

Reviews

Reviews of the latest books and technology

Books

The Great British Dream Factory: the strange history of our national imagination

by Dominic Sandbrook
Allen Lane, 688pp, £25.00



Dominic Sandbrook's *The Great British Dream Factory* opens with a picture of Alfred Hitchcock peeking through the doors of the Rover's Return. It sets the tone perfectly for this

cheeky, argumentative, often bitchy and sometimes outrageously inconsistent take on British popular culture.

British culture, writes Sandbrook, "has a very good claim, pound for pound, for being the most successful". He describes the Doctor Who series *The Talons of Weng-Chiang* (1977) as "a microcosm" that explains many of the reasons for our cultural success: "at once trivial and serious, sentimental and spine chilling, childishly silly and painfully earnest, unashamedly clever and yet unrepentantly populist." Cultural snobs and critics may sneer at Tolkien's novels, the Ealing comedies and ITV's *Coronation Street*, but this "middle-brow" culture is where the money is. And Britain is good at it.

But Sandbrook shows little understanding of anything outside the mainstream and does a fair bit of sneering himself. Has he ever met a punk, a *Guardian*-reader or an ordinary member of the Labour Party? To someone who's been all three, his feeble stereotypes seem lifted straight from the *Daily Mail*, for which Sandbrook is a columnist. Apart from a brief discussion of Hanif Kureishi and Monica Ali (both mixed-race), there's nothing on the contribution of black and Asian people to British culture. The tradition of dissent in British music (The Jam? The Clash?)



is dismissed in a couple of paragraphs. And, Doctor Who apart, he has surprisingly little to say about the BBC.

Naturally, John Lennon gets it with both barrels. Yes, Lennon was a hypocrite who asked us to "imagine no possessions" while keeping a locked room full of his wife's fur coats. Yes, he "only began to indulge his artistic, political and spiritual enthusiasms" once he'd become rich. But it's Lennon's politics – not his money making – that gets Sandbrook's goat. Elsewhere, he celebrates artists who exchange suburban semis or grimy northern back-to-backs for posh London flats and country houses as "self-made" men, and women whose achievements are driven by their ambition to escape their backgrounds.

This leads Sandbrook to draw some political conclusions as wonky as one of Doctor Who's early sets. If Britain's cultural success vindicates Thatcherite individualism, why did most of the fig-

ures he celebrates emerge in precisely the kind of "collectivist" society that Thatcher despised? The idea that collective support like the welfare state might help talented people to flourish doesn't get a look-in. Neither does the fact that Thatcherism has reversed the social mobility which he says was essential to cultural success.

Sandbrook is uncharacteristically silent on the apparent decline of British culture in recent years. Yet the evidence is there in his own pages. Apart from video games and *Downton Abbey*, Sandbrook rarely discusses anything produced after 1990. Decades of individualism seem to have produced very thin pickings indeed.

If the book has a defining hero, it's Reginald Dwight, "the genuine everyman" who becomes "one of the most popular entertainers of all time". But if the triumph of the artist now known as Elton John is an important part of British culture, it's not the whole story. None of this makes *The Great British Dream Factory* a bad book, just not the history book it purports to be. But you'll probably have too much fun to care.

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Reviewed by Craig Ryan