

Rule Britannia the novel by Daphne du Maurier who 'saw' Brexit in 1972

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Among old papers scattered in the family archive, I found by chance the review of the novel by Daphne du Maurier (1907-1989) *Un bel mattino (One Fine Morning)*, the title of the Italian version, by Gioia Zannino Angiolillo (Rizzoli, 1973); *Rule Britannia* is the original title (Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1972). Carlo Villa's review is entitled *A Political Fable*. What happens if England leaves the European Community (the clipping bears neither the date nor the title of the periodical but can be dated to 1973). I tracked down and read the novel, which I found engaging for the multiplicity of historical contexts in which the reader is urged to immerse himself and for its unsuspected connection with the present. The contexts are: the fictional political one of the novel; the real one at the time of its publication; and finally, today's real context in which the imagery of the narrative seems in some ways to have materialized.

In *Rule Britannia* Daphne du Maurier, taking her cue for the fictional setting of the novel from the controversial relationship between the United Kingdom and the EEC, places the events in a moment that follows the imaginary detachment of the UK from the Common Market, decided by a government relegated from its original favour and approved by a referendum vote called by a coalition government. The story then unfolds in the context of an imaginary merger of the UK with the USA, called USUK, which will soon evolve towards the subjection of the UK to its powerful US partner.

At the time of writing the novel England had applied to join the European common market, the application for membership of the EEC had originally been submitted in 1961, but had been opposed by French President Charles de Gaulle, who had vetoed it in 1963 and then again in 1967.

Negotiations continued, however, and by 1972 (the time of the novel's publication) the Conservative government was taking action to get Britain admitted to the EEC. Finally, the United Kingdom became a member in 1973, by the government led by the conservative Edward Heath and with the support of G. Pompidou, who succeeded De Gaulle. Subsequently, and under the government of Harold Wilson, in office since February 1974 and at the head of a Labour Party divided on

membership of the EEC, a popular referendum was held called by Wilson himself (June 1975); the result was the confirmation of the permanence in the EEC with a solid majority.

Wilson, however, resigned the following year due to the financial difficulties encountered at the time. Participation in the EEC (European Union since 1993) lasted until 2013, when David Cameron, the Conservative Prime Minister, called a referendum on remaining in the EU. As is well known, the outcome of the referendum, held on 23 June 2016, was in favour of leaving the EU (Brexit).

Almost fifty years have passed since the first publication of the book and the fictional imagery of Brexit has become reality in some respects after the 2016 referendum. The question arises as to whether D. du Maurier predicted Brexit (as Rachael Thorn did in *Did Daphne Du Maurier predict Brexit?* on BBC News, August 17, 2016).

D. du Maurier in *Rule Britannia* fantasizes about the international alliances of the United Kingdom after the exit from the Common Market: thus was born the USUK (merger between the UK and the USA) and also the ESPDA, linked to USUK, a defensive alliance between English-speaking peoples with nuclear bases on both sides of the Atlantic, in the Pacific and in the Indian Ocean and with a defense system based on atomic submarines.

The ESPDA has significant similarities with today's AUKUS, and the USUK is matched by a strengthened alliance between the US and the UK.

The events of the novel take place in a conjuncture of severe unemployment with ever-rising prices, financial uncertainty, widespread resentment against the Westminster elites; eminent politicians, rulers and financiers are in favour of the USUK, while hostility to this alliance finds ground in a distrustful population:

Men, women, boys, girls who were jostling to find a job, who were scrambling to get one of the few jobs worth having, and ever since the government had backtracked and left Europe – the official reason had been the lack of agreement between the Ten, and a national referendum had given a huge majority to the government of the moment – things seemed to be going from bad to worse.

La du Maurier (French ancestry and studies in England and France) realistically outlines her characters and their social relationships, set in the fictional town of Poldrea in Cornwall; The events

are fatally and ruinously concatenated, giving rise to bloody events that can no longer be governed. Thus we will witness a real occupation of British soil by US military forces in the name of USUK, although originally configured as the merger of the two states.

The strange family made up of the nonconformist eighty-year-old theater actress Mad lives in that locality, with her six adopted children (abandoned boys between the ages of three and 19, whom she picked up), Emma, Mad's twenty-year-old granddaughter with her after the death of her mother; Around them are the small community of farmers and traders, the doctor and other characters who confront and clash with the foreign occupiers. In the background is London, the capital, far away in every sense; There the powers that be make decisions of great historical significance and from there comes scarce and unreliable news.

Through Emma's sensitivity and thoughts, the story unfolds. One fine morning, as the Italian title of the book says, a warship is moored in that bay of Cornwall, television and radio communications are interrupted and the mail no longer works. The bizarre Mad, described as dressed somewhere between Robin Hood and Mao Tse Tung, soon understands that this is not a naval exercise and like a warrior "after a long inactivity he raises his head and smells battle"; Emma thinks it's a movie shoot, but the strange event of the unprovoked killing of a dog by an American soldier happens, a harbinger of other, more serious upheavals in local life.

On the TV screen there is an image, never broadcast before, of the two British and American flags, joined at the base; The announcer, far from his usual joviality, communicates the state of emergency in the country but reassures:

The planes [...] have no hostile intentions towards us. The U.S. Sixth Fleet is on the English Channel. The troops you may have observed in the cities and ports belong to the joint forces of the United States and are here in the United Kingdom with our full assent and cooperation.

The prime minister will make it clear that membership of the EEC has been a failure and that USUK, the great association between the US and the UK, "has nothing to fear from anyone", and will be welcomed "as one of the greatest advances in our long and glorious history".

Friends, we have been through difficult times. The failure of our association with the European Community and our withdrawal from it, which is not due to any failure on our part, have brought

great economic difficulties, as I feared and as I predicted, endangering our political autonomy and our military supremacy.

The next path will be anything but progressing, the powerful partner will turn out to be hostile and life will change in the corner of Cornwall with roadblocks, traffic bans, document checks, requisitions thus giving rise to tensions, suspicions and divisions in the small community, which will never be the same again. Life will take the double track of daily normality with its needs, rituals, habits on the one hand and the exceptionality of events and behaviours on the other.

Daphne du Maurier depicts with shrewd irony the cultural changes resulting from the USUK: the new school education includes USUK ties for everyone, "a lot of marching and singing with the new songs" including the American anthem; the study of American history; religious teaching ("a chat about Jesus" says the very young Colin); finally, "something called Reflection. We had to sit still for about ten minutes, and then everyone had to get up and say what they thought." Television broadcasts old British or American films, to create cultural harmony.

The basic question is asked, as in children's games, by little Colin to Mad: *"Are American soldiers good or bad?"*

In the political project of the USUK there is the establishment of the Ministry of Leisure and the destination of the west coast from North Wales to Cornwall as a large area of leisure. Mad even criticizes the aesthetics of the acronym "a name so ridiculous, USUK, that it makes us the laughing stock of the whole world, but it is true that we have been for years" and, driven by the arrogance and coarseness of the occupiers, she is determined to preserve her freedom and that of her group by supporting actions of disturbance and resistance, even daring and provocative, to combat employment:

U.S. troops were everywhere, guarding power stations, telephone switchboards, television studios, along with the United Kingdom armed forces and police, in case, so it was said, there should be disturbances caused by those mysterious subversive elements of which everyone kept talking.

In this context, two different judgments on the situation confront each other, that of the local newspaper read by Emma: "finally we can raise our heads... no longer a small island in the middle of

the sea, but a part of the great union of English-speaking peoples", and that of Mad, who grasps its arbitrariness, in dialogue with a soldier.

The exercise in which you are engaged has been planned by our government and yours, with the support of the financial sectors in the United States and the United Kingdom, for many, many months, and that it is nothing more nor less than the greatest attempt at oppression that the world has ever seen.

In the newspaper, Emma reads the propaganda announcement of "freedom of movement between countries, common nationality, jobs for all, opportunities open to young people, common culture" and draws attention to the fact that "it seemed that Australia, New Zealand and South Africa must also have interests in the USUK", "the newspaper did not say exactly what it was but there was a rather sinister allusion to the nuclear deterrent". The theme of the defensive reasons for the union between the two states is introduced by Lieutenant Sherman, one of the occupying soldiers; he identifies the main reason for the UK's change of foreign policy in the need for defence: "You have had strategic fears, or rather your government has had them. As I understand it, USUK is your only hope. We could manage on our own, you can't."

The two states form a single state, the USUK, but this is ruled by the American president who offers a dinner and reception in honour of the queen at the White House; Prince Philip received a "welcome from a tribe of Indians with whom, and this was somewhat surprising, he was suddenly about to wait," writes du Maurier, whose husband General Frederick Browning served as Treasurer to the Duke of Edinburgh.

Other elements make up the design of the strange alliance: a monetary agreement between the USUK and its allies, and finally an agreement that is defined as follows:

A new alliance for defensive purposes among the English-speaking peoples, an alliance that went by the name of ESPDA, would have fulfilled the function already attempted by NATO, but in a much broader context, with nuclear bases on both sides of the Atlantic from north to south, and also in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. The real method of defence and attack, in the event of a conflict between ESPDA and foreign powers [...] would be based on atomic submarines, capable of carrying missiles with very long ranges.

This, then, is the international political framework outlined by du Maurier in *Rule Britannia*, a military alliance of English-speaking peoples, called ESPDA, with nuclear bases on both sides of the Atlantic, in the Pacific and in the Indian Ocean with a defence system based on atomic submarines, which is contrasted by the prospect of the UK becoming a holiday resort of cultural interest.

Searching for Memories of the Past:

It had to be acknowledged that its heyday as a great industrial nation was over, but it had a new future ahead of it as the historical and cultural centre of the English-speaking peoples. Just as a few years before people had gone on holiday, by the thousands, to the Costa Brava, in Spain, in search of the sea and the sun, now new tourists would come by the millions to explore the country that had given birth to Shakespeare, Milton, Lord Byron, Laurence Olivier, Nelson (the order followed seemed strange enough), to Florence Nightingale and others.

In this description, the writer's irony takes place. The political judgment is entrusted to Vic, an international expert in economics son of Mad and father of Emma, he argues that industry in England is over and that there is no future "totally dead under the USUK", so that Americans will come to the UK "in search of the past", "Canterbury Cathedral will take the place of St. Peter", "the Texans will come in flocks". Vic reiterates that the unfortunate economic situation was caused by the UK's accession to the European Common Market:

The entry into Europe was a fiasco, a disaster, prices went up by almost fifty percent, do you remember that? We had a political storm, almost a revolution. And then what happened? General elections, with the people hopelessly divided, then a referendum and finally the coalition government, which we have today, which has clung to the idea of the USUK like a drowning man grabs a straw. The only difference is that the straw is not a straw but a damned big plank, my dearest, which will take us all, if not to the Eldorado, at least out of the threat of annihilation. And he concludes by arguing for the necessity of the choices of the alliances undertaken by the government, "The USUK together with its allies, South America, Africa, Australia, Canada, can give a damn about anyone from a strategic or economic point of view. We will have united air and nuclear forces, and a single currency."

The Cornish MP commented on the triumphalist opinion in the face of this new geopolitics: "From a historical point of view, this is a magnificent moment for our two nations. United again, after almost

two hundred years", on the opposite side there is the critical and rebellious attitude of Dr Bevil Summers, where wisdom and pride are mixed:

I think suddenly millions of people will understand that it just doesn't work [...] and there's going to be the biggest uprising our country has seen since... well I don't know, let's say from the time of William the Conqueror. It has nothing to do with left or right, fascism or anarchy, or any other so-called ideology; just pure genuine British stubbornness refusing to get kicked.

Dr Summers concludes: "Alliance with other countries, good. Domination by one in particular never." The novel outlines an appreciation for the size of the small community that is based on the exchange of agricultural products, rendered by one of Mad's adopted sons, Joe, who tells Emma.

You see, community life works. Our neighbours help us, and we help them. We don't need money, we can live without it. If everyone did this, in our country, there would be no need for foreign trade, we would not become rich but we would be happy, we would be free. Poor but free and happy, tied to their land but with a sense of responsibility in possession; In fact, Emma praises the "meek, neither rich nor famous, who inherited the land not for themselves but to pass it on, as if they had a mandate of trust."

The novel is full of political reasoning and thoughts attributable to du Maurier's interest in these topics, suffice it to say that there is even a nod, expressed by Mad, to the theme of the third political force to be placed between the two dominant and hostile blocs of the USA and the USSR, a theme debated after the Second World War: "Do you remember what we wanted to do in Europe... Constitute a third force? Well, the idea failed, some blamed the left, others the right. In any case, the Europeans did not agree." Daphne du Maurier has a knowledge of the deep moods of the people and of social ferments. Mad again addresses the theme of nationalism to express her opposition:

"I'm never able to decide about nationalism," said Grandma. It has a tendency to turn into fanaticism, and fanatics make a lot of noise about where they were born. I was born in Wimbledon, and even though I loved going to tennis tournaments when I was young, I wouldn't die for Wimbledon. I really wouldn't care if the city, all its houses and its inhabitants ceased to exist. But it's been a long time since I've chosen to live in this corner of this peninsula, and I'd be willing to die for it if I thought it could be useful.

"We must be free or die, we who speak the language that Shakespeare spoke," Mad declares, Emma continuing by reciting the other lines of the same sonnet to Wordsworth's freedom. In the declarations of the novel's characters, we can see the multiple contradictions inherent in these inspiring ideologies: self-sufficient local communities or trade links, nationalism or international solidarity, the pride and responsibility of the great imperial nation, among the victors of the Second World War, but economic weakness. A further inconsistency is that in this case the dominant and the dominated speak the same language. It is surprising how much living politics there is in this novel, defined as dystopian, but which in some ways appears anticipatory and prophetic.

In reality, as in the novel, there was a referendum in the UK on whether to remain or leave the EU; took place on June 23, 2016 (about 45 years after the fictional one of *Rule Britannia*). In Cornwall, Leave won with 56.52 per cent, in the country with 51.9 per cent of Britons belonging to the four nations that make up the UK, London voted in favour of remain with 59.9 per cent. The referendum led to the fall of David Cameron's Conservative government; political commentary around the referendum initiative highlighted how it was motivated by the desire to resolve the conflict within the Conservative Party between those in favour and those against remaining in the EU and to obtain confirmation of her political mandate in the face of the rise of Nigel Farage's UKIP.

After the 2016 referendum, one of whose slogans was take back control, i.e. the return of power from Brussels to Westminster, there was support for the plan to bring together English speaking countries. In Cornwall, the place where the fictional story is set, the summit of the G7 (the seven most industrialized countries) under British presidency took place from 11 to 13 June 2021 and extended to Australia, South Korea, India, South Africa, the UN and the WHO. During this summit, the new political defence alliance in which Great Britain now participates with Australia and the USA, referred to by the acronym AUKUS, was not made public known; the three states were present in Cornwall and the agreements were probably already in progress, but the announcement to the public did not take place until a few months later, in September. AUKUS, the Military-Strategic Partnership for Security in the Indo-Pacific, provides for close collaboration between the parties in areas such as cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, and the sharing of naval defence technologies. Under this agreement, the United States and the United Kingdom will provide Australia with the technology needed to build nuclear-powered submarines.

On the White House website, East Room, you can find the conversation (15/9/2021) between President Biden and the two Prime Ministers Morrison (Australia) and Johnson, during which

Morrison defines the agreement between the three nations as a "next generation partnership" and "new enhanced trilateral security partnership"; states that Australia intends to build the submarines in Adelaide and will continue to participate in all nuclear non-proliferation agreements. Johnson, for his part, says that the alliance's first task is to help Australia possess a fleet of "nuclear powered submarines" not armed with nuclear weapons and announces that these agreements would result in hundreds of "highly skilled jobs across the United Kingdom, including in Scotland". Biden also emphasizes that the purpose of "trilateral security cooperation" is to ensure peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific in the long term.

This agreement has points of contact with the ESPDA of *Rule Britannia* defined as an "alliance for defensive purposes among the English-speaking peoples" "with nuclear bases on both sides of the Atlantic from north to south, and as well as in the Pacific and the Indian Ocean", whose method of defence and attack "would be based on atomic submarines, capable of carrying missiles at very high range", imagined by du Maurier as a lateral to the USUK and a substitute for NATO.

The unstated aim of AUKUS, the "largest strategic-military alliance since World War II," is the containment of Chinese power, and this was not a living issue at the time of *Rule Britannia*. AUKUS has given impetus to the European Union, NATO, and the main international players to reposition themselves on the world stage. The international picture therefore presents considerable differences compared to 1972 but, as far as relations between the UK and the EEC and the UK and the USA are concerned, Daphne du Maurier had anticipatory intuitions of the accession and then rupture with the EU, of the development of possible strategic and military alliances following the rupture, of the strengthening of the Anglosphere. Daphne du Maurier may have inspired AUKUS' current partner rulers and their strategies.