

Daphne du Maurier's dystopian 1970s 'Brexit'

For those in want of some holiday reading, CIB Chairman Edward Spalton reflects on Daphne du Maurier's 1972 novel Rule Britannia. Did the ideas it contained shape British thinking on the EEC and its subsequent incarnations? A longer version of this article originally appeared on The Conservative Woman.

Fiction sometimes affects perception of fact. Erskine Childers' *The Riddle of the Sands*, about a threatened German invasion plan, certainly increased public demand for strengthening the Royal Navy before the First World War.

I wonder whether Daphne du Maurier's *Rule Britannia* – first published in 1972 – had somewhat similar but more diverse effects on opinions of the then-EEC in the early years of our membership. Like many of du Maurier's books, *Rule Britannia* is set in Cornwall – a fictional Cornwall of the early Seventies. Britain has just 'crashed out' of the Common Market and is in economic difficulties.

'Mad' (short for 'Madam') is a retired actress, socially well-connected but a bit of a Left-wing luvvie who sometimes wears Chairman Mao outfits. She has an eccentric household, composed of six adopted sons, her 20-year-old granddaughter Emma, and Dottie, her dresser from theatrical days who is the housekeeper.

They wake to the sound of planes flying overhead and see an American warship in the bay. Soon US marines come ashore. In a foretaste of darker things, one of the advancing marines shoots a dog from the neighbouring farm.

The prime minister announces on TV that Britain and the United

States have joined together to form one country to be called USUK. There is a state of emergency with roadblocks and interruptions to phones and post. America's plan is that Britain should become a huge heritage holiday destination. But there is a building undercurrent of resentment and resistance...

In those days before the internet, it was difficult and expensive to be well-informed. The press and broadcast media were almost totally pro-European. If you wanted to read a European treaty, you had to buy a copy.

My wife once suggested we should get a copy of the treaty, but it was more than £100 – around £300 in today's money. I told her not to be silly. The late Colonel Sir Peter Hilton (Lord Lieutenant of Derbyshire) told me years later that his family had clubbed together for a copy, passed it round for people to make notes, and then had a family conference. They all quietly decided to oppose continued membership.

I recall people of a pro-European view asserting time and again over decades that EEC membership kept us from the fate of becoming an American state. I wonder if it was this book which first nurtured that thought.

Some independence campaigners thought that democratic Americans would surely be our allies against European authoritarianism, if only they knew what was really happening to us. This belief popped up sporadically until the parliamentary opposition of the Maastricht treaty rebels created a more informed public debate. This was soon intensified by the advent of UKIP.

The CIA and American big business were strong supporters of the European project and of our absorption into it. The mistaken hope that they would support us in our fight for independence may well have been sparked initially by this book.

I also remember many pro-independence people who claimed that

there was a master plan which forced our economy to de-industrialise and become dependent on tourism and financial services. It was a widely held belief, although it was not until years later that credible evidence for this sort of intent became widely available. Again, I wonder whether this book first started the thought running outside informed political circles.

Rule Britannia is not on a par with Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* or *Jamaica Inn*. Its plot is sometimes whimsical and sometimes brutally bleak. A detestation of our centralised, over-mighty, London-based political class shines through it.

In spite of massive EU regional grants, Cornwall voted in 2016 to leave the EU whilst London voted Remain. This is a worthwhile, thought-provoking read, especially for people with long experience and interest in the cause of independence.