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The English

A Portrait of a People

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Published by Penguin Books

Extract

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PENGUIN BOOKS

Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England
Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA
Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3
(a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)
Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland
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Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia
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Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India
Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, North Shore 0632, New Zealand
(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)
Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

www.penguin.com

First published by Michael Joseph 1998
Published with minor revisions in Penguin Books 1999
This edition published 2007
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Printed in England by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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ISBN: 978–0–141–03295–5

PREFACE

Being English used to be so easy. They were one of the most easily identified peoples on earth, recognized by their language, their manners, their clothes and the fact that they drank tea by the bucketload.

It is all so much more complicated now. When, occasionally, we come across someone whose stiff upper lip, sensible shoes or tweedy manner identifies them as English, we react in amusement: the conventions that defined the English are dead and the country's ambassadors are more likely to be singers or writers than diplomats or politicians.

The imperial English may have carried British passports – as did the Scots, Welsh, and some of the Irish – but they really didn't need to think too hard about whether being 'English' was the same as being 'British': the terms were virtually interchangeable. Nowadays, nothing will so infuriate a Scot as to confuse the terms English and British, for England's Celtic neighbours are increasingly for striking out on their own. Elections in May 1999 to the new Scottish parliament and Welsh Assembly were, predictably, trumpeted by the Labour party (which had invented the whole idea of devolved governments) as strengthening the Union. Perhaps so. But it is unquestionably changed. Scotland, at least, has always been a nation,

with its own legal and educational system, and civic and intellectual tradition. Now it has its own government and it is hard to think of political institutions which, once given power, have not sought more of it. The language has begun to reflect this changed relationship. Where a year or two ago events in Scotland were talked of as regional, they are increasingly spoken about as 'national'. The BBC has even issued instructions to its staff on the unacceptability of any longer talking of Wales as a 'Principality'.

Then there is the problem of Europe. Who knows how the collective ambition or delusion that has gripped the European political élite will end up? If it is successful, a United States of Europe will make the United Kingdom redundant.

And then there is the corrosive awareness that neither Britain, nor any other nation, can singlehandedly control the tides of capital that determine whether individual citizens will eat or starve. Increasingly, the main business of national governments is the culture of their citizens.

These four elements – the end of empire, the cracks opening in the so-called United Kingdom, the pressures for the English to plunge into Europe, and the uncontrollability of international business – set me wondering. What did it mean to be English?

Although these are political questions, this is not a political book in the narrow sense of the word. I set out to try to discover the roots of the present English anxiety about themselves by travelling back into the past, to the things that created that instantly recognizable ideal Englishman and Englishwoman who carried the flag across the world. And then I tried to find out what had become of them.

Some of these influences were relatively easy to spot. Obviously the fact that they were born on an island rather than living on a continental landmass had had an effect. They came from a country where Protestant reformation had put the church firmly in its place. They had inherited a deep belief in individual liberty.

Others were more opaque. Why, for example, do the English

seem to enjoy feeling so persecuted? What is behind the English obsession with games? How did they acquire their odd attitudes to sex and food? Where did they get their extraordinary capacity for hypocrisy?

I sought answers to the questions through travelling, talking and reading. Several years later, I am a bit the wiser and have a different set of questions.

And now I have just noticed that I am writing of the English as 'they', when I have always thought myself one of them. They remain elusive to the last.

CHAPTER ONE

THE LAND OF LOST CONTENT

Ask any man what nationality he would prefer to be, and ninety nine out of a hundred will tell you that they would prefer to be Englishmen.

CECIL RHODES

Once upon a time the English knew who they were. There was such a ready list of adjectives to hand. They were polite, unexcitable, reserved and had hot-water bottles instead of a sex life: how they reproduced was one of the mysteries of the western world. They were doers rather than thinkers, writers rather than painters, gardeners rather than cooks. They were class-bound, hidebound and incapable of expressing their emotions. They did their duty. Fortitude bordering on the incomprehensible was a byword: 'I have lost my leg, by God!' exclaimed Lord Uxbridge, as shells exploded all over the battlefield. 'By God, and have you!' replied the Duke of Wellington. A soldier lying mortally wounded in a flooded trench on the Somme was, so the myth went, likely to say only that he 'mustn't grumble'. Their most prized possession was a sense of honour. They were steadfast and trustworthy. The word of an English gentleman was as good as a bond sealed in blood.

It is 1945. At last, the apparently endless war which has governed every waking moment of the British population is ended and they can relax. Everywhere in the industrial cities are gap-toothed mementoes of the Luftwaffe. In the towns that had survived relatively

unscathed, the High Street is a jigsaw of different shop fronts, most of them little individual businesses, for this is, in Napoleon's famously scathing condemnation, 'une nation de boutiquiers', a nation of shopkeepers. The vast retail chains which will within a few decades have driven the small tradesmen out of business are there, but if you dropped into the chain of Boots chemists, it might as easily have been to change your books at the library. In the evening, maybe a visit to the cinema.

There is a strong case for agreeing with Churchill that the Second World War had been his country's 'finest hour'. He was talking about Britain and the British Empire, but the values of that empire were the values which the English liked to think were something which they had invented. Certainly, the war and its immediate aftermath are the last time in living memory when the English had a clear and positive sense of themselves. They saw it reflected back in films like *In Which We Serve*, Noël Coward's fictionalized account of the sinking of HMS *Kelly*. As the survivors of the destroyer, sunk by German dive-bombers, lie in their life-raft they recall the ship's history. What they are really calling up is a picture of the strength of England. The captain and the ratings may be divided by their accents, but they share the same essential beliefs about what their country represents. It is an ordered, hierarchical sort of place in which the war is an inconvenience to be put up with, like rain at a village fête. It is a chaste, self-denying country in which women know their place and children go dutifully and quietly to bed when told. 'Don't make a fuss,' say the wives to one another during an air raid, 'we'll have a cup of tea in a minute.' As the Chief Petty Officer leaves home his mother-in-law asks him when he'll be ashore again.

'All depends on Hitler,' he says.

'Well, who *does* he think he is?' asks the mother-in-law.

'That's the spirit.'

In Which We Serve was unashamed propaganda for a people facing

the possible extinction of their culture, which is the reason it is so illuminating. It shows us how the English liked to think of themselves. The picture that emerges from this and many similar movies is of a stoical, homely, quiet, disciplined, self-denying, kindly, honourable and dignified people who would infinitely rather be tending their gardens than defending the world against a fascist tyranny.

I have lived all my life in the England which emerged from the shadow of Hitler, and have to confess an admiration for the place as it seemed to be then, despite its small-mindedness, hypocrisy and prejudice. It fell into a war that it had repeatedly been promised it could avoid, and in so doing advanced its fall from world eminence by decades. The revisionists tell us that so much of the British achievement in that war was not what it seemed at the time. Certainly, the English have clung fiercely to heroic illusions about the war, the favourite ones being the Little Ships at Dunkirk, the victory of the Few in the Battle of Britain and the courage of Londoners and other city-dwellers in the Blitz. All right, the role of the Little Ships has been exaggerated, the Battle of Britain was won as much by Hitler's misjudgement as by the heroism of the fighter pilots, and the Blitz by the courage and ruthlessness of Bomber Command's retaliatory raids on Germany. It may be demonstrably false that the English won the war alone, as any reading of Churchill's desperate attempts to secure American intervention will attest. But the fact remains that the country *did* stand alone in the summer of 1940 and had it not done so the rest of Europe would have fallen to the Nazis. Had it not had the great benefit of geography, perhaps, like the rest of Europe, from France to the Baltic, the country would have found willing executioners to do the Nazi bidding. But geography matters; it makes people who they are.

How many attempts have there been to explain what the Second World War did to Britain? One thousand? Ten thousand? What none of them can undermine is that in that titanic struggle the English had the clearest idea of what they stood for and, therefore,

the sort of people they were. It was nothing to do with Hitler's pride in his Fatherland, it was something smaller, more personal, and I think, more quietly powerful. Take David Lean's 1945 tale of forbidden love, *Brief Encounter*. The couple meet in the tearoom of a railway station, where she is waiting for the steam train home after a day's shopping. A speck of coal dirt gets caught in her eye and, without a word of introduction, the gallant local doctor steps forward and removes it. The following eighty minutes of this beautifully written movie depict their deepening love and the guilt each feels about it. Trevor Howard's tall, spare frame, strong nose and jaw, Celia Johnson's *retroussé* nose and clear eyes seem to embody the ideal Englishman and Englishwoman. They belong to the infinitely respectable middle class, in which strangulated scheme of things 'levly gels' wish only to be 'relly heppy'.

The doctor begins his seduction with the classic English gambit of commenting on the weather. A few moments later he mentions music. 'My husband's not musical,' she says. 'Good for him,' says the doctor. Good for him? Why is it good for him? It makes it sound as if he has managed to fight off a killer disease. It is good for him, of course, because it recognizes a God-ordained right to philistinism and the rectitude of individuals who please themselves in their own homes. As Rachmaninov's Second Piano Concerto comes and goes in the background, their affair unfolds, measured out in cups of tea in the waiting room of Milford station. Celia Johnson's husband is the sort of man who calls his wife 'old girl' and to whom sympathy is the suggestion that they do the newspaper crossword together. 'I believe we'd all be different if we lived in a warm and sunny climate,' she thinks to herself at one point. 'Then we shouldn't be so withdrawn and shy and difficult.' Being English, she feels no animosity towards her husband, whom she considers 'kindly and unemotional'. Trevor Howard, equally trapped in a dry marriage, also expresses no hostility towards his wife and children. But the two of them are in the force of a passion they can hardly

control. 'We must be sensible,' is the constant refrain. 'If we control ourselves, there's still time.'

In the end, despite all the protestations of undying devotion, the romance remains unconsummated. He does the decent thing and takes a job at a hospital in South Africa and she returns to her decent but dull husband. The end.

What does this most popular of English films tell us about the English? Firstly that, in the immortal words, 'we are not put on earth to enjoy ourselves'. Secondly, the importance of a sense of duty: wearing uniform had been a fact of life for most of the adult population. (Trevor Howard had been a lieutenant with the Royal Corps of Signals, with a number of entirely imaginary acts of heroism credited to him by the film studios' publicity machines. Celia Johnson had been an auxiliary policewoman: they knew all about sacrificing their pleasures for a greater good.) Most of all, the message is that the emotions are there to be controlled. It was 1945. But it could as easily have been 1955 or even 1965; the fashions might have changed, but the weather would still be damp and the policemen still avuncular. It would, despite the post-war Welfare State, be a country where everyone knew their place. Delivery carts, driven by men in uniform, still brought milk and bread to the front door. There were things which were done and things which were not done.

One could assume about these people that they were decent, and as industrious as was necessary to meet comparatively modest ambitions. They had become accustomed to seeing themselves as aggressed against, steady under fire, defiant against the enemy. The image is of the British troops at Waterloo withstanding all-out assault by the French, or the dome of St Paul's emerging from the smoke and flames of German bombs. They had a deeply held sense of their own rights, yet would proudly say they were 'not much bothered' about politics. The abject failure of both left- and right-wing extremists to get themselves elected to Parliament testified to their profound scepticism when anyone offered the promised land. They were, it is

true, reserved and prone to melancholy. But they were not in any meaningful sense religious, the Church of England being a political invention which had elevated being 'a good chap' to something akin to canonization. On the occasions when bureaucracy demanded they admit an allegiance, they could write 'C of E' in the box and know that they wouldn't be bothered by demands that they attend church or give all they had to the poor.

In 1951, the *People* newspaper organized a survey of its readers. For three years, Geoffrey Gorer pored over the 11,000 responses. At the end of which he concluded that the national character had not really changed much in the previous 150 years. The superficial changes had been vast: a lawless population had been turned into a law-abiding one; a country which enjoyed dog-fights, bear-baiting and public hangings had become humanitarian and squeamish; general corruption in public life had been replaced by a high level of honesty. But

> what seems to have remained constant is a great resentment at being overlooked or controlled, a love of freedom; fortitude; a low interest in sexual activity, compared with most neighbouring societies; a strong belief in the value of education for the formation of character; consideration and delicacy for the feelings of other people; and a very strong attachment to marriage and the institution of the family . . . The English are a truly unified people, more unified, I would hazard, than at any previous period in their history. When I was reading, with extreme care, the first batch of questionnaires which I received, I found I was constantly making the same notes: 'What dull lives most of these people appear to lead!' I remarked; and secondly, 'What good people!' I should still make the same judgements.[1]

The reasons for this unity are obvious enough – the country had just come though a terrible war, which had required shared sacrifice. The population of England was still relatively homogeneous, used to accepting the inconvenience of discipline and unaffected by mass immigration. It was still insular, not merely in a physical sense but because the mass media had yet to create the global village.