Englishness Identified
Manners and Character 1650–1850

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ENGLISHNESS IDENTIFIED
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For Hugh
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Preface

This book is an attempt to contribute to two distinct enterprises. In the first place it aims to offer a range of new or little-known evidence on the subject of social behaviour and manners. Most of that evidence consists of observations by contemporaries, many of them foreigners or at any rate outsiders. The history of manners does not always reflect systematic study of this kind of material. To a marked and understandable degree it has relied much on the didactic literature of manners, on the manuals, protocols, and rule books which centuries of European civility, courtesy, and etiquette have generated. These are valuable sources but they carry their own dangers. Guides to the ‘dos and don’ts’ of human behaviour do not necessarily reveal a great deal about the way people actually behave. If they did it would not have been necessary to write them. It may be true that those of them that condemn certain practices as well as recommend others may incidentally be revealing of prevailing behaviour. Even so, their empirical value is to say the least questionable.

Secondly, I hope this may contribute to current debate about the history of identity though my own concern is primarily with the things identified rather than the politics of identification. I seek to show how certain traits came to be seen both in England and outside England as typical of the English, and how those traits were defined and redefined to suit changing priorities and preoccupations. The significance that England and the Britain of which it was part came to acquire beyond its own shores between the execution of Charles I in 1649 and the Great Exhibition of 1851 perhaps gives the resulting characterization a particular interest. To the extent that it remains, implicitly or explicitly, a perception and a self-perception today, it may also say something about the influence that shadowy legacies of this kind can exert. Above all it perhaps demonstrates how dependent such long-lasting stereotypes can be on highly contingent historical circumstances.

P. L.

January 1999
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Note on Sources

Many of the sources used in this book were published in languages other than English in the first instance, though some were translated into English either in the lifetime of their author or later. In referring to the latter I have generally employed the most accessible English version. In certain instances, however, these represent translations which are contentious or misleading. In these cases I have cited the original version, while noting any points of interest that may be raised by the existence of dubious translations. Quotations from non-English sources represent my own translations, unless otherwise indicated. Throughout I have tried to combine the requirements of scholarship with the desirability of accessibility. In some instances the result has been the citation of a number of versions, in different languages, of the same work.
ENGLISHNESS is a term much employed by historians, understandably, given the current interest in matters of identity. The entire span of English history is affected, from the time when the presence of the English, or rather the Angles, in the British Isles, first makes such a formulation seem appropriate, to the present. Strictly speaking, as applied to the greater part of that span, the word itself is an anachronism. ‘Englishness’ is a relatively modern invention. Dictionaries place it no earlier than 1805, its first occurrence apparently being attributable to William Taylor of Norwich, the radical poetaster who is credited with bringing German romanticism to the attention of a British audience. It is pleasantly ironic that he should also have been accused by contemporaries of ‘employing words and forms of construction which are not sanctioned or not current in our language’. In this respect Taylor cheerfully admitted to his own un-Englishness, boasting to Southey that his taste was ‘moulded on that of a foreign public’.

Perhaps it was his immersion in German that induced him to coin a word that has
something of a Germanic feel about it. Many languages to this day lack a substantive capable of summarizing the essence of their nationality, but German, with its ‘Deutschtum’, is not one of them.

Discussions of Englishness tend to imply interest in the process of identification as much as the things or values identified. Some major scholarly reappraisals have resulted. The rediscovery of Anglo-Saxon ethnic self-consciousness, for example, has powered a revival of interest in the vigour, originality and endurance of Old English institutions. Similarly, features of Victorian thinking have revealed the centrality of specifically English nationhood to the social, political, and imperial concerns of the nineteenth century. Not only the traditional concerns of the historian have been affected. Swathes of the literary canon have been subjected to analysis in terms of patriotic or nationalistic preoccupations, with large claims being made for their continuing relevance today.

In this book, my focus is somewhat different: it is the things identified rather than the process of identification. By Englishness I mean those distinctive aspects of national life that struck either outsiders or insiders or both as characteristic. I give outsiders higher priority than they would normally be accorded by historians of English nationalism or patriotism. I hope this may be considered no bad thing. There is, after all, the freshness of perspective that foreign views bring, as intermediaries between the historian and his subject. In Madame de Staël’s words, ‘foreigners constitute a contemporary posterity’. There is also the likelihood that if their testimony is not objective, it is at least disengaged. And above all, they shine light where it would not occur to their English contemporaries to do so. Things that are taken for granted as part of the fabric of everyday life may to outsiders be sufficiently novel to merit scrutiny. Moreover, they can rarely resist the impulse to generalize from their limited experience.

Such speculations have often annoyed by their glibness. The Spanish Anglophile Blanco White, not altogether innocent of the offence himself, denounced ‘especially those theorizing Frenchmen, who would confidently run up some philosophical reflections on the state of the nation on the basis of a fortnight’s tour’. These more discursive reflections are often little valued by historians, so little that they have sometimes been suppressed even in the most scholarly translations. Yet they can be highly suggestive of the relationship between a society and
its competitors. They have, too, featured in some indisputable classics including Voltaire’s *Letters on England* of 1733, better known in its grander French dress of a year later, as *Lettres Philosophiques*, and Emerson’s *English Traits* of 1856.

Such sources suggest a radical reassessment of the importance of England and things English. Between the execution of Charles I in the middle of the seventeenth century and the Great Exhibition in the middle of the nineteenth century, the place of Britain and therefore England in the comity of nations changed markedly. In terms of population it rose from being a minor demographic appendage of mainland Europe to one of its most populous states. As an exporter of people it made British institutions and the English language prominent features of the extra-European world. In point of power politics the overall trend from the time of Marlborough and the War of Spanish Succession was uncontestably upward. Even a sceptical Frenchman reckoned that the century of warfare between Blenheim and Waterloo had lifted Britain from sixth place to first in the league table of international powers.\(^8\)

The focus of interest in this phenomenon was not solely grand strategy, nor was it the same throughout. In the early eighteenth century the appearance of a new form of constitutional monarchy, and its implications for the liberties of the subject, attracted attention. Foreigners came to England, it was said, in search of government, as they went to Italy in search of arts.\(^9\) Later on it was the commercial and colonial character of Britain’s pre-eminence that seemed most striking. Later still, by the early nineteenth century, industrialization, with all it implied not only for the wealth of the State but for the ordinary life of countless human beings, was fascinating observers. And, throughout but increasingly, there was awareness of the cultural progress of the new Leviathan, which, as Disraeli’s father Isaac, himself a second generation immigrant, put it, did as much as arms and wealth to ensure that ‘An island, once inconsiderable in Europe, now ranks among the first powers, arbitrates among other nations, and the very title of its inhabitants ensures respect.’\(^10\) Few outsiders would have contested the claim and to those from remote cultures, the impression of power, wealth, and sophistication was almost stupefying. As a Persian envoy to the Court of the St James’s put it in 1810, ‘It seems God who created the Universe chooses special people on whom to shower special blessings.’\(^11\)
In all these matters innovation was the leitmotif. This was somewhat paradoxical considering what attention the English paid to their past and their traditions. But this may have been rather misleading. The cult of ‘Old Englishness’ was itself a natural reaction to the speed of change that the new England experienced in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In any case interest in the physical evidence of the English heritage among the English themselves was not always very marked before the late nineteenth century. Moreover, the growing part that Americans played in construing Englishness for a wider world had the effect of emphasizing their own particular needs. These were understandably concerned with ancient roots and traditions. Our Old Home, as Hawthorne expressed it, was meant to exhibit stability rather than change, age rather than youth. To many Americans the reality came as something of a surprise. Landing at Liverpool, Harriet Beecher Stowe had to wait for a trip into the Lancashire countryside to find at Speke Hall ‘the first really old thing that we had seen since our arrival in England’. Before her lifetime few foreigners had set foot in England with the intention of seeing ‘really old things’. They came to view tomorrow in the making, not yesterday.

In this respect Britain’s failures were taken to be as significant as its successes. The greatest of these, the loss of the thirteen American colonies, was itself a portentous modernity. That one of the newest colonial powers should be the first to suffer in this way merely confirmed the impression that whatever was going on in the British empire was more dynamic, more prophetic than what happened in other empires. The fact that Britain not only survived this setback, but entered upon a period of unprecedented economic growth enhanced the impression that the new prodigy among nations was unique.

This belief that whatever the truth about British prowess, was a truth about the future, gained an increasing hold in the late eighteenth century and was rarely disputed in the early nineteenth. It was not necessary to agree that the future was a desirable one. Romantic travellers, who relished the opportunity to view societies that preserved the past in aspic, could not resist visiting one in which the future could be glimpsed. And for those who saw in British industrial progress only political ossification and social retardation, it was no less instructive. Here in effect was taking place a grand experiment in the history of civilization, ‘the new world of the old world’. Not to have inspected it personally was not to have trav-
elled. As the great Montesquieu himself observed: ‘I, too, have been a traveller, and have seen the country in the world which is most worthy of our curiosity—I mean England.’

These were sentiments that would not have been contradicted in England itself, with its growing faith in progress in general and the progress of Britain in particular. The cult of ‘improvement’ was a more satisfying aspiration than ‘enlightenment’, to the extent that it emphasized moral and material progress rather than an intellectual state. Significantly, the ‘Scottish school’ was always more ambivalent about the future than its English contemporaries. For others, it was easy to assume that Britain was destined to be the great improver of the human race. Was it not after all, as Sir Richard Phillips meaninglessly but revealingly boasted in 1828, ‘the most improved country that ever existed in the world’. And if some were more restrained they did not deny that here was a kind of laboratory where the future was being tried and tested. This was as Mark Pattison put it ‘the illustrative country’.

The psychological impact of this transformation was enhanced by Britain’s seemingly peripheral position on the margins of Europe, and also by older assumptions about its inferiority in the annals of civilization, though by the middle of the nineteenth century, it was possible to forget England’s relative insignificance at earlier times in its history. It was Ralph Waldo Emerson who remarked, ‘The problem of the traveller landing at Liverpool is, Why England is England? What are the elements of that power which the English hold over other nations? If there be one test of national genius universally accepted, it is success; and if there be one successful country in the universe for the last millennium, that country is England.’

In truth most of this success had been achieved in a small fraction of that millennium. It is hard to believe that in 1650 any outsider, even one with some claim to be an honorary Englishman, as Emerson had, would have written in such terms. Rather the English had featured as Europe’s mavericks, their history one of violence, turbulence, and instability, of achievement perhaps, but achievement unpredictable, unsustained, and unconvincing. They constituted a standing reminder of the spasmodic vigour of a people still close to barbarism. Nobody, surely, in 1650 could have observed, as Talleyrand did in 1806, that ‘if the English Constitution is destroyed, understand clearly that the civilization of the world will
be shaken to its very foundations'. The word itself would not have sprung to the lips of Talleyrand's grandfathers. Civilization had for them been where the European tradition located it, in the heartland of Latin Europe, or among the Gallic and Germanic peoples who had taken on the cultural and political responsibilities once associated with Rome. But by the 1820s, Édouard de Montulé could exclaim, glimpsing the white coast of England just out of Boulogne, 'there is the centre of civilization'. And the rounded nature of what was envisaged would have seemed extraordinary before the nineteenth century. The verdict of Madame de Staël's son, the Baron de Staël-Holstein, in 1825, was comprehensive. 'Civilization is there farther advanced than in any country on the Continent, that knowledge is more widely diffused, the science of government better understood, and all the movements of the social machine more rapid and more ably combined.\(^{24}\)

If there was any particular point at which this acceptance of at least the possibility of English pre-eminence was attained it was probably the third quarter of the eighteenth century, and more particularly the 1760s. Then, Lord Normanby remarked, looking back from the 1820s, we 'led the way in human civilization'.\(^{25}\) Or as Giuseppe Baretti put it in 1770, the English 'stand of course quite at the head of mankind'.\(^{26}\) The stupendous victories of the Seven Years War, obtained at the expense of Europe's most populous and powerful State, naturally impressed contemporaries. At home they bred a fierce pride in the worldwide impact of a tiny island's prowess. In the words of the novelist Charles Johnstone, 'whenever England is at war with any of her neighbours, the effects are felt to the extremities of the globe'.\(^{27}\)

Understandably, England's nearest Continental rivals were particularly struck by the transformation. In his influential posthumous tract of 1772, 'De l'Homme', the French philosopher Helvétius selected the English as a spectacular example of progress, by what had once been 'a nation of slaves, inhuman and superstitious, without arts and without industry'.\(^{28}\) This was written at a time when France was undergoing one of those periodic waves of fashionable *anglomanie* that punctuated the history of Anglo-French relations. Anglomania took its adherents in France, and later in Germany, far beyond an interest in British politics into realms of manners and culture that raised deeper questions about what constituted Englishness.\(^{29}\) And above all there was the growing pen-
etration of English letters on the Continent, a development that had its origins earlier but which by the 1770s was having a marked effect. It has been observed that in 1700 no educated Continental European would have thought it necessary to speak or read English whereas by 1800 it would have been considered essential. The foreigners who came to Britain and wrote about their experience were precisely those who already had a mental picture of their hosts, much of it formed from imaginative literature.

What foreigners identified was what they increasingly described as national character. It is an expression that readily offends the sensibility of a late twentieth-century reader. The title which Sir Ernest Barker gave to his Stevenson Lectures at Glasgow in 1925, *National Character and the Factors in its Formation*, would certainly not appeal to an academic audience three-quarters of a century later. The very idea that nation states are rooted in ethnic or racial origin, and that their behaviour either at the collective or individual level, is determined by the resulting organic tendencies, is repugnant to the liberal conscience of the West. This is understandable, but it should not be permitted to blind us to the prominence that the concept of national character has played in the past, nor to the less forbidding associations that the term itself has sometimes possessed. Attributing peculiarities of thought and behaviour to particular groups of people must be as ancient as human society itself, and does not presuppose any one explanatory model, let alone those that underpin nineteenth- and twentieth-century ideas of race. In the case of Europe there exists a long tradition of national characterizations, informing every kind of discourse from the common currency of diplomats to the proverbial wisdom of peasant folklore. As it happened, that tradition came under scrutiny at the time that Britain itself was being so closely inspected. It is tempting to attribute this to the political climate created by the rise of modern nationalist movements in the turmoil associated with an age of revolution. But it owed as much to the Enlightenment’s search for the defining terms of the modern state and its fascination with the science of manners. Moreover, when the term national character became fashionable in the late eighteenth century it did so in a context that took little note of innate, inherited forces.

The prevailing fashions in what we would classify as psychology, sociology, and anthropology, treated nations merely as convenient, and often