for 'only by dire necessity' could they ever be 'stirred to do unpleasant things'. But in the end they had been provoked once too often. Hitler, Nicolson declared, would now discover to his cost the conviction and tenacity of the mild-mannered islanders whom he had so rashly underestimated.[15]

Why Britain is at War was published in the sleepy first months of the conflict. In June 1940, when the Allied armies on the continent collapsed in the face of the German *Blitzkrieg*, France fell and Britain seemed on the brink of invasion and defeat, the left-wing novelist J. B. Priestley mobilised the same myth to even more influential effect in his series of 'Postscript' broadcasts on the BBC. Priestley described to his listeners how the 'kindness, humour and courage' of the British people would inevitably overcome the 'half-crazy, haunted, fearful minds' set against them.[16] Most famously, he drew on the story of the commercial paddle-steamers conscripted into service to rescue the troops trapped on the Dunkirk beaches as a way of epitomising what the war was about, and how it would be won. It was a war,

Priestley declared, of people from an 'innocent foolish world' of pork pies and sandcastles, Pierrots and amusement arcades, who had found themselves pitted against madness and machine-age tyranny; of civilians performing feats of unexpected courage 'so absurd and yet so grand and gallant that you hardly know whether to laugh or to cry when you read about them'.[17]

Priestley did more than just rally a confused and frightened nation in June 1940. He helped to teach the British how to understand what was happening to them as a 'People's War' of humble, essentially civilian-minded heroes like the Little Man depicted by Strube. His version of Dunkirk was one of 'little ships' crewed by stout-hearted amateurs saving their country's army when all else had failed, rather than the professional Royal Navy, which actually rescued most of the trapped soldiers. Priestley's influence is undiminished eighty years later. Christopher Nolan's 2017 blockbuster *Dunkirk* is basically one of Priestley's Postscripts illustrated with twenty-first-century special effects. Its central character is not some brawny uniformed Achilles but the mild-mannered, middle-class, middle-aged Mr Dawson (Mark Rylance), the skipper of a diminutive pleasure yacht, a Dorset Frodo sailing into battle in knitted pullover, armed with nothing more martial than a hot, sweet cup of tea.

What writers such as Nicolson and Priestley had begun, Winston Churchill continued and confirmed in his six-volume *The Second World War*, a history which, after its completion in 1954 (the same year that the first volume of *The Lord of the Rings* was published), would become the most influential narrative of the conflict in the English-speaking world. The moral Churchill offers for Britain's war is of a Shire Folk almost undone 'through their unwisdom, carelessness, and good nature' in allowing Hitler to rearm and conquer the West. Churchill cast himself in the early chapters of his first volume, *The Gathering Storm*, published in 1948, as a Gandalfian seer whose warnings about the threat from Germany in the 1930s had been ignored almost until it was too late. 'Poor England! Leading her free, careless life from day to day [... behaving] as though all the world was as easy, uncalculating, and well-meaning as herself.'[18]

What made the Shire Folk narrative so persuasive to the British, whether it was told by a man of the left such as Priestley or a conservative patriarch like Churchill, was that it explained the nation's early wartime failures, as well its subsequent successes. Those failures and successes were products of the same unchanging national characteristics. The British had been gulled into almost catastrophic carelessness in the 1930s by the cunning of their enemies. But

what the Germans, in their hubris, had failed to guess at were the inner reserves of fortitude such a modest island race possessed – a stubborn unwillingness to be bullied, and an indomitable pluck even in the face of as grotesque and triumphant a Moloch as Hitler. The Shire Folk, it turned out, were a people of brilliant 'muddlers-through', inspired amateurs in an emergency:

> Ease and peace had left this people still curiously tough. They were, if it came to it, difficult to daunt or to kill; and they were, perhaps, so unwearyingly fond of good things not least because they could, when put to it, do without them, and could survive rough handling [...] in a way that astonished those who did not know them well and looked no further than their bellies and their well-fed faces.[19]

That was Tolkien describing his hobbits. But it could just as easily have been Churchill writing about Dunkirk, or the Battle of Britain, or the U-boat war in the Atlantic.

It is not difficult to see why the British found this appealing. To be sure, it portrayed them as a people with shortcomings – dangerous shortcomings of naivety and unworldliness that had almost ruined them. But *attractive* shortcomings all the same. Perhaps, the Shire Folk myth suggested, they should have been more aware of what was going on abroad during the 1930s. Perhaps they should have been more cognisant of the terrible possibilities of Nazism, more urgent in their response to German rearmament. But there was nothing shameful about preferring peace to war. There was nothing inexcusable about being too good-hearted to understand the totalitarian mind. They had done the right thing in the end. Besides, foolish and incompetent (and conveniently dead) leaders had encouraged them in their early follies. Attlee's left and Churchill's right could agree on that. This was a myth that had something to offer everyone, no matter what their politics.

It was – is – all the same, a myth. To call it a myth does not mean that there is no truth to it at all. Like all myths that endure, it has succeeded precisely because it includes much that is true. But it also includes much that is true but deceptive, and much that is only half-true, and much that is not true at all. If we want to really understand the British experience of the Second World War, we need to acknowledge the Shire Folk myth, salute it and then set it aside. Because the British people who fought and defeated Hitler from 1939 to 1945 were not nearly as innocent as hobbits. Nor as unprepared for the viciousness of total war. Nor anything like as nice.

2

ULSTER *KRISTALLNACHT*

The manager of Astley's hardware shop was standing a few feet away from his front window when the explosion happened. He remembered afterwards 'a loud boom and a terrific inrush of air which threw me to the ground. The front door and the whole of the structure and windows were blown inwards.' The blast tossed cars across Broadgate, Coventry's main shopping promenade. It left the pavement ankle-deep in shattered glass and scattered children's toys and women's handbags a quarter of a mile in every direction. Passing trams and buses were punctured with flying shrapnel. Once the sound of the explosion had reverberated away, the screams and whimpers of the injured became audible. Rescuers, gingerly making their way through the rubble, could see bodies lying in the brick dust as the smoke began to clear.[1]

Sixty people, it turned out, had been wounded, most of them by lacerating glass and clumps of debris. 'I have never experienced anything like it, absolute chaos,' wrote one survivor, Joan Thornton. 'The falling glass did more damage than anything.'[2] Three of the wounded died of their injuries at the scene, one of them a fifteen-year-old boy. Another two people were found dead, having been killed instantly by the blast. One of them, twenty-one-year-old Elsie Ansell, was so badly disfigured that she could be identified only by her engagement ring. Five days after the explosion she was buried, in her wedding dress, in the grounds of St Barbara's in Earlsdon, the church in which she had been expecting to marry. Four days after her funeral, Britain declared war on Germany.

The smack of detonation; the rain of crystal scythes and timber and masonry; the doleful search for survivors afterwards; the reckoning with the dead. For six years the British would have to get used to this grim procession of events, not least in the city of Coventry, doomed for destruction by the Luftwaffe. But what happened in Broadgate on 25 August 1939 was not an air raid; indeed, it had nothing to do with the Germans at all. The

explosive device that blew up Astley's front windows arrived by an altogether less complex delivery system than a Heinkel or a Dornier bomber. It was left on the kerbside in the front basket of an errand boy's bicycle. The man who left it there, later identified as Joby O'Sullivan, was making his way by train to Holyhead and the mail-boat to Dublin when the bomb went off. The British authorities never caught him. But five of his accomplices were apprehended soon after the bombing, and in the winter of 1939 they were tried at Warwick Assizes for murder. Two of them, James McCormack and Peter Barnes, were convicted and hanged at Winson Green Prison in Birmingham in February 1940 – the last two members of the Irish Republic Army (IRA) to be executed in Great Britain.[3]

Why did the IRA blow up Broadgate? We don't know. It may have been deliberate. It may have been a mistake. It was not a one-off attack, however. It was merely the bloodiest incident yet in a campaign – the 'S-Plan' – which had been going on since January 1939. The S-Plan was the most violent terrorist campaign that the British mainland had experienced since the late nineteenth century, and one that would not be matched in its ferocity until the pub and motorway bombings of the 1970s.

The IRA bombed Broadgate to try to cajole and frighten the British state into handing over to the government in Dublin the six counties of Northern Ireland, which had remained part of the United Kingdom after the rest of Ireland had achieved quasi-independence in 1922. The S-Plan involved hundreds of incendiary and high-explosive attacks across England's major cities at a rate of almost one every day. Coventry had been a target several times already before the Broadgate explosion. Telephone cables had been destroyed, bombs placed in shop letterboxes, sticks of gelignite sent to the city's main post office and, in one of the campaign's more quixotic touches, four municipal public lavatories blown up.

Other English cities had suffered in much the same way. Hotels, cinemas, banks, power stations, postal sorting offices, gas mains and aqueducts had all been targeted. One of the walls of Walton Gaol in Liverpool had been blown up in a failed attempt to set off a prison break. London Tube stations had been bombed. An attempt to destroy Hammersmith Bridge had been narrowly foiled by the actions of a passer-by, who subsequently received an MBE for his valorous efforts. There were rumours of planned attacks on Buckingham Palace, Windsor Castle and the Houses of Parliament. The Broadgate victims were not the S-Plan's first fatalities. A Manchester fish porter and a passenger waiting in the

left-luggage area of London's King's Cross station had both been killed a few weeks earlier.

For the police, 1939 was a frustrating year of trying to guess where the IRA might strike next. Vehicles passing through the Rotherhithe and Blackwall tunnels under the Thames had been searched for explosives. The Grand Union Canal in Paddington basin was drained in a laborious and, as it turned out, fruitless search for dumped weapons. Road blocks had been set up around Birmingham and the city's main police station girdled by a thick steel mesh. A radiologist had written to the *Daily Telegraph* proposing a novel security measure: perhaps, he suggested, luggage at train stations ought to be X-rayed to see whether there were weapons or explosives in it (the idea was not taken up). The home secretary, Sir Samuel Hoare, told his Cabinet colleagues that they were faced with a most serious terrorist threat, 'a highly organised secret society which incites and ruthlessly enforces fanatical obedience'.[4]

In a way, the whole S-Plan campaign had been a kind of dress rehearsal, albeit on a vastly less lethal scale, for the sort of ordeal that the Luftwaffe was going to dole out to the British people during the Second World War – and, equally, that RAF Bomber Command was going to dole out to the German people. Terrorism, like strategic bombing, was a method of asymmetrical warfare. It was an attempt to strike at an enemy obliquely rather than head-on. Its goal, at least in part, was to break the adversary's morale: to 'subjugate the obdurate will of our inveterate and powerful opponent', as the main planning document setting out the S-Plan put it.[5]

The IRA campaign, like the German and British strategic bombing campaigns, began with a formal renunciation of any attempt deliberately to kill civilians. All targets were to be strictly economic and industrial in nature – 'precision strikes' against the means of enemy production only. As it progressed, however, there was greater and greater temptation to set such fine distinctions aside. By April 1939 the IRA, having suffered a series of embarrassing failures, and frustrated by the British government's lack of response, warned that its 'conditional' restraint against the taking of innocent life might now be withdrawn.[6] The bomb that blew up Broadgate may have been an expression of this new ruthlessness. Later it was suggested that the real target may have been Coventry's main power station, and that the bomb had been accidentally left in the city's shopping district because O'Sullivan panicked and abandoned it half-way through his mission.[7] We don't know. Either way, to take a powerful explosive device into a busy

street risked killing many people. Precision strikes were always a good deal easier to perform on paper than in practice, for airmen as well as terrorists. Fatalities – intentional or collateral – were hard to avoid.

The S-Plan anticipated the strategic bombing campaigns of the Second World War in another way too: it failed. The IRA could not, in the end, terrify an entire people into submission any more than the Luftwaffe or the RAF could. Shedding blood only made the victims more determined to resist. The Broadgate bombing was, as it turned out, the beginning of the end of the S-Plan. The campaign meandered on for seven months after the outbreak of the European war, but it attracted less and less attention from the police and the public, who by then had other, more urgent things on their minds. The last bomb definitely attributable to the IRA blew up a rubbish heap in London in the spring of 1940. Hardly anyone noticed. The S-Plan's author, Jim O'Donovan, wrote afterwards that it had been 'hastily conceived, scheduled to a premature start, with ill-equipped and inadequately trained personnel, too few men and too little money'. This would not have been a bad summary of the strategic bombing efforts of the Germans and the British during the first two years of the war.[8]

*

Coventry's Broadgate was blown up by the IRA, not the German air force. But Nazi complicity in the S-Plan was strongly suspected by the British public in 1939. In a speech to the House of Commons outlining the government's response to the terrorist campaign, Samuel Hoare hinted that the IRA's activities were being 'closely watched and actively stimulated' by what he called 'foreign organisations'. Josiah Wedgwood, a Labour backbencher, developed the theme. The attacks were evidence that members of 'the physical force party of the Fascist world' were acting in conspiratorial unison. The IRA was merely one small part of 'the whole Fascist movement against liberty, democracy and freedom'.[9] Hoare, for his part, was careful not to spell out exactly what he meant by 'foreign organisations'. He was probably referring to Irish-American IRA sympathisers rather than the Germans. But he did not correct Wedgwood.[10]

The link between the IRA and the Nazis was understandable enough. It was no secret in the late summer of 1939 that Britain and Germany were edging towards war. In the circumstances it seemed highly plausible that Hitler might have co-opted a domestic terrorist group like the IRA to harm

and distract his enemies. Some witnesses to the Broadgate bombing interviewed by the police were convinced that they had seen aircraft in the sky moments before the explosion, and that they had actually been attacked by the Luftwaffe. Such threats had been conflated before. When, back in May, the IRA had set off a magnesium bomb in a Paramount cinema in Birmingham, there had been pandemonium inside the auditorium as members of the audience panicked, thinking that the long-dreaded German aerial Blitz had begun. 'Keep calm – it's only the Irish again,' someone shouted to reassure the crowd (whether they added 'and carry on' is unknown).[11]

The IRA *did* try to get the Germans to co-operate with them in 1939. But they did not get very far. Jim O'Donovan made three trips to Germany that year to try to persuade officials of Hitler's military intelligence, the Abwehr, to provide support to the Irish terrorist effort in Britain. But the Germans were unimpressed by O'Donovan's organisation, regarding it, with good reason, as amateurish, ineffective and riddled with informers. They offered encouragement and some token material assistance, but little else. The relationship between Irish radicalism and continental totalitarianism was mostly fantasy.[12]

But it was appealing fantasy, all the same, because it underscored for the British the *foreignness* of IRA violence to their own way of life. By the 1930s the British were heavily invested in the Little Man conception of themselves. Key to this was the idea of their nation as a uniquely gentle, domesticated and consensual place, a 'peaceable kingdom' in which belligerence was rare, moderation the norm and reasonableness celebrated.[13] The Broadgate bombing represented everything that was supposedly inimical to British civilisation in the 1930s: a resort to terror rather than persuasion; an indifference to the suffering of innocents; a contempt for constitutional process. Britain, according to the Little Man view of the world, was an offshore haven of tranquillity, mercifully detached by geography from the cruel and quarrelsome mainland of Europe. The techniques of political terror commonplace on the continent – pogroms, purges, assassinations – were unknown on the English-speaking side of the Channel. 'Our methods,' the military commentator J. F. C. Fuller pointed out, 'are not of the stiletto, the bomb, and the cup of bad coffee.' Thinking of the collapse of parliamentary democracy across Europe in 1935, the historian J. E. Neale sought consolation in his own nation's exceptionalism. 'We may thank God,' he said, 'we are not as other men are.'[14]

Some of this was true. The Great Britain of the 1930s had a stable and

moderate political system, no small thing in an age of totalitarianism. Its three main political parties all sought to govern from the centre rather than the margins and did not challenge the validity of election results even in defeat. Extremists who rejected this constitutional order, like the Communists and Blackshirts, could boast noisy antics which got a lot of press attention and a handful of well-placed sympathisers, but so far as the masses were concerned they never occupied anything more than a tiny and contemptible niche in political life. The violence of their street marches and protests only underscored how foreign and marginal their ideas were.[15]

In a broader sense, too, the two decades following the First World War represented probably the greatest single period of civil peace in all English history, before or since. Rates of recorded violent crime were at an all-time low. Twenty-four prisons were closed for lack of inmates.[16] According to George Orwell, the 'gentle manners' of the English people were one of the characteristics that differentiated them most obviously from other Europeans between the wars. 'In no country inhabited by white men,' he suggested, 'is it easier to shove people off the pavement.'[17] Even the era's occasional moments of political turbulence apparently underscored the idea of the peaceable kingdom. The General Strike of 1926 was remembered afterwards as an exhibition of British self-control and good-humoured tolerance. Instead of battering one another with truncheons and broken bottles, the police and the picketers had, it was said, played football in the streets.[18] The English, thought Stanley Baldwin, were the 'kindest people in the world'.[19]

This portrait of the peaceable kingdom left out a lot of awkward details, however. The British state did not organise *putsches* against its citizens. But it did hang them and whip them with enthusiasm. Countless acts of everyday violence in inter-war Britain were excluded from the official record, either because they were never reported or because investigating them was not considered to be within the proper purview of government. Husbands could beat and rape their wives in the 1930s with an impunity we would find shocking today. Much working-class violence was occluded from middle-class view except on rare, horrifying occasions. Gladys Langford, a London schoolteacher on a visit to Bath on Easter Monday 1938, was disgusted to find herself caught up in a 'fearsome fight [...] the combatants came out of a doorway like projectiles from a cannon's mouth; one with a bloody nose fell in a heap almost at my feet, the other pounced on him and pummelled him'. On the train home to London, 'packed with sots', football hooligans hurled empty bottles through the carriage windows.[20]

The British police did not always exhibit the cheerful restraint that popular tradition would suggest, especially when pitted against left-wing protesters. In 1931 a crowd of 20,000 unemployed demonstrators in Manchester was attacked by mounted constables bearing truncheons. The following year, angry policemen conducted a night-time reign of terror in working-class Birkenhead following street protests over the Means Test. 'Batons were wielded to good effect,' the local newspaper noted, with fifty marchers left 'screaming and shouting on the road'.[21]

Above all, to make the idea of the peaceable kingdom work, you had to ignore an awful lot of places under British rule that did not resemble England, especially rural southern England, one bit. This was most true of the overseas Empire, of course. But you did not have to travel all the way to Calcutta or Cape Town to see a very different kind of British attitude towards violence from the one on normal display in the Home Counties. All you had to do was take the ferry from Stranraer in Dumfries and Galloway and cross the twenty miles of the North Channel to Belfast.

Mainland Britons before the Second World War had little consciousness of Northern Ireland. Few thought of it as part of their own homeland. Neville Chamberlain notoriously described the conflict between the Sudeten Germans and the Czechs as 'a quarrel in a faraway country between people of whom we know nothing'. He could just as easily have called the sectarian divide within Northern Ireland a quarrel in a nearby province between people of whom we know even less. The British state was not in any great hurry to talk about Ulster, a policy of official absent-mindedness that continued into the war itself. Between 1942 and 1944 the Army Educational Corps produced a series of eighteen 'British Way and Purpose' pamphlets. These were intended to facilitate discussion in military units in problems of contemporary citizenship and to help soldiers better appreciate what it was they were fighting for. The pamphlets ranged widely in topic, from the mechanics of parliamentary democracy to the development of the colonial empire to housing, health and education reform in the post-war British state. In all its 600 pages the main text mentioned Northern Ireland exactly twice. Neither of these passing references suggested that there was anything in the least bit unusual or challenging about the six counties of Ulster. They were a non-problem so far as the British Way and Purpose were concerned.[22]

So when Northern Ireland's brutality suddenly erupted in the middle of an English high street, as it did in Coventry on 25 August 1939, the

mainland masses were unsurprisingly shocked. It was a violence that was freakishly, unintelligibly alien to them. Yet the province of Northern Ireland was just as much a legally constituted part of the United Kingdom as Yorkshire or Surrey. Ulster's violence was every bit as British as red pillar boxes and fish and chips.

Looking at the state of the UK on the eve of the Second World War from the perspective of Belfast, rather than London, offers a very different picture of the Britain of the 1930s than the one we usually imagine. Northern Ireland was no peaceable kingdom, no land of constitutional moderation and open-minded forbearance, no country of Shire Folk innocently whiling away the last years of peace. At the territorial margins of the United Kingdom in 1939 there existed an older, fiercer, crueller, altogether more messianic Britishness than the kind that could be found in Godalming or Shrewsbury.

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From the vantage point of the early twenty-first century, at a time when the United Kingdom as a multi-regional polity seems fractured and fissuring, the late 1930s look like a period of exceptional national harmony. At no time before or since in the UK's history had so many people been so comfortable thinking of themselves, first and foremost, as British. Welsh and Scottish nationalist consciousnesses, often driven in the past by religious discord, were at a low ebb. In Wales much of the pre-war passion of the separatist movement had receded with the disestablishment of the Anglican Church and the breaking up of big English-owned estates. Scotland too had won full independence in spiritual matters from England, leading to the reunion of the United Free Church with the Church of Scotland in 1929.

Parliamentary politics encouraged cohesion. The major British political parties competed nationwide for seats. The Conservatives won two-thirds of Scotland's constituencies in the 1931 election. Labour dominated in Wales, but neither Welsh nor Scottish socialists had any time for parochial identity politics; they saw the future in strictly British terms. Plaid Cymru and the Scottish National Party between the wars became absorbed with medieval obscurantism and an unhealthy taste for continental fascism, neither of which was calculated to impress the sober middle classes of Cardiff or Edinburgh.[23] In any case, the terrible slaughter of the

First World War had bequeathed a legacy of shared sacrifice that Britons from all parts of the UK could embrace as a unitary tragedy.

Ireland had always been the greatest challenge to the cohesive integrity of the British state. The fate of Ireland had preoccupied Westminster before the First World War. By the summer of 1914 it had seemed that it might drag the entire United Kingdom into civil war until the outbreak of an even greater crisis on the continent. But the creation of the Irish Free State in 1922 had uncoupled Irish politics from British life. By the late 1930s most Britons had come to terms with the idea that the Irish were a fundamentally different people from themselves. Few people in mainland Great Britain regretted any longer the fissuring of the Free State from the rest of the UK.[24]

But the split had not been complete. Northern Ireland, made up of six of Ulster's historic Protestant-majority counties, had chosen to remain part of the United Kingdom rather than join the Catholic-dominated Free State. No one quite knew whether this was a permanent arrangement or not. Neither the government in London nor in Dublin liked it much. But neither had any urgent desire to change the status quo. Éamon de Valera, the Free State's prime minister, had a romantic attachment to the idea of Irish unification, but he was busy constructing a Irish-language-speaking clerico-peasant state in the south, and he was well aware that this project would be horribly complicated by the intrusion of 800,000 truculent Presbyterians thrown into the mix. The British government paid lip-service to the idea of Ulster's innate Britishness and treated the IRA's demands to withdraw from the province with scorn, but it had little enthusiasm for Northern Ireland remaining permanently part of the UK. Eventually 'there would have to be a united Ireland,' mused Neville Chamberlain, 'just as there was a united Canada'.[25] Only the fear of reigniting the passions of 1914 prevented it.[26]

So Northern Ireland persisted, a province of 1.2 million people, two-thirds of them Protestant, one-third Catholic. It was the most economically depressed region in the whole of the UK. At no point during the 1930s did Ulster's official unemployment rate fall below 22 per cent, and since this figure excluded agricultural and uninsured workers, the real rate was probably closer to one in three. The post-1931 slump hit the region particularly hard. In 1932 and 1933 Harland and Wolff, the great Belfast shipyard which had constructed the *Titanic*, built no vessels at all. Northern Ireland's poverty remained at a Victorian level of indigence. According to a survey