Deep and True?
Reflections on the Cultural Life of the English Countryside

by Patrick Wright

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1. Foot and Mouth

Those pictures of burning livestock were disturbing enough to watch here in Britain. They showed somebody's livelihood going up in smoke (and not just the farmers', as we may have thought at the time). Yet they surely also provided a reminder of how dissociated we, a predominantly urban nation, may be from the actuality of rural life, even as we embrace the image of the countryside as our own.

That same television footage looked perhaps even more alarming in America. In early April, I happened to be in Michigan, where the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries' pyres seemed to be burning all day long on scores of television channels. Add BSE to the mix, as commentators promptly did, and Britain looked like the last place in the world you would want to visit or, for that matter, to come from: a beleaguered island where some dreadful mutation had happened and onto which you could hardly step without grave risk to your health and chromosomes. Not so long ago, when it was adopted as the new name of the Nature Conservancy Council, the phrase 'English Nature' might have sounded solid and reassuring. In the current climate, it would serve all too adequately as the title of a horror film.

We routinely talk of the countryside as if it were a single entity, yet, as every successive rural crisis reveals, there are actually many different countrysides, and they don't necessarily get along that well. There are, of course, very different soils and agricultural terrains, as the insidious but partial spread of foot and mouth demonstrated, yet there are also very different ways of thinking about the land. There is the pastorally tinted urban perspective, as distinct from more practical rural perceptions. There is the agricultural view, itself internally differentiated, as distinct from the conservationist perspective, or those concerned with tourism, recreation and access.

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Meanwhile, the recent drama also showed that the image of the countryside remains close to our idea of national identity, and that the idea of infection or pollution can consequently shoot off in alarming directions. It wasn't just in desperate pub conversations that foot and mouth became coupled with tabloid-stoked anxieties about illegal immigrants and asylum seekers. On March 27th, the Agriculture Minister Nick Brown announced, presumably as briefed by MAFF, that the foot and mouth epidemic was probably caused by infected meat that had been illegally imported for use in Chinese restaurants, and then reprocessed as swill. This story – which smelt to me like an updated version of the old 'they're stealing our cats and serving them up as chicken' myth - caused a 40% drop in the business of Chinese restaurants, and also a nasty flurry of racist phone calls. It also brought Nick Brown back to the microphones a few days later, not exactly to apologise on behalf of his civil servants, but to admit that there was no basis to the story after all.

The recent trials have obliged the government to announce a rethinking of the countryside and the various claims it must now accommodate: not just farming, but conservation, leisure, and the consumers rather than just producers of food too. Given the confusion that these events have also brought to our customary ideas and images of rural life, I think this is also an appropriate time to reflect on the cultural dimension of the countryside. Not so much the way we farm it, but the way we have imagined it as something closely connected to our sense of identity, both locally and in a more national sense. The countryside, then, as a repository of values that neither farmers nor scientific conservationists may immediately recognise as belonging on their turf: ideas like innocence, beauty, peace, tradition, nature and, of course, nationhood too. This is a story with a pastoral theme, yet it involves much more than just planting roses around an otherwise bleak cottage door.

2. Raising Up the Downs

I will introduce what I mean by the cultural life of the landscape with reference to the chalk downlands, one of the defining geographical features of southern England. The chalk of the white cliffs is anciently connected to the name of Albion, the very rocks that have long served to define England's distinction from land's overseas.

That imagery has persisted through the twentieth century, with the white cliffs being especially active during the two world wars. Yet there is another tradition

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which attaches its value not so much to the whiteness of the coastal cliffs, but to the height of the barrow-dotted and largely inland downs. It has long been a pastoral convention to exaggerate the height of the downs, a picturesque cliché, indeed, which encouraged diverse eighteenth and nineteenth century writers to make towering, Alp-like mountains out of rolling hills that actually struggle and indeed, never quite manage to reach a thousand feet above sea level.

This convention was given profundity by Thomas Hardy, in his poem from the 1890s 'Wessex Heights', in which the downs were presented as a high ground for 'thinking, dreaming, dying on', where a man could escape the 'mind-chains' that governed his life in the world below.

At the end of the First World War, the southern English chalk was reconfigured once again. Thus in May 22, 1920, H. M. Tomlinson, a man of letters, went for a walk on the South Downs in Surrey, and his description of the experience is tellingly composed. On those heights he picks up a Neolithic flint scraper, as old as the Pyramids and yet evidence of an ancient life that seemed as close and immediate as the voices of children picking bluebells in the oak wood below.

Having established this sense of deep continuity, Tomlinson sits down to read a memoir of the recent war, one that engages his own recent memories of the Somme. There could hardly have been a more profound and important story for his generation, and yet the book was one of the kind that publishers were already advising authors against producing. Indeed, to counter the perceived 'unpopularity' of the genre, it had been draped in a ludicrous dust-cover showing a 'ghostly knight in armour leading a charge of British cavalry' in the recent war.

So here is the high chalk as a touchstone, dividing the true experience – 'an abiding presence with us' as Tomlinson calls it - of a generation that had been through the trenches, from meretricious commercial cynicism and the 'romantic nonsense' of those who had sat at home and, with the help of the newspapers, 'made a luxury of the sigh' as the carnage went ahead.

A similar post-war redefinition was contrived by H.J. Massingham, who built a whole theory of the downs and their prehistory in the 1920s. Five years previously, he had been a member of the guild socialist circle that had gathered around A. J. Orage's publication, the *New Age,* and he now came to the downs as a survivor of the war which, so he recalled, had virtually exterminated his

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generation, and extinguished the hopes of that band of reformers. He too made a great thing of the height of the downs, calling them 'skywedded' and, using an exaggerated prose to raise them up and away from the modern, industrial life that prevailed in the valleys and plains below.

Massingham had once dreamed of a countryside in which the guild socialist idea would be renewed, rather in the manner of the post-urban future envisioned in Morris's *News From Nowhere.* But the war turned him into a man who, far from building the future, could only go around seeking out the relics of the good life as it had once been lived on that heightened English ground. As a downland traveller, Massingham studied the henges and barrows, and the ancient, or perhaps not so ancient, terracing, and concocted a wishful theory of prehistoric Downland Man.

Consciously or not, he took the utopian aspirations of Edwardian guild socialism and projected them backwards into a more or less perfect megalithic culture, a golden age that had once been lived on the chalk heights. It was a society of peace and co-operation, innocent of concentrated wealth, and it had been ruined by a great cataclysm, which bears a striking, if unconscious, resemblance to the First World War.

This habit of imagining the downs as mountains of contrary distinction continues, in the post-war period - although things have changed considerably by the early seventies, when the science fiction writer Keith Roberts wrote *The Chalk Giants.* By this time, the high chalk uplands are peopled by the weird and twitching survivors of a nuclear apocalypse. Mentally blasted and mutated back into prehistory, they gaze down over valleys in which towns and villages have been utterly wasted, and where certain death awaits the curious visitor.

3. England belittled: the Pleasures and Perils of Conservation.

Speaking personally, I enjoy these poetic invocations of the countryside. They may be factually incorrect, as Massingham's theory of 'Downland Man' certainly was, but they demonstrate that a historical landscape can be a repository of the best hopes as well as some of the more eccentric fantasies of successive generations.

Yet it is also one of the facts of modern life, that places and atmospheres are inevitably changed by the very process that identifies them for conservation as part of the national landscape, and that their relationship to the present, so

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remarkably diverse in the case of those chalk downs, is formalised too. The consequence is a kind of redrawing of the national map, and one that is worth considering in some detail.

In Julian Barnes's novel *England, England*, published in 1998, a monstrous leisure tycoon named Sir Jack Pitman sets out to buy up everything that embodies the historical image of England and shift it to the Isle of Wight, thereby creating a super-concentrated English theme park. Thanks to 'The Island Experience', American tourists can once again encounter England as 'This England' - 'this precious stone set in the silver sea'. They will be able to enjoy white cliffs, Robin Hood and his merry men, cavalry twills, sheepdog trials and a relocated Royal Family. There will be real ale, a white horse cut into a chalky hillside, a topiary frieze showing Great Scenes from English History, and, by the same kind of slippage that made Dvorak's New World Symphony serve as the soundtrack for the famous Hovis advert filmed at Gold Hill, Shaftesbury, a few leading phrases from Beethoven's Pastoral symphony, hummed by Sir Jack himself at appropriate moments.

This idea of England distilled appears in Barnes's book as a witty literary conceit, but it actually has an interesting prehistory. In his novel *Howards End,* published in 1910, E.M. Forster describes the Isle of Wight as 'beautiful beyond all laws of beauty', and a microcosm of the diverse English landscape too. Viewed by Forster's Schlegel sisters from high up on the chalk of the Purbeck Hills in Dorset, 'it is as if a fragment of England floated forward to greet the foreigner – chalk of our chalk, turf of our turf, epitome of what will follow'.

Just after the Second World War, the writer and architect of Portmeiron, Clough Williams-Ellis, suffered a vision very similar to Barnes's in the course of editing a book about the National Trust. He imagined all the lands and properties then owned by the National Trust 'uprooted and set adrift and then, by some further sorcery, reassembled into one fabulous island'. The consequence would indeed have been a kind of theme park with 'the pith and pick of England close-packed into a compass smaller than that of the Isle of Wight, yet sampling all that we most prize'.

Reflecting on this 'intoxicating medley of scenic and architectural high-lights with never a shadow, even of mediocrity, never a dull moment anywhere', Williams Ellis concluded that it would be like a 'cake made only of plums and brandy', which is to say 'quite deadly as a diet'. Worse, it would be quite lifeless, with 'everything arbitrarily torn out of its historic and geographic context by the

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roots, compressed into an ill-assorted bouquet, set apart and neatly labelled . . . the flowers of Britain Preserved"' Williams-Ellis was relieved to conclude that this nightmare could never be realised: 'Thank God that even a monster syndicate of maniacal millionaires could not make it a reality or seduce the National Trust from its charted duty – the preserving of beauty as and where it is'.

The quandary that Williams-Ellis is pondering here is not just that conservation seeks, paradoxically, to arrest history in its own name, but that the very act of valuation that counts some things into the national heritage, is often also concerned with counting other things out. Clough Williams-Ellis knew the dangers of this, and so too, I think, does Julian Barnes. His 'Island Experience' cannot be built without the help of a purge that rids the Isle of Wight of such aberrations as the NHS, welfare programmes, and the elderly and socially dependent who, it turns out, have been removed to the mainland before opening day.

Perhaps the most significant early twentieth century attempt to distinguish England and its grounded local countryside from the wider identity of Britain itself can be found in the writing of G.K. Chesterton. In his book *Heretics* (1905), Chesterton took issue with Rudyard Kipling, and in particular with the epigram in which Kipling asked 'what can they know of England who only England know?' It was, contended Chesterton, 'a far deeper and sharper question to ask, "What can they know of England who know only the world?" He asserts that 'the moment we care for anything deeply, the world – that is, all the other miscellaneous interests – becomes our enemy . . . The moment you love anything, the world becomes your foe'.

With his British imperial cosmopolitanism, Kipling may certainly 'know the world; he is a man of the world, with all the narrowness that belongs to those imprisoned in that planet. He knows England as an intelligent English gentleman knows Venice.' Claiming Kipling's devotion to England was the outcome not of love but of critical thought, Chesterton values it far less than the 'real' (by which he means instinctive and unreflected) patriotism of the Irish or the Boers, whom Kipling had recently 'hounded down in South Africa'. Kipling did not belong to England or, indeed 'to any place; and the proof of it is this, that he thinks of England as a place. The moment we are rooted in a place, the place vanishes. We live like a tree with the whole strength of the universe'.

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Chesterton considered this parochialism the opposite of small-mindedness, insisting that 'the "large ideas" prosper when it is not a question of thinking in continents, but of understanding a few two-legged men'. He goes on to elaborate an argument that contrasts interestingly with the assumptions of the present-day tourism industry. As he says:

> The globe-trotter lives in a smaller world than the peasant. He is always breathing an air of locality. London is a place, to be compared to Chicago; Chicago is a place, to be compared to Timbuctoo. But Timbuctoo is not a place, since there, at least, live men who regard it as the universe, and breathe, not an air of locality, but the winds of the world. The man in the saloon steamer has seen all the races of men, and he is thinking of the things that divide men – diet, dress, decorum, rings in the nose as in Africa, or in the ears as in Europe, blue paint among the ancients, or red paint among the modern Britons. The man in the cabbage field has seen nothing at all; but he is thinking of the things that unite men – hunger and babies, and the beauty of women, and the promise or menace of the sky.'

For Chesterton, Kipling had been fatally damaged by the globe-trotting cosmopolitanism of the British empire, and his England was really a theory of living presences as opposed to mere objects: 'the more dead and dry and dusty a thing is the more it travels about'. And so it was with people: 'The man standing in his own kitchen-garden, with fairyland opening at the gate, is the man with large ideas. His mind creates distance; the motor-car stupidly destroys it'.

Whatever its attractions, we should recognise that this is already a defensive definition, formulated in the apprehension that the world was charging headlong in the opposite direction. It defines the rural English locality as a nook-like recess, small and parochial but also deep and connected, even in its tiniest details, with the universal. From this Edwardian starting point, however, we don't have to travel far into the twentieth century until we arrive at a native English countryside defined not so much as a cosmic locale, but as a last ditch to be defended against all sorts of encroaching forces of modernisation.

Chesterton himself had moved in this direction by 1913, when he published his novel *The Flying Inn.* This book opens on a tiny islet in the Ionian sea, where the 'King of Ithaca' (actually Chesterton's romantic Irish hero, Patrick Dalroy), who has fought tirelessly and successfully against a Turkish enemy, watches as Lord

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Ivywood, representing the European powers, agrees a settlement entirely along Turkish lines.

Having condemned the agreed peace as 'worse than death' and torn up the three tall olive trees that Ivywood has just declared holy memorials to this wretched treaty, Dalroy remarks dreamily 'I am now going to "The Old Ship".' The Turk asks if this means he is returning to 'the warships of the English King'. But Dalroy replies that he means '"The Old Ship" that is behind apple-trees by Pebbleswick; where the Ule flows among the trees. I fear I shall never see you there'.

The novel then opens into a story in which beleaguered English virtues are lined up against a host of modern absurdities. Dalroy gets back to Pebbleswick, only to find that Humphrey Pump, the publican of the Old Ship, is in trouble. The British government, represented by Lord Ivywood, has fallen under the spell of a tub-thumping Islamic prophet, and imposed a ban on alcohol. The Old Ship must close and, Dalroy and Pump uproot their pub sign, take a barrel and a large cheese and set off around the country, coming out of hiding to erect their pub sign at a number of fugitive locations, and then melting away as the chase heats up.

By the time he wrote this novel, Chesterton was defending the traditional English countryside and its ways against evils that can be traced back, not so much to Kipling's imperial idea of Britain, but to the Fabian vision of reforming state socialism that Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc had been opposing most vociferously over previous years. In these arguments, Chesterton had declared beer symbolic of the decent English qualities that the Fabian reformers, including the teetotaller George Bernard Shaw, yearned to suppress. As he had written in 1908, 'Drink and property have been swelled in our world into abominations . . . The proposed abolition of personal property has its only practical parallel in teetotalism'.

While it contains the famous poem praising 'the rolling English road' (made, as you may recall, by the 'rolling English drunkard'), *The Flying Inn* also imagines the 'nightmare' that follows 'when the English oligarchy is run by an Englishman who hasn't got an English mind'. That, of course, is Lord Ivywood, against whom Chesterton celebrates the unschooled publican Humphrey Pump as a kind of English aborigine who has learned by experience rather than through books or 'academically like an American Professor'. Common sense and an 'incorruptible kindliness' lie at the root of Pump's 'Englishry'. He also has an

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instinctive grasp of his native land, knowing the 'English boundaries almost by intuition'. 'The deepest thoughts are all commonplaces', as Dalroy says, lining up plain truth against the eccentric cleverness of the ruling elite: 'if they have to choose between a meadow and a motor, they forbid the meadow'.

This polarizing tendency to define England and its most symbolic landscapes against perceived threats in contemporary life, would achieve many different manifestations in the decades to come. The motor car would remain a persistent enemy, but the sense of opposition could have more general geographical consequences too, valuing one kind of landscape at the expense of others. Thus, for much of the twentieth century, a clear disparity existed between the more or less sacred southern English landscape, and that of the industrial north.

Commentators would write books with names like 'I Saw Two Englands', and for some of them, it was as if you could get to Hell merely by driving a couple of hundred miles up the Great North Road.

A similar differentiation still affects the Thames. To my mind, the estuary, which is the real source of the river's immense historical interest, is one of the most interesting landscapes in England – a bleakly fascinating area of mudflats, prisons, oil refineries, many of them built on the site of former explosive factories, derelict docks, caravan sites and new, often very mediocre, housing developments. And yet many books professing to tell the story of the Thames, or to journey along its length, simply leave it out altogether, starting at the source but stopping, with a nervous glance downstream and a sigh of relief, further up, perhaps at Greenwich.

Early on in the history of the conservationist imagination, this tendency to defend a particular idea of the historical English landscape against endangering present forces opens into a battle between different versions of preservation itself. Those who think that the so-called 'heritage industry' only came under critical attack in the nineteen eighties are quite wrong. William Morris founded the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings in opposition to bad refurbishment of medieval buildings - anti-scrape, as the impulse was called. J. R. Robertson Scott, who founded *The Countryman* magazine some decades later, declared war against the 'pleasant seeming' of the picturesque, promising to break through its glassy surface in order to expose what he called the 'haggard reality' of country life beneath. H. J. Massingham was a formidable hater of the urban picturesque, which he saw as a banal, exploitative and sentimental image against which the true qualities of English country life had to be protected.

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The same uneasiness about mass tourism was felt by many who worked on John Betjeman's series of Shell Guides to the English counties in the thirties. They knew and sometimes worried out loud about the fact that the cars in which they travelled to unspoiled places were themselves engines of destruction, and that increased public interest and accessibility would affect the atmosphere of the places they loved.

Whether we are talking about buildings or the countryside, polarization is in the very mode of 'heritage' thinking. It may be an overstatement to suggest that there is only heritage where there is also a perception of danger. But the measures that have helped to define the historical landscape since the late nineteenth century have certainly also created a whole catalogue of vividly imagined threats.

Country houses and their landscaped grounds have been defended against a state perceived as a malevolent encroacher, whether in the form of taxation, its insistence on educating the servant class, or of forcing ancestral homes into service as, schools, mental hospitals, and military billets.

English deciduous and broadleaved woodlands have been cherished in fierce opposition to the monocultural coniferous plantations imposed on the landscape by the Forestry Commission, which was set up in 1919, with memories of the submarine blockade in mind. The idea was to make Britain self-sufficient in timber requirements, but it wasn't long before those conifers were being derided as destructive aliens. Trees and forestry techniques that originated in Scandinavia or the Pacific Northwest, were soon being derided as 'German', as if every plantation was a state-martialled column of marching Huns. Indeed, I suspect C.S. Lewis even squeezed one of those hated alien plantations into the most famous wardrobe in children's fiction. Narnia may have been leafy and evergreen, but you could only get to it by pushing you way through a scratchy, and icy evergreen plantation.

Other representatives of the state have been seen as the defilers of the national landscape, including the great British institution that presently goes, pathetically, by the name of Consignia: i.e. the Post Office. This too came under attack when it tried to introduce public call boxes into the countryside in 1935. It was known as the Jubilee scheme, designed to put telephone facilities into remote villages as 'a special concession' to mark the Jubilee of George V.

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Designed by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott, the red 'Jubilee' kiosks have since been hailed as significant works of architecture. But there was considerable objection at the time, and more excessive metaphors of encroachment and destruction. Indeed, CPRE members, from Oxford to the Lake District, denounced the new kiosks as invasive eyesores, and complained about this vicious 'intervention of red' into the national landscape – a phrase that might seem to suggest that the Communists were coming. Negotiations eventually allowed for 'battleship grey' to be used on kiosks in areas of outstanding natural beauty, much to the regret of the designer John Gloag, who observed that, at this rate, we will end up 'thatching everything' modern that enters the countryside, 'even motor coaches'.

Yet the list of encroaching and unwelcome presences that have been used to defend and define the English countryside over the years is not confined to the various apparatuses of the modern state. Roads, ribbon development, the expanding suburbs, which were met with sometimes the most extraordinary expressions of snobbery and class contempt by the defenders of the old English landscape in the 1930s. Organic England has been lined up against the towns and cities, and indeed every evidence of the industrial system. Ramblers and mass trespassers in the nineteen thirties may have pressed in the opposite direction, defining their countryside against private property, enclosure and, like Massingham the depradations of industrial capitalism. But there were also influential versions of old England, that were invoked against socialism and the advancing Labour Movement.

In the twenties, Stanley Baldwin famously invoked the sights and sounds of England - actually the rural Gloucestershire in which he had grown up - against the stirrings that eventually became the General Strike. And there were more extreme versions of the same anxiety, including *The House that Berry Built,* a novel by Dornford Yates that was published in 1937. This concerns a country house named 'Whiteladies' in Hampshire which for the usual reasons – taxation, death duties, trouble on the stock market – has been signed over to the nation. With their ancient ancestral seat now in use as 'an official retreat for the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, the Pleydell family withdraw. They might, perhaps, have settled for the Isle of Wight, but they actually went further - to the French Pyrenees, where they discover 'a little English meadow, locked in the arm of France'.

Having acquired this site, and using their own superior cultural instincts rather than the superficial expertise of any professional architects or landscape designers, they set about rebuilding the house and pastoral landscape that could

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no longer be sustained back home. The whole story is predicated on contempt for the fallen state of England, a country that is judged no longer habitable by true English folk, because its traditions have been 'swamped' – not least by a general election that had brought into the Cabinet people who 'would not have qualified for the reference traditionally accorded to the incompetent charwoman'.

I could give many other examples, but it is enough to say that through the whole modern period, our idea of the traditional English countryside has tended to be on the defensive – selected, and concentrated in opposition to vividly imagined threats. Our perception of the very landscapes and buildings that we like to think of as timeless in their Englishness, has been shaped by polarizing anxiety and social polemic that has belonged very much to the present. I have drawn most of my examples from the interwar period. But the post-war story could serve just as well.

Think, for example, of the whole post-war cult of the English country house and its often classically landscaped grounds. The saving of these representatives of old England was one of the defining symbolic dramas of the post-war decade – a drama in which they came to be lined up against the other England, represented by infernal tower blocks and the reforming welfare state. Or think of Andrew Roberts' vaguely Chestertonian and still quite recent novel, *The Aachen Memorandum*, in which an 'English Resistance Movement' is pitched against a usurping German-dominated European superstate, which obliges letter-writers to use the post-code, discourages respectable English women from shaving their armpits and even sanctions eco-snoops who condemn the traditional English Christmas as abusive to pine trees.

3. Is the English countryside racist?

Silly enough, as it may be thought, but there are, without doubt serious matters at stake here. Followers of the history of British art will know about the gypsy pastorale of the Victorian age: the fond images of 'Romanies' at the races, or encamped on Clapham Common, or even (in Augustus John's work) enacted by the artist's wife or daughter dressed up in exotic clothes. In recent years a number of photographers have been producing very different images of 'aliens' in the English landscape. John Kippin's photograph 'Muslims at Lake Windermere', shows a large Muslim group sitting beneath a tree with Windermere just behind them.

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These people seem entirely at ease, and yet the suggestion that the English landscape might be a racist construct is not far away. Ingrid Pollard, a black British photographer who describes herself as a representative of a 'world majority culture', has made the point rather more explicitly. One of the pictures in her 'Pastoral Interludes' series shows Pollard standing by a roadside gazing out over a dry stone wall at a landscape in the Lake District. The accompanying text declares 'it is if the Black experience is only lived within an urban environment… A visit to the countryside is always accompanied by a feeling of unease, dread . . .'

I found myself both arrested and a little irritated by these images when I first saw them. They seem highly schematic in their interpretation, and I suppose that, like many others, I also think of the Lake District as the kind of place you go to get away from this sort of social stereotyping. Yet these pictures raise a question that really does demand our attention. Can trees in themselves be racist, or rocks and lakes exclusively white? I think not. Yet their image is certainly capable of exactly that kind of expression.

The difficulties of asserting a black presence in the customary English landscape can take unexpected forms, as was discovered by a metal detectorist and amateur historian called Pat Barrow, who recently published an interesting book named *The Slaves of Rapparee* (1998). His story opens with a quantity of yellow flint gravel noticed between the high and low tide mark in a North Devon bay. Intrigued by this, Barrow started researching and soon became convinced that these stones had been used as ballast in *The London*, a ship that was wrecked in a storm in 1796 on the North Devon coast as it made its way towards Ilfracombe Harbour from the West Indies.

The London was laden with gold and black prisoners, former slaves who had been captured while fighting for the French in the ongoing revolutionary war of that time. Along with masses of gold coins, the bodies of many of these slaves – Barrow calls them 'freedom fighters' - were washed up in the cove, and then roughly and unceremoniously buried en masse at the head of the cove by locals who were considerably more interested in gathering up the coins on the beach.

As this story emerged from Barrow's researches, along with the bones of those poor drowned men, some of them apparently still attached to rusted manacles, a new kind of visitor started turning up to see the site in Rapparee Cove. The High Commissioner of St. Lucia, was among them, as was the black Labour M.P. Bernie Grant, who expressed concern at reports that people were looting the

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burial site. He wanted it declared a National Heritage Site, and a memorial mounted.

A large ceremony was eventually enacted in the English drizzle on 1 August 1997 It was attended by Spartacus R, the African activist and one-time founder of the band Osibisa, a tribal chief from Nigeria, and also by members of the African Spiritual Society, who came here to chant over the bones of the dead. As Pat Barrow writes, 'It was incredible; a wonderful sight, sheltered as they were beneath a sea of umbrellas. . . Dazzling gowns of orange, bright blue, turquoise, multicoloured shapes and sizes and various African style hats. . . It was indeed a sight never before seen in North Devon – A truly historic occasion'.

And yet Barrow also reports that, as he set out to clarify the story, he found himself up against a certain resistance – not least on the part of people who wanted the dead West Indians to be designated 'prisoners of war', and who resisted such evidence as turned up revealing that those who had survived the wreck had subsequently been classified as slaves, imprisoned and disposed of accordingly. Barrow was surprised by the reluctance of 'the powers that be' and 'some people in Bristol', as he puts it, to credit his findings, or to countenance the idea that people might have suffered such a fate as 'slaves' in their part of England. As he observes, 'it baffled and disturbed me'.

It is probable that those 'powers-that-be' wanted to avoid the word 'slave' out of embarrassment and shame rather than hatred, but I think we can still understand Pat Barrow's experience a little better if we place it in a wider context.

Over and again, the attempt to sustain and defend a traditional sense of English identity as expressed by the historical landscape has been attended by an imagery of the despoiling, racial outsider – a figure who, notwithstanding the meddlesome Islamic 'prophet' in Chesterton's *The Flying Inn,* was rather more likely to be a Jew than a Muslim in the early decades of the twentieth century. Hilaire Belloc's defence of old, often Catholic, England was touched by this poison; and the guild socialist imagination, with its hatred of usury, leaked into the same area.

Some, although not all, of the people who pioneered organic farming in the twenties and thirties years were fiercely anti-Semitic, and applied a eugenic theory of breeding to the membership of their organic communities as well as to their cattle. Some, indeed, were self-declared fascists. The same disease infected

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the patriotism of the eminent mid-century Conservative historian, Arthur Bryant. He was a great one for remembering the English countryside as it had been before the Enclosures, the England of benign aristocrats, ruddy-faced farmers and commoners, and often placed this sort of image as the moral centre of his histories. This sort of pastoral patriotism, brought Bryant considerable fame and fortune as a national historian. Yet in 1940, the very year that he published his best-selling national text, *English Saga,* Bryant also published a horrible volume about the Nazi takeover in Germany. Entitled *Unfinished Victory,* it recited as fact many Nazi allegations about the doings of the Jews in the corruption of Weimar Germany, and approved the main thrust of Hitler's dictatorship.

That same pattern, albeit in a version closer to the guild socialist lineage, was carried into the literature of the Southern English downs by Mary Butts in her novel *Death of Felicity Taverner,* published in 1932. The endangered ancestral landscape in this book is modelled on the area around Kimmeridge, between the limestone and chalk downland of the Purbeck Hills in Dorset, and, as it happens, the site of Mentmore House, where Sir Arthur Bryant would be found living shortly after the Second World War.

Butts, who died young in 1937, turns it into a perfect epitome of England at its best, and then names it, after William Morris, the Hollow Land. It's downland turf is enamelled and blessed with wild flowers. It's stream is a 'running trap for light', and a fan-shaped 'sacred wood' runs down to the sea. There is a 'chess-board of fields' and 'a village of extraordinary beauty'. It has its indigenous people and its deep organic traditions have long been safe in the tenureship of the mansioned Taverner family. The Hollow Land offered 'a nucleus' and model according to which the whole of war-torn Europe might be reconstructed.

But history, in the form of the Jew named Kralin, is pointing the other way. Having married and perhaps partly blackmailed his way into the family, he plans a hotel, bungalows along the cliff, golf-links, car parks and a garage. The rolling English roads will be straightened and one of the old barns will be converted into a cinema. To make the defilement complete, he proposes to advertise the attractions of the place, and to make a killing as the urban masses poured in. In this book, the preservation of rural England, comes to depend on an act of anti-Semitic murder. Kralin must go, and go he does, at the end of a story in which his violent demise is considered justified.

Anti-Semitism may have receded in the post-war period, but a significant number of the more recent champions of Englishness have been systematically

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opposed to multiculturalism, and to post-war immigration from the Caribbean, Africa or Asia. Anyone who doubts this should take a second look at *This England,* a 'heritage' publication launched by a man called Roy Faiers in 1968. A longstanding staple with W.H. Smiths and other mainstream newsagents, this mass-selling publication may initially look like a nostalgic, gently weak-minded heritage magazine, and it certainly has built a large circulation with the help of images of old England that also appeal to hankering expatriates.

Yet *This England's* old English countryside seems to me resolutely and indeed purposefully white, and its emphasis on what Faiers calls 'looking back with pride', has long been accompanied by editorials in which old English residues are valued against the thought of unwelcome immigrants: 'England is our home', as Faiers once wrote, 'Heathrow is our front door'.

So, whether we like to acknowledge it or not, what we might politely call the racial question has kept obtruding into the English pastorale. Against this background, it is not surprising that people from Afro-Caribbean or Asian backgrounds sometimes remark that while they are content to describe themselves as British, they would not want to get mixed up in trying to define themselves as English.

Directly racist expressions are obviously to be resisted. But I think some more general conclusions need to be drawn against this background. It is surely not helpful to see the historical landscape as thoroughly polarized against the present, just as it is not helpful to use an idea of that same historical landscape to confine our sense of authenticity and nationhood exclusively to the past. I was apprehensive when I saw the cover of Roger Scruton's new book, *England – an Elegy.* It features an evocative old photograph of an Edwardian-looking family on the beach at Margate, with another set of telling white cliffs in the background.

Reading it, however, I discovered that Scruton, who has offered us his thoughts from Dover beach before, has taken care to ensure that his tribute to the lost England of his childhood is not based on racial argument. We do indeed need to be cautious about the elegiac habit of thought, and watchful of the blessings and curses it may bestow as it breaks the late, lamented past off from the denigrated present.

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4. So what do we make of all this?

Listening to this lecture, you may feel inclined to object that many expressions of landscape are innocent, and that many of the threats facing it have been all too real – the immensely destructive development of industrial farming, road developments, coniferisation, the heavy hand of the Fabian state, the Environment Agency teaming up with big corporations against independent scientists to burn tyres in cement factories, including, as now seems likely, the Blue Circle one that now interrupts Eric Ravilious's famous view, painted from a third class railway carriage, of the White Horse on Bratton Down in Wiltshire.

I fully accept that there have been true occasions for resistance, that the preservation of historical buildings and landscapes, and indeed the defence of the very air we breathe, are both desirable and necessary endeavours. I also accept that it is quite possible to value local or regional cultures, to listen to a lark ascending or, indeed, to delight at the sight of blue-bells in a wood during spring, without feeling a sudden rush of hostility towards immigrants.

If I have dwelt on the negative, that is because I think that, in a climate in which the government blames Foot and Mouth, even only fitfully, on Chinese restaurants, and in which asylum seekers are targeted by ranting patriotic tabloid columnists, we need to keep it in mind. Not dwelling on the negative then, but perhaps erring on the side of caution.

That said, I think we should feel relaxed about freeing our own minds from some of those inherited definitions of the countryside, and of reconnected the historical landscape to the present in different, and I hope also less panic-stricken, ways. There are, of course, and always have been, other ways of seeing the countryside than those I have highlighted.

In his recent book *Landscape and Englishness,* the geographer David Matless has written about the planners who, through the very years when others were defending the idea of organic old England, were pursuing a very different, indeed an assertively modern, idea of the English landscape. The new towns came out of this sort of energy, an attempt to remake the link between people and the land, and to preserve the historical landscape within the modern world rather than just lining it up against it. And the National Parks were also promoted by people who had very different ideas for the integration of the public interest and private property in areas of outstanding natural beauty.

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There have always been alternative ideas of place and landscape, even in that land of the 'Pleasant Seeming', known as the South. If you picked up, as I did a few years ago, a book called 'Southern English', published in 1942, you might expect just another eulogy to the scenic beauties of the south. But, the book I am thinking of – which is almost entirely forgotten - isn't like that at all.

Its author, Eric Benfield was a Purbeck stone worker and self-taught sculptor and writer, who viewed with considerable dismay that imagery of lush fields full of manor houses, organic communities, and thatched or stone cottages of the type already favoured by the coming tourist or commuter trade. Benfield surveys all this, but he views it with palpable horror. The 'Southern English' he is talking about is represented by the stone-working culture, that has long occupied the Purbeck coast around Swanage – hard, industrious, concerned with rocks rather than views, rooted in medieval tradition and yet, thanks to centuries and comings and goings on that at times savage coast, quite without any of the thoroughbred ancestral lineages that are carefully preserved in the nearby country houses, churches and villages.

A find like that leads me to think that we should recognise the interest and value of the less spectacular, more everyday places, the populated, unbaronial places, the countryside which has people in it and perhaps some modern industry too. Consider what has happened to the landscapes that have been counted out of earlier definitions of Deep England and it's imagined island heritage.

Visit the Thames estuary or the site of the Staffordshire potteries or the Durham mining industries, and you will find that much of the evidence of history has been deliberately removed, landscaped away in measures that really amount to a kind of scenic obliteration. Slag heaps and derelict wharfs can be unsightly and even dangerous, and places will change as industries rise and fall. Yet I still wonder at the extent to which the evidences of industry have been removed and replaced by the smoothed-over and remarkably placeless contours of landfill England: a landscape that holds few memories and which, even though it may contain new housing estates and developments, seems designed less for living in than for glimpsing from a rapidly passing car.

And what about the much idealized virtues of the localised rural life? In his recent book, *A Song of the Earth,* the ecologically-minded literary critic Jonathan Bate cites the example of the nineteenth century agricultural worker and poet John Clare, whose childhood world consisted of a tiny area around the village of

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Helpston in Northamptonshire. As Bate puts it, ‘the more attuned I am as I miniaturize the world, the better I dwell upon the earth’.

It’s a moving idea, and no doubt a good statement of what Bate calls ‘ecopoetics’. Yet this image of life as a kind of grounded spiritual small-holding can’t provide the only model of how we might live authentically today. Just as we live increasingly between town and country, we also move in and out of cultures, and we should feel at ease in understanding ourselves, through those moments of passage, intersection and discontinuity. George Steiner once said that Jews have legs rather than roots, and it is no insult to nature, surely, to say, perhaps with some relief, that this is the condition of most of us nowadays.

Finally, and with regard to our recently troubled idea of nature, we might take a cue from the wildlife and birds. Where I live, many of these creatures have moved into the towns and villages, which are now considerable centres of biodiversity, by comparison with the industrially farmed countryside around them. The history I’ve described has encouraged us to think of nature primarily, as a largely unpopulated landscape - quite the opposite of a teeming town or city. But maybe nature has become an urban refugee too. I once asked the American evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould what kind of geography most seemed to represent nature to him. Far from mentioning a landscape or wilderness, this exponent of variation and natural selection, recalled a street in the middle of New York City, where he had once seen a whole urban block filled with shops selling an astonishing diversity of buttons.

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