

**The Great British Dream Factory – Dominic Sandbrook**  
**Reviewed by Ronnie Glavin**

**For U3A History Book Group meeting on 21<sup>st</sup> September 2020**

Sandbrook's argument is that the UK punches well above its weight in terms of popular culture compared to other populous industrial countries. He acknowledges that having English as our language in a USA dominated film and music industry and having the led the world in the industrial revolution and created a demand for leisure activities have been powerful contributing factors. One of Sandbrook's claims is that we live very much in the shadow of the Victorians, who although different from our culture, were not as different as we might think. We still live in the world they made.

Britain is a country that used to lead the world in making things; now, it leads the world in telling stories.

Sandbrook takes four broad themes to link individual components.

Part one considers how an 'Englishness' linked the transition of producing manufactured goods to producing cultural icons.

Part two considers the role of the country house with its class distinctions and different behaviours of those 'Upstairs' and those 'Downstairs'.

Part three considers how Dickens and H.G. Wells influenced the shape and direction of soap operas and science fiction and fantasy.

Part four explores the cult of the individual or self-made man.

I have read four of his books that deal with the popular history and this one lives up to the standard of these predecessors. He writes well in an informed yet entertaining manner and I the following phrase certainly made me chuckle: -

"The British are coming" yelled Colin Welland .... but few people could have guessed that Jeremy Clarkson would be leading the charge.

I also enjoyed his writings on the musicals of Andrew Lloyd Weber and the man himself, acknowledging the man's triumphs but being appropriately waspish in his assessment of the man's character.

Those who participated in our Zoom discussion enjoyed the book but raised some interesting issues:

The part on the influence of public schools through such characters as Billy Bunter and Harry Potter was well done but it concentrated on stories about boys and possibly for boys. Where were the references to those stories about Girls' Boarding schools? I suspect that Sandbrook wanted to support his thesis about the Victorian Influence and so took Tom Brown's Schooldays as his leading influence.

There was also some discussion about the influence of H.G. Wells, possibly not so much in relation to his science fiction writings but more to do with the stories of self-made men, especially when reflecting Wells's own circumstances.

One of the topics that we all enjoyed was his ability to elicit powerful waves of nostalgia for us baby-boomers when describing television advertising and its role in popular culture.

We also discussed the central thesis of this book; that we are still in thrall to the popular culture begun and developed by the Victorians. It made us think about the legacy that our current popular culture will bequeath to future generations.

Sandbrook has spent a lot of time researching source material but rightly claims that this is neither an encyclopaedic work, nor an academic treatise but an opportunity to explore how Britain has influenced the world in the realm of popular culture.