

# THE ENGLISH ROSE THAT WASN'T

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It is a portrait of an English Rose. The pretty blonde girl in the photograph is looking slightly upwards and beyond the camera lens. Maybe an adult standing in front of her has just said something funny or silly to her to get a reaction, because her eyes are twinkling and she is smiling, her lips parted revealing a slight gap between her two front teeth.

Her hair is long and curls down onto her shoulders. She is wearing a plain checked buttoned-up shirt; it looks new, perhaps purchased for the occasion. The girl is maybe ten or eleven years old, which means it is 1944 or 1945 and the German bombers that demolished houses and killed her neighbours on the road where she lives in Morden, south London, no longer strike fear. The World War is coming to a close or is just over, and

maybe it is the new air of optimism amongst the adults in her family that is putting the smile on her face. Her name is Maureen Yvonne Barnett.

There was good reason to believe that things were going to improve. Although the years after 1945 saw a continuation of war-time measures such as rationing, Maureen's teenage years were materially better than the first decade of her life, that had spanned global recession and unimaginable slaughter. The post-conflict economy picked up, the Attlee Labour government introducing major reforms in state education, welfare and health. Leaders of powerful industrial trade unions were regularly treated to beer and sandwiches at Number 10 Downing Street. There were jobs to be had and the prospect for some workers of a mortgage and owning your own house.

There was a liberalisation of social norms, giving young people, particularly women, more freedom. Personal emancipation was facilitated by a bit more disposable income. As Maureen would later recall of her and her friends: 'We were young girls. We chatted to anybody and everybody. We were never ever home. We used to cycle everywhere. Cinemas, entertainment, that sort of thing.' But every evening, after a night out at the pictures, coffee house or ballroom, Maureen would return home to her 'respectable' working class home in Morden.

A heavily idealised, black and white film version of Maureen's post-war decade, that began with the defeat of Hitler and ended with the Suez crisis (that underlined Britain's inexorable decline on the world stage) runs on a continuous loop in the mythic propaganda of the Little Englander nationalists who put themselves at the head of the Brexit campaign. Political scientist Matthew Goodwin describes it as

a particular blend of Englishness which, at times, has ventured into the darker underbelly of nationalism. It is Wat Tyler and the Peasants' Revolt, the Blitz Spirit, Private Walker, Del Boy and Fat Les all rolled into one; rebellious, angry and disillusioned but also defiant, redemptive, sarcastic, dogged, and, occasionally, triumphant.

One of the main ideological components of this Englishness is that the 'old' or 'traditional' working class of which the pleasing photo of the young Maureen might be said to symbolise, had a racial and ethnic purity – it was white. This whiteness also describes a certain shared societal

outlook – respectable, proud, aspirant working class, ‘bolshy’ in defending its rights as ‘free-born Englishmen’ but also socially conservative, deferential and knowing of its place in the gradients of the British class system. The docking of the *Empire Windrush* in June 1948, carrying British passport-holding migrants from Jamaica, at Tilbury docks is seen as the dark negative – the harbinger of the coming assault upon the ethnic and cultural homogeneity of Englishness. The present-day stripping of British citizenship from the ‘Windrush generation’ of West Indian immigrants by the UK Tory government, should not therefore be seen as a series of unfortunate mistakes or the result of bureaucratic overzealousness by Home Office civil servants, rather it is an expression of a racist impulse by powerful forces to turn back the clock by physically expelling the founding generation of the modern British multicultural society.

Racist demagogues from the patrician Enoch Powell of the 1960s and ‘70s, to today’s tin-pot version Nigel Farage, have argued that successive governments, by opening the floodgates of immigration, have displaced the ‘white’ working class as beneficiaries of the post-war years into an increasingly marginal and disadvantaged ghetto, encircled by dark-skinned competitors. The Little Englander project, therefore, is to somehow return to that simpler, purer, more prosperous time. Whether or not those times ever existed, let alone exactly how they would go about reverse-engineering British society back to that place, is hardly ever explicitly stated. It is more about feeding off some kind of generalised yearning. As activist and campaigner for social justice, Ann Dummett, wrote in her 1973 book *A Portrait of English Racism*:

Enoch Powell...by referring to England’s green and pleasant land as under threat, can rouse feelings instantly. For the home of the new Jerusalem to be under threat from without strikes the fear of the devil into the least Christian of men. Powell did not mean to describe present-day England as a green and pleasant land in any literal sense, nor was he taken to mean that.

Maureen, our poster girl for Englishness, returns to her suburban home after an evening at the Gaumont Cinema in nearby Wimbledon. Her family are all at home – her bookish older sister Valerie, her father Albert, ‘Bert’, and her mother Doris. The house is spick and span – Doris is rather obsessive about cleanliness. The front room, with its curtained bay window

facing the street, is out-of-bounds except for visitors. On the back of the sofas are antimacassars – laced cloth to stop Bert's hair-oil staining the material. The family usually gather in the downstairs backroom, where easy-going Bert does his books (he earns his money collecting weekly life insurance payments from his client list in the local area), smokes his Players cigarettes, listens to the radio and plays cards with his two girls. The kitchen is Doris's domain, where a pot of tea is always on the go, in case her sister Hilda, who lives in the next road with her family, drops by for a chat.

Bert is a veteran of the Great War of 1914–18 and an unsung hero. He was born into a well-to-do family in Somers Town, behind London's King's Cross Station, and was a month shy of fourteen years old when the war broke out. Bert went to the local recruiting office, gave his age as eighteen, and signed up to the British Army. According to his sister Joan 'he was amongst the first 200 sharpshooters who went to France at the outbreak of the war. My mother sent seven birth certificates to the War Office but they never sent him home. All his life he never mentioned the war or the part he played in it'. After the war Bert joined the Merchant Navy, where he no doubt picked up the life-long habit of chain-smoking strong Navy Cut brand cigarettes. For Joan, her brave but modest brother embodied all that was the best of British: 'A wonderful man. Scrupulously clean and upright'.

For some reason, during or just after the war, Bert changed his surname from that which he was born with and adopted a new one. When he married Doris in London in 1927, the name he gave on the marriage certificate was Albert Barnett, yet his father (whom he was named after) is recorded as one Albert Brown.

This is not particularly unusual in times of chaos and rapid change. People have always seized the opportunities that wars and mass upheavals generate to reinvent themselves, including altering their official identities. Generations of men and women drawn from the countryside into work in the cities, or who migrate from one country to another, have used the cover of anonymity that urban life provides to abandon the ties of their previous existence and give themselves a chance to start a new life over again.

We do not know why Albert Brown decided to become Albert Barnett and thus pass on that invented surname to his spouse Doris and their

offspring. Just as he never talked about the war, he rarely talked to his two daughters about his own family history and roots. Sometimes they would overhear adult family members talking and glean a little tit-bit of information, but they had no way of knowing whether they had heard right, or how all the fragments might possibly fit together. Maureen always held to the belief that somehow that she might have a connection through her father to the Jewish people and faith, but she never managed to find out for sure. The Roman Catholic nuns who ran the Ursuline High School in Wimbledon that Maureen attended from the age of eleven, were certainly never told her father was part-Jewish, and that her grandmother was directly descended from Jews of Eastern European origin.

Those who wish to advance the notion of a distinct indigenous white working-class community that has become economically disadvantaged and politically marginalised by post-war immigration, most often point to the east end of London. In 2008 the BBC ran a provocative season of documentaries under the banner 'The White Season'. The BBC press office put out a release describing the season as:

... a series of films that shine the spotlight on the white working-class in Britain today. It examines why some feel increasingly marginalised... The films explore the complex mix of feelings that lead some people to feel under siege and that their very sense of self is being brought into question. And, as newly arrived immigrant populations move in, the season examines the conflict between the communities and explores the economic and psychological tensions.

A *Daily Express* newspaper journalist, commenting on one of the documentaries, *All White in Barking*, took the opportunity to argue that, 'In the Sixties and Seventies most council housing in the East End was given to large families just arrived from Bangladesh... Families who had manned the docks, lived through the Blitz and helped fend off Nazi Germany were flabbergasted to find Britain's rulers showing more consideration to strangers from the Third World'. The journalist concluded that the English East Enders had been made 'refugees in their own country. They saw one beloved neighbourhood with a legendary community spirit destroyed in the name of multiculturalism'.

Completely absent in all this is any grasp that the history of the east end of London is a history of movement and migration, and that its economic

dynamism and ability to adapt, change and grow has been fuelled by immigration. The monumental economic contribution that working class Bangladeshis have made to the east end of London, mirrors the achievement of the poor Jews fleeing anti-semitism who arrived before them, and the Huguenots fleeing religious persecution who arrived before them.

And who exactly are these 'English' East End cockneys and when exactly did they become white? If we assume that most of them have local family roots going back to the nineteenth century, what we do know is that they were regarded by Victorian society as anything but white. As academic Anoop Nayak has pointed out:

Historically there is ample evidence to show that the bodies of the British urban poor were regularly compared with African natives of Empire in terms of physique, stature, posture, facial mannerisms, intelligence, habits, attitudes and disposition. Moreover, this 'casual residuum', as they were frequently termed, were rarely seen as 'white', but rather were imagined as part of a toiling, sweating, blackened and putrefying mass of flesh, unapologetically designated 'the Great Unwashed'.

Anoop quotes historian Anthony Wohl, who in his introduction to John Hollinghead's *Ragged London in 1861*, observes that 'concerning the pigmentation of the industrial Impoverished' it is alleged that 'the inhabitants of the slums are 'swarthy', or 'sallow', or have 'yellow faces', or are blackened with soot, or possess 'dark sinister faces' – any colour, it would seem, but white'. Anoop remarks, 'Today this may seem strange, as the working-classes now tend to be seen as the authentic carriers of whiteness, as synonyms such as being "salt of the earth" or "backbone of the nation" testify'. He concludes that 'The designation of the British working classes as white is then a modern phenomenon'.

One of those dark sinister-faced slum dwellers was Maureen's great-great grandfather, a man named David Alexander. We know a little about him. He was born in Spitalfields, east London, in 1821. Today it is a gentrified area favoured by well-heeled hipsters, but in David Alexander's time Spitalfields, and the neighbouring areas of Whitechapel and Bethnal Green, were notorious slums, known as a haunt of the destitute and criminals and ridden with diseases such as cholera. When David was aged eleven Spitalfields was described thus: 'The low houses are all huddled

together in close and dark lanes and alleys, presenting at first sight an appearance of non-habitation, so dilapidated are the doors and windows – in every room of the houses, whole families, parents, children and aged grandfathers swarm together’.

The surname Alexander indicates that he was a Jew of Ashkenazi (Eastern European) origins. Alexander was a fairly common Jewish surname, harking back to the time when Alexander the Great was a popular figure throughout the Middle East. David married his wife Mary when she and he were in their early twenties. From records we know that David was a hawker – a travelling salesman, going from town to town, door-to-door selling domestic goods to housewives. They had four children born in different towns across England – Kendal, Manchester, Northampton, and Liverpool. But by the time he was thirty, David and his family were all living back in east London; in Whitechapel, then Spitalfields, then nearby Mile End Road. He was still selling door to door, while his wife was doing piece-work sewing beads onto fabric. We lose sight of David in his 50s.

However, one of his children, Joseph, born ‘on the road’ in Manchester, appears in the historical records towards the end of the nineteenth century, living in Caernarfon, north Wales. What took Joseph to the entirely Welsh-speaking, Presbyterian non-conformist church-going town is not known. But we do know what he did when he got there – he married a local girl Jane Jones, the daughter of a river pilot who had drowned in a tragedy at sea when she was a child.

The young Jewish man entered the household dominated by his mother-in-law, who according to family accounts was tyrannical and god-fearing, insisting on ‘putting stockings on her table legs, whitewashing the kitchen after every weekly wash’ and who commanded in her will that Jane should scrub her late father’s tombstone every week – ‘and this was duly carried out!’ Joseph and Jane started up a dyers and cleaners business in the town and raised three children. However when Joseph died young, the family was tragically broken up. His father, who had apparently never agreed with Joseph’s marriage, insisted the body was transported from Caernarfon all the way back to London to be buried in a Jewish cemetery. Joseph and Jane’s children were sent to an orphanage – one grew up and married a rich shipowner, one emigrated to Canada, and the remaining daughter

Esther 'Hettie' Alexander moved to London and married James Brown. Hettie is Maureen's grandmother. Maureen remembered Hettie's visits during her childhood years but had only a vague idea of her gran's diverse roots and ancestry.

The fictional English hero 'Bulldog' Drummond was the invention of the successful Edwardian pulp fiction novelist Herman Cyril McNeile, known by his pen-name Sapper. Drummond's various adventures typically pit him and his gentleman friends (known collectively as 'The Breed') against a succession of (often Jewish) Bolshevik conspiracies hatched by dastardly foreigners intent on destroying his beloved England. As Ann Dummert observes, Drummond is sometimes simply described as 'a white man', but one whose Englishness sets him apart from all others: Dummert writes that

Greeks and Spaniards were Dagoes to Sapper – greasy and 'olive-skinned' as well as untrustworthy, shifty, cowardly characters. The famous saying 'Niggers begin at Calais', was not uttered in ignorance of the fact that Continental Europeans are the same colour as Englishmen; it was uttered to convey the meaning that all who are not English are shifty, greasy, untrustworthy characters.

All this is rather unfortunate for our vision of the English Rose – given that Maureen, on her mother's side, was one of Sapper's greasy Dagoes. Doris's full maiden name was Doris Helene Draco (Greek for dragon), and she was descended from a long line of Dracos, stretching back to the original patriarch of the family, Emanuel Pantoleon Draco.

Emanuel P Draco is recorded as being born on the island of Chios (Khios) in 1838, situated in the Aegean Sea just off the coast of mainland Turkey. Historically a majority Greek island, it was famed for producing mastic gum (a tree resin much valued as a spice and herbal remedy) and for its dominance in the region's merchant shipping and trading industry. The Ottomans seized Chios from the Byzantine Empire in the sixteenth century and nurtured it as a lucrative source of wealth and taxation. However in 1821 Chios found itself at the centre of the Greek War of Independence, launched with the aim of liberating historically Greek territory from the Turks. In March 1822, hundreds of armed Greek revolutionaries landed on the island, and encouraged the islanders to join



the rebellion. This in turn provoked an invasion by the Ottoman army, who put down the uprising, and set about slaughtering, expelling and enslaving the Greek population. Outrage in Europe against the atrocity became a cause célèbre across Europe, symbolised by the famous 1824 painting by French artist Eugène Delacroix, *The Massacre at Chios*, that depicted helpless islanders being put to the sword by vengeful Ottoman soldiers.

Emanuel P Draco is recorded to have been born on the island just over a decade after these bloody events, but he did not stay there. Sometime in his twenties he left the island forever and fetched up in Liverpool, working first as a clerk, boarding in lodgings, and then getting married, raising a family, all the while gradually building a prosperous cotton brokerage company. He married a woman from Liverpool's Greek community and had five children: Panteleon, George, Basilio, Michael and Hypatia. Later in life Hypatia gained press attention when she was listed as a survivor of the 1912 sinking of the Titanic, on which she was serving as a stewardess. Her brother George Emanuel Draco, also gained a public profile (and some notoriety) as an Edwardian music hall promotor and manager. George E Draco married a Liverpudlian named Esther Pickup and moved down to Kennington in south London to become part of the capital's bohemian theatrical community. They had two daughters, one of whom was Doris Helene Draco (born in 1906) – Maureen's mother.

However, the marriage quickly went seriously wrong. George abandoned his wife and infant daughters, had a scandalous affair with a theatrical dresser, with whom he then started a new family. His wife Esther refused to grant him a divorce despite his feckless behaviour and lack of support for Doris and her sister Hilda. Doris certainly never forgave him, considering him a stain on her lifelong efforts to be seen as utterly respectable, decent and without moral reproach. However, Maureen never got to meet her Greek grandfather, and his name was rarely spoken in the family home.

Returning to the portrait of our idealised young working-class girl, we can now see that we have imposed a wholly imagined community of identity upon an individual whose scattered roots defy such simplistic categorisation. Are we really going to agree to sacrifice Maureen's rich ancestry in pursuit of artificially constructed notions of Englishness and whiteness? In reality, Maureen exists not in some narrow trickle of nativist exclusivity, but as a

unique combine in a churning current of working class identities, forever mixing, merging and transforming, often below the surface, mostly unremarked upon and unrecognised, but no less real for all that.

*A Coda, January 2020*

A long lifetime has just come to its end. We are in Epsom General Hospital, just a few miles south of Morden. It is midday and an old woman has just drawn her final breath. All morning she had been losing the battle against respiratory failure brought on by pneumonia. Her mouth is open in death, revealing a full set of teeth with a small gap on the top row.

A few months earlier, ever since she had sensed that something was seriously wrong with her, she had begun starving herself, and her weight had rapidly dropped to that of a child. It is difficult to now imagine that tiny frame had given birth to twelve children, most of whom are presently squeezed round her hospital bed in the side room off the main hospital ward where she had been put as her condition worsened. The hospital staff had been watching all morning with growing amazement and curiosity as the woman's brown skinned sons and daughters kept arriving up one after the other after the other. It is explained that they are the offspring of Maureen and her Indo-Caribbean husband whom she married in the 1950s.

The word spreads amongst the staff that the nice old English lady with her old-fashioned London way of speaking and polite manner, has passed away. Nurses and doctors pop their heads round the door to say a few kind words into the room.

Above the dead woman's bed is a hand-written name tag: Maureen Yvonne Mahamdallie.