Casino Royale, the first Bond novel, was published in 1953 when, as David Cannadine has observed, the coronation celebrations provided 'a retrospectively unconvincing reaffirmation of Britain's continued world power status'. The last of Fleming's novels, The Man with the Golden Gun, appeared in 1965, the year of Churchill's funeral, 'self-consciously recognised as the requiem for Britain as a great power'.

The same period also witnessed a gradual relaxation in the relations between East and West as the acute tensions of the cold war period gave way to the less troubled atmosphere of detente. There had been significant changes in the sphere of gender and sexual relations, too. In the 'permissive society' of the early 1960s, both male and female sexualities were, to a degree, freed from the cloying stranglehold of marriage, family and domesticity which had characterized the 1950s.

When Fleming died in 1964, by which time three Bond films had been released, Bond's currency in relation to these areas of cultural and ideological change was already well established. As a popular hero, the figure of Bond coordinated a series of ideological anxieties and cultural concerns centring around the questions of nation and nationhood, the relations between East and West and changes in the pattern of gender relations.

It is perhaps therefore fitting that 1983 should see the release of two new Bond films. In June, Roger Moore appears in his sixth Bond film, Octopussy, produced by Eon Productions, the company responsible for all the previous Bond films. Then, in the winter, Never Say Never Again will be released after a long legal dispute contesting Eon Productions' claim to a monopoly over the legal right to describe a film as 'a Bond film'. Sean Connery, who co-wrote the script for this film with Len Deighton, will once again stalk the screen as James Bond after an absence of twelve years. It will be his sixth time in the part too.

The long-awaited Battle of the Bonds has at last arrived. No doubt much ink will be spilt comparing and contrasting Moore's and Connery's portrayals of Bond. A more interesting question, however, concerns precisely how the Bond — or Bonds — of the 1980s will compare with the Bond of earlier periods.

If other signs of the times are anything to go by, the prospects do not look good. The current political situation looks increasingly like an action replay of the 1950s, when Bond first arrived on the cultural scene — a case of history repeating itself that would be farcical were it not so tragic.

Great power illusions have been kicked into a macabre half-life again in the aftermath of the Falklands crisis. The royal wedding — and then the royal pregnancy, the royal birth, the royal christening and god knows what else — have again placed the nation, in its more traditional and imaginary forms, at the centre of people's lives. And the family is again being triumphantly re-installed as the true centre and purpose of life as the effects of unemployment and the increasing momentum of the anti-abortion lobby threaten to reverse the advances of feminism.

There is, then, cause for concern that the Bond of the 1980s might be merely a ghostly shadow of his former, 1950s self. Although Casino Royale was published in 1953, with Live and Let Die and Moonraker appearing in 1954 and 1955 respectively, Bond did not have a significant impact on British popular culture until he was taken up by the Daily Express in 1957 — in the form of both a daily strip-cartoon and the serialisation of From Russia with Love.

It is no accident that the Daily Express serialized this particular novel, in which Bond is pitted against the Soviet espionage organisation SMERSH, as, in the late 1950s, Bond functioned primarily as a political hero for the lower middle classes. An exemplary figure of the cold war era, he personified the virtues of Western individualism, effortlessly triumphing over the leaden hand of Soviet bureaucracy. Equally important, particularly after the Suez fiasco and humiliation, Bond offered an imaginary outlet for a historically blocked jingoism. His exploits — warding off the communist threat to world peace single-handedly, reducing the USA, in the person of Felix Leiter, to the role of assistant and by-stander — fictitiously placed Britain once again at the centre of world affairs, an imaginary compensation for the disappointments and rebuffs of history. It is a gloomy prospect, but real enough, that the Bond of the 1980s will resume some aspects of the ideological currency of this period in being made to echo to the tunes of a nation triumphant.

However, perhaps this is being too pessimistic. It is true that the figure of Bond has always reverberated to the ideological concerns of nation and nationhood, the relations between East and West and conceptions of masculinity and femininity. However, the precise ways in which these concerns have been combined and expressed in relation to Bond have varied during the different moments of his career as a popular hero. A revival of the Bond of the 1960s would be a more attractive prospect.

This was undoubtedly the moment of Bond. The social reach of Bond's popularity in the 1950s was relatively restricted. The novels did not sell particularly well until the Daily Express took an interest in Bond and, even then, annual sales never topped the quarter of a million mark. With the first cycle of Bond films starring Sean Connery — from Dr No (1961) to You Only Live Twice (1967) — Bond became a major presence in British cultural life, a popular hero with a mass audience. The films had a dramatic impact on sales figures for the novels, too. Between 1955 and 1961, 1,506,000 copies of the Bond novels were sold in Britain. Between 1962 and 1967, total British sales were a staggering 22,790,000, suggesting a considerable working class readership.
The cultural and ideological currency of Bond in this period, however, was markedly different. The Bond films eschewed the SMERSH formula, typical of Fleming’s early novels, in favour of the SPECTRE formula. In this, Bond is pitted against an international criminal organisation — usually SPECTRE, the Special Executive for Counter-intelligence, Terror, Revenge and Extortion led by the diabolically mad but clever Ernst Stavro Blofeld — which exploits the fragility of the relations between East and West for the purposes of private gain. No longer an adversary of the Soviet Union, the threat Bond averted — more in tune with the period of detente — was that of the world being destroyed as a result of a misunderstanding between the super powers wrought by the evil machinations of a criminal genius.

As a symbol and image of nation and nationhood, moreover, Bond accomplished something of an ideological about-face. Initially a rallying point for a chauvinism well and truly on its uppers, Bond, in the 1960s, formed part of an attempt to modernise the nation, best encapsulated in the slogan ‘Swinging Britain’, associated with the development of a new style, image and rhetoric of cultural and political leadership. Refashioned as the very model of the tough, abrasive, unsentimental professionalism which, according to the rhetoric of Heath and Wilson, was destined to lead Britain into the modern, no illusions, post-imperialist age, Bond represented, in a highly condensed form, the much heralded ‘classless’ spirit of the age. A hero of rupture rather than one of
tradition, a break with the traditional ruling class heroes — such as John Buchan's Richard Hannay and Cyril McNeile's Bulldog Drummond — with whom he had earlier been likened, Bond crystallised the virtues of a supposedly new, untraditional, anti-establishment committed to rescuing Britain from the dodoism of its traditional rulers.

The images of sexuality in the relations between Bond and 'the Bond girl' were also, although again in a strategic and limited way, modernising. Representations of 'the Bond girl' in fanzines and the like typically stressed her qualities of freedom and independence. 'They are women of the nuclear age', Terence Young argued, 'freer and able to make love when they want to without worrying about it.' However, 'the Bond girl' was 'liberated' only in the areas (bed) and respects (sexuality) that 'liberated man' required. In all other respects, she accepted a 'naturally' subordinate position in relation to men. But it was a change from Doris Day.

In sum Bond's ideological and cultural associations were forward rather than backward looking in this period. A 'hero of adjustment', he facilitated an ideological shift from one image of nationhood to another and from one set of gender identities to another whilst preserving a degree of continuity between the two. An ideal popular hero, he was both 'progressive', a sounding-board for change, yet also conservative, limiting change within clearly defined boundaries.

This subtle, double-edged ideological and cultural currency gave way, in the 1970s, to a more straightforwardly reactionary construction of Bond. With the Roger Moore films, especially the later ones such as Moonraker and The Spy Who Loved Me, the centre of narrative interest shifts away from the contest between Bond and 'the girl', usually portrayed as excessively independent but destined to meet her come-uppance in her encounter with Bond. Typically, the main ideological work accomplished in the films of this period is that of a 'putting-back-into-place' of women who carry their independence and liberation 'too far'.

Looking back over the various phases of Bond's career, then, Bond has not always stood for the same values. His functioning as a popular icon has been more complex and ambiguous, articulating a fairly consistent range of ideological concerns, but always inflecting, combining and mixing these in different permutations. Never exactly what you'd call a 'positive hero', but clearly some Bonds are better than others.

And if Fleming had developed his hero's character a little differently, he might have been much more bearable. In Casino Royale he questioned whether communists were really the villains they were made out to be. He even doubted whether he was fighting on the right side. Mind you, his vital parts had been badly knocked about with a carpet-beater just a little while before, so his thoughts were naturally a bit deranged. Then, in From Russia with Love, he spoke but in favour of employing intellectuals rather than retired Indian Army officers in the secret service, insisting that not all intellectuals were 'long-haired perverts'. And, to his lasting credit, he did try to assassinate M in The Man with the Golden Gun, although it took a KGB brainwashing to put him up to the idea.

That's not much to go on, I admit. But it's food for thought. An ideal Bond for the 1980s would try to unionise espionage workers, campaign for gay rights in the secret service, encourage Miss Money-penny to leave M and set up an abortion clinic, leak all he knows to END, exchange his supercharged Bentley for a bike and switch from Martini to beer—shaken, not stirred, if he must. If he could also attach a limpet to the royal yacht, secretly arrange for the peaceful transfer of the Malvinos to Argentina and deliver Thatcher bound hand, foot and especially mouth to Arthur Scargill at a secret destination somewhere near Barnsley, that would be handy too. As that's probably asking too much, I'll settle for Never Say Never Again being infinitely superior to Octopussy. I never could stand Roger Moore as Bond, so a box-office victory for Connery would be nice.

2 Cited in 'What happened to the Bond girls?' Telegraph Sunday Magazine 17 September 1978 p10.