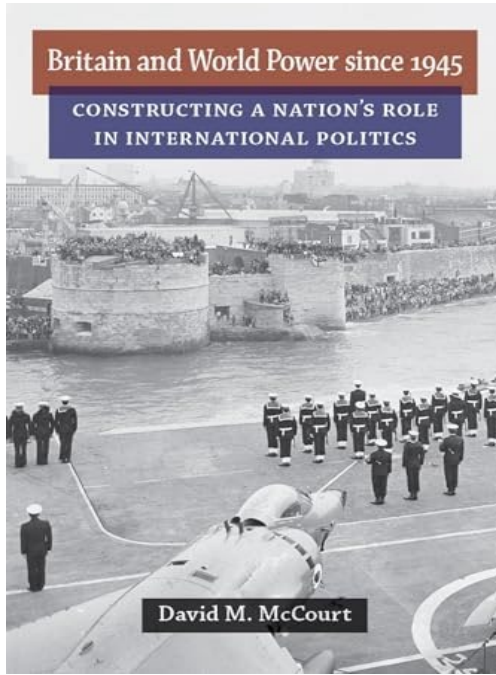


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David M. McCourt, *Britain and World Power since 1945: Constructing a Nation's Role in International Politics*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, Michigan, United States, 2014, 270 pp.



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The international system has undergone profound transformations since the end of the Second World War, marked by the emergence of new actors and the reconfiguration of global order. Within this shifting landscape, the United Kingdom has faced the enduring challenge of maintaining its global status despite an evident relative decline in economic and military terms. David McCourt, Professor of Political Sociology at the University of California, Davis, and a leading constructivist scholar in International Relations, addresses this issue directly in *Britain and World Power since 1945: Constructing a Nation's Role in International Politics* (2014). In this work, McCourt offers a compelling and deeply informed analysis of how Britain has constructed and adapted its international role through the interplay between national identity and the structural dynamics of the

post-war international system.

McCourt's central contribution lies in his constructivist theoretical framework, which views British foreign policy as shaped not solely by material capabilities—such as economic strength or military resources—but also by the ways in which the state perceives itself and is perceived by others. This perspective places the social construction of national roles at the heart of the analysis, emphasising the dynamic articulation between domestic and external normative expectations and national identity. For McCourt, British foreign policy thus represents an expression of how the nation defines itself and the shared norms that delineate what constitutes “legitimate behaviour” in international politics.

Throughout the book, McCourt highlights Britain's capacity to maintain a coherent and continuous narrative of its global role, despite its material decline since 1945. This narrative, continuously reshaped in response to structural and conjunctural change, serves as a symbolic anchor sustaining the United Kingdom's sense of legitimacy and purpose in world affairs. Far from being a passive actor constrained by an international order successively dominated by the Cold War and later American unipolarity, Britain actively interprets, negotiates, and redefines

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those constraints through the social construction of its roles. The concept of “role” thus becomes a key analytical instrument for explaining both continuity and change in British foreign policy across seven decades.

At the core of McCourt’s analysis lies national identity, which not only defines how the United Kingdom views itself but also establishes the normative framework within which its international roles are constructed and negotiated. British identity, as the author contends, is a constantly evolving social construct, shaped through political discourse, social practices, and collective experiences that reflect both historical legacies and contemporary aspirations. This identity acts as a normative compass linking domestic self-understanding and social cohesion with external behaviour and the pursuit of legitimacy abroad.

Methodologically, the book is grounded in qualitative and discursive analysis. McCourt undertakes a meticulous historical study, drawing upon an extensive range of official sources—government documents, political speeches, parliamentary debates—and a rich corpus of secondary literature. This enables him to trace the evolution of Britain’s national roles from 1945 to the present. Discourse analysis allows McCourt to explore how national identity is articulated, negotiated, and reconstructed through foreign policy practices, highlighting the narratives and normative expectations that guide state behaviour. This methodological approach convincingly bridges structural constraints and state agency, demonstrating that social perceptions are essential for understanding the evolution of Britain’s international role.

To substantiate his argument, McCourt presents four key case studies that illustrate pivotal moments in the evolution of Britain’s post-war foreign policy. The first is the 1956 Suez Crisis, which he interprets as a critical juncture exposing the tension between Britain’s self-perception as a great power and the realities of imperial decline. The crisis laid bare the contradiction between Britain’s aspiration to global leadership and the limitations imposed by a bipolar system dominated by the United States and the Soviet Union. Despite political and diplomatic failure, the United Kingdom maintained a resilient self-image as a global actor, sustaining a narrative of strategic relevance even as its material influence waned.

The second case, the 1962 Skybolt Affair, exemplifies the dynamics of strategic dependence and the renegotiation of Britain’s international role during the Cold War. The unilateral cancellation of the Skybolt missile programme by the United States—intended to modernise Britain’s nuclear deterrent—exposed the tension between Britain’s desire for strategic autonomy and its reliance on American technology and support. McCourt reads this episode as a defining moment in the rearticulation of Britain’s identity as a nuclear power, positioned within a framework of relative subordination yet bound by the necessity of close collaboration. This case further consolidated the so-called “special relationship,” marked by cooperation as well as asymmetry.

The third case is Britain’s second application for membership in the European Economic Community (EEC) between 1964 and 1967. Following France’s veto of the first application in 1963, the renewed attempt symbolised a shift in Britain’s self-conception—from a traditional global power to a European actor seeking integration within a rising regional project. McCourt



interprets this move not merely as a strategic or economic adjustment but as a symbolic redefinition of Britain's international role in a changing world where Europe was becoming a major pole of influence. This process reignited debates over sovereignty, identity, and the "special relationship," revealing the enduring ambivalence between Britain's imperial legacy and its adaptation to a multilateral post-imperial order.

The final case, the 1982 Falklands War, provides a paradigmatic example of the interconnection between national identity, international role, and foreign policy in the post-imperial era. The conflict was not only about defending territorial sovereignty but also about reaffirming Britain's status as a capable and resolute global actor. McCourt argues that the war revitalised national identity and domestic cohesion, reinforcing the narrative of an assertive and self-confident Britain. It also exposed the interplay between pragmatic factors—domestic pressures and the need for international credibility—and symbolic considerations, as well as the enduring importance of the Anglo-American alliance in crisis management.

From these case studies, McCourt concludes that British foreign policy has been profoundly shaped by the social construction of national roles, with national identity serving as both a driver and a normative framework for action. Despite global transformations and Britain's relative decline, the country has maintained a sense of purpose and legitimacy through the persistence and adaptation of its socially constructed roles. British foreign policy, therefore, is characterised by a constant tension between the aspiration for strategic autonomy and the need for cooperation with key partners, especially the United States and Europe.

Britain and World Power since 1945 stands as an important contribution to the study of International Relations and national identity. McCourt develops a robust constructivist framework that transcends traditional materialist explanations and foregrounds the symbolic and social dimensions underpinning foreign policy. His rigorous historical and discursive analysis greatly enriches our understanding of Britain's international conduct since 1945.

Nevertheless, certain limitations remain. The qualitative and discursive emphasis may limit the potential for quantitative generalisation, and the focus on elite discourse overlooks broader societal perspectives—such as civil society or subnational actors—that may also influence national role construction. Moreover, while the book's historical coverage is extensive, developments after 2010 merit further study to update and extend its theoretical and empirical relevance.

McCourt's suggestions for future research include examining how new global dynamics—such as the rise of emerging powers and digital transformation—reshape Britain's role and identity. He also calls for interdisciplinary approaches combining discourse analysis with quantitative methods, and for greater attention to non-state actors and public opinion. Comparative studies with other middle powers could further test and refine his constructivist model.

In sum, Britain and World Power since 1945 is a seminal work for scholars, researchers, and advanced students of International Relations, security studies, and foreign policy—especially those interested in constructivist perspectives and the role of national identity in



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global politics. It is equally valuable for policymakers, analysts, and diplomatic professionals seeking a nuanced understanding of Britain's historical evolution as a global actor. Ultimately, McCourt's book stands as a key reference for the study of the social construction of national roles and the complex interplay between material power and identity in contemporary world politics.