

BUTLER TO THE WORLD

Also by Oliver Bullough

Moneyland

The Last Man in Russia

Let Our Fame Be Great

BUTLER TO THE WORLD

How Britain became the servant of tycoons,
tax dodgers, kleptocrats and criminals

OLIVER BULLOUGH

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THE BUTLER BUSINESS

A couple of years ago, an American academic asked me to meet for a coffee. His name was Andrew. He was researching Chinese money and he wanted to hear about Chinese-owned assets in London and what the British government was doing to ensure their owners had earned their wealth legally. I get these requests every now and then, thanks to my role as a guide on the London Kleptocracy Tours, which show off oligarch-owned properties in the pricier parts of Knightsbridge and Belgravia, and I like to help if I can.

We met at a café on the first floor of a bookshop in a rather grand building on Trafalgar Square – a building that, funnily enough, considering the topic we had met to discuss, Ukrainian oligarchs had swapped between them in 2016 to settle an argument, in the way that my son might give a rare football card to a friend after they've fallen out in the playground.

Andrew had come well prepared for the meeting and had a checklist to work through, which was clearly designed to generate a list of names for other people he could speak to. Which law enforcement agency was doing the most to tackle the threat of Chinese money laundering? Who was the best person to talk to at that agency? Which prosecutors had brought the best cases? Who had done the most robust research on the volume of Chinese-owned money in the UK, and what assets did that

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money tend to buy? Which politicians were most alert to the question, and how did they organise themselves?

Because of the shared language, Americans and Brits often think their countries are more similar than they actually are, which is something I am as guilty of as anyone. When I do research in the United States, I am consistently amazed by the willingness of officials to sit down with me and talk through their work. I call them without an introduction, and yet time and again they trust me to keep specific details of our discussions off the record. Court documents are easy to obtain, and prosecutors willing to talk about them. Politicians meanwhile seem to have a genuine belief in the importance of communicating their work to a wider public, which means they're happy to talk to writers like me. American journalists complain about their working conditions, just like everyone does everywhere, but for a European doing research into financial crime in the US is as heady an experience as letting a child loose in a Lego shop.

Andrew, however, was discovering that the pleasant surprise sadly does not work in the opposite direction. I think he had been hoping that I would share a few contacts, for British equivalents of the kind of people I have always found without too much trouble when I've visited Miami, Washington, San Francisco or New York. It's possible that he had been concerned I would refuse to open my address book to him, but it seemed not to have occurred to him that I would have no address book to open; that essentially the people he was looking for would not exist.

There was no concerted law enforcement effort against Chinese money laundering, I told him, so there was no investigator who could talk to him about it. There have been essentially no prosecutions so none for him to look into, and there is almost no research into where the money has been going, how it's been getting there, or indeed how much of it there is.

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He kept coming at the questions from different angles, almost as if he thought that he just needed to find the right password to unlock the door hiding Britain's enforcement mechanism. Where was the equivalent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation's International Corruption Squad? Who was doing the work of the Kleptocracy Team at the Department of Justice? What about Homeland Security Investigations; did Britain have something like them? Were prosecutors building cases, in a British version of the Southern District of New York? Was bringing down a big Chinese money-laundering ring the kind of case that would make someone's career? Which parliamentary commissions were probing this? Surely, someone was? As he talked, I began to see the situation through his eyes, which gave me a perspective I'd never had before.

The problem was that he could keep trying different passwords until the rocks rotted away, but it wouldn't help: there was no cave of treasures for him to open. If he wanted to find out how much Chinese money was entering the UK, who was moving it and what it was buying, he was going to have to start from scratch and do all the work himself. Andrew had come to London to discover how Britain was fighting illicit finance, but he was discovering that this was not happening at all. Quite the reverse, in fact.

It is of course not just Britain which helps Chinese kleptocrats and criminals to launder money. The shadow financial system used by Chinese criminals is transnational by its nature. It transcends any one jurisdiction, and derives its power and resilience from the fact it does not rely on any one place: if one jurisdiction becomes hostile, money effortlessly relocates to somewhere that isn't. And the system grows all the time, as lawyers, accountants and others persuade politicians to give them access to the kind of fees they can generate by moving

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money around. You can find it as much in Dubai, Sydney, Lichtenstein and Curaçao, as you can in Switzerland or New York. But you find it most of all in London.

And what I began to realise when talking to Andrew is how Britain is so much more invested in this business than all those other places. Financial skulduggery isn't just something that *happens* in the UK; there has been a concerted and decades-long effort to encourage it to do so. This is hard to comprehend, because it is so at variance with Britain's public image: as the country of Harry Potter, Queen Elizabeth II and Downton Abbey; a place defined by irony, tradition and substantial breakfasts. Mob bankers are vulgar, and if there's one thing we know about Britain, it's that it's not vulgar. But the facts are the facts. However bad other countries are, Britain has for decades been worse. It operates as a gigantic loophole, undercutting other countries' rules, massaging down tax rates, neutering regulations, laundering foreign criminals' money.

It's not just that Britain isn't investigating the crooks, it's helping them too. Moving and investing their money is of course central to what the UK does, but that's only the start: it's also educating their children, solving their legal disputes, easing their passage into global high society, hiding their crimes and generally letting them dodge the consequences of their actions. I had known this before, but I had never thought of it as a single phenomenon. It was Andrew's questions that crystallised the matter in my mind.

'Britain is like a butler,' I said at last, as I tried to explain to both of us what was going on. 'If someone's rich, whether they're Chinese or Russian or whatever, and they need something done, or something hidden, or something bought, then Britain sorts that out for them. We're not a policeman, like you guys, we're a butler, the butler to the world. That's why we

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don't investigate the issues that you're talking about – that's not what a butler does.'

He looked at me for a few beats, perhaps trying to work out if I was being serious.

'How long has this been going on?' he asked at last, and the answer came to me without me having to think about it. It was suddenly obvious.

'It started in the 1950s. We needed a new business model after America took over as the world's superpower, and this is what we found.'

Our conversation didn't last much longer, and he walked off towards Parliament perhaps hoping to find someone less depressing to speak to, but I stayed put and ordered another coffee. The idea of Britain as a butler was not one that had occurred to me before, but the more I thought about it, the more appropriate it seemed. Butlers have all the traits that Britain professes to value most – manners, resourcefulness, reserve – but repurposed as the obsequious polish of a servant, rather than the *noblesse oblige* of a master.

Having created this theory, however, I wanted to test it in the real world, but immediately came up against a problem: I had not in fact ever met a butler; so the first thing I needed to do was to find one, but that didn't strike me as something that would be hard. British butlers are the gold standard around the world, and Britain has a thriving industry in training people to serve as attendants to the world's oligarchs, so I called a butler school and asked for a meeting. A few days later, I was sitting in on a flower-arranging class in a basement near Covent Garden. A middle-aged and rather horsey flower expert was teaching a group of would-be butlers from four continents how to decorate a country house with the fruits of an English garden, assisted by a large number of younger equivalents of herself, who scurried around with secateurs.

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A different group passed through this basement every week; how could there possibly be sufficient demand for all these people's services after they graduated? 'It's obvious, isn't it?' replied a dark-haired Canadian woman who was weaving stems together into a floral lattice. 'Anyone who can afford it wants their own Jeeves.' If I'd been a cartoon character, a lightbulb would have lit above my head at that point. This world-leading British industry exists to solve problems for its clients, discreetly and profitably, as Jeeves did for Bertie Wooster. I clearly needed to hear more of these trainees' insights, and decided to follow them as they moved into the homes of the very wealthy and see what happened next.

Sadly, however, it was not to be. At this point the manager of the training centre appears to have googled me and discovered that I write about financial crime rather than domestic employment. He became markedly less enthusiastic about helping me research his trade, and my access to real-life butlers dried up. I therefore took inspiration from the words of that Canadian butler-to-be, and turned to the work of P. G. Wodehouse, author of the many stories about Bertie Wooster and his 'gentleman's personal gentleman' Reginald Jeeves.

The way Wodehouse describes Jeeves, he's a reassuring presence, a man of infinite sagacity who helps Wooster and his friends out of scrapes, whether an unwise engagement to an inappropriate girl, an elderly relative withdrawing an allowance, an attempt by a rival family to poach a chef or stealing a diamond pendant to settle a gambling debt run up while operating as an illegal bookmaker. It's all very amusing, thanks to Wodehouse's feather-light command of his distinctive prose style, but it can also be surprisingly sordid.

In *Without the Option*, for example, one of Bertie's friends has been jailed for punching a policeman and risks falling out

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of his wealthy aunt's favour if she finds out about it. After a tortuous series of mishaps, Jeeves is able to solve everything owing to his access to police secrets. As written by Wodehouse it's jolly funny, but it wouldn't be hard to rewrite so as to end up with a very different impression of Bertie Wooster's valet. If you focus on Jeeves's actions rather than on his smooth-talking, soft-shoed manner, you end up with something extremely dark: a mercenary, a fixer-for-hire.

‘Good Lord, Jeeves! You didn't bribe him?’

‘Oh, no, sir. But it was his birthday last week, and I gave him a little present.’

Very amusing of course, but I've heard Ukrainian lawyers talk about how they've settled tricky legal disputes with the help of ‘a little present’, and it never sounded funny the way they said it. Behind Jeeves's polished exterior is someone prepared to help anyone who can pay him. Take away his immaculate appearance, his educated accent and his ability to quote Marcus Aurelius, and you have not a butler but a *consigliere*. Paying off police officers is just the start of his talents; on one occasion he coshes a policeman unconscious, on another he terrifies a fascist into silence by threatening to reveal the source of his secret wealth. With brains like his, he could succeed at almost anything, but he devotes himself exclusively to helping the very rich to escape the consequences of their actions, while earning a nice living – over and above his salary – from their tips.

Over the last few years Britons have taken to arguing about who should represent us and, by extension, who we should be proud of. Imperialist Cecil Rhodes has attracted the most attention thanks to a statue in Oxford, but he is only the beginning. When Black Lives Matter protesters threw a statue of the slave trader Edward Colston into Bristol harbour, far right activists stood guard around statues of Winston Churchill, Robert

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Peel and other long-dead politicians. The BBC has erected a statue to George Orwell outside its headquarters to commemorate a different kind of Britain, one of scepticism and progressive values, although that provoked an argument over whether he was too left wing. Similarly, when the suffragist Millicent Fawcett became the first woman to be commemorated in Parliament Square, rival newspaper columnists had a row over whether she deserved to be there. And it's not just statues. Every couple of years the Bank of England puts someone new on a banknote, which provides a fresh reason to row about who we are, as do the figures chosen for commemoration on stamps. It all gets rather exhausting.

But while Britons appear to disagree profoundly about which of their ancestors to commemorate, they clearly agree on one thing: the kind of people worth remembering. All these people – whether suffragist or suffragette, imperialist or socialist – made a mark on the world, whether they conquered much of southern Africa or campaigned to end slavery. Britain likes to see itself as somewhere that knows what it wants, and as somewhere that isn't afraid to stand alone to achieve it.

But that self-image increasingly doesn't fit with how Britain has behaved in the last few decades, when it has been far more focused on helping others achieve what they want, and earning a good living from doing so, than on proposing its own vision for how the world should be. When dictators want somewhere to hide their money, they turn to Britain. When oligarchs want someone to launder their reputation, they come to Britain.

That is what I mean when I say Britain behaves like a butler. It's an amoral enabler-for-hire, an enforcer-for-cash, which hides the reality of what it's doing behind quaint traditions, literary allusions, immaculate tailoring, references to the Second World War and a supercilious manner. But if Britain is a butler,

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who is it working for? Who are the equivalents of the *flâneurs* and boulevardiers on whose behalf Jeeves assaulted policemen, stole novelty items of silverware and provided immaculate evening dress on time for dinner. That is the question I intend to answer in this book.

There is one thing we can establish straight away, however. While Jeeves's clients were gormless men-about-town, Britain's clients are some of the worst people in existence; and the scrapes they need extricating from are very far from being amusing. They have real-life victims whose loss is far greater than Britain's gain. As a result, the stories I'm about to tell will not be as anything like as funny as those of Mr Wodehouse. On the contrary, this couldn't be much more serious.

Some of the numbers I will quote in the chapters ahead are huge. Hundreds of billions of pounds are laundered through the British banking system every year. That is money stolen from people who desperately need it, which was intended to pay the wages of nurses or teachers, or to build roads or power lines, but instead has ended up in the offshore bank accounts of dishonest politicians or crooked businessmen, thanks to the discretion and skills of Butler Britain. If you sat down to count a hundred billion pounds, taking a pound a second, it would take you more than three thousand years. You'd have had to have started counting at the time of the Trojan War in order to get to a hundred billion around now.

And Britain doesn't just help kleptocrats steal that money, it provides them with a place to spend it too. At the start of the COVID crisis, when international travel froze, a major problem for wealthy Nigerians was that they suddenly couldn't visit their doctors, who were all based in London. The ability of the Nigerian elite to access world-class healthcare has long infuriated their poorer compatriots, who have no choice but to

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turn to underfunded and oversubscribed clinics when they get ill. Politicians consistently promise to do something about this when they seek election, then fail to do so, preferring instead to fly abroad themselves. In 2019 the Nigerian government's health spending came to just \$11 per person, which is barely an eighth of what the World Bank recommends it spend in order to cover basic needs. Nigeria's medical facilities are in disrepair, drugs are unavailable, and many newly qualified doctors emigrate. In healthcare, as in legal services, banking and so much else, Britain has provided a luxury alternative that the elites of other countries can enjoy while they ruin their own systems, turning them into tools of theft rather than governance.

'Nigeria has two medical systems. If you don't have money, you go to pastors and imams to prospect for miracles,' the Nigerian novelist and essayist Okey Ndibe told me. 'If you have a tonne of money or political connections, you are flown abroad where you receive good treatment. When they fall sick they like to be airlifted to Britain.'

When I say Britain, I'm not just referring to the United Kingdom, but also to its archipelago of offshore territories, which have their own parliaments but which are overseen by the government in London. Thanks to them, Britain is able to provide butlering services not just to wealthy foreigners, but to wealthy Britons and their companies too. The same tricks that allow wealthy Nigerians to exploit their compatriots have allowed, for example, British gambling companies to base themselves in Gibraltar and suck money out of the UK. That means there are victims in Britain too, including hundreds of young men and women who have killed themselves as a direct result of becoming addicted to products offered by the problem companies.

Thinking as a butler precludes sympathy for those

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less fortunate than yourself. There is no solidarity in P. G. Wodehouse's world; Jeeves helps those who can afford to pay him, and everyone else must manage on their own. Wodehouse clearly recognises the irony of this, even making a joke out of Jeeves serving a substantial meal to a family of revolutionaries who – through a series of improbable plot twists – ends up dining at Wooster's luxurious flat.

'Do you know what you are, my lad? You're an absolute relic of an exploded feudal system,' one revolutionary tells Jeeves.

'Very good, sir,' Jeeves replies.

This is only the start. There are many more wealthy clients out there for Britons to advise, and many more bright young graduates to be lured into serving them, which is inevitably undermining the quality of services available to the rest of the country. It is now so profitable for intelligent and well-connected Brits to act as butlers, that ever more of the country's most gifted children have chosen to go into the family business, rather than into something more constructive, or more generous.

Already, judges are warning that British courts are suffering from the reluctance of the best barristers to forgo the fees they can earn from high-paying oligarchs and become judges. 'If the profession stops producing the brightest and the best for appointment to the bench, the reputation of our jurisdiction for superlative quality in decision-making will quickly fade. It will become a self-fulfilling prophecy,' said one judge in a speech in 2018. It's a strong argument, but it only applies if barristers see themselves as part of a larger community. If they think of themselves as individuals out to do the best they can for the people that pay them – as butlers, in short – then there is no reason why they should care about the long-term prospects for the country's institutions at all. They don't even have to

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rely on Britain for a job any more. Entrepreneurial lawyers have opened tribunals in Dubai and Kazakhstan, applying English law, employing British lawyers, to support the efforts of local governments keen to develop their financial systems.

Brits reading this may bristle at these criticisms. Of course, not everything about Britain is pernicious – Welsh rugby, Scottish literature, English universities are all stellar contributions to making the world a better place. The country that invented pubs quite obviously cannot be all bad. Not all the country's people are so amoral as to take money from anyone, and of course the country has lots going for it beyond its butlering industry. But as you read the chapters that follow, I hope two things become clear: first, that the tendency is alarmingly widespread, far more widespread than you may have realised; and second, that much of the national elite is devoted to serving the interests of the rich and powerful, no matter who they are and whatever their interests. So much of what makes Britain British, and which Britons take so much pride in – its history, tradition, humour, institutions – has become a costume for the country's elites to wear, as they scour the world for fresh clients.

This is a huge topic to try to address in one book; an exhaustive account would fill dozens of volumes the size of this one. It was also a tricky topic to research during lockdown. I normally travel widely, with all the serendipitous encounters that creates, when I research my books. New research techniques proved surprisingly rewarding, however, and led me to scandals I had no idea existed. In telling the story of Butler Britain, I have chosen to focus on certain details and describe them closely. The accounts of specific aspects of Britain's behaviour over the last seventy years are representative of a far larger whole.

One of the reasons I decided to write this book was that, in the months and years after the UK's decision to leave the

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European Union in 2016, there was so much anguish about what kind of country Britain should be, without – as far as I could tell – much public discussion of what kind of country it actually was. Brexit felt at the time like a crisis that required a response, but it has since been eclipsed by the far more serious crisis of COVID-19. The need to diagnose what's wrong with Britain has been heightened by the pandemic, which has exposed tensions in many countries but has hit the UK – with its disproportionately high death toll and stumbling governmental response – particularly hard. I hope that when the crisis passes, British politicians heed its lessons and aim to forge a new kind of country that does not see every situation as an opportunity to earn a fee and does not engage quite so readily in enabling the kind of activities I describe in this book, but acts more like the land of heroes they claim to admire.

This is not an unrealistic hope. There are some years when history speeds up, and societies achieve transformations that normally take decades. We know this, because it was just such a crisis that gave birth to Britain's butlering career back in the years when my parents were young and I was unthought of.

