

# Introduction

In the 1960s the world shrank for the British public. In a literal sense, they lost an empire. The start of the decade marked the most intense period of decolonisation and, by its end, more than twenty-five colonies in Africa, the Caribbean, and the Indian Ocean had gained independence. With each independence ceremony, with each newly hoisted flag, the pink area on the map retreated. But the world was becoming smaller in other ways as well. The 1960s were distinctive not just for the rapid pace of decolonisation, but also for a boom in international mobility and communications, and a concomitant surge in the establishment and growth of international agencies and organisations. As a play produced in 1964 for school children by the humanitarian organisation Christian Aid described it:

The world we live in has become one. Overnight we have discovered that China is not very far away, that it is easier to fly to Greece ... than it is to drive up the M1 to the North of England. This has been brought about by the rapid growth of travel, satellites in orbit which bring us pictures of Moscow or America as things happen and the on-the-spot commentaries of the commentators as they give us their judgements about a war in Vietnam or a soccer match in Argentina.<sup>1</sup>

This interconnectedness made faraway places, the people that lived in them, and the things that they did there *feel* as if they were closer to Britain than ever before.

Such sentiments may not have been entirely new in the 1960s; similar pronouncements about proximity, accessibility, and interconnectedness were made in 1866 about the establishment of transatlantic telegraph lines, for example, and again in the aftermath of the First World War.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the sense of living in a shrinking world was reinvigorated by the geopolitical shifts of the post-war period and its imagery became a prominent feature of political and associational life

in the 1960s. In the pages of broadsheet newspapers the world was described as shrinking when markets expanded into new geographical areas, when increased air travel required new international health regulations to stop the spread of disease, and when the threat of nuclear attack made the internal affairs of one country the immediate concern of another.<sup>3</sup> According to R. J. D. Evans, writing in *The Times* in 1959, a shrinking world was a world in which ‘most major issues – economic, political and military – [were] ... universal in their import’.<sup>4</sup> But it was also one in which opportunities for real and vicarious travel increased the British public’s ability to see and interact with the outside world. Public attitudes towards the wider world were shaped simultaneously by this increasing interconnectedness and by the dissolution of the British Empire. This book is about the paradox of living in these two shrinking worlds – about what it meant that the world felt more visible and accessible to the British public at precisely the moment that Britain lost authority over it – and about the impact of that paradox on the ideas and practices of post-imperial responsibility within middle-class society.

Until at least the mid-1980s, most scholarship on British imperialism assumed that ‘empire’ was something that happened overseas and was therefore marginal to the lives of most British people.<sup>5</sup> Since then, however, efforts to assess the impact of imperialism on metropolitan societies have moved to the centre of an ever-expanding field.<sup>6</sup> Empire is no longer treated as just a phenomenon ‘out there’, but as a fact that registered in ‘the social fabric, the intellectual discourse, and the life of the imagination’.<sup>7</sup> While the majority of this scholarship deals with the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the post-war years of imperial decline also raise important questions about Britain’s imperial experience. In 1996 Bill Schwarz published a rallying call, pointing out that conventional histories of decolonisation presented a ‘stunning lack of curiosity’ about its impact within ‘the heartland of England itself’.<sup>8</sup> In the two decades since, scholars have mounted a persuasive challenge to the ‘minimal impact thesis’, focusing on representations of empire in political discourse and cultural productions (including satire, children’s popular literature, commercial films, travel writing, and television programming) to illustrate the effects of decolonisation on domestic life.<sup>9</sup>

This book builds on these existing histories of decolonisation by introducing a cast of actors and a set of spaces understudied in the post-war period. It thinks about the village hall, the clubhouse, the local church, and the small-town assembly room, and it traces the associational and organisational links that connected these spaces to the outside world. By decentering the traditional focus on cultural

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products in order to analyse civic forms of engagement with the declining empire, this book links a rich scholarly tradition of research on the domestic experience of Britain's Empire to a new and emerging field of research that seeks to understand the institutional and associational makeup of the interconnected post-war world. Popular memories of the 1960s often centre on the increased mobilisation and radicalisation of young and left-wing political activists.<sup>10</sup> Alongside markers of affluence, permissiveness, and transatlantic consumerism, the sit-in and the protest march endure as common symbols of a decade of change. As a result, we have little difficulty in imagining youth or political activists as international actors – as active participants in a globalising world. Yet, as this book shows, it was not just the young and politically active who looked out onto the changing world. The geopolitical changes of the 1960s also opened up new opportunities and created new expectations for international engagement among middle-class, middle-aged members of society with little interest in protest. For many participants in middle-class associational life it became a civic duty to engage, understand, and intervene to help the shrinking world in which they lived. This book uncovers how associations and organisations acted on this sense of duty, developing projects that promoted friendship and hospitality as the foundations of world peace, visions for secular and religious forms of humanitarianism that encouraged relationships of both sympathy and solidarity with those in the global south, and plans to increase international understanding through educative activities.

The experiences of the associational groups uncovered in this book do not simply broaden our sense of those affected by the end of empire, they also require us to rethink how we characterise the domestic impact of decolonisation and the enduring legacies of imperialism. There is a broad consensus that the late 1950s and early 1960s represent a key transitional phase in public attitudes towards the Empire. Stuart Ward suggests that attitudes began to shift after the Suez crisis in 1956, from which point we can see signs of 'a more gradual and ambivalent awareness of British impotence in the world'.<sup>11</sup> John MacKenzie agrees that Suez was significant, but locates the key turning point slightly later, arguing that an illusion of imperial power persisted throughout the 1950s and until the rapid decolonisation of Britain's African colonies in the years between 1959 and 1965. By the end of this process, he suggests, it had become 'cruelly apparent that the British could no longer trade off (in both literal and metaphorical terms) on a richly powerful and imperial past'.<sup>12</sup> Wendy Webster puts similar emphasis on the first half of the decade, arguing that Churchill's funeral in 1965 marked a final public display of heroic visions of martial

imperial masculinity that a few decades earlier had been commonplace.<sup>13</sup> There are some significant commonalities between these accounts and the story that this book tells, in particular, the undermining of heroic narratives of empire that these histories detail did filter through to associational life. As expressions of unqualified regret at the dissolution of the Empire were increasingly stigmatised in the early 1960s, there was also a considerable drop-off in appetite for outspoken nostalgia within associational life.

Where this book's findings differ from these existing periodisations is in relation to the high levels of anxiety about decline that they often identify as a key feature of the domestic response to the 1959–65 'implosion' of Empire.<sup>14</sup> This book does not suggest that anxiety and pessimism did not exist. As Stuart Ward has shown, the early 1960s saw a wave of 'state of Britain' writing by journalists, economists, academics, and public commentators, many of who expressed concerns about Britain's declining international status.<sup>15</sup> In his 1963 analysis *A State of England*, for example, Anthony Hartley worried that with no empire and only scraps of programmes and fragments of idealism left – 'a movement of penal reform here and a protest of apartheid there' – there was little left to give the nation a sense of purpose.<sup>16</sup> Writing towards the end of the decade, Michael Adams confidently diagnosed decolonisation as a 'traumatic moment for Britain' because it had required the 'renunciation of a role in the world which had become second nature'.<sup>17</sup> But while the pessimism of these diagnoses may have been a central feature of political discourse and popular culture, it does not hold true for the associations discussed in this book.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, the commonly used vocabulary of absences, amnesia, guilt, shame, and nostalgic longing gives the Empire an emotional charge that was simply not there in many of the ways in which people interacted with the declining and former empire.

As this book shows, the public responded to Britain's changing global role in diverse and often optimistic ways, imagining new futures that sought to tally the receding influence of Britain on a national level with the increased opportunities for international engagement becoming available to the British public on an individual or associational level. Crucially, this optimism was not because participants in associational life were uninterested in or unaware of decolonisation, but because they chose to read it through a pre-existing narrative of global benevolence in which they, as British citizens and participants in associational life, could play an active part. Prior to decolonisation, two imperial narratives had long run parallel to each other.<sup>19</sup> This book shows that while the first – centred on authority, expansionism, and militarised heroism – was dampened by the final implosion of formal Empire in

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the first half of the 1960s, the second – built on notions of a ‘peace’ empire of improvement and development – found new purchase among a set of middle-class organisations and associations in this period. For these groups the principles of international goodwill offered a sense of stabilising continuity that made them resistant to pessimistic readings of the 1960s implosion of Empire.

Most of the existing literature that addresses the British public’s exposure to, and engagement with, the ‘benevolent trusteeship thesis’ in the post-war period has focused on the utility of the Commonwealth as its key symbol.<sup>20</sup> In these accounts the development of the idea of the Commonwealth as a symbol of enduring British influence and benevolence is seen to have acted as a potent anaesthetic against the trauma of decolonisation.<sup>21</sup> Historians of the period have tended to share the sense expressed by political commentators at the time that the invention of the Commonwealth saw the public through the most intense period of decolonisation and that, by the mid-1960s, it had mostly served its purpose.<sup>22</sup> In 1967, Bowden wrote a Cabinet memorandum on ‘the value of the Commonwealth to Britain’ in which he explained, writing pointedly in the past tense, that ‘the modern Commonwealth was a triumphant technique to cover the process of decolonialisation, turning “Empire” into “Commonwealth.” This both enabled us to extricate ourselves from colonial responsibilities with honour and psychologically cushioned the shock for the people of Britain adjusting to a new era.’<sup>23</sup> The case studies discussed in this book show that the Commonwealth did have *some* appeal in associational settings, but not at the levels imagined by some contemporary commentators.

As this book shows, for many middle-class participants in associational life the crucial ‘anaesthetising’ element of the ‘benevolent trusteeship thesis’ was not, as is usually suggested, the ideal of the Commonwealth, but rather a much more flexible conception of international goodwill – a broader faith in British people’s desire and ability to do good in the world.<sup>24</sup> There was nothing new in the idea that Britain’s responsibilities to humanity might extend beyond empire; the distinction has always been blurred, particularly in relation to humanitarian projects.<sup>25</sup> But in the 1960s the combined processes of decolonisation and globalisation further decoupled ‘caring’ from ‘ruling’, making it easier to detach ‘benevolence’ from specifically imperial responsibilities. Even though the literal geographies of associational benevolence were often still delineated by the boundaries of the former and declining empire, decolonisation made it possible for associations to imagine a world role for themselves that offered the promise of making a difference with neither the burdensome liability of colonial responsibility nor the negative connotations of imperial authority. By

the middle of the decade, ideals of international benevolence gained more traction when reworked to apply to humanity as a whole than when limited to the Commonwealth.

*Active citizenship and post-imperial responsibility*

In this book, I approach associational performances of post-imperial responsibility and international benevolence through the lens of 'active citizenship'. Scholarship on the domestic impact of decolonisation has tended to focus on cultural and political representations of imperial decline. As a result, we are more used to thinking of the public as an audience to decolonisation – as consumers of cultural products and political discourse – than as active participants, shaping their own experiences of the end of empire. Yet, as I show, the combined processes of decolonisation and globalisation prompted civic organisations and members of the public to think through their responsibilities to their local community, their nation, their Commonwealth compatriots, and to the broader global population. Many members of associational life used the imaginative framework of 'active' or 'responsible' citizenship to emphasise the British public – rather than the British state – as key agents of change in a rapidly shrinking world.

A rich body of scholarship shows how the concept of active citizenship shaped associational life in the inter-war period. Organisers used the discourses of active citizenship to defend and give substance to the political rights of citizenship extended to women and working-class men in the aftermath of the First World War. As Helen McCarthy has shown, this period saw rapid growth in non-party mass membership associations, which had 'remarkable success in engaging voters in alternative forms of activism and organised sociability'.<sup>26</sup> Most of these organisations were self-consciously non-radical in their politics and approach, promoting increased civic participation rather than protest as the best route to societal change. As well as informing inward-facing claims for increased rights and representation, the traumas of the First World War also increased consciousness of social, political, and economic problems that transcended borders and contributed to the emergence of internationalism as both foreign policy and civic ideal.<sup>27</sup> In the inter-war period, active citizenship was central to developing projects of civic internationalism that encouraged identification with, and participation in, projects of international collaboration and extended civic responsibility to the international sphere.

As this book illustrates, the principles of active citizenship remained important in 1960s associational life, particularly in relation to international engagement. Yet ideas of active citizenship have been

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largely absent from research into the impact of decolonisation.<sup>28</sup> Instead, this literature has tended to focus on two other interrelated dimensions of citizenship: first, the political–legal relationship between citizens and the state; and second, the use of citizenship discourse to establish the boundaries of the national community and describe who ‘belonged’ within it.<sup>29</sup> In relation to the impact of decolonisation, this literature has focused on the intersections between citizenship and race. As Matthew Grant reminds us, ‘the history of racial discrimination, and the fight against it, highlights that formal citizenship – the possession of a British passport and political rights – did not in itself define what citizenship was or who was a citizen in post-war Britain’.<sup>30</sup> Yet these are not the only dimensions of citizenship that are relevant to discussions of decolonisation.

Within the circles that this book discusses, those who spoke about civic responsibility were predominantly white and middle class. As such, by the 1960s, the active, performative elements of their citizenship – the specific ways they participated in and contributed to civil society – were underpinned by a legal status and sense of belonging that was never in question. I have not chosen this cohort with the intention of underplaying the significance of race to ideas of belonging in post-imperial Britain. Indeed, this book is indebted to the rich literature that charts the intricate relationship between British identity and racial identity in the post-war period.<sup>31</sup> Instead, I want to show that by temporarily shifting our focus away from debates about status and belonging and towards debates about purpose, we can bring to light underappreciated dimensions of national and civic identity in this period. For the groups discussed here, talking about responsible citizenship offered a way of thinking about Britain’s place in the shifting post-war world – thinking, that is, about the kind of influence the nation and its population might exert on the global stage, the relationships they should seek with former colonies and the white British diaspora, and the narratives that should describe this activity. Debates about the best forms of international engagement within civic society bring hierarchical assumptions about Britain’s global status into sharp focus; they reveal the influence of state priorities on civic activities; and they illuminate the complex interplay between local, national, and international dimensions of identity.

As well as contributing to debates about the domestic impact of decolonisation, this book also seeks to deepen our understanding of the changing nature of post-war civic society. The meaningful role that discourses of active citizenship played in middle-class associational life in the 1960s does not sit comfortably within traditional narratives about the decline of post-war civic society, which argue

that the expansion of the welfare state eroded expectations of civic responsibility and left 'passive' citizens in its wake.<sup>32</sup> Yet nor does it entirely fit within the thrust of scholarship on the globalisation of civic society, which, although it challenges the declinist narrative, has tended to focus either on the rapid expansion of professionalised NGOs or on the confrontational, activist approach of new social movements.<sup>33</sup>

In isolation neither account of post-war civic society fully describes the associational worlds and projects of active citizenship discussed in this book. On the one hand, simplistic narratives of decline have not appreciated the adaptability or diversity of the voluntary sector in this period. Indeed, recent scholarship has challenged the assumption that the decline in traditional forms of civic participation such as church attendance should be read as evidence of the decline of British civic society as a whole. On the basis of the 1959 *Civic Culture Survey* and 1973 *Political Action Survey*, Peter Hall concludes that the average number of associational memberships held by individuals at all levels of educational attainment rose rapidly in the 1960s.<sup>34</sup> Decline in one area was being matched by growth elsewhere.<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, work on the globalisation of civic society and on left-wing new social movements has often overlooked the extent to which, in the 1960s, these new civic activities interacted with – and indeed relied upon – older forms of associational life and discourses of non-activist active citizenship.<sup>36</sup> To date, most work on global civil society has focused on what Matthew Hilton describes as the 'more dramatic forms of campaigning and protests that emerged out of new social movements associated with the 1960s': environmentalism, women's rights, anti-nuclear campaigns, and the anti-apartheid movement.<sup>37</sup> Yet the voluntary sector was 'not the preserve of the radically progressive'.<sup>38</sup> While the growth of NGOs and new politicised social movements did change the face of the voluntary sector in 1960s Britain, many long-standing non-activist associations – including the Women's Institute and Rotary Club, two of the key case studies used in this book – also engaged in the rapid internationalisation of public life, adapting their remits to respond to the shrinking world.

### *Networks and patterns of associational life*

Empires are networked spaces. Flows of people, ideas, and goods have shaped not only the development of the imperial project overseas but also the experiences of those who remained in domestic Britain.<sup>39</sup> Personal, familial, business, and religious networks did not disappear with decolonisation.<sup>40</sup> A central concern of this book is to determine



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how the organisations and associations of civil society functioned as conduits for the flow of information and ideas between local, national, imperial and global spaces. How did individuals and communities navigate these international networks? Through what frameworks did these networks encourage their members to engage with the Empire? How did the ideological preoccupations and practical limitations of associational organisations shape the local or personal realities of ‘experiencing empire’? Civic society was a space in which connections were made and lives opened up. But it was also a space in which identities were formed, boundaries policed, and power exerted. To answer these questions, I focus on ‘the social worlds of citizenship’ that existed within a set of five non-partisan organisations, each with predominantly (though not exclusively) white and middle-class memberships and supporters.<sup>41</sup> Where Jodi Burkett has shown that the end of empire had a significant impact on the aspirations and activities of progressive, anti-colonial, left-wing extra-parliamentary organisations, this book argues that decolonisation also affected the ostensibly apolitical dimensions of associational life, broadening our sense of who we consider to be international actors.<sup>42</sup>

The five organisations discussed are: the Royal Commonwealth Society (RCS), with a British membership of approximately 8000 made up largely of colonial administrators, retired officers in the colonial civil service, and businessmen with imperial interests; Rotary International in Great Britain and Ireland (RIBI) with a membership of approximately 44,000 middle-class businessmen from across Britain; the Women’s Institute (WI) with a membership of approximately half a million women spread across more than 8000 predominantly rural clubs; the humanitarian organisation Christian Aid, whose most active supporters came from existing forms of religious associational life; and the United Nations sponsored Freedom from Hunger Campaign (FFHC), whose British efforts drew on a wide base of support including government, individuals, and existing associations.<sup>43</sup> Collectively the case studies represent a broad section of middle-class society, but their distinct characteristics – their memberships, remits, and access to international networks – also allow us to chart the uneven impact of decolonisation on different sections of the British public. To uncover the distinct trajectories of these organisations and their members, I have used archival and published material produced by the organisations themselves alongside the published material of external commentators, particularly the press, and, where possible, governmental records detailing state interaction with civic activities.

The RCS, WI, and RIBI were, at heart, mechanisms for sociability and service. Their purpose was twofold: to serve the needs of their

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fee-paying members and to serve the needs of the wider community to which they felt they belonged. For the RCS, this was understood quite narrowly as a responsibility to promote the Commonwealth to the British public while developing collaborative projects with other Commonwealth nations. The RCS was the largest and most senior of a much larger group of associations, including the Victoria League and Royal Over-Seas League, established in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in order to serve those with colonial interests while maintaining and strengthening imperial ties. In the 1960s, the RCS served an ageing membership who had once made up the scaffolding of colonial administration, meeting the needs of those who wanted to maintain an intellectual engagement with the changing Commonwealth as well as those who simply wanted the company of like-minded people.<sup>44</sup> While the work of the RCS provides a window onto the impact of decolonisation on those most involved in the Empire – and of their attempts to influence wider British society – the WI's and RIBI's broad spectrum of motivations, activities, and concerns makes them ideal case studies with which to ask: what did the Empire mean to those for whom it did not mean everything?

When Mrs Rachel Wild of the Cliffords Women's Institute in Yorkshire asked her daughter to join the WI in the late 1960s the daughter turned her request down with the exclamation 'oh mother, jams and jellies'.<sup>45</sup> The following extracts from the records of monthly meetings kept by the Burythorpe Women's Institute, also in Yorkshire, do little to challenge such an image.

- March 1952: Competition for the best darn in a sock heel.
- June 1952: Miss Seaton gave a demonstration on salads.
- July 1954: Visit to the Blind Institute in Hull to be arranged.  
Demonstration on butter icing.
- June 1959: Presentation on the Hoovermatic Washing Machine.
- August 1960: Competition for the best necklace made from garden produce.
- June 1961: Presentation on soft slippers.<sup>46</sup>

Domestic concerns were undoubtedly an important part of members' involvement in the movement, but there was more to the WI than the proverbial jam and Jerusalem. Established in Britain in 1915, by the inter-war period it was one of the few women-only organisations to hold monthly meetings that were partly social, partly educational, and partly a forum for pressure-group politics.<sup>47</sup> As Caitriona Beaumont has shown, the WI provided rural housewives with access to cultural and educational pursuits, and gave them the means to shape British society.<sup>48</sup> Alongside sock darning and salad making, the WI involved

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itself in a wide range of civic issues in the post-war period, guided by the principles of active citizenship. Some of these activities, such as campaigns on equal pay and family planning provision, directly supported women in their roles as wives, mothers, and workers; others addressed broader concerns such as road safety and littering.<sup>49</sup> Less well known, but also a significant dimension of WI life is the movement's international activity.<sup>50</sup>

Over the course of the 1960s, responding to the decolonising, globalising world, the WI involved itself in a wide range of international issues including international friendship schemes, educational initiatives, and philanthropic fundraising. As one member put it for the WI's monthly magazine *Home and Country* in 1967, 'I can't imagine that any WI member anywhere hasn't had a finger in some international pie or other by now.'<sup>51</sup> These activities make it possible to consider how the 'female space' of the WI shaped its members' experience of decolonisation. As Joanna Lewis summarises, 'European women, whether as wives of administrators, as missionaries, as lobbyists at home, or working overseas as amateur do-gooders, nurses, teachers, welfare officers are now seen as having played an important part' in upholding the imperial project.<sup>52</sup> By studying the international work of the WI in the 1960s we are able to follow the well-plotted trajectory of women's involvement with empire into new territory, beyond the 'end' of empire.

The Rotary Club offered similar opportunities for sociability and active citizenship to business and professional men to those that the WI provided for rural women, but with a greater emphasis on the development of business relationships. The movement had its origins in North American business networking culture; it was founded in 1905 in Chicago as an informal luncheon club and rapidly grew into a global movement.<sup>53</sup> Each Rotary Club was encouraged to admit one individual from each local business or profession with the aim of building a representative community of engaged and responsible citizens. From its early days, Rotary's institutional vision centred on local community service and international engagement with businessmen around the world, seeing little contradiction between these two imperatives.<sup>54</sup> Members were expected to adhere to the principles of 'service before self' in vocational, community, and international spheres. Like the WI, its membership grew rapidly in the inter-war period and, by 1960, there were 40,257 members in clubs spread across Britain, each belonging to the national organising structure Rotary International in Great Britain and Ireland.<sup>55</sup> By considering WI and Rotary participation in local clubs across Britain we can trace how the impact of decolonisation and globalisation registered beyond the nation's more commonly studied urban centres.

The second set of organisations discussed in this book are humanitarian NGOs. These differ from the membership organisations in a number of key ways and therefore allow us to consider the impact of decolonisation across a broader range of civic activity. First, the remit of humanitarian organisations was predominantly outward facing (most of their work was directed at serving the needs of those in the global south); second, their main stated responsibility was to the recipients of aid rather than a fee-paying membership; and, finally, they placed a much higher value on expertise and professionalisation than was generally the case in membership organisations. Existing scholarship on post-war humanitarianism has focused on these elements of NGOs' work, seeking to explain the rapid growth of the sector, detail the changing nature of operational practices, and trace the internal debates that drove these developments.<sup>56</sup> This book builds on this work by thinking about the particular influence of decolonisation on these processes. The FFHC, an international UN sponsored initiative to encourage agricultural development, and Christian Aid, the humanitarian wing of the British Council of Churches, were both at the centre of these changes and illustrate the different ways that humanitarian organisations chose to engage with Britain's imperial past.

This book also differentiates itself from existing scholarship on humanitarianism by integrating its analysis of the ideological debates taking place within Christian Aid and the FFHC with a close examination of the understudied experiences of donor participants. Both organisations were committed to raising public awareness, both generated funds through the organisation of local committees and activities, and both provided diverse opportunities for the public to engage with debates about international aid and development. In these areas there are significant overlaps between the donor side of humanitarian work and older forms of associational life. As well as targeting new NGOs, the FFHC also sought support from a wide range of pre-existing institutions – including the WI and Rotary Club. Christian Aid, one of the new NGOs established at the end of the Second World War, may represent the modernisation and professionalisation of the charity sector, but its fundraising efforts and arguments about post-imperial responsibility were also influenced by longstanding rhythms of religious associational life. Its work reveals how religious organisations adapted in the face of decolonisation, but it also illustrates the extent to which ostensibly 'outward facing' humanitarian activity was determined by local priorities, expertise, and rivalries.

Histories of civic forms of international engagement in the 1960s have tended to focus on its more radical manifestations, feeding into a familiar narrative about the decline of deference and rise of political

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activism.<sup>57</sup> The Anti-Apartheid Movement, Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), and anti-Vietnam War movement, for example, all employed the strategies of public protest to challenge the British state to act responsibly on the international stage. In contrast, the organisations that I discuss in this book mobilised members of ostensibly apolitical associational life to support non-confrontational forms of international activity. As Caitriona Beaumont has shown in her work on the domestic efforts of mainstream, non-feminist women's organisations to promote the interests and needs of women in the post-war period, we should not overlook the impact that non-radical organisations might have on public debates about citizenship and public responsibility in this period, nor the significant number of people that they engaged in these debates.<sup>58</sup>

The RCS, WI, and Rotary weren't simply non-radical by comparison to other movements of the time, they incorporated a conscious rejection of radicalism into their institutional identities, consistently discouraging confrontational protest. While Christian Aid and the FFHC made space for political activism, particularly by the end of the 1960s, the majority of their supporters – and the majority of the members of the RCS, WI, and Rotary – participated in ways that did not seek to challenge the political establishment. Where these groups did identify the need for change – for example, in relation to the demand for increased government spending that formed a key element of the FFHC – their approach was reformist rather than reactionary. All five organisations were committed to non-partisanship and generally avoided engaging with parliamentary politics. They saw themselves as acting independently of the state, carrying out work alongside or in addition to it, rather than in partnership with or opposition to it.

This positioning certainly suited the political temperaments of the majority of these groups' members: largely small-c conservatives who felt financially comfortable and secure in their own political rights. Having profited from the political and economic situation as it stood, they had little to gain from any upending of the status quo.<sup>59</sup> But, the anti-radicalism of associational groups was more than a convenience; it was transformed into a largely coherent, though delusional, claim for political neutrality that in turn acted as the ideological underpinning for all the groups' models of international engagement. For the majority of the groups discussed in this book this meant arguing that their work was guided not by political ideology, but dictated by 'common sense' and a commitment to 'service'. Speaking to the Rotary National Conference in 1965, Morris Barr argued that to secure 'Britain's place in international affairs', the assembled Rotarians should 'forget the politics, remember the people. Only the selfish, the beaten, the cynical

and the intellectually dishonest fail us, and this sets a task for you and for me [...]. It is a matter of "Service above Self."<sup>60</sup> Members of these organisations had their own political allegiances and inclinations. Broadly speaking, while the diverse groups affiliated to the FFHC occupied a broad range of positions on the political spectrum, RCS, WI, and Rotary members were more likely to be right-leaning, and Christian Aid organisers and participants more likely to be on the centre left. But the concept of service – of limited self-sacrifice and communal endeavour – allowed them to see their active citizenship and international engagements as explicitly separate from these other allegiances. Associations' claims to apolitical neutrality had important implications for the way that they described Britain's relationship with the outside world. As this book shows, discourses of active citizenship often worked in ways that depoliticised the power dynamics of imperialism. While it was empowering for individual members of civic society to focus on civic action, this emphasis also helped to relocate the issue of responsibility away from the political sphere, and from a context in which issues like state culpability, reparations, and compensation might be discussed. This meant that, unlike more politicised campaigns on the left, the associational groups in this book placed their emphasis on the needs rather than the rights of those they sought to help.<sup>61</sup> Rights implied a political rather than a moral responsibility that was not compatible with ideas of apolitical service. The assumptions and practices of outward-facing active citizenship that these organisations established in the 1960s have had an enduring impact on narratives about Britain's international responsibilities into the twenty-first century.

*Models of international engagement: the structure  
of the book*

There were three predominant strands of international engagement: those founded on knowledge, those founded on interpersonal relationships, and those founded on philanthropy. All of these forms of engagement shared the same set of underlying assumptions: that responsibility and benevolence were inherently British characteristics; that Britain's experiences as a colonial power had furnished its citizens with a set of skills uniquely suited to make a difference in the post-imperial world; and that Britain should seek to maintain a large global role on the basis of these proficiencies and inclinations. Through each form of international engagement, members of civic society repurposed imperial narratives and networks for a post-imperial age.

In order to map the development of these ideas of international responsibility, benevolence, and exceptionalism, each chapter of this

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book addresses a distinctive form of international engagement and interrogates the beliefs, practices, and people that informed it. Chapter 1 is about the promotion of the Commonwealth as a model for international cooperation. Using the activities of the Royal Commonwealth Society (RCS), it assesses the afterlife of empire as it was lived by those who had been the most involved. Negotiating the transition from Empire to Commonwealth was a complex process and this chapter, more than any of the others, is about the difficulty of adaptation. This is not a story of triumphant success – the membership of the RCS was an ageing cohort, often more interested in sociability than public engagement. But nor is it a story of outright failure. Many found scope for optimism by reflecting on the possibilities of the new modern Commonwealth. This chapter acts to set up the other four by illustrating what a preoccupation with empire might look like and by illustrating how those with vested interests established discourses that permeated wider circles of associational life.

Chapters 2 and 3 use the Women's Institute and Rotary Club to explore how education and friendship offered different routes to international understanding. Both routes described ways of 'knowing' people from other countries, but where the former promoted detached interest and objective observation, the latter was built on ideas of intimacy, exchange, and direct contact. Chapter 2 shows how imperial decline shaped both the practical and discursive dimensions of educative activities such as film screenings, lectures, and 'International Days'. Global events determined not only which parts of the world were worth investing time in, but also which aspects of foreign life were worth knowing about. Chapter 3 addresses the emotional history of international engagement by focusing on two projects designed to develop familiarity and intimacy across international boundaries: hospitality for foreign visitors to Britain (particularly overseas students) and building friendships with people living overseas. As both chapters illustrate, imperial legacies determined not only the geographies of these connections but also the hierarchical structures through which they were conceived. The precise circumstances in which these different kinds of 'knowing' were brought into play tells us a lot about how members of British society imagined their place in the world.

Chapters 4 and 5 assess secular and religious humanitarian engagements with the decolonising empire. They use the FFHC and Christian Aid as windows onto the changing experience of international philanthropy in the 1960s. Chapter 4 shows how the FFHC became a way to talk about Britain's 'lost vocation' and imagine new forms of benevolent intervention. Chapter 5 uses the work of Christian Aid to

address the neglect of religious institutions in histories of the domestic impact of decolonisation. It shows how the complex interplay between domestic and international contexts determined the everyday experiences of religious humanitarian action. By the end of the 1960s, humanitarianism emerged as the dominant form of civic international engagement, attracting far more attention and energy than projects that sought to promote knowledge and friendship. The final two chapters show that three key factors determined this outcome. First, the malleability of humanitarian discourse meant that it was able to support multiple, contradictory narratives about British exceptionalism, ranging from those that were critical of Britain's imperial past to those that were nostalgic about colonial rule. Second, it was driven by an increasingly professionalised infrastructure that recognised the need to embrace both traditional and modern organising strategies in order to engage large numbers of the public. In comparison, friendship and educational projects remained more amateur. Third, it was the most obvious manifestation of the narrative of benevolent Britain that had come to underpin a wide range of international civic engagement. This being the case, why have I not chosen to write a book simply about humanitarianism? Although it came to dominate civic international engagements, humanitarianism did not exist in a vacuum; it always operated alongside other outward facing associational commitments. Associational practices of understanding and friendship were not only important components of narratives about benevolent responsibility, they also made it easier to mobilise crucial networks in support of humanitarian activity.

The concluding chapter brings the five case studies back together to consider how they can help us to understand why narratives of British benevolence and responsibility that had their origins in imperialism have endured into the twenty-first century. The 1960s were a crucial transitional decade in which members of British associational life reasserted, reframed, and repackaged their relationship with the spaces of the Commonwealth and former empire, developing new practices of civic engagement to suit the changing environments of the decolonising world and of domestic associational life. The practices of the WI, the RCS, and the Rotary Club; the supporters of the FFHC and Christian Aid; and the individual enthusiasts that made these organisations work reveal that empire resonated beyond the governing elite. Imperial decline stimulated productive and optimistic discussions – alongside those that were anxious and regretful – within middle-class communities in industrial towns, in isolated villages, in seaside expatriate havens, in churches, chapels, school assembly rooms, town halls, and sitting rooms across Britain.



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### Notes

- 1 School of African and Oriental Studies (hereafter SOAS), Christian Aid archive (hereafter CA) I/5/4 'Our Daily Bread' play c.1964, Schools Secretary Bridget Russell 1964–65.
- 2 Emily S. Rosenberg, *Transnational Currents in a Shrinking World* (London: Harvard University Press, 2014). On responses to increased mobility within the British Empire in the 1840s see Alan Lester, *Imperial networks: Creating Identities in Nineteenth-century South Africa and Britain* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 179. 'Shrinking World', an 1866 article about the transatlantic telegraph, was reprinted in *The Times* (27 July 1966).
- 3 'Salesmen "Too Diffident"', *The Times* (9 May 1961); 'New Health Regulations For Air Passengers Predicted', *The Times* (11 February 1966).
- 4 R. J. D. Evans, 'A Commonwealth Magazine?', *The Times* (13 May 1959).
- 5 Andrew Thompson (ed.), *Britain's Experience of Empire in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 2.
- 6 Antoinette Burton (ed.), *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking With and Through the Nation* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 2. See also, Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830–1867* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002); Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose (eds), *At Home with Empire: Metropolitan Cultures and the Imperial World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); and the Manchester University Press 'Studies in Imperialism' series.
- 7 Benita Parry cited in Antoinette Burton, 'Who needs the nation? Interrogating "British" history', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 10:3 (1997), 232.
- 8 Bill Schwarz, "'The only white man in there": the re-racialization of England, 1956–1968', *Race & Class*, 38:1 (1996), 65.
- 9 See, for example, Bill Schwarz, *The White Man's World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Camilla Schofield, *Enoch Powell and the Making of Postcolonial Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Stuart Ward (ed.), *British Culture and the End of the Empire* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001); Wendy Webster, *Englishness and Empire, 1939–1965* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Webster, *Imagining Home: Gender, 'Race' and National Identity, 1945–1964* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1998). Those taking a different and/or broader approach include Jordanna Bailkin, *Afterlife of Empire* (London: University of California Press, 2012); Elizabeth Buettner, *Europe after Empire: Decolonisation, Society, and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Jodi Burkett, *Constructing Post-imperial Britain: Britishness, 'Race' and the Radical Left in the 1960s* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).
- 10 See, for example, Caroline Hoefferle, *British Student Activism in the Long Sixties* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013); Burkett, *Constructing Post-imperial Britain*; Lent, *British Social Movements Since 1945*; Celia Hughes, *Young Lives on the Left: Sixties Activism and the Liberation of the Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).
- 11 Ward (ed.), *British Culture and the End of Empire*, p. 8.
- 12 John M. MacKenzie, 'The persistence of Empire in metropolitan culture', in Ward (ed.), *British Culture and the End of Empire*, pp. 21–36. Bailkin, *Afterlife of Empire* also focuses on 1958–62 as a key transitional period.
- 13 Webster, *Englishness and Empire*, p. 184. On changing attitudes towards imperial masculinity see Jeffrey Richards, 'Imperial heroes for a post-imperial age: films and the end of empire', in Ward (ed.), *British Culture and the End of Empire*, pp. 128–44; Max Jones *et al.*, 'Decolonising imperial heroes: Britain and France', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 42 (2014), 787–825.
- 14 For further discussions of decline and decolonisation see: Dan Rebellato, 'Look back at Empire: British theatre and imperial decline', in Ward (ed.), *British Culture and the End of Empire*, pp. 86–7; Ward, 'No nation could be broker', in Ward (ed.), *British Culture and the End of Empire*, p. 108.

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- 15 Ward (ed.), *British Culture and the End of Empire*, pp. 9–11.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- 17 *Ibid.*, pp. 23–4.
- 18 On the interdependence of optimism and pessimism, see Bailkin, *Afterlife of Empire*, p. 21; on left-wing optimism see Burkett, *Constructing Post-Imperial Britain*.
- 19 Peter Hansen, 'Coronation Everest: The Empire and Commonwealth in the "second Elizabethan age"', in Ward (ed.), *British Culture and the End of Empire*, p. 58.
- 20 Rebellato, 'Look back at Empire', p. 86.
- 21 John Darwin, 'The fear of falling: British politics and imperial decline since 1900', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 36 (1986), 42. This interpretation has been repeated and endorsed by others including Rebellato, 'Look back at Empire', p. 86; Hansen, 'Coronation Everest', p. 69; Craggs, 'Hospitality in geopolitics', 93; K. Srinivasan, *The Rise, Decline, and Future of the British Commonwealth* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 116; Burkett, *Constructing Post-Imperial Britain*, pp. 68–72.
- 22 For discussion of the Commonwealth in political discourse see Buettner, *Europe After Empire*, pp. 67–77. See also, Enoch Powell's anonymous contribution to *The Times* in which the Commonwealth was a project of 'self-deception' that had 'been employed on the grand scale' but that, in 1964, had 'served [its] purpose'. 'Now the wounds have almost healed and the skin formed again beneath the plaster and bandages, and they can come off' in 'Patriotism based on reality not on dreams', *The Times* (2 April 1964). For further discussion of Powell see Schofield, *Enoch Powell*.
- 23 'The Value of the Commonwealth to Britain' Cabinet memorandum by Mr Bowden, Annex, 24 April 1967 NA, CAB 129/129, C(67)59 reprinted in S.R. Ashton and Wm. Roger Louis (eds), *East of Suez and the Commonwealth 1964–1971*, Part II *Europe, Rhodesia, Commonwealth (British Documents on the End of Empire, Series A, Volume 4)* (London 2004), 418–29. Also discussed in Buettner, *Europe After Empire*, p. 71.
- 24 On the role of morality in left-wing international activism in this period, see Burkett, *Constructing Post-Imperial Britain*, p. 20.
- 25 Richard Huzzey, 'Minding civilisation and humanity in 1867: A case study in British imperial culture and Victorian anti-slavery', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 40:5 (2012), 807–25. See also Emily Baughan, 'The Imperial War Relief Fund and the All British Appeal: Commonwealth, conflict and Conservatism within the British humanitarian movement, 1920–25', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 40:5 (2012), 845–61.
- 26 Helen McCarthy, 'Parties, voluntary associations, and democratic politics in interwar Britain', *The Historical Journal*, 50:4 (2007), 892.
- 27 Daniel Gorman, 'Empire, internationalism, and the Campaign Against the Traffic in Women and Children in the 1920s', *Twentieth Century British History*, 19 (2008), 189.
- 28 The most significant exception is Jodi Burkett's work on anti-colonial, left-wing civic organizations. Burkett, *Constructing Post-imperial Britain*.
- 29 For a summary of this literature see Matthew Grant, 'Historicising citizenship in post-war Britain', *Historical Journal*, 59:4 (2016), 1187–206. See also, Kathleen Paul, *Whitewashing Britain: Race and Citizenship in the Post-war Era* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).
- 30 Grant, 'Historicising citizenship', 1193. See also Kennetta Hammond Parry, *London is the Place for Me: Black Britons, Citizenship, and the Politics of Race* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
- 31 See, for example, Schwarz, *White Man's World*; Schofield, *Enoch Powell*; Webster *Imagining Home*; Paul, *Whitewashing Britain*.
- 32 For example, Frank Prochaska, *Christianity and Social Service in Modern Britain: The Disinherited Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). For statistics on membership figures see Matthew Hilton *et al.*, *A Historical Guide to NGOs*:

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- 33 For example, Akira Iriye, *Global Community: The Role of International Organizations in the Making of the Contemporary World* (London: University of London Press, 2002); Adam Lent, *British Social Movements Since 1945: Sex, Colour, Peace and Power* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001); Håkan Thörn, *Anti-Apartheid and the Emergence of a Global Civil Society* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).
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- 35 Hilton *et al.*, *A Historical Guide to NGOs*, p. 22.
- 36 For a discussion of this interplay in relation to human rights campaigning see Chris Moores, *Civil Liberties and Human Rights in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
- 37 Matthew Hilton, 'Politics is ordinary: non-governmental organizations and political participation in contemporary Britain', *Twentieth Century British History*, 22:2 (2011), 240.
- 38 Caitriona Beaumont, 'Housewives, workers and citizens: voluntary women's organizations and the Campaign for Women's rights in England and Wales during the post-war period', in Nick Crowson, Matthew Hilton and James McKay (eds), *NGOs in Contemporary Britain: Non-state Actors in Society and Politics since 1945* (London: Springer, 2009), p. 61. See also, Lawrence Black, *Redefining British Politics: Culture, Consumerism and Participation, 1954–70* (London: Springer, 2010).
- 39 See, for example, Alan Lester, 'Imperial circuits and networks: geographies of the British Empire', *History Compass*, 4:1 (2006), 124–41.
- 40 For a discussion of these networks see Andrew Thompson with Meaghan Kowalsky, 'Social life and cultural representation: Empire in the public imagination', in Thompson (ed.), *Britain's Experience of Empire*, pp. 251–97.
- 41 Grant uses the phrase 'social world of citizenship' in Grant, 'Historicizing citizenship', 1205.
- 42 Burkett, *Constructing Post-imperial Britain*.
- 43 Women's Institute, 'History of the W.I.: 1960s', [www.thewi.org.uk/standard.aspx?id=63](http://www.thewi.org.uk/standard.aspx?id=63) (accessed 1 May 2010); *1965 Proceedings: Fifty-sixth Annual Convention of Rotary International* (Rotary International, 1965), p. 260.
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- 48 Beaumont, 'Housewives, workers and citizens' in Crowson, Hilton and McKay (eds), *NGOs in Contemporary Britain*, p. 59.
- 49 Beaumont, 'Housewives, workers and citizens'.
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- 51 *Home and Country* (October 1967).
- 52 Joanna Lewis, *Empire State Building: War and Welfare in Kenya, 1925–52* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 11.
- 53 McCarthy, 'Parties, voluntary associations', 895.
- 54 Brendan Goff, 'The Heartland abroad: The Rotary Club's Mission of Civic Internationalism' (PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 2008), p. 13.
- 55 *1960 Proceedings: Fifty-First Annual Convention of Rotary International* (Rotary International, 1960), p. 264.
- 56 Michael Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011); Matthew Hilton, 'Ken Loach and the Save the Children film: humanitarianism, imperialism, and the changing role of charity in

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- 57 For a critique of decline of deference narratives see Frank Mort, 'The Ben Pimlott memorial lecture 2010: The permissive society revisited', *Twentieth Century British History*, 22:2 (2011), 269–98.
- 58 Caitriona Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens: Domesticity and the Women's Movement in England, 1928–64* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
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- 61 Moores, *Civil Liberties and Human Rights*.