# ‘You’re just as English as you feel’

## Four post-concert talks for BBC Radio Three, broadcast in June 1996

## by Patrick Wright

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## 1. Posthumous England (tx: 17/6/96)

The butcher across the road from me is truly a decent and patriotic fellow. A church going man of Conservative outlook, he does his bit for the village; and, as one of the best butchers in East Anglia, he's careful of the quality of everything he sells. His shop is well presented, with the proprietor's name and occupation emblazoned over the window in heraldic gold letters. It has a curious strip of union jack bunting in the gutter too.

The fiftieth anniversary of VE Day was a big event round here - one could hardly get into the butcher's shop for commemorative mugs and union jacks. But that was a year ago and, for some reason, our butcher still hasn't got round to removing the last of that festive paraphernalia. To begin with, I assumed he was waiting until the fiftieth anniversary of VJ Day, but that came and went, and now, three seasons later, the bunting is still there, faded but still fluttering - or rather rattling in the way that crinkled, sun-dried plastic does.

Why hasn't he taken it down? Ask him and this normally fastidious man will shrug as if he has merely forgotten, but I suspect there may be a deeper motivation. My guess is that for him and others of his generation, the Second World War seems increasingly like the last truly virtuous moment in our national history. In this village the elders on the Parish council even put a new memorial on the village green. So, right next to the War Memorial, we now have new rose bed with a shining stone plaque in it, commemorating last year's commemorations . . .

Since then, my butcher's patriotism has found a different object. His shop is now full of mental Spitfires, scrambled at a moment's notice in defence of British beef. I met him in the Chinese takeaway shortly after the possible connection between BSE and Creutzfeldt Jacob Disease was revealed, and was most surprised by his version of the story. We had, he said, been feeding ground-up animal protein to cattle for decades - since long before the war. The problem only came up in the early eighties.

So, I wondered, was it Margaret Thatcher's fault? Certainly not. In his mind the contaminating prion bore an uncanny resemblance to another 'enemy within', namely Arthur Scargill. It was, he said, all due to the miner's strike. This had created an energy shortage and obliged some animal feed manufacturers to loosen up on safety precautions. I would have mentioned the fact that Margaret Thatcher had prepared for her battle with the miners. Didn't she stockpile mountains of coal precisely in order to avoid any such energy shortage? But

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nothing was going to change my butcher's interpretation of these alarming events and I would have been wasting my time.

Compared with many other places in the world, England is a stable, secure and, for many people, positively genial place to live. Yet it is not only loyal butchers who are desperately reaching out for explanations as the ground disappears beneath their feet. Anyone who believed the press on St. George's Day in April might fear that the game was up. *The Times* took the pulse of England, and pronounced it stone dead. The tabloids, meanwhile, clamoured for resuscitation. Lamenting England's reluctance to celebrate its patron saint, the *Daily Express* recruited Saint George, sharpened his lance and shoved him into the front line of its 'crusade' against the Eurodragon. Meanwhile Richard Littlejohn, the uninhibited columnist who has recently moved from the *Sun* to the *Daily Mail,* tried to brace his readers with an invigorating history lesson. 'Any objective reading of history would conclude that the English ran the most benevolent and benign empire in history', and yet now here the English people were reduced to being the one ethnic minority in Britain without rights. Charging against the Commission for Racial Equality, he thundered that 'To be English in England today is almost a criminal offence'. Littlejohn wasn't afraid to declare English reserve and self-effacement far superior to 'the maudlin swaggering of the Scots, the drunken sentimentalism of the Irish, or the blazered bravado of the Welsh'. According to this crusader, the English are now 'a race in denial' - no less than 'the nationality that dare not speak its name'

Ranting has always sold newspapers. But it remains true that - often thanks to these very same tabloid crusaders - the traditional icons of British national identity are in a remarkably battered state. The monarchy has imploded into an endless soap opera of cellulite and infidelity. The law is full of miscarriages of justice. The church of England is broke and full of bickering - quite unable to focus the nation. The military has been cut to the point where it apparently even has trouble mustering a proper massed band. The Last Night of the Proms has been invaded by Harrison Birtwistle, and Big Ben itself is said to be tottering, undermined by the new Jubilee Line. English Nature itself seems to be giving out our feet - BSE, baby milk, even male virility are said to be on the slide. Only the tradition of gunboat diplomacy lives on, albeit reduced to symbolic gestures like reclaiming sunken U-Boats from the sea-bed or inviting the contemporary German enemy - aka Chancellor Kohl - to 10 Downing Street and making him eat a large plateful of British beef. That, as the *Sun* put it, was a case of 'Major shows bulls at last'.

Much of this is farcical stuff, but there are serious problems here too. Consider the sense of common decency often claimed as part of the British tradition. It is surely not a fantasy to think that a shared moral sense did indeed once form the

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social bedrock on which systems of education and social justice were built. In recent years, however, our public conscience has become a helpless captive of death and disaster. It surfaced in May 1994 when the Labour leader John Smith died unexpectedly, and since then its occasions have been moments of vile outrage - the murder of Jamie Bulger, the horrible deeds of Fred and Rosemary West, the slaughter at Dunblane. These events strike at us all but we should still ask what sort of collective morality is it that consists only of hand-wringing, putting flowers at the gate, and helplessly throwing money at the victims. I suspect that it is an impotent, even voyeuristic kind of morality that only finds expression after monstrous events such as these.

And yet what happens when we do try to repair our national identity, or make something more conscious or purposeful of it? When our politicians try it, the results tend to look very thin indeed. Not so long ago, John Major or his speech writer, tried to reprise George Orwell's wartime image of England your England. Under his government, as Major tried to convince the Eurosceptics in his party, England and its 'invincible green suburbs', whatever those may be, would remain 'unamendable in all essentials'. Yet even as he said it, it was apparent that this supposedly timeless vision was actually cobbled together out of exhausted debris - the bric-a-brac of a surpassed mid-century way of life. Those tired old maids bicycling across England's village greens in search of communion, looked frankly implausible by the time Major got around to them. And they soon crashed anyway, drowning not so much in a puddle as in a sea of sleaze.

Paddy Ashdown has tried to make the case for essential British decencies - describing us as undogmatic, fair-minded, tolerant and keen on justice - but these are in creasingly detached abstractions and they sound like wishful thinking to me. As for Tony Blair's determination to reclaim patriotism from the Tory Party, this was well received at the Labour Party conference last year. But this is cautious too, distinguished by a nervous desire not to start conjuring with ancestral relics. The Labour leader's speech is said to have been inspired by the official VJ Day ceremonies last year. After the event, Blair and a number of Tory ministers walked back down the mall to their various cars, and people all along the way were shouting at him to kick out the Tories. So Blair came up with 'a patriotism for the 21st century', which turned out to be positively leery of history. It was, as Blair said with an eye on Mr Keating's Australia, about being a 'young country' rather than an old one, and above all not an expression of toxic Europhobia. 'You can stress the community of the nation state, without diminishing your internationalism', as Blair's press secretary, Alastair Campbell, informed me soon after the speech was delivered. 'You can have that from Tony,' he added after a little pause in which he weighed up the merits of the phrase, demonstrating how political quotations are made.

When it comes to working up a conscious national identity in the British Isles, it is a definite advantage to be able to set yourself against the dominant centre. The Welsh, the Scottish, and many in Northern Ireland too, know for certain that they are not English. The same process applies to regional identities in England - with the north, and south west differentiating themselves vigorously from the south. But what happens if the centre itself tries to rise up?

Towards the end of last year I received a leaflet in the mail, from a group calling itself the Movement for Middle England. Headed 'Middle England Awake', it displayed a quotation from G. K. Chesterton, 'For we are the People of England that have never spoken yet'. it announced a conference to be held in Oxford, and invited people to 'work for a society you'll be proud to live in'. The Movement for Middle England was in favour of Devolution and autonomous English Regions. Spurning party politics, it favoured Belonging - 'taking root in your region and helping to run it'. It wanted to 'encourage local moots of around 50 householders', and to establish them as 'the basic building block of future democracy'. It was in favour of ecological sustainability and described itself as 'a dynamic English not British campaign to disengage the English identity from the Norman English chauvinism that has so devastated other peoples and cultures - most especially our Celtic neighbours'. In her statement the organiser, Catherine Perry, regretted that we had lost our ability to sing songs, and admitted to being rendered wistful by the vibrant Afro-Caribbean, Irish and Asian cultures in Britain - 'I would like to know what my culture is too, so that I can contribute to the multi-cultural scene'.

Richard Littlejohn aside, I must admit to feeling a little disconcerted by the idea of middle England rising up to assert itself as another of our oppressed ethnic minorities. Was this the beginning of a genuine resistance movement, I wondered, a grass roots resurgence in which bamboozled and brow-beated Anglo-Saxons would finally throw off the yoke of the centralised and, as the leaflet put it, Norman British state. Was it a harmless fantasy addressed to the retired colonels and Morris dancers of the deep English shires? Or was it a primitive historical cult convened in the spirit of Goose Green? Picking up the phone, I discovered that the movement for Middle England was founded from Leicester in 1988, some years before John Major fell on the idea of Middle England and tried to use it to improve his flagging electoral fortunes.

It was formed by grass roots activists - cooperators, quakerish peace campaigners, bottom-up democrats. And I discovered that these rather Chestertonian campaigners were familiar with being misunderstood. Their existence has been noted with a certain unfounded suspicion in the green press and they have to argue their way through similar reservations when they take

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their stall out into towns and festivals. Their flag shows a cross of St George, adorned with a burgeoning English oak and also discreetly dismembered to signify regional devolution - and it leads some people to suspect that they must be a front for the British National Party. It appears, as Catherine Perry told me, that the very word 'English' has been captured by fascists.

The thought of a resurgent Englishness does indeed seem to fill many of us with embarrassment. The tabloid ranters may be right to suggest that, among the liberal or leftish intelligentsia, nothing is more English than a suspicion of Englishness itself. Who, after all, wants to intensify a culture that can be smug, insular, class-ridden, xenophobic and full of replayed imperialist assumption?

The world of cultural studies, which took its point of departure from close observation of British popular culture, provided by writers like George Orwell and Richard Hoggart, is now full of escape attempts. Hoggart himself may stick stubbornly to the tracks of William Cobbett, diagnosing the way we English live now at supermarkets and car boot sales in Farnham and other places. But many younger critics blench at the very thought of this and have adopted a somewhat frantic internationalism - clinging onto the American conference circuit, reading American novels, dreaming of cyberspace and scouring the world for exotic overseas thinkers - anything to escape the stolid and infernally comfortable facts of English life.

One well travelled way to escape the embarrassment of being English is to retreat into identity politics. Speak as a woman, or a gay, or from any other historically subordinated status you can lay claim too. And if that route isn't open to you, there's always the possibility of escaping into the Celtic hinterland with the help of roots. This was how the socialist thinker Raymond Williams survived. For years he taught at Cambridge University and eventually retired to that most agreeably English of country towns Saffron Walden, and yet all the time he wrote as the son of a signalman in Wales. Terry Eagleton, who is now our pre-eminent marxist literary theorist, grew up in Salford, but he too has tempered the peculiarities of his position as Wharton Professor of English Literature at Oxford University. He has reinvented himself as something of an Irish Republican. What the embarrassed English intellectual appears to crave nowadays is less a holiday cottage in the Celtic fringes than a lineage - a Scottish or Irish or Welsh ancestry may be most desirable, but failing that a remote Northern or Cornish aunt will certainly do.

You don't have to be a chronic malcontent to take this route. The BBC has long used Irish and American accents to escape the instant recognitions of the British class system, And some of the more established members of the liberal literary intelligentsia also stand back from the very centre they might seem to command.

Melvyn Bragg, novelist and media baron maintains a rugged northern distance with the help of Dark Age fables and a helicopter or two. Malcolm Bradbury sticks to Norwich and defines himself as a provincial writer.

But what about the male writers who really can't help but embody the values of the English south? Various strategies are available. In *Fever Pitch,* Nick Hornby describes how a white, southern suburban lad may cleave to the working class solidarity of Arsenal supporters in a desperate attempt to escape the embarrassment of being, well, white, middle class, suburban and at home in Maidenhead. In Martin Amis's novel *Success,* a character looks up at a passing aeroplane and begs 'Take me to America'. Since then, many southern English novelists have followed his advice, perhaps urged on by their agents and struggling British publishers. Mark Lawson has rerun the Kennedy assassination, Luke Jennings set his last book on a mid-century boat steaming for America in the mid-Atlantic, D.J. Taylor's *English Settlement* imports an American management consultant into England, and no reviewer has yet worked out how to categorise the mid-Atlantic freak called Ricky in Adam Thorpe's *Still.*

A similar desire for distance seems to sustain a whole raft of travel writers, who will go to extraordinary lengths to provide their readers with imaginary escape routes. Up the Andes with a pigmy. Down the Orinoco with a crocodile. Anything, it seems, is better than waking up one morning in Herne Hill, Whitstable or Slough. This is not just a man's world either. No doubt England's Victorian explorers used to exploit their guides and bearers in all sorts of dark ways. But some of the women explorers of our time, I think of Fiona Pitt Kethley and Lucretia Stewart, are making amends. They journey through southern European mountain ranges or Carribbean islands and then spice up their chronicles with stories of their amorous adventures.

What would happen if we applied some of these energies at home - and started travelling our own world a bit more enthusiastically? Would we really find that the only traditions in England are morbid reflections of jingoistic insularity? Surely not. And anyway, the argument for a stronger sense of English identity is not just made by those advocates of posthumous England who would use history as a way of denying the present. The case for a stronger regionalism is sometimes also voiced in Scotland, Wales and Ireland. The suggestion here is that if the English had a clearer sense of their own identity, they might actually become less attached to the unitary and highly centralised British state. Conceivably, it would then be possible to achieve a better accommodation of the different nations within Great Britain. It's an interesting thought. We might even be able to understand BSE without blaming it on Arthur Scargill, and that would be an improvement too.

## 2. Deep and Beleaguered England (tx: 18/6/96)

Last year, I picked up a new novel by Andrew Roberts, the Conservative polemicist and historian, known for his critical attitude towards the European Community. *The Aachen Memorandum* is a frankly Europhobic fantasy in which the heroes of a monarchical 'English Resistance Movement' are arrayed against the usurping bureaucrats of a totalitarian German-dominated superstate. A soulless agent of political correctness, this alien Euroregime is bent on extirpating all the English virtues. It forces letter-writers to use the post-code, and discourages respectable English women from shaving their armpits. It sanctions eco-snoops who condemn the traditional English Christmas as abusive to pine trees. Its usurping German functionaries have proscribed fish and chips, fur and the English oak. They have freed Myra Hindley, assassinated Margaret Thatcher and renamed Waterloo Station Maastricht.

Immersed as we have been more recently in the demented excesses of John Major's beef war, it might seem reasonable to dismiss Roberts' tale as a squib that has been quite upstaged by events. But even with the battle of the bull semen raging and the *Sun* newspaper protesting that the theme music to the Euro 96 football championship should have been composed by a Hun called Beethoven, I'm still drawn up short by the cover of this novel, which Roberts presumably approved even if he didn't actually conceive it himself.

It shows a union jack being burned away to reveal corrupting yellow stars beneath. Yellow stars and burning national flags. We've seen a lot of that this century, as Roberts the historian certainly knows; and we should be thankful that his yellow stars are not those of the anti-Semite's international Jewish conspiracy. Instead they form the 'golden halo' of a different evil - the EC, which Roberts presents as the Nazi 'Reich' reborn triumphant. This remains an extreme iconography to use, nonetheless, and the toxic sense of conspiracy, pollution and threat lives on.

There are many entirely legitimate questions to ask of the European Community, but there is no chance at all of bringing them into accurate focus through a distorting lens like this. Indeed, that burning union jack suggests different questions, which come much closer to home.

There is a characteristically Conservative form of English patriotism, which cherishes Englishness as the semi-instinctive inheritance of a native people. Far from being a dynamic and open-ended sense of identity which can be renewed or reshaped in the present, this Englishness is imagined as a way of life that is already complete - an essence which, like the historical landscape to which it is

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intimately connected, needs to be defended against contamination in modern times.

This backward-looking and often lamentational kind of Conservative patriotism has a long history. Eighteenth century Tories looked back longingly at the old rural community disrupted by the enclosures. And in the nineteenth century, there were Tories as well as socialists, who recoiled from urban industrialism and from the Whiggery of free trade.

In this century too, influential Conservatives have sought to base their outlook on an idea of the deeply rural community. It was Stanley Baldwin, the Tory Prime Minister, who, in 1924, stood up before the annual dinner of the Royal Society of St. George and famously invoked the 'sounds of England... the tinkle of the hammer on the anvil in the country smithy, the concrake on a dewy morning, the sound of the scythe against the whetstone'. For Baldwin, whose hymn of praise to English ancientry has been repeated and paraphrased by countless subsequent Conservative thinkers, 'these things strike down into the very depths of our nature, and touch chords that go back to the beginning of time and the human race'. The defining sense of danger was there too: Baldwin was mortified to think that this pastoral experience was no longer the 'childish inheritance' of the majority of English people.

Many Baldwinite Conservatives have described English Conservatism as if it were more like an intimately known landscape than a dogma or ideology. And in the post war years, at least as I see them, the fate of that deeply settled valley of Tory inspiration was to be dramatised in one location above all. I'm referring to Tyneham, a remote coastal settlement, folded between limestone and chalk downs on the Isle of Purbeck in Dorset. This was a perfect English valley in Thomas Hardy's Wessex, equipped with a benign climate, an Elizabethan manor house, a small village, a few farms and an ancient landscape that, even in the thirties, was being run as an unofficial nature reserve by the Bonds - a modest gentry family that had owned and lived in the valley for nearly 500 years.

All this came to an abrupt end in the Second World War. Shortly before Christmas in 1943, the valley was evacuated and turned into a training area for American tanks preparing for the Normandy landings.

There is a true story of dispossession here. But it was quickly overtaken by the extraordinary mythology that came to occupy Dorset's forbidden valley. Rightly or wrongly, it was said that Churchill himself had promised that Tyneham would be returned to its owners after the war. But thanks to the Labour election victory of 1945, it fell to Clement Attlee's government to break Churchill's pledge, citing the excuse of the developing Cold War. Tyneham became the Village that Died

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for England - a little vale of organic Tory virtues, extinguished by the bureaucratic state.

As this expropriated fragment of England fell into ruin, it seemed to become more real by the minute. Many of the uprooted villagers quickly came to terms with the modern amenities of their modest but well-plumbed new council houses. But in the minds of more distant onlookers, for whom Tyneham symbolised the plight of England in the age of the welfare state, every stroke of post-war modernisation seemed to make its memory burn brighter. No-one had decimalised its currency, metalled its rolling English roads, or demolished its cottages to make way for tower blocks. No reforming bureaucrat had come to interfere with the bracing curriculum of its schools or to tamper with its liturgy. Tyneham was the one English village that hadn't suffered the loss of empire, or been picked up by Edward Heath and shoved into the European Community.

As time went on, Tyneham's cause would be taken up by a clutch of seriously Conservative figures: Lord Goddard, the hanging and flogging Lord Chief Justice who would later put an end to Derek Bentley; David Mellor, the disgraced former minister, who seems to have made his political debut fighting for Tyneham back in the sixties. The story has also moved Dame P.D. James, the Conservative moralist and detective novelist, who has written for the *Salisbury Review* about the prewar provincial community in which she grew up - superior in every regard to the restless and chaotically progressive world in which we live now.

Other post-war champions of Tyneham were of a distinctly Baldwinite frame of mind. Sir Arthur Bryant, who came to be known as England's historian during the Second World War, spoke out in the late forties and later became President of the Tyneham Action Group in 1970, a time when he was also busily opposing coloured immigration and Britain's entry into the Common Market. The campaign was also joined by Lord Hinchingbrooke, an anti-freemarket Tory reformer in the forties, who eventually resigned his peerage in order to stand for the House of Commons on an anti-Common Market platform. Hinchingbrooke was M.P. for South Dorset at the time of Tyneham's expropriation. And if he associated this battle with the very essence of Conservatism, this was because for him too, Conservatism was less an ideology than a stream of inspiration that came trickling out of a pastoral and now direly threatened valley at the back of every true English mind : 'the compact world,' as he put it, 'in which we lived until a generation ago - in which the parish constituted the surroundings which a man knew and loved as his home'. For these Tory patriots, Tyneham was plainly England's last ditch.

Sadly, however, there was corruption at the very heart of the idyll, and it wasn't just a matter of dark forces encroaching from the other side of the hill. In the '80s, the story of Tyneham's expropriation was adopted as an emblematic fable by *This England,* a nostalgic heritage publication premised on a loathing of multiculturalism. And even before the army came along, Tyneham and its coast line were wreathed in alarming stories of malign encroachment and Jewish contamination. One of the leading activists of the sixties had only just have broken with the League of Empire Loyalists; and some of the older 'Friends of Tyneham', including Sir Arthur Bryant, had been involved with a bizarre 1930s network called the English Array - an eccentric grouping that is worth some consideration as a precursor of the English Resistance Movement in Andrew Roberts's novel.

As an anti-democratic, monarchical front with a strong bias towards the land, the English Array set out to 'give strength and health to the sound types of the nation'. It was modelled on the guild system of feudal England, and the name was said to have been of Gothic derivation. It implied a 'militant response to duty', and had once upon a time served as a rallying cry for the archers at Agincourt.

The leader, or 'Marshal', was Lord Lymington, a Wessex aristocrat who was also a poet, an agricultural theorist, a serious appeaser of Hitler and, rather to the embarrassment of today's greens, an early ecologist. The Array's male members, and there were to be no other, had to be 'physically sound' and prepared to vouch that they and their forebears were 'of the English types and stocks bred within the four seas'. Grouped in 'musters' around the country, they comprised an eccentric mixture of idealistic farmers, army officers, basket-weaving cranks, aristocrats and fascists.

The men of the English Array set out 'to regain, preserve and intensify all those attributes and qualities that appertained to English life and the English type at the most vigorous and flourishing periods of our history'. This meant breathing deeply through the nose, eating fresh fruit and salads, and avoiding artificial laxatives. It meant exposing your skin to the sun as much as possible in the winter months, but covering up during the summer - apparently to avoid darkening as well as skin cancer. Modern inventions were to be distrusted - 'the menace of electric light' was thought gradually to be driving the nation blind. They were to eat wholemeal bread, rather than the industrialised white stuff with which unscrupulous chain stores deceived the urban poor, and their runner beans should be grown up sticks of English hazel rather than imported oriental bamboo.

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The English Array clung to a traditional idea of rural England, which they felt to be suffering encroachment from all sides. They marched to the slogan, 'English food in English bodies', and their *Quarterly Gazette* was devoted to 'the Olds' as opposed to 'the News'. At one of their camps, they were addressed by Captain A.M. Ludovici, a Nietszchean and fascist who had been secretary to the sculptor Rodin. He asked the men of the Array to consider the discrepancy between the images traditionally associated with the word 'England' and the very different realities of the urban and industrialised country they lived in. He pointed out that the traditional idea of England gave no quarter to the population of cities like London, Manchester, Sheffield and Liverpool. It left out the stock exchanges and factories too, preferring to linger over the idea of Johh Bull, 'placed in a setting of waving cornfields, green hills, and nestling red-roofed cottages'. The Array's job was to fight for the 'transvaluation of values' that would halt the decline of the 'fast-vanishing Englishman', and overthrow the values that had produced the modern city.

To judge from Marshal Lymington's bulletins, the English Array loathed every institution of the modern state - from schools and the BBC to the new agricultural marketing boards. They hated free market capitalism, and associated 'usury' with an international Jewish conspiracy. They surveyed the city population with the eye of cattle-breeders who had read a few articles on eugenics, and saw a horribly fertile multitude of 'aliens' mixed with 'the dregs of English blood'.

Lymington predicted that, if war came, these degenerates would waste no time stirring up Revolution. 'After the towns had been looted a swarm of starving, diseased and desperate population would spread itself over the surrounding countryside, glad of grass and dead rats to eat, killing and devouring, like locusts, any living thing in its path'. Among the most ardent appeasers of the late thirties, the Array's Marshal reckoned that Hitler was more or less on the right track: not least when it came to sorting out true German wheat from the Jewish chaf of cosmopolitan urban culture.

Considerable as its disorders may be, the present-day Tory Party is not incipiently fascist, and anti-Semitism is in no way central to its outlook, even though a few disconcerting remarks may still escape from the back benches from time to time. But I was still surprised by the rhetorical excesses of last year's party conference, which took place considerably before John Major's beef war was declared. This revealed that many Conservatives are ready to form their own kind of English Array at a moment's notice, complete with weird musters at the fringe meetings, which address such topics as 'the German enemy'. The conference logo struggled heroically to turn the Union Jack into a magic carpet associated with 'Our Nation's Future'. Yet the discussion seemed altogether more at home with 'the Olds' than with 'the News', and a beleaguered idea of

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country life remained surprisingly central. Agriculture Minister, Douglas Hogg proclaimed that Conservative values were at heart rural values - like pride in history and personal independence.

And there was no shortage of encroaching threats either. The Tory countryfolk and their representatives spoke out against the Labour Party with its urban values and proposed 'right to roam'. They worried about the anarchy threatened by animal rights activists or by incomers who had no respect for country traditions like fox-hunting; and they demanded that the 'rights of the minority' - ie themselves - be upheld.

The chorus was taken up by speakers from the floor. A man from Northumberland got up to say how proud he was to take the side of 'traditional people', who measured beer in pints, butter in pounds and farms in acres. These, he said, were Chesterton's 'secret people': beleaguered and bamboozled folk whose way of life was under threat, and whose voices are too little heard. One speaker after another stepped up to join this defensive Tory array - gazing out towards the ever advancing enemy and identifying its various cohorts: urban pressure groups, 'barmy eco-nuts', the apostles of Intervention and the bureaucrats of state control.

As Secretary of State for the Environment, John Gummer hoped that Tory patriotism would not be further 'clouded by urban thinking'. Gummer's view of the urban trespasser was less florid than that of Lord Lymington, yet he was certainly in the tradition when he brandished the governments new Criminal Justice Act at 'ravers, trespassers and hippy camps'. It was Michael Portillo who swept in to denounce Brussels as the worst encroacher of all. He stood there like some monstrous windmill, blowing clouds of Europhobic vapour over the assembled party members - who were doubtless pleased to hear that Portillo would never surrender 'our brave soldiers, sailors and airmen' to functionaries in Brussels who - and here's a trick that Andrew Roberts somehow missed - would force them to undergo paternity leave.

A number of more refined Conservatives were dismayed by Portillo's 'Latin American' performance. But others seem happy to be blown along by it. This brings us back to Andrew Roberts, who has dipped his flag in the same sink of beleaguered prejudice. Roberts is an interesting figure, partly because he knows better than most that the Tory English patriotism of the pre-war generation could be rotten to the core. His book *Eminent Churchillians* includes a vigorous denunciation of Sir Arthur Bryant - unmasked not just as a fraud and an appeaser, but as a fellow traveller, whose hatred of 'usury' predisposed him to publish what was effectively an apologia for Nazi anti-Semitism in 1940.

Roberts himself is much attached to British sovereignty. A Unionist who has declared his respect for Enoch Powell, he has tried to cleanse Tory patriotism of the corruption that made such an embarrassment of Bryant's early and 'unreasoned' opposition to Britain's entry into the Common Market. Roberts has informed at least one visiting journalist that he and his circle of rightwing friends are decidedly philosemitic. What, then, is he doing showing yellow stars burning their way through the national flag?

It seems to me that if you define your country as an organic inheritance, already fully achieved in the past, then your patriotism will inevitably also be premised on a sense of everpresent threat. The encroaching enemy may now be the usurping German Eurocrat rather than the Communist, the Jewish banker, or the Afro-Caribbean immigrant. But whatever opponent you chose, the defining pattern - in which a heritage is surrounded by pressing dangers - remains remarkably similar. And to the extent that this polarised way of thinking oversimplifies the facts of the situation to which it responds, it will remain at best a retreat from reality. This backward-looking style of patriotism certainly has its uses. It is, as Roberts as well as Bryant has now demonstrated, a lot easier to wave a burnt flag around that to resolve the deeper challenges facing British Conservatism. It is easier to resort to cryogenic English nationalism than to come to terms with the fact that Britain is a mixed land with more than one historical lineage. It is easier to construct puerile fictions about the German enemy than to think coherently about the European Community. And despite the real crisis facing our farmers, it is easier to run a Beef War than to reconcile your cultural Conservatism with the free market economics that have done so much to break up the traditional British settlement in recent years.

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## 3. Threadbare England (tx: 19/6/96)

Small can be telling even when it is not exactly beautiful, as Tony Blair might have noticed at an unusual party he attended shortly before Christmas a couple of years ago. Guests arrived at one of London's most exclusive squares to find themselves in a large bare house, stripped as if for decorating. They were offered beer or vodka but not wine; and the food, which was served by waiter's dressed as workmen, consisted of deftly shrunken portions of proletarian fare: tiny helpings of fish and chips, each one served in a conical twist of newspaper; miniaturised bacon sandwiches; microscopic hamburgers in minute sesame buns.

The Labour leader was among friends, but he may still have wondered about those ironic little snacks. Perhaps they conveyed a well-disposed millionaire's view of what he must do to socialist ideals in order to make them socially acceptable. But they might also have prompted wider thoughts, for it is certainly not just rich London's canapés that have been miniaturised in recent years. Labour's traditional working class constituency now resembles a plateful of bite-sized remnants; and the Lilliputian trend has also overtaken the levers of state power with which Blair's predecessors tried to engineer social improvement. Those that haven't been disconnected and sold off in the name of privatisation, have been reduced to the point where they look barely more effective than a row of cocktail sticks. Think of state intervention in the nineties, and you quickly arrive at the Cones Hotline. Think of local government, and it is no longer the heavy machinery of comprehensive redevelopment that comes to mind, but the one-person-operated street cleansing machine, with a bollard and perhaps a little improving landscape design in the background. And what of Labour patriotism, of the kind that fifty years ago was built into the foundations of the welfare state? Has that gone the way of the tower blocks and also been knocked down to size?

When I think of the shrinkage evident in so much of the Labour Party's old heartland, I remember something that the late Dennis Potter said when I interviewed him in February 1993. I asked if he saw anything hopeful in the Labour Party. He laughed a little sadly and replied, 'Well, if I use a pair of binoculars I do'.

Potter was in London to publicise his television drama *Lipstick on Your Collar,* but I wanted to hear about the late fifties when Potter himself was counted among the Labour Party's brightest hopes. A miner's son from the Forest of Dean, he had gone to Oxford University, where he chaired the Labour Group and was talked about as the next Aneurin Bevan. In 1960 Potter published the manifesto

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that might have launched his political career. Entitled *The Glittering Coffin,* this book condemned both the rotten Tory establishment and the Labour Party, which lay thrice-defeated then as now and was, as Potter asserted, desperately searching around for 'posters and jingles' while diluting its policies to the point where they hardly seemed to exist.

Even then, Potter resented the way patriotism was being purloined by the right. 'The past, as he wrote 'is always represented by these new patriotic inheritors as a kind of packaged totality, where the struggles and emotions that made it are smoothed over with awesome talk of "our heritage"'. And what should his generation do? Potter's conclusion was windy but clear. 'We have the job of remaining patriotic in the decent sense of the word, when our identity is dwindling away in a steady capitulation before the Cocoa-Cola onslaught of the New World on the one hand and a dangerously militant and even criminal nostalgia for the supposed glories of the past on the other.'

Potter was to abandon his political career before it had really started. Looking back when I met him, he dismissed *The Glittering Coffin* as the canting, sanctimonious work of 'a young man on the make' and declared himself pleased not to have a copy in the house. Yet he remained, unmistakably and despite all the odds, a patriot of a decidedly Labour type. This had certainly not been easy. He went to enormous lengths to distinguish the working class patriotism he had known in the Forest of Dean from the deformities that imperialism had visited upon it, and he hated to see 'the true English past' being used by racists. True patriotism is 'millions of miles from nationalism' he stressed, but 'The trouble with words is that you never know whose mouths they've been in'.

When I asked him to define what his patriotism actually consisted of beyond those memories of the Forest of Dean, Potter remarked that 'The dream of a common culture used to move me enormously. But technologically, it is now impossible'. His immediate point was that the media had become fragmented. The people running television when he became a BBC trainee, in 1959, may have been patronising in their attitudes. But 'they actually believed in their mission to educate, inform and entertain'. It was for this reason, I'm sure, that Potter, who named his cancer after Rupert Murdoch, was so eager to have his last television dramas, *Karaoke* and *Cold Lazarus,* shown on both the BBC and Channel Four. Not because of ghastly media narcissism, but as a gesture towards that increasingly abandoned idea of a socially purposeful common culture.

Threadbare and frayed as it has since become, that idea of a common culture which emerged as part of the post-war reconstruction, was primarily a Labour inspiration. And yet it was accepted more broadly, as is revealed by the fact that George Orwell's wartime descriptions of the English character are still quoted to

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justify very different political visions. The maiden aunts cycling to communion in Orwell's essay 'England Your England', may finally have crashed over fifty years later in a speech by John Major. But it would have been quite unnecessary to remind Dennis Potter, for whom Orwell was a constant reference point, that the book in which they first appeared was subtitled *Socialism and the English Genius.*

George Orwell's socially farflung inventory of the 'characteristic fragments' of English life defines the very bedrock of mid-century Labour patriotism. Orwell had little time for the rural virtues hymned by Stanley Baldwin, whom he described as not so much as a stuffed shirt as a hole in the air. His own list combines green grass with blatant advertisements, heavy coins, clattering Lancashire clogs, queues outside the Labour exchanges, smoky towns and red pillar boxes. His is an England of bad teeth and pigeon-fanciers, where love of flowers combines with a horror of abstract thought and probably the foulest language in the world.

Orwell also noticed that the English had a curious ability to overcome the grumpy disputatiousness of their embedded class system and, at moments of crisis, suddenly to 'swing together' as they had at Dunkirk. It was, said Orwell, like a Giant awakening, and then, unfortunately, slipping back into sleep. Yet looking back now, we may wonder whether Orwell was right to think that after paroxysms of national unity, the English always fell back to sleep quite so quickly.

For in fact that solidarity of the war effort was built into the post-war settlement. Take Lord Beveridge, whose report paved the way for the welfare state - he was undoubtedly an army surplus thinker, who imagined 'the new spirit' in which the British had defeated 'the evils of war' would now enable them to vanquish the evils of peace.

Doubtless the 'spirit of the blitz' that came to be built into the post-war consensus was partly romanticised, but it was an institutional habit too. As the sociologist Richard Titmuss described - the war raised a desire for social justice, and also brought the state into new areas of social activity, like housing. Titmuss, who talked of 'the war-warmed impulse of people for a more generous society', saw the precedents for universal social welfare in the wartime relief schemes, which were available to people of all kinds, without means tests or a concern to sort out the truly deserving poor. So the common patriotism of the war was converted into public housing, state education, nationalised industry and the NHS. It helped to shape emerging national arts policy and, as Dennis Potter pointed out, public service broadcasting at the BBC. The result may have been over centralised, bureaucratic and flawed in other ways too. But there was enough

here to ensure that many people who grew up at this time remain attached to the memory of blue-capped orange juice from the state, innoculations, cod liver oil and possibly even Spam and American peanut butter too.

The juke box in the milk bar may not always have helped - and initially Dennis Potter viewed it with as much misgiving as Richard Hoggart had done in *The Uses of Literacy.* But it was not primarily this that undid the consensual world that the 1945 Labour government tried to build out of the austerity and uniformity of the war effort. The welfare state made vast improvements in many people's way of life. But there were other problems it merely rearranged, and some wholly new ones that, as time went on, it appeared to create. The mixed economy failed to deliver. The renewal of Britain turned out to involve reckless demolition in many historic towns and cities. Public housing collapsed into a demonised warren of high rise estates. Even the children's homes of the caring state are now revealed, all too regularly, to have been places of horrible abuse.

The key books were still intact - George Orwell's 'England Your England' and Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* were set texts in A level English when I took it in the late sixties. But by then everything interesting in the culture seemed to define itself against the disenchanted coorporatist system that had once been mistaken for the New Jerusalem. Indeed, the whole country was collapsing into economic crisis, industrial dispute, and extreme political polarisation which made it increasingly impossible for the media and cultural establishment to speak in the nation's name. By the time the three day week came along in December 1973, who could associate any of this with the common patriotism of the war effort? Perhaps only the desperate junior energy minister who urged the British people to help save electricity by cleaning their teeth in the dark.

Some of the welfare state's critics were internationalists, including the advocates of working class revolution who condemned it as a petty mechanism for propping up an otherwise bankrupt capitalism. But others, often of a more right wing orientation, were already busy separating the memory of the war from the faltering state Leviathan built in its name. This trick of remembering the war in order to redeclare it against the peace was to be taken up and much used by Margaret Thatcher. It was also adopted by Prince Charles, when he condemned the planners, architects and assorted experts of the sixties who, as he put it, did more to destroy British cities than the Luftwaffe.

To begin with, however, it seemed like the desperate measure of eccentric superpatriots and extremists. I once visiting an overgrown house in Thames Ditton - a crumbling bunker in the midst of house proud Surrey Suburbia. This

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was the home and headquarters of Patrick Clavell Blount, the veteran anti-fluoridationist who, since 1962, had campaigned constantly against the state that was, as he saw it, converting the public water supply into a system of 'enforced mass medication'. When he was accused of running an unaccountable 'pressure group', Clavell-Blount replied with a classic cry of the welfare state era: 'We are not a pressure Group, we are a resistance movement'.

I could hardly grasp Blount's motivation until he started talking about the Second World War, in which he had served as a catering officer at Scampton, a bomber base in Lincolnshire. He talked about seeing the young airmen off the tarmac at dusk and then staying up to cook breakfast for the ones who made it back from the night's mission over Germany. Clavell Blount may have been a crank, as Enoch Powell certainly claimed when he was Minister for Health. But the memory of those missing fliers was built into the campaign he waged so stubbornly against the excesses of a state that he considered to be eroding the liberties they had gone out to defend.

So it was to be in the economic field too. The early free-market think tankers, supporters of Hayek, saw themselves as another version of 'The Few' - scattered, derided, and off the map, they nevertheless persisted until their unfashionable message was heard. Here too, the war was a virtuous memory to be thrown in the face of the interventionist state. One of the most influential of these men, Anthony Fisher flew Hurricanes during the war and lost a brother in the Battle of Britain. After 1945, he too saw England under threat from its own state and decided that his brother had given up his life for nothing. Having made a fortune pioneering broiler chicken farming, he set up the Institute for Economic Affairs, the free market think tank, which would eventually find its hero in Margaret Thatcher.

In our own post-Thatcher time, it has become hard even to remember the kind of world that was built in the name of nationalisation and the welfare state, with its virtuous but dull uniformity and its forsaken hopes for an improving common culture. The old nationalised public realm has been parcelled up into a million franchises. The 'glittering expresso Bar prosperity' feared by the young Dennis Potter seems to have won. Some of George Orwell's red pillar boxes may survive, but the big railways stations - once orderly if also monumentally drab examples of nationalised public space - have been franchised out as bazaars. I noticed the other day that my bit of British Rail is now run by an outfit called WAGN. The trains seem to run along the same lines, and the coffee and baguettes are certainly better than the uniquely ghastly English hamburgers and chipped utility tea cups of yesteryear. But the whole service has a hacked-about and visually illiterate look: a sense of applique identity, with too much reliance on the glue brush and the corporate logo.

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Perhaps it was inevitable that the visual chaos privatisation introduced into the public domain would eventually provoke a conservative reaction. It certainly did so, and never more strongly than over the fate of the old red phone boxes.

The story began in November 1984, when British Telecom was launched into the future as the flagship of Margaret Thatcher's privatisation programme. A few months later, Mr Iain Vallance, who was then Managing Director of BT's Local Communications Service, announced that his company would be taking a 'radical approach"' to the 'outdated payphone service'. In short, the old red phone boxes would go, to be replaced by the new range of anodized aluminium kiosks based on a foreign design and varied so that, in th words of one BT manager, different facilities could be 'put in different parts of the society'. Generally speaking, the better your area, the more kiosk you would get. In respectable areas, or on main thoroughfares, you could still expect a door, walls and a roof. But the underclass would have to make do with a pre-vandalised metal stump with a card phone bolted onto it.

The condemnation came up fast enough, and not just from those who suspected that the redesign was actually a screen behind which the public phone service could be concentrated at lucrative outlets like railway terminals and airports. Anachronistic or not, the red telephone boxes were part of the national landscape, and Mr. Vallance, who has since risen to even greater heights within BT, was tampering with the soul of the nation. He was not impressed by that objection, saying that there was 'no accounting for taste'. This was not strictly true. Public affection for the kiosks ensured that they were auctioned off for considerable sums to buyers from all over the world.

This was too much for some. The Thirties Society set out to reveal that the red telephone box was a work of significant architectural interest, designed by no less an architect than Sir Giles Gilbert Scott. Different models were identified, and the red telephone box, which had cause howls of protest when it was introduced in the 1920s and 30s, was suddenly recognised as part of the national heritage. In 1986, one at London Zoos parrot house achieved the distinction of becoming the first to be awarded protection as a listed building. Meanwhile laments for the passing of this English icon continued to roll in, particular from people whose politics actually put them on the side of privatisation. Roger Scruton celebrated the red phone box as one of the last creations of a 'disciplined tradition' that had since been overwhelmed by modernism. He liked its fenestration, the domed top, and also the fact that an embossed crown stood over the nation's public communications. Charles Moore, then editor of *the Spectator*, described the civilising influence one of Giles Gilbert Scott's creations could exert over even the most wasted stretch of inner city.

What was this fuss really all about? Gavin Stamp, Chairman of the Thirties Society, liked the design qualities of the red phone box too. But he pressed the case further, condemning the government for its 'blinkered refusal to recognise the valuable and essential role' of the public sector and denouncing the sale as asset stripping applied to the fabric of public life. As Stamp described the red phone box as decent, solid and serviceable, it became apparent that the ideal of uniform public service was itself now hiding out in heritage country. Those old red phone boxes were distinguished not just by Scott's design, but also by the fact that they were the same everywhere, and, intended to be accessible to all comers. They represented a universality of public service. By the late eighties, the war-born idea of national consensus that had been built into the welfare state, was reduced to hiding out in a telephone box and trying to pass itself off as an abstract quality of design. I guess it is not just Tony Blair, who has ended up in Lilliput.

## 4. Thin England (tx: 20/6/96)

It is becoming all too easy to announce the end of things. Yet in the case of English patriotism, there are two long-standing approaches that really have reached the end of the line.

The first offers us a thoroughbred dream of England as an old and predominantly rural country, defined by an Empire that has since disappeared. This has a Tory version, but it is capable of more alarming manifestations too. Seen through a retrospective lens of this kind, Englishness appears as a fully achieved historical identity - an organic but also largely monocultural inheritance which is increasingly out of kilter with the way we live now. This nostalgic image of old England may remain serviceable as an evocative tourism brochure, or even as a vaguely consoling Baldwinite dream of our island story.

But it leaves the present looking degenerate, or as if it were composed entirely of encroaching threats - urban development, the state, Arthur Scargill, Europe, the free market, immigration, social workers, the whole messy and imperfect apparatus of our mobile mass democracy.

When it comes to the second of these exhausted traditions, I'm more reluctant to call for the last rites. But what actually is left of the much praised and comparatively radical consensus of 1945? That idea of the common cause was born in the national solidarity of the Second World War, stirred by the Christian decencies of William Beveridge, and then demobilised into the patriotism of the post-war settlement. Sadly or not, this nationalising, welfare statist vision of Britain remade has lost its hold on the present too. Its institutional basis is now largely undone and its guiding rhetoric, which once promised a new and more just world, seems increasingly detached and sentimental.

We may feel a genuine loss here, and wish to remember the social ambition of this project. Yet if welfare state patriotism is now undermined, this is partly because of the very form it took. Centralisation, uniformity, planning, and the wisdom of the public-spirited officer class - there is no longer an inspiring future in that list. In the forties, George Orwell may have rested much of his case on the common decencies of the English people, but when the same claim is made now, it is often hard to distinguish from complacency.

So where do we go from here? If English patriotism is prone to sentimental and sometimes plain toxic expression, perhaps we should avoid trying to concentrate

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it in any form at all, and instead welcome its diffuseness - if not its actual disintegration. Much that is vital and interesting in Britain today seems largely indifferent to this problem. The technical, scientific and industrial impulse often stands at a well-maintained distance from insular patriotism - especially of the present Europhobic kind. For a while in the eighties the business schools, which were in the forefront of Margaret Thatcher's economic revolution, were actually running a war with English culture. Rightly or wrongly, they claimed that it was our poets and aristocratic pastoralists who had snuffed out the spirit of enterprise in Britain.

In fact, many innovative strands in British culture have also set themselves against the received idea of Englishness, preferring to operate in a mixed society than in anybody's idea of an ancient nation. We can see this in many different fields - from popular music to cookery, starting with Elizabeth David, whose books on continental food set colour and brisk mediterranean taste against the stodgy pallor of the post-war years. Our aid agencies, of which we have good reason to be proud, combine a fairly traditional idea that Britain still has a role in the world, with a refusal to get bogged down in the stolid insularity of our national scene. If we have a particular gift for fashion, satire and subcultural expression, this too is connected to the fact that we are an imploded imperial nation with an increasingly polyglot identity and a hollowed out centre stuffed full of imperial clichés.

One of the major developments that stands between Britain now and the island patriotisms of the past is surely the rise of the market, which has disorientated many of the improving cultural ambitions of the post-war period. Take the juke box, which was viewed with enormous distrust by writers like Richard Hoggart and also Dennis Potter, when it first appeared in the milkbars and pubs of the 1950s. For these early observers, raised in the English tradition of radical earnestness, the jukebox was an insidious Siren-like thing - a sweet sapper of the nonconformist spirit, a thumping destroyer of psalms and true folk song, which would lure the young working class away from their own real interest, and then lose them in tawdry, chrome-plated American dreams.

Since then, we've become thoroughly acclimatised. The juke box is everywhere, even if it no longer looks like a machine into which you have to drop heavy coins. Every fashionable shop has its own version. There are corporate muzak consultants who insist we can't live without it, and the television - which Potter liked to see as a 'Palace of Varieties' in the living room - has its own non-stop juke box in MTV.

Looking back now, the milk bar juke box seems to have been the herald of an increasingly global commercial culture that has indeed had a powerful impact on more localised identities. The same songs travel all over the world - at least the American and English language ones do, but the market has overcome geography in other ways too. It is, as Raphael Samuel once pointed out, a lot easier to find a Kentucky Fried Chicken in England nowadays, than to turn up a bloater. Our town centres and high streets are converging on one another - increasingly dominated by the same retailers. Poets and the promoters of tourism may go on about regional identities like Wessex and Mercia, but the telling difference nowadays is more likely to be a matter of where Waitrose ends and Morrisons begins.

And what would George Orwell have made of the strange new installations that Marc Augé, a French anthropologist, has called 'non-places' - airport departure lounges, supermarkets and shopping malls, hotels, motorways? The same all over the world, these are strangely thin zones of pure functionality, dominated by credit cards, instructions for use and advertising. Direct communication is rarely necessary in a 'non-place' - even at the till or cash-dispenser - and traditional ideas of identity seem to have been put at an infinite distance. If history survives here, it is apparently only as a disconnected and probably spectacular relic, or as a brown road sign adressed to drivers who might like to know that the past still exists even through they won't actually turn off. As for the motorway service station, that, so Marc Augé suggests, is set to become the new centre for regional culture, selling maps and probably local products too.

All this may sharpen some people's urge for reality, for a house in the country that has not yet been thinned out in this curious way. Yet it should also remind us of a tension that is truly characteristic of our times, and experienced in many parts of the world. How does one reconcile these placeless and apparently universal forms with local or at least territorially defined character and identity?

One British organisation that has tried to address this issue is Common Ground, an environmentalist group which recently launched a campaign to promote 'local distinctiveness'. In some cases this seems to be a matter of trying to preserve native flora and fauna, or of fostering English traditions - old cheeses, five bar gates or the Abbots Bromley Horn dance.

Common Ground recognises that local vitality can't be made of relics alone, but it has also come up against the other main factor which, like the ever-rising market, intervenes between us now, and the insular patriotisms of the past. Some of the most locally distinct and vibrant places in Britain now are actually centres of immigrant population. In recognition of this Common Ground added Mosques to their alphabet of local distinctiveness - alongside Milestones,

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Macallan Malt Whisky and the Marshfield Mummers They were right to do so. Nobody could mistake Southall for a 'non-place'. Walk fifty yards down Ridley Road street market in East London, and you've been round the world several times - stopping off in Lagos, Cyprus, Odessa, the Caribbean and old England too. Places like this may still seem to confirm the reformer's idea of poverty and disadvantage. But these urban sites are rich in many still untold ways too. They certainly offer a more dynamic image of nature and culture than any frozen old landscape with a country house in front of it.

So what is left for English patriotism after these transformations of the market and multiculturalism? In a thoroughly anti-insular pamphlet published by Demos last year, Philip Dodd scolded George Orwell for describing American style frankfurters as 'Bombs of filth' going off in your mouth. No mileage, then, in defending English virtues - let alone sausages - against the Americanising market. Dodd rejected the Orwellian idea of a common culture made of semi-instinctive English decencies. And he also stood back from such purist ideas of Celtic identity as may now be promoted in Scotland, Wales or even the north of England.

Heading one of his chapters 'In Praise of Mongrels', Dodd announced that the time had come to recognise that we British have long been among the most mixed up people in the world. We are an imploded empire, and rather than lamenting the apparent 'slackening' of our national culture, we should learn the lesson of the juke box. Such vibrancy and dynamism as we now possess is actually a product of hybridity. Ours has long been an 'import-export' culture and the time has come to give up on thoroughbred fantasies, and to found a new sense of identity on what Dodd calls 'the historical experience of penetration'.

This is, I suppose, a morally secure position, even though it is a lot easier said than done. It recognises that we are now global as well as local. Contrary to the cricket test introduced by Norman Tebbit during the 1991 series against Pakistan, we can have many different allegiances at the same time.

Dodd's argument fits well with the work of those black British artists who are now challenging the idylls of English identity. Travellers using the escalators at Euston Station over the next few weeks will find themselves viewing the polemical works of Ingrid Pollard, a black photographer who makes a point of putting 'the wrong person' into the English countryside. In one of her photographs, a black woman holds a divided, and very red, watermelon in front of the blue and green of English grass and sea; in another a black hiker stands holding flowers by a dry stone wall in the Lake District.

These abstractly constructed images, sometimes accompanied by crude textual reminders about the history of slavery, make their point by being altogether more startling than they should be. Let's hope that the sense of mismatch soon disappears.

It is one thing, however, for a photographer to try to flush out the exclusive attitudes that may or may not be sequestered in the countryside. It is quite another to achieve an adequate reconciliation of cultural differences in the real political world. If anyone doubts this, they only have to consider the fatwa pronounced on Salman Rushdie after the publication of the Satanic Verses. This really tested the multiculturalist aspiration, and also the intelligentsia, whose response to the situation was sometimes pusillanimous in the extreme. Even now, it is still possible to find apparently liberal journalists, who come near to justifying the fatwa on the grounds that it has enabled Britain's Muslim population to achieve a sense of identity - as if all expressions of cultural identity were equally desirable.

Cultural conservatives may have little appetite for these changes even if they don't actively oppose them. But those who stand more to the left have some work to do as well If 'hybridity' is to be more than a buzz word, then it demands something quite other than the inane market-led relativism that became so prevalent in the eighties. It demands the defence of common values, not just their transgression in the by now very mannered style of the twentieth century avant-garde.

As for English traditions, it seems to be almost mandatory now to treat these as objects for deconstruction - proving that they are invented, or not as old as they would seem - as if that were enough to falsify everything they express. What we need is not a cancelling of English traditions - as if only the ethnic minorities had a right to feel positive about their roots. Instead, we should aim for a recovery that frees them from the bunkered nationalist symbolism which - if Ingrid Pollard isn't exaggerating - makes the very sight of a black person in a British national park an incongruent surprise. Tempted as we may be to take flight from the past, I think this is actually a time for conservation, albeit of a critical and decidedly unfogeyish kind.

Living in east London through the eighties, I saw the challenges to conservation as they emerged in two different cases. The first concerned the Spitalfields Historic Buildings Trust,which encountered many of the difficulties of preserving ancient English buildings, in an area with a very mixed and diverse population. The object of their attention was a set of Georgian townhouses, built just east of the City of London in an area that has been an immigrant quarter almost ever since: Huguenot, Jewish, Irish and latterly, Bangladeshi. At the beginning of the

1980s, many of these buildings were derelict and scheduled for demolition. No financial institution would lend money on them. Ten years later, a fair number were painstakingly restored architectural gems, worth hundreds of thousands, and owned by a mixture of Conservationists, Bohemians, gays and adventurous city bankers.

From a purely architectural point of view, this is a success story. Yet when I attended the tenth anniversary celebration of the Spitalfields Trust, I was struck by the complete absence of anyone from the Bangladeshi community. I'm not trying to make a cheap point here. I'm glad the buildings have been conserved, and I recognise that the Spitalfields Trust has not been in the business of evicting tenants, or of closing down Bangladeshi enterprises without ensuring that they have other accomodation waiting.

And yet these did seem like worlds apart. On the one side, I saw an exotic collection of New Georgians, carried along by a fast rising property market. Their interest in historical authenticity extended to advocating the closure of the 19th century vegetable market, which had long been the commercial heart of the area. Then there was the Bangladeshi population, which, to reverse a phrase of John Betjeman's, was considerably more interested in housing than ancient houses; and which anyway would rather like to turn this newly Georgianised area in its own, perhaps rather too monocultural, direction and relaunch it as Banglatown. These tensions between these two constituencies could be quite considerable.

There are ways of overcoming these cross cultural difficulties, as the National Trust has been finding out in Hackney, a few miles northeast of Spitalfields. Sutton House is now one of their prouder possessions. But when I first visited it in 1987, this 16th century mansion on the corner of Homerton High Street was a dishevelled wreck. It had been squatted, and then looted, and the Trust was eager to dispose of it. At that time, the National Trust was the prisoner of an anti-urban conception of what a country house should be. Its staff couldn't understand why their predecessors had ever acquired this dismal relic in the long since urbanised village of Hackney. They were busily seeking a developer to take it over and chop it up into flats, which, so they hoped, might be sold to that shortlived and at least partly fabulous species, the London yuppie.

The Trust's blindness to its property in East London appears to have been matched by that of at least some members of Hackney Council's planning department. They were inclined to agree that Sutton House was in the wrong place - as an old English house, it had all the wrong associations for their multicultural borough. Indeed, if buildings could be racist, Sutton House was apparently guilty.

Since then things have changed for the better, thanks to local agitation. The house has been restored at considerable cost and the National Trust now displays it with pride and talks about it as a turning point in their history. This may well be considerably overstated, yet, as one who was involved in opposing the sale, I find this story encouraging. I was a little apprehensive when the trust started shipping in historical costumes and other conventional heritage paraphernalia into this house that had actually been in institutional use - as a school, a boys club, a charity office - for at least a century. I feared the worst when one National Trust worker revealed that her ancestors may once have lived there.

Sutton House now attracts a good number of National Trust members, many of whom travel into this exotic destination from the home counties. Its cafe serves as something of a haven for youngish middle class householders who may feel a little trapped in Hackney thanks to negative equity, and who need a place to bring their worried parents in order to demonstrate that east London isn't all dreadful. At the same time, the building is also beginning to be used somewhat more widely. Run in co-operation with a local committee, it has a schools education programme and is also used as an amenity by a growing range of people - catering for meetings of all sorts, and also for marriages. There's some way to go, but Sutton House is finally becoming at home in the inner city. Here, in the midst of mixed-up Hackney, is a modest but telling indication of how things can be done.

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