

1 Adrift in the South Atlantic

The Falklands amid the Turmoil of Decolonisation

It was a nondescript Wednesday morning in Stanley, with little to report except that the Islanders had finally seen the sun for the first time in weeks. The sleepy ambience was suddenly disturbed by an unusually loud noise: a four-engine airliner was approaching at a dangerously low altitude. One of the locals, describing the events on the radio the following evening, recalled that

the plane turned round and came along Ross Road with the wheels down, skimmed the Cathedral, and it was obvious that a landing was going to be attempted – with such a large craft this did not seem possible. There was a terrific scurry in town and I should think that every landrover was moving along Ross Road towards the west. I suspect that the 20 m.p.h. speed limit was exceeded in some cases.¹

The townsfolk, unaccustomed to such a disturbance, had flocked to assist the passengers in distress. The mood changed as soon as they arrived there. Several armed men descended from the plane using ropes, planted seven Argentine flags around the area and took about twenty Islanders hostage. The aeroplane was an *Aerolíneas Argentinas* Douglas DC-4 on a domestic flight destined for the city of Río Gallegos in southern Patagonia. It had been hijacked by a group of eighteen extreme nationalists on a mission codenamed *Operativo Cóndor*, who forced the pilot to divert to the Falkland Islands. The ‘Condors’, with an average age of under 25, were poorly prepared, however. Their lack of knowledge about their destination became quickly apparent, as they spent a long time circling the Stanley area looking for a nonexistent airstrip, which then forced an emergency landing as the aircraft ran low on fuel. The pilot, showing great dexterity, performed an almost acrobatic landing on the narrow Stanley racecourse, and the plane was brought to an abrupt halt as its wheels sank into the soft ground. Dardo Cabo, the twenty-five-year old leader of the operation, announced to those present on the racecourse:

Today we set foot on the Argentine Malvinas Islands, in order to affirm with our presence our national sovereignty and to remain as jealous custodians of the blue and white [flag] ... Either we forge our future or we will die with the past.²

These radical young men (and one woman) claimed that their actions, ‘in defiance of the oppressive clutches of England’, were motivated by a desire to effect ‘the definitive liberation of the Malvinas Islands . . . in order to erase forever the marks of the Masonic imperialism of her British majesty’.³ Whether or not they had expected ‘crowds of Falkland Islands natives to swarm round the aircraft shouting, “Viva Perón, this is the day of deliverance” and move into Stanley unopposed’ (as a radio presenter caustically put it in the immediate aftermath of the event), the reality was very different.⁴ No sooner had the DC-4 landed than local officials, aware of the potential consequences of the landing, got in touch with London and reported the incident as a case of ‘air piracy’. The British response, however, was curt and unhelpful: they were to ‘manage as best they could’.⁵

The story ended well for the Islanders. Despite the lack of cooperation on the part of Britain, the Falklanders managed to avert what for them would have been a disaster. The hijackers, encumbered by twenty-six other passengers, including women and children, and deprived of their basic needs, eventually came to an agreement with the local forces. Within thirty-six hours most of the intruders had sailed back to Argentina.⁶

Yet a tinge of bitterness remained in what would otherwise go down in Falkland folklore as a story of heroism. A Falkland-born writer, Graham Bound, points out that ‘in the aftermath of the incident, they had been let down by the British Government’.⁷ Some Islanders would later interpret this ‘token’ invasion – the second unofficial attempt by Argentines to recover the Islands in two years – as the precursor to the 1982 ‘occupation’. It thus acquired a much deeper significance than it may otherwise have been afforded at the time. But the unexpected landing was nevertheless a rude awakening, making Islanders more aware than ever of future risks: had the rebels been better prepared, they could have taken the Islands. This prevailing anxiety is often seen as the first rumblings of discontent, which would later turn into accusations and cries of betrayal levelled against Britain. According to Graham Bound, that was only the beginning. Things would get progressively worse for the Falklanders:

Slowly but inexorably the threat increased, not only from the near neighbour, but – in a political sense – from London as well. Later in 1966 it became clear that British diplomats were manoeuvring to solve the problem of a colony which was of no further use to Britain. If necessary, they would do this by conceding to the Argentine demands.⁸

Bound’s choice of words gives the story an air of inevitability, of Britain slowly but unmistakably revealing its true, perfidious nature. As we will

see, there was nothing inevitable about the British–Argentine talks. Yet, significantly, this is how the Islanders saw the events unfolding: they were not attuned to the subtleties of the negotiations, but only their increasingly worrying consequences.

The aftermath of the incident, however, is even more telling. The Governor of the Falklands, Sir Cosmo Haskard, saw this as an opportunity to strengthen the defence of the Islands, asking Whitehall for an increase of the Royal Marine presence to platoon strength and the construction of an airstrip for long-haul aeroplanes – perhaps an implicit reference to Britain’s inaction during the crisis. His request fell on deaf ears, however. In fact, the Foreign Office in London had drawn the opposite conclusion from this event: ‘it was irresponsible to plan on a basis of perpetuating the existing situation for 2,000 people whom we were now unable effectively to protect’.⁹ This was indeed the prevalent view at the decision-making level in Britain, at a time when the United Kingdom was mired in economic and military problems. The following year would see the devaluation of the pound and the announcement of the withdrawal of Britain’s military presence from East of Suez. This was not the time to consider investing in the defence of a relic of empire, which – as British officials would repeatedly stress over the coming years – had ceased to be of any economic or strategic importance to Britain. Perhaps the benefit of hindsight has projected certain nuances onto the DC-4 incident. Yet as subsequent events would show, the Islanders’ sense of abandonment was fuelled by deeper tensions and divisions that were eroding the foundations of Greater Britain on a global scale.

The next two chapters consider the long prelude to the 1982 conflict. The first examines the early years of the Falklands dispute within the context of global decolonisation and the breakup of Greater Britain, while the second analyses key developments in the 1970s and early 1980s. Martín González has rightly emphasised the importance of the rise of decolonisation at the United Nations and Britain’s policy towards the remnants of empire during the 1960s.¹⁰ Without dismissing the significance of those factors, I emphasise here the gradual disintegration of the idea that had united British settlers and Britons at ‘home’ for over a century. During this period, as the Falkland Islanders progressively became aware of British plans to negotiate a deal with Argentina, they assumed the rhetorical mantle of ‘abandoned Britons’ in a manner resembling other British settler communities around the world, in response to Britain’s rapid and abrupt change of priorities. Looking at the origins, nature and development of this rhetorical posturing can shed light on how this peripheral quarrel culminated in military confrontation

less than two decades later and help us understand some of the key arguments deployed to justify Britain's reaction to the Argentine invasion in April 1982.

The Bigger Picture: The Breakup of Greater Britain

Perhaps it is no coincidence that the Falklands began to experience the very real prospect of losing their British connection at a time when escalating tensions between other parts of the British world and their erstwhile 'mother country' had set in motion the unravelling of Greater Britain. Though increasingly under strain since the end of the Second World War, there is little evidence to suggest that the leaders of the British world anticipated the crisis.¹¹ As John Darwin has shown, British prime ministers from Clement Attlee to Harold Wilson saw 'no reason to abandon the empire' in the post-war period, and their policies of attempting to perpetuate Britain's world role through the Commonwealth manifested this.¹² This was matched by similar attitudes in the white dominions. The 'neo-Britains' of Australia, New Zealand and Canada were societies largely composed of British settlers, deeply influenced by their identification with Britain in the areas of trade, law, communications, media, traditions and culture. Their indigenous populations, and growing communities of non-British migrants, were consigned to the margins of the national conversation. During two World Wars, they had proudly fought for King and Country, and neither military setbacks (notably the Fall of Singapore in the Australasian case) nor the economic decline of the 'metropole' had inflicted lethal damage on the British bond in the immediate term, as the post-war leaders of those societies continued to advocate close links with the United Kingdom.¹³ It is often remarked that the dominions had already gained 'independence' in 1931, when the Statute of Westminster abrogated the right of Parliament in London to legislate for the dominions without their explicit consent, thus granting them legislative equality with the United Kingdom. Yet scholars have demonstrated that their emotional and material bonds with Britain continued to overwhelm any sense of independence for a long time afterwards.¹⁴ That their sentimental attachment to Britain continued well after World War II is amply corroborated by the sense of shock they experienced as rapidly changing 'metropolitan' priorities became apparent from the late 1950s onwards.

The origin of these crises can be traced to the after-effects of World War II, as Stuart Ward has shown. The credibility and viability of the common identity that had given cohesion to the British world was fatally

undermined by profound changes in Britain, leading to an ever-widening divergence of material interests between dominions and metropole.¹⁵ More important, the widely divergent perspectives adopted by different 'British' leaders at the onset of decolonisation exposed that 'there were as many conceptions of the British World as there were British interests at stake'.¹⁶ Thus it was the realisation that there were 'subtle cleavages in their respective philosophies of the meaning and utility of "being British" that disabused them of assumptions of unity and kinship'.¹⁷ Other scholars, such as A. G. Hopkins, José E. Igartua, Phillip Buckner and James Belich, have also made valuable contributions in this regard, lending further credence to the view that the British world's undoing transcended legal independence and the constitutional end of empire.¹⁸

Over the past decade, these historians have identified key moments in Britain's post-war history, which encapsulated and triggered significant crises of belonging in these 'British' societies. The Suez debacle of 1956 was one important landmark. The crisis was sparked by Egyptian President Nasser's unilateral nationalisation of the Suez Canal (until then owned by the Anglo-French Canal Company), prompting Britain and France (with collusion from Israel) to attempt military retaliation. They were quickly stopped in their tracks by stern condemnation from the United States, much of the Commonwealth and the UN General Assembly, and the resulting failure would haunt British politicians for decades to come. The reverberations in Australia and New Zealand (both of which remained deeply loyal to Britain throughout) were very different from those in Canada, where St Laurent's Liberal government sided with the United States.¹⁹ According to J. L. Granatstein, it was 'a watershed in Canadian relations with Britain'.²⁰ St Laurent's decision, however, divided the nation and was deeply resented by many conservatives in Canada, led by the leader of the opposition, John Diefenbaker. 'What was at stake', argues Igartua, 'was Canada's self-definition as a British nation, for some a definition that was being abandoned, for others a definition that was being reaffirmed in spite of the failings of Britain itself'.²¹ Nevertheless, many English Canadians would continue to think 'of Canada as a British country with a special relationship with the United Kingdom, despite Suez and despite Britain's attempt to enter the EEC', as Buckner has shown.²²

Britain's bid to join the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1961 rang further alarm bells. After declining to sign the Treaty of Rome in 1957 in order to protect the Commonwealth trade preference system, new economic and political imperatives in the early 1960s had finally tilted the balance in favour of Europe. Ward states that Britain's bid 'implied a fundamental and permanent reorientation of the British

conception of “community”, away from the former imperial conception of Britain’s world role and towards a new basis for great power status as a leading player in an economically dynamic, and politically united Europe’.²³ The key words here are *fundamental* and *permanent*: this was what ‘marked the EEC crisis off from so many earlier breaches in the veneer of “British” unity’.²⁴ Here, too, reactions differed. To the Canadian Conservative government, ‘London’s approach to Europe was almost treason, a virtual betrayal of the Commonwealth and of the hundred thousand Canadians who had died to defend Britain in the two World Wars’.²⁵ Yet these sentimental reactions were not matched by economic exigencies, which – though not entirely negligible – were massively overwhelmed by Canada’s trade with the United States. Unlike the Suez crisis, much of English-speaking Canada did not side with the government on this matter.²⁶ By contrast, the reaction in Australia, where Britain’s trade share was far more significant, was pronounced. The initial confusion and disbelief was followed by pleas for special treatment, and later a fatalistic acceptance that a ‘shift of history’ had occurred, leading to conventional beliefs about Australia’s British connection to be publicly debated and questioned.²⁷ And even after De Gaulle’s famous ‘*non*’ slapped down Britain’s attempts to join the European club in 1963, the damage – as far as Australians and New Zealanders were concerned – had already been done: the Macmillan government had demonstrated that Britain’s priorities had changed for good.²⁸

Underlying these issues, according to Curran and Ward, there was ‘a clear breach in understanding of the meaning, significance and above all the scope of “being British”’.²⁹ This was partly driven by the gradual – yet not so subtle – redefinition of Britishness through the Commonwealth Immigrants Acts of 1962, 1968 and 1971. The first of these measures sought to curtail the scope of the British Nationality Act of 1948, which had de facto conferred British citizenship on subjects from the entire Commonwealth. As Burkett puts it, ‘the end of the British Empire had a profound effect on the ethnic, racial and religious contours of the British population’, and thus, with the unravelling of the colonial empire in the late 1950s and early 1960s, ‘issues that had previously been confined to the empire, namely relations between different “races” of people, increasingly came “home”’.³⁰ Amid mounting public anxieties about great numbers of non-white immigrants ‘flooding’ into Britain, therefore, the Conservative Macmillan government created three types of vouchers for immigrants from the Commonwealth, differentiating between those arriving to take up a job, unemployed skilled labour and unskilled workers. This quota system was not intended to curb

immigration from the dominions: on the contrary, Home Secretary R. A. Butler noted privately that 'its restrictive effect is intended to, and would in fact, operate on coloured people almost exclusively'.³¹ Yet it was perceived in Australia and New Zealand as 'the thin end of the wedge of total exclusion'.³² Subsequent Immigration Acts in 1968 and 1971 would further restrict numbers of migrants: in 1968, the voucher quota was reduced to 7,000 – excluding from controls those who could provide a British passport and evidence of having a parent or grandparent born, adopted, registered or naturalised in Britain; and in 1971, the concept of 'patriality' was introduced in order to deal with all immigrants under the same system. This concept ruled out anyone unable to provide evidence of having at least one parent born – as opposed to adopted, registered or naturalised – in the United Kingdom.³³

The late 1960s would witness further blows to the transcontinental idea of Greater Britain. One major landmark episode was the decision to effect cuts in Britain's overseas defence commitments, under pressure from a crippling sterling crisis.³⁴ By April 1967, the Wilson government had decided to withdraw its defence forces from East of Suez. Yet the devaluation of sterling on 18 November 1967, soaring unemployment and mounting pressures in the Middle East and Nigeria, prompted the British government to announce in January 1968 that the timetable for withdrawal would be accelerated, aiming to remove all British troops by the end of 1971.³⁵ This was indeed a watershed moment in Britain's history. The end of its east of Suez role had consequences that went far beyond the merely military and economic measures that it implied. It signalled the beginning of a new era in which Britain's world role would be far more circumscribed, prompting severe condemnation from Australia's prime minister.³⁶

With the unfolding of these crises, the initial reaction of disbelief turned into open accusations of betrayal and duplicity levelled against Britain, as it gradually became evident that the Old Commonwealth relationship had changed irrevocably.³⁷ Differences between the dominions and London had been a recurring feature of the Commonwealth from the outset, but it was only during the late 1950s and 1960s, as Britain underwent massive post-war transformations, that they 'intensified into outright antagonism'.³⁸ That the pleas of 'abandoned Britons' in Australia, Canada and New Zealand went unheeded only served to induce these formerly 'British' societies to reconsider their place in the world, with the younger generations in particular ready to shed their outmoded British trappings. Deprived of their Britishness, they sought new flags, anthems and symbols, and rewrote their histories through a

nationalist lens, reinterpreting events and developments as a progressive journey towards maturity and adulthood.³⁹ A. G. Hopkins puts it succinctly:

The adoption of new anthems and flags ... marked the end of long-established connections between the old dominions and Britain ... in ways that in some respects were more profound than the achievement of formal independence was for the colonies because they involved the destruction of the core concept of Britishness, which had given unity and vitality to Greater Britain overseas, and the creation of new national identities.⁴⁰

By far the most traumatic episode in this global drama took place in Southern Africa. At 11.00 am on Remembrance Day, 11 November 1965, the Rhodesian cabinet signed a Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) from the UK. It was an act of defiance against Westminster's insistence on introducing majority rule in the territory, which Rhodesian Prime Minister Ian Smith feared would precipitate the annihilation of his white people. Southern Rhodesia had been a self-governing colony since 1923 and had acquired over time an 'honorary dominion' status. Its ethnic composition, with a large minority of white settlers, set it apart from other African colonies (even if they remained heavily outnumbered by the disenfranchised African population).⁴¹ Rhodesians took pride in their fierce loyalty to Britain, often depicting themselves as second to none in allegiance to the Crown. The image of the typical white Rhodesian, not unlike their Australian or New Zealand counterpart, was that of 'a lone, sun-tanned, and broad-brimmed rancher embodying the virtues of the English public schoolboy adapted to the African veldt'.⁴² Southern Rhodesia briefly formed part of the Central African Federation (1953–1963) together with the protectorates of Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland. Violent riots and unrest in Nyasaland triggered the eventual dissolution of the Federation, leaving a powerless Britain with little choice but to grant independence (under majority, African, rule) to Zambia and Malawi.⁴³ The 1961 constitution of Southern Rhodesia (rechristened Rhodesia in 1964) was 'colour-blind' in theory, yet the rigid requirements of education and property for Africans to vote made it almost impossible for them to participate in the political process.⁴⁴ Ian Smith's own rhetoric of loyalty to 'true' Britishness resonated among sectors of the UK population and elites, but was also fiercely condemned by many, raising questions about British loyalties. Rhodesia continued to invoke its allegiance to the Queen, despite its abhorrence for the London government. It was only after years of protracted negotiations, crippling economic sanctions and mounting mutual mistrust that Rhodesian whites voted in a referendum to leave the

Commonwealth and become a republic in 1969.⁴⁵ The Rhodesian question would prove one of Britain's most exhausting and politically intractable post-imperial dilemmas, which remained unsettled until Robert Mugabe's election as president of the newly established Republic of Zimbabwe in 1980.⁴⁶ It is important to note that their neighbours in South Africa were also part of this drama. While demographically different from Rhodesia, many English-speaking South Africans shared their attachment to the Greater British ideal and considered themselves fiercely loyal to the Crown. Even if the fall of Jan Smuts to the Afrikaner National Party in 1948 had signified Britain's decline in the eyes of many British South Africans, it was the 1961 withdrawal from the Commonwealth that dealt a lethal blow to their British bond. This became manifest when four years later they sided with their northern neighbours after they declared UDI.⁴⁷

Aaron Donaghy has recently argued that the 'abandoned Britons' concept 'does much to explain the nature of the Britain–Falklands relationship in the 1970s'.⁴⁸ The same can be said of the earlier 1960s period, when the relationship began to acquire such contours. This is not to say that the Islanders discussed their 'plight' overtly in the light of developments elsewhere in the British world. Yet despite the Islanders' parochial outlook, the diminishing purchase of a transnational British identity was closely tied up with their future. The serial crises of belonging throughout Greater Britain demonstrate that the Falklands dispute was not merely affected by the influence of decolonisation in the UN, but also by the creeping obsolescence of a worldview that underpinned their self-perception. Hints of this tension can already be gleaned in the aftermath of the Second World War. A glance at an internal crisis in the South Atlantic in the late 1940s can give us a better appreciation of the Islanders' attachment to Britishness.

'Like People Living in an Island off the British Isles': The Fundamental Britishness of the Falklands

The first half of 1948 had seen an unusual level of political activism in the Islands. There was growing popular discontent with Governor Geoffrey Miles Clifford, as many people felt his policies were leading the Falklands towards financial ruin. The situation came to a head in the month of May, when Clifford announced an increase in taxes, and the Islanders responded by collecting 740 signatures for a petition requesting his removal from office. The document, addressed to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, was blunt and forthright: 'This British community, 100% white, and noted for its loyalty to the Crown in the past, has lost

confidence in the Administration'.⁴⁹ By evoking a 'kith and kin' relationship, the petition placed the Falkland Islands apart from other non-settler colonies. These developments in the Falklands were taking place more or less simultaneously with several important events in the international and British world arenas: Indian independence in 1947; the United Nations' early efforts to find a way to grant independence to non-self-governing territories; the debate over the British Nationality Bill in the UK; and the imminent arrival of HMS *Empire Windrush* in London, carrying some 500 West Indian migrants. But, of more immediate relevance to the Falklands, around this time Argentina had begun to revive the Malvinas issue. In that sense, the petition also served to distinguish the Islanders from Argentina. As we shall see, the Falklands lobby would emulate this strategy two decades later.⁵⁰

This was not merely a matter of clever tactics, however, nor had it been 'invented' for the occasion. Though clearly a colony and not a self-governing dominion, the fact that the Falklands' population was almost exclusively of British descent meant that they were often referred to in the same light as other British settlers around the world. A message of congratulation from King George V in 1933, on the occasion of the centenary of the British settlement of the Falklands, expressed this mentality succinctly: 'I shall always follow with affectionate solicitude the fortunes of a Colony whose people, though separated from the Mother Country by wide tracts of ocean are nevertheless bound to it by the closest ties of kinship and loyalty'.⁵¹ When Islanders emigrated from the Falklands, their destinations of choice – other than the UK – tended to be Australia, New Zealand and Canada. Evidence from the 1930s shows that there were plans for resettling some 'Kelpers' in the different dominions, and proposals to send their children there to educate them in 'farm schools'.⁵² More important, the Falkland Islanders saw themselves as distinctly British, and like other settler societies in the empire, they stressed their loyalty and whiteness. This, in turn, translated into an appeal for a greater degree of autonomy in internal affairs – not a cry for independence, but a demand for greater equality within the empire. Thus the petition underlined that 'after 115 years the Colony is still without representative Government and it is evident that under the present Administration elected representation on the Executive Council is a necessary preliminary to self administration'.⁵³ Over the previous years there had been discussions on how to increase democratic representation in the Islands, as it was felt that 'the Governor in combination with the board of the Falkland Islands Company (FIC) largely ignored all forms of direct political consultation with the local populace'.⁵⁴ This culminated in a reform of the Legislative Council (LegCo) and the

creation of a new Constitution in 1949. The new LegCo, presided over by the Governor, would be composed of three senior ex officio members (the Colonial Secretary, the Senior Medical Officer and the Agricultural Officer), four directly elected councillors, two appointed unofficial members and three official members. The Executive Council (ExCo) would include two elected councillors, two appointed members and two ex officio members.⁵⁵

This demand for equality and greater representation went hand in hand with the conviction that they were 'better Britons'.⁵⁶ Overseas Britons often saw themselves as stronger and healthier, as they had a more wholesome diet, had a better climate and lived and worked in open spaces – not in the mines and factories of the imperial metropole.⁵⁷ This belief was bolstered during the two World Wars in the twentieth century, as their contribution to the British forces became – in their eyes – proof not only of their loyalty, but also of their superiority. The Falklanders, of course, could not boast a better climate than Britain, nor could they claim superiority over British forces during the two World Wars. They did, however, remind Britain about their contributions during the two conflicts. For example, a letter to the *Times* on behalf of the Falkland Islands Association (FIA) stated in 1968 that 'during the last war the small community of just over 2,000 people contributed £70,000 and a squadron of Spitfires'.⁵⁸ A special 'Victory Issue' of *Today* highlighted that 'over 150 of the colony's fighting men and women, of pure British stock, left their wind-swept island home to fight and serve in the Armed Forces, the Merchant Navy, Nursing Services and the Land Army of the United Kingdom'.⁵⁹

Yet, over and above their wartime contributions, successive Falklands Governors, in their dealings with the UK, stressed three particular features. First, that the Falklanders' loyalty was second to none: 'no where [*sic*] within the Empire is there any more loyal community than this', asserted Clifford in 1948; twenty-two years later, the recently appointed Governor Rex Hunt was still able to affirm that the 'National Anthem is sung lustily (who in Britain knows the second verse by heart?) and patriotic fervour rides high'.⁶⁰ Second, they stressed an almost absolute racial homogeneity, as Governor Cosmo Haskard affirmed in 1968:

The islanders were like people living in an island off the British Isles, they were completely English: in fact, more English than the people here [in the UK], there were no Argentines or Spaniards, their language, race, politics and culture were all British and they would regard with horror and bitterness any attempt to hand them over.⁶¹

Twenty years earlier, Governor Cardinall had pleaded that 'as full a measure of democracy as possible is essential to the just government of

this Colony which should approximate to that of rural communities in England rather than to a Colony where the majority of the people are of another race'.⁶² Finally, they also claimed to have preserved certain qualities Britain no longer had. On the eve of war, after the Argentine invasion of South Georgia, the Governor of the Falklands declared: 'Life here is very pleasant. The people here have a quality of life that was lost in Britain 50 years ago. I can quite understand why they want to keep it'.⁶³

Clearly, the Falklands followed many trends in line with other realms of the British world. In that sense, it is perhaps not surprising that the Islanders also chose to adopt the rhetorical mantle of 'abandoned Britons', in the face of the turmoil of the 1960s. The point here is not to lump together widely divergent cases, ignoring the many differences between them. But in stressing the commonalities, we can see how they responded to strikingly similar political dynamics. The differences, in fact, are also a key part of the story: it was the growing awareness that the supposed 'sameness' that bound them was largely a mirage that set the unravelling of 'Greater Britain' in motion.⁶⁴ It is in this context that we can understand the development of the Falklands conflict as a broader, transnational issue, and not just as an isolated phenomenon.

One feature peculiar to the Falkland Islands was their remoteness and marginality: their place in the British imagination was virtually non-existent and, until the 1982 conflict, few in the UK would even have been able to locate them on a map. In this regard, 'decolonisation' in this particular case appeared far more acceptable and appropriate than in other British settler communities. An important Foreign Office document from 1968 spelt this out very clearly and is worth quoting at length:

- (1) The colony is no longer of any strategic or much economic value to us. It has hitherto been virtually self-supporting but its economy is largely dependent on wool. The prices of this commodity have fallen in world markets.
- (2) The Governor had said that pro-Argentine sentiment may grow among the Islanders as their economic prosperity (which has been associated by them with their close links with Britain) declines;
- (3) We can no longer defend the Falkland Islands effectively, except by a force ridiculously large in relation to the population and our resources . . .
- (6) If the Falkland Islanders are to have any kind of tolerable future, a *modus vivendi* with their infinitely larger neighbour will have to be found: they cannot live in a state of latent hostility forever.⁶⁵

It was clear that, in the eyes of Foreign Office officials, Britain was neither willing nor able to keep the colony indefinitely. The first paragraph is particularly revealing. Without any material incentive to invest in the Islands' future, a settlement with Argentina appeared to be the logical



Figure 1.1 A view of Philomel Street, Stanley, c. 1968–1969.
Photograph taken by Sven Gillsäter.

way forward. Yet the defence costs of retaining the Islands were an important factor too. The decision to withdraw from East of Suez had been made nineteen months earlier, and the prospect of deploying a ‘ridiculously large’ force in the South Atlantic was clearly contrary to Britain’s latest policies. It is true that this decision had not had a direct impact on the Falklands: the 1965 Defence Review had specified that ‘an ice patrol [would be kept] to maintain our position in the Falkland Islands and the Antarctic and to deter Argentinian incursions’.⁶⁶ Yet it is likely that the defence cuts also affected British attitudes to the Falklands. As we will see, changing attitudes in the metropole would play into Islander fears right down to the eve of war.

Much as it might have considered the fate of the Islands effectively sealed, however, the British government could not escape the fact that decolonisation was not a straightforward issue either. In this particular case, not only was there no colonial nationalist movement pushing for the end of the British link, but, on the contrary, the Falkland Islanders had chosen to highlight their close links to the 'mother country' – thus positing a crucial distinction between 'self-determination' and 'decolonisation' that would characterise other British overseas possessions in years to come.⁶⁷ The resulting tension between the Colony's feelings of Britishness and the UK's fatigue created a crisis mentality that would be exacerbated by several events from the mid-1960s until the eve of war.

'Bringing Pressure to Bear on the Islanders': Hints of 'Betrayal' and 'Duplicity'

One important source of tension came from the involvement of the United Nations in this dispute. UN General Assembly Resolution 2065 (XX), passed in December 1965, asked the governments of the United Kingdom and Argentina to negotiate in order to find 'a peaceful solution to the problem', bearing in mind two key points: UN Resolution 1514 (XV) of December 1960, which called for the granting of independence to colonial countries and peoples, and 'the interests of the population of the Falkland Islands (Malvinas)'.⁶⁸ The disagreement over the meaning of these two provisions became a nodal point in the ensuing dispute, yet at the same time both countries also had strong reasons for compliance.

Martín González argues that it was the 'fear of decolonization' that drove Argentine and British negotiators, not just mere opportunism by the South Americans or delay tactics on the part of Britain, as some authors have argued.⁶⁹ From the Argentine perspective, there was a growing realisation that the push for decolonisation in Britain, coupled with the anti-colonial campaign at the United Nations, could lead to the triumph of self-determination in the Falkland Islands, thus putting an end to Buenos Aires' claim to the Islands. Argentinian governments had protested regularly since the British invasion in 1833 (with two significant long 'periods of silence', between 1849 and 1884, and between 1888 and 1908), but the Malvinas did not become a major national issue until the mid-1940s, when General Juan Domingo Perón took office in 1946 and pushed for a 'national awakening' in Argentina. This coincided with a growing fear – shared both by Peronists and anti-Peronists – that Argentina's long-held attitude towards the Malvinas (based on the belief that the eventual repossession of the Islands was only a matter of time) was becoming dangerously unrealistic, as new proposals to grant the Islands

an international administration or self-government were tabled. In light of this, Argentina adopted a new discourse at the UN between 1961 and 1963, presenting the Malvinas as an upshot of colonialism – and their inhabitants as ‘British colonialists’, rather than a ‘colonial people’.⁷⁰

At the British end, officials in London believed that the Falklands were a particular case in which self-determination should be subordinated to considerations of an economic, strategic and diplomatic nature – regardless of the Islanders’ wishes. Policy-makers were coming to the realisation that the Colony’s sell-by date was approaching fast, as labour costs in the Falkland Islands increased and the world price of wool decreased. Coupled with this, there was an underlying conviction that a sovereignty transfer was just a matter of time – a question of *when* rather than *if*. This air of inevitability was quite prevalent among British policy-makers – and even Falkland Governors. For example, the Under-Secretary for the Commonwealth Office suggested in 1967 that

no good purpose would be served, and it would not be playing fair with the islanders, to leave them under any illusion that they really have an option of staying there in the Falklands as it were [*sic*] in the early years of this century, and being maintained there by Britain against all comers.⁷¹

Other sources corroborate this view. For instance, Governor Sir Cosmo Haskard ‘realised that the U.K. could not indefinitely keep the islands but they had a duty to make things as palatable as possible’, and thus the United Kingdom ‘should avoid being trapped into making rosy statements about the future’.⁷² He even went as far as suggesting that the year 2000 be set as a target for the eventual sovereignty transfer.⁷³ Similarly, there was a growing belief that Argentine sovereignty would some day become acceptable to the Islanders. Minister of State at the Foreign Office Lord Chalfont, for one, pronounced:

I believe therefore that the Falkland Islands may one day be prepared to choose Argentine sovereignty. But the process will take years; and we must strive to make Argentines understand, and accept, that they must exercise patience, and show the Islanders by all practical means possible the advantages to be derived from closer association with Argentina, leading gradually but inexorably to the acceptance of Argentine sovereignty.⁷⁴

González nonetheless stresses that a very important aspect of the dispute was the fact that, as far as London was concerned, a resolution of the Falkland issue could become a model for other colonial cases. This is one of the reasons why an otherwise unimportant conflict could not simply be solved by a sovereignty transfer negotiated at the top, without consulting the population of the Islands. Such course of action would set a precedent for the disputes over Gibraltar, British Honduras or Rhodesia,

in which Britain supported self-determination. Thus both Argentina and Britain could see clear benefits in finding a common solution to their dispute, but willingness to negotiate on both sides did not translate into a credible basis for a settlement. In fact, the starting points of the two parties were so distant from each other that it was hard to envisage how they could come to any agreement. While Britain wanted a very slow and gradual change, which would be amenable to the Islanders, Argentina did not want to leave its claim (which had gained a considerable amount of international support) at the mercy of the opinion of a tiny and overwhelmingly British population.⁷⁵

Several attempts since 1966 to draft a treaty between the two parties had failed due to a fundamental disagreement over the precise meaning of 'the interests of the population of the Falkland Islands (Malvinas)', as stated in Resolution 2065. While Buenos Aires saw the *interests* of the Islanders as something that could be worked out between Britain and Argentina, London was conscious of the ripple effect this could have on other 'similar' colonial cases. By mid-1967, as the negotiations reached a deadlock, Britain proposed that both parties draft a Memorandum of Understanding, which 'could serve as the basis for a public announcement'.⁷⁶ Up to this point, the Islanders had been unaware of the negotiations. A few months after Britain's new proposal, however, the news reached the Falklands, and the reaction in Stanley was far from sympathetic. While most Islanders were 'still absolutely in the dark' about the recent developments, ExCo had 'at last seen something of a realisation among members as to what the future may well hold'. The councillors had said to Governor Haskard (Figure 1.2): 'all we want to know is that Britain is going to stand by us'. Yet, 'in their hearts', concluded the Governor, in a letter to the Gibraltar and South Atlantic Department, 'there is now grave doubt as to whether Britain will'.⁷⁷ The councillors were not yet fully aware of what the negotiations entailed; they only knew that British sovereignty over the Islands was at stake. Haskard, being the only person in Stanley who had the full picture, tried to appeal to the best instincts of the British government, waxing lyrical about the Islands' closeness to the 'mother country':

We have a strong emotional feeling for the Queen, the flag (flying every day over Stanley) and the national anthem (sung vigorously once a week in the Cathedral and played last thing at night over the wireless). Our links, sentimental and economic, bind us firmly to England.

It is worth pausing to reflect on the ambiguity in Haskard's use of 'us' and 'them', as it illustrates the conflicted loyalties that beset many Falkland governors. Sir Cosmo Haskard had been born in Dublin, the



Figure 1.2 Governor Cosmo Haskard coming into Stanley with his wife on RMS *Darwin*.

Photograph: J. A. Leonard.

son of a British Army officer and an Irishwoman. He had spent his early years in Ireland and England, with a brief spell in Egypt and China, and later worked as a colonial officer in Nyasaland until he was appointed Governor of the Falkland Islands in 1964.⁷⁸ Dodds argues that his use of 'us' to refer to the Islanders perhaps 'suggested that he also identified himself with [their] plight'.⁷⁹ Yet his views on the Islanders' Britishness (as he described them to Whitehall officials) were ambiguous at best. He did not hold much hope for the Islands' future, nor did he believe that Britain should worry excessively about it. But he adamantly opposed an immediate sovereignty transfer. The evidence suggests that this may simply have been a rhetorical flourish to give his message greater impact. We will see that he later adopted a seemingly contradictory view, also for rhetorical purposes.

Apart from stressing the Islands' links with the United Kingdom, Haskard also emphasised their distance from Argentina:

We know as much about Argentina as the inhabitants of the Shetlands know about Poland ... Argentina, seen through Falkland eyes is unknown, foreign, aloof, disdainful, corrupt, feared, a place where taxation is high and the standard of the public service low.⁸⁰

By February 1968, the councillors' opinion had hardened considerably, largely because the early draft of the memorandum, which they had finally been allowed to see, was mired in problems. It was ambiguous and had been stretched to the limit in order to accommodate both the British and Argentine positions – which, in turn, would be clarified in two unilateral statements to be produced by the respective governments.⁸¹ Yet it was precisely this ambiguity that confused and unnerved the Falklands' councillors most. In their eyes, the word *betrayal* was stamped all over the document: Britain had been negotiating a settlement behind their very backs.

Though a careful reading of the memorandum would alert anyone to the fact that there was nothing final about this 'settlement', the Falklanders were understandably startled when they read the document, as it spoke about 'taking duly into account the *interests* of the population of the Islands', while failing to mention their *wishes*. Even more alarming was that Article 4 categorically stated: 'The Government of the United Kingdom as part of such a final settlement *will recognise* Argentina's sovereignty over the Islands from a date to be agreed'.⁸² Two conditions qualified this otherwise emphatic statement but, again, they were completely dependent on what Whitehall considered to be the interests of the Islanders rather than on consultations with them. And even the wording of the statement could become problematic, as one official had put it a few months earlier:

What if our consultation with the inhabitants of the Falkland Islands showed that the transfer of sovereignty to the Argentine was completely unacceptable to them? I can only think that, given the language of Article I, we would be morally committed to bringing pressure to bear on the islanders to agree to the change of sovereignty.⁸³

Hostility in the Islands was already beginning to gather momentum. As Haskard explained to Lord Shepherd, Minister of State at the Commonwealth Office, at a meeting in early February, 'there had been a slipping from one foothold to another' and the negotiations had advanced in a 'remorseless way'. The Governor again emphasised the Islanders' Britishness and stressed that he 'was not satisfied that the enormity of handing over territory had been understood in London, New York and Buenos Aires'. Yet he also recognised that the time would come when a sovereignty transfer would take place. He simply did not want to rush it.⁸⁴

Within a few weeks, the issue came to a head. In a fashion echoed in other corners of Greater Britain, the Falklanders quickly moved from appealing to their shared identity to openly accusing Britain of selling them out. On 27 February 1968, four Unofficial Members of the Executive Council sent a broadsheet to MPs in the UK and to all major newspapers. The tone was severe and bitter:

TAKE NOTE THAT –

The Inhabitants of the Islands have never yet been consulted regarding their future – they do NOT want to become Argentines – they are as British as you are, mostly of English and Scottish ancestry, even to the 6th generation – five out of six were born in the Islands – many elderly people have never been elsewhere – there is no racial problem – no unemployment – no poverty, and we are not in debt.

ARE YOU AWARE THAT –

The people of these Islands do not wish to submit to a Foreign Language, Law, Customs, and Culture because for 135 years they have happily pursued their own peaceful way of life, a very British way of life, unique in fact, when you consider that the Islands are 8,000 miles from the Country which they still call 'Home' in spite of the Immigration Act.⁸⁵

The following month would see the creation of the Falklands lobby, later to develop into a highly effective committee with bases in London and Stanley. The message in the broadsheet already contained key elements of its rhetoric. A crucial theme was its clear Greater British credentials: the Islanders were 'as British as you are', and perhaps even more so, since they had 'no racial problem'. The reference to the Immigration Act was no idle addition: the Islanders were also anxious about the repercussions of the new restrictions, as up to five hundred of them could be excluded from direct entry.⁸⁶ With all these matters emerging in 1968, the

Falklands lobby would attempt to raise awareness in the United Kingdom in order to arrest what seemed to lie in the not-so-distant future. Faced with the prospect of being cast adrift in the South Atlantic, the lobby would adopt the rhetorical mantle of 'abandoned Britons' to instil new life into one of the few remaining links between the Falklands and the UK: the idea of Greater Britain.

Not long after the lobby's inception, as we shall see in the following chapter, the negotiation process was brought to a halt, leading to a change of strategy. Whether or not it can be credited with dampening the prospects of a sovereignty transfer, its role in creating a greater sense of awareness of the Falklands in Westminster is undeniable. As such, it seems fair to argue that it brought the plight of Falklands into focus in the UK, at a time when the British world was undergoing profound and permanent change. Yet this case was founded on the remnants of an idea that was losing its political allure, and thus the future was far from bright for the Falklands. The ensuing fourteen years would witness growing tensions and disagreements between the Islands and their 'mother country'.