THE ENGLISH TRADITION

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Since the war ended there have been great changes in the British Empire. Eire has gone. Burma has gone. Pakistan and Ceylon have acquired full self-government. India has declared for a republic, but has retained a defined membership in the British Commonwealth under a new formula worked out at a conference of Prime Ministers. The British position in the Middle East has been visibly weakened. There are great movements in China, and they are certainly not friendly to British interests.

Are we, then, witnessing the end of an era? Are we the close spectators of a British decline, to be followed by a British fall? Or is there in the English, the chief original founders of this famous structure, some element of permanence which will enable them 'to strive, to seek, to find and not to yield'?

As a reasonably bigoted descendant of the Scottish race, I do not want to be misunderstood. The Scot has made and will continue to make a fine contribution to the world; in quality and character, as I think, unsurpassed. But the early foundation of the British Empire, its seafaring origins, and its parliamentary and legal development, represent a peculiarly English contribution to the world history and world security. It is therefore to the English characteristics that I propose to devote attention.

It is easier for an Australian than for an Englishman to write about the English tradition. For there are things about the English which even they themselves do not always clearly understand, and which are frequently completely misunderstood outside of England; particularly, perhaps, in America.

The travelling Englishman, the writing Englishman, the politically vocal Englishman, the governing Englishman in scattered colonies and protectorates has, so far, been broadly the educated Englishman. Education in England has a long and, if you like, conservative tradition behind it. The educated Englishman, therefore, has certain inherited and acquired mental habits which deserve study. He cannot be explained in a sentence, or disposed of by a single epigram. He is probably the most civilized of human beings; he is certainly one of the most complex.

He has, for example, great social confidence; a faculty which, if accompanied (as it sometimes is) by a dogmatic and unmodulated voice, easily creates the impression of coldness and arrogance. At his best, he possesses miraculous powers of real conversation, a social and intellectual art which is in process of decay in most countries, degenerating too often into indiscriminate wisecracking exchanges or a series of boring monologues.

But the educated Englishman, whatever his conversational powers, has an obstinate objection to wearing his heart on his sleeve, or parading his private affairs in the public eye. The more deeply he feels about anything, the less likely is he to discuss it seriously or even to mention it at all. When, driven to it by circumstances, he consents to speak of it, he does so with a deliberate under-emphasis which contrasts oddly with the over-emphasis by which most of us seek to indicate strength of conviction or violence of opinion. I have myself heard an English statesman, fresh from Berlin a few years before the war, say with exasperation that Hitler was

'being very tiresome'. This Englishman was no appeaser; he had strength, conviction, and resolution; but he was very English.

The truth is that by tradition and training, the educated Englishman keeps his inner life to himself. He burns more readily with inward passions than with the facile fire of the lips. His reserve in great matters, his sense of 'good form', his belief that deep emotion is not for daily display, his odd faculty of getting himself mixed up in the world's most dramatic crises and remaining, for the most part, dry and cool and undramatic – these paradoxical elements, have in more exuberant countries, given him his reputation for cold-bloodedness and hypocrisy.

In the United States (and to an extent in Australia), where men are most widely appreciated when they are 'folksy', or 'good mixers', or, let's be frank, unsubtle, I have frequently sensed a feeling that the Englishman is a cagey sort of fellow, who 'must have a lot up his sleeve', and who is undoubtedly playing some mysterious and selfish game of his own.

In a world of boisterous and hail-fellow democracy, this English reticence is easily construed as aloofness. In a world, a restless world, in which we have confused mechanical skill with civilization and have assumed, blindly, that all movement is progress, there may seem to be less and less room for the Englishman and his ancient ways.

Yet, this same Englishman has, twice this century, been the defender of the world's freedom in dark and desperate times. In the twentieth century, unlike the nineteenth century, Great Britain has not been, in absolute terms, the greatest power in the world. In two wars she has been the first into the field, and has been literally in the front line of battle.

These two wars have, at least temporarily, exhausted her. Today, in spite of her victorious efforts and good-humoured tenacity, indeed, because of the occasion for them and the material and nervous sacrifices they have involved, she has a problem of economic survival which has called upon her people for renewed efforts and sacrifice, and has moved the generous people of the United States to a magnificent measure of help through the Marshall Plan.

Yet, as the material power of Great Britain has become relatively smaller, I am convinced that the English tradition, of cheerfulness, justice under the law, tenacity, and the abiding importance of the individual, becomes richer and more significant. Walter Scott's passage in *Ivanhoe* provides us with the key to this tradition and its influence on the Englishman. The famous archer match was on; the archer Hubert was under challenge:

> 'A man can but do his best,' answered Hubert, 'but my grandsire drew a good long bow at Hastings, and I trust not to dishonour his memory.'

Come forward to our own times. Early in 1941, during the period when the British nations, without any major ally, were under attack by a so-far victorious enemy, I was in England. Every night for the ten weeks that I sat with the War Cabinet in London, the sirens sounded, and some of the town was bombed, factories destroyed, thousands of men and women and children blasted to death.

I was much in the company of Winston Churchill and became familiar at first hand with his unwavering confidence and his cheerful and chuckling courage. It was not without significance that he lived and moved at Chequers, a Tudor mansion deep in the Chiltern

Hills, surrounded by reminders, in book and picture and church steeple and the ancient scars still visible on the hillsides looking down to the Roman Road to Wendover, of old struggles and the heroes of the past. Amid visible memories of Hampden and Cromwell and the whole course of the English struggle for freedom, it is small wonder that Churchill came to embody, for millions all over the world, that continuing English spirit which confronts the future with confidence because its roots are deep in the soil of English history?

For tradition, to the Englishman, is not a barren pride in departed glories; it is something from which he derives a profound assurance, a sense of destiny, and a determination never to abandon what has been purchased with such valour and endurance by those who have gone before him. There is the essence of the matter. The English tradition is not a recollection of the dead; it is real, and living, and growing. It rests upon an unspoken, and perhaps in many cases unrealised, faith in the undefeated continuity of the race.

'Let us eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die.' is the motto of those who lack this faith. But a man with a deep sense of continuity sees himself not as an accidental unit doomed to vanish in a few years but as one of a great human procession, influenced and helped by those who have gone before him, responsible in his turn for giving help and encouragement to those who will come after.

In no rhetorical sense, I declare my own belief that the English tradition, so understood, cannot be destroyed, and that no material change of circumstance, no international rearrangement, can ever outmode it. There are two things about this traditional spirit which must be appreciated if the English are to be accurately understood and justly valued.

The first is that, in the language of the logicians, the Englishman's habitual mental method is inductive, not deductive. He reasons from the particular to the general. We newer peoples, the Americans, the Australians and older Latin countries bred in the traditions of the Roman Law and the kind of mind that produced it, readily adopt broad theories – of international organization, of statecraft, of economics, of social or individual behaviour. The broader the better.

And then we are disposed to take our theory and fit the facts to it, squeezing them here, stretching them there; forgetting all too frequently that facts are intractable things which have shattered many theories before today and will shatter many more in the future.

The Englishman starts at the other end. Subject to human frailty, he deals with the individual case as it arises, as justly and as fairly as he knows how. After a while he finds that, by a series of decisions, he has established a line of precedent. His line of precedent becomes a working rule; a mass of working rules is seen by some student to evolve into a theory of doctrine. The Englishman thus works up to a proved theory, and not down from an unproved one.

This simple analysis explains and is illustrated by the origin and growth of the English Common Law. Over a period of centuries that law developed, with little statutory assistance, from one judicial decision to another on the particular facts of some dispute; case piled on case, precedent on precedent, until at long last all the basic elements in the laws of contract and civil wrongs and the like were hammered out and took form and obtained an accepted authority. This slow and inductive process contrasts sharply with that instinct for

codification, for the promulgation (in advance) of the complete law, which has characterized European law from the Institutes onward, and which still has its champions in the draftsmen of the Charters of San Francisco and Havana.

The second feature is the English humour, a rich part of the English tradition. It is an integral part of the national sanity and therefore of the national continuity. We are told that we are not to argue about matters of taste, though we constantly do, and for the very human reason that our taste is demonstrably right and the other fellow's absurd!

Similarly about humour, only more so. You may tell Jones that he is colour blind, or has poor timing in games; but you tell him he has no sense of humour at your peril.

And if this is true among individuals of the same race, how much more true it is among nations themselves. To the average Frenchman the Englishman is a long-faced fellow with no humour save an occasional wintry smile. To the average Englishman the French wit seems to have an undue element of cruelty in it, while it has become a convention, based upon an occasional visit to Paris's Montmartre and Montparnasse (where in the better-known places of tourist entertainment there are few Frenchmen to be found) that French humour entirely revolves around sex. In the United States, *Punch*, London's famous humour magazine, is not infrequently treated with the respect that would be accorded to any other antique, a chair by Chippendale or a table by Sheraton, while I myself (let me confess it without either sackcloth or ashes) can sometimes read through an entire number of *The New Yorker* with nothing more than mild bewilderment.

Let me not, therefore, try to analyse the unanalysable. Let me rather say, quite simply, that the English humour is not of words but of character and situation. It quickly sees and enjoys the ridiculous; it makes game of the pompous; it instinctively seeks a laugh out of misery. It knows, as Shakespeare knew, that tragedy cannot be unrelieved if men are not to go mad; and so, in 1940 and 1941, under the blitz, it continued to sprinkle its *Hamlet* with grave-diggers' humour.

In Cardiff, in March 1941, I visited an area where a German parachute mine, dropped from a raiding bomber, had finally landed. Well over a hundred houses had been literally blown out, and many hundreds of others damaged. The destruction was dreadful; the smoke was still rising; among the hot ruins people were still digging and searching.

I spoke to fifty violently evicted householders and asked about casualties. A cheerful voice spoke up. 'No, only one killed, mister, and you can't rightly say killed, because he died of heart failure!' They all laughed. Call it macabre, or heartless, if you will, but it was the quaint, strange element which Hitler never understood, and which ultimately defeated him.

In a broadcast in Australia in November 1942, I used words which I now repeat: 'If ever anybody writes a history of the human mind under the strain of war, he will give a chapter of honour to the English people under the blitz. There he will find few heroics, oddly little black rage, no imitation intellectualism, no showing off. On the contrary, he will find a strange and enduring mixture of brave wit, patient humour, high spirits and merry talk in the midst of dirt and discomfort and danger.'

Well, there it is, as one observer sees it; a tradition compounded of a sense of continuity, a conviction of responsibility, a distrust of the vague and theoretical, and the laughter which sets a rainbow across the cloud.

It is a good tradition, and it cannot die.