

Doris Lessing and the British Empire

Introductory note by Francis Bennion

The following letter was prompted by annoyance at the fact that Doris Lessing, when talking to schoolgirls in Exeter (near where I live) lumped the British Empire with Nazi and Fascist tyrannies. Lessing is a white authoress of note. She had the privilege of being brought up in one of the best parts of the British Empire, Southern Rhodesia, in the good old days before it became Zimbabwe and was raped by the robber Mugabe. Now she has the impudence to tell Exeter schoolgirls that the great British Empire was on the same level as Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy.

It is followed by her reply, which misses the point of my letter. I was not boasting of my war service but describing how men and women from the British Empire fought against those tyrannies. My subsequent letter pointing this out was of course not published by the *Spectator*.

From Francis Bennion

I am an Englishman living near Exeter. I was interested to learn from Jane Gardam's review of Doris Lessing's *Time Bites* (Books, 23 October 2004) that the latter had told girls of Exeter School that when she was young 'there was the Soviet Union, Hitler's Germany, Mussolini of Italy, the British empire' and now rejoiced that 'they are all gone'.

I am 81. For me there was (or were) also these things. I spent five years of my youth fighting Hitler's Germany and Mussolini of Italy in company with many brave young men and women from various parts of the British Empire. I captained a Wellington bomber of 221 Squadron when the other four in the crew were all Australians.

They would have been surprised to be lumped with the enemy in a sour condemnation like this. {*Spectator*, 6 November 2004.}

From Doris Lessing

If Francis Bennion (Letters, 6 November) had troubled to read what I had written instead of what someone else said I had written, he would have seen there was no rejoicing, sour or otherwise, when I listed some of the great powers that loomed over my youth — Hitler's Germany, Mussolini's Italy, the Soviet Union (our ally in the war, as it happened), the British empire — and said they had all vanished. All of those seemed set to last. I could have added the other European empires: Franco. Salazar racism constructed in certain nations, like South Africa. My point, which I had thought it unnecessary to labour, was that certain contemporary great powers will probably disappear too, no matter how impregnable they seem now.

Francis Bennion cites his war service. I, being female, was merely having babies, but my family has more than done its bit. My father lost a limb and his health in the trenches. My mother nursed the wounded from 1914 to 1918. My brother, Harry Tayler, was sunk in the *Repulse* by the Japanese (yes, there was that empire too, I nearly forgot), my son John Wisdom fought for good ole Smithie who was defending white supremacy in former Southern Rhodesia. I knew many of the 'brave young men and women' fighting Hitler, as of course anyone of our age was bound to have done.

Francis Bennion says he is 81 years old, an Englishman living near Exeter. Well, I am 85, an Englishwoman (with Scottish and Irish tinctures) living in London. {*Spectator*, 20 November 2004.}

From Francis Bennion

It is obvious from her response that Doris Lessing is celebrating the passing of the British Empire and also lumping it together (as of equal guilt) with Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy (now she adds the wartime Japanese Emperor Hirohito). It was this lumping together I was objecting to, and for that reason citing my Wellington bomber crew consisting of four Australians. It was because Doris Lessing apparently conveyed her unpleasant views to an audience of Exeter schoolgirls that I mentioned that I live near Exeter and therefore have an interest. Where she lives is irrelevant. {Not published.}