

ENGLAND, WHERE NOTHING IS WHAT IT APPEARS TO BE

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I WISH TO DEDICATE MY PAPER TO WENDELL RORY, WHO SHARES IN THE JOYS OF PEREGRINATION, EVEN IF IT IS TO FRANCE, AND TO JIM LOVE, FRANCOPHOBE OF THE HIGHEST ORDER, WHO SURELY WILL INDULGE ME A TRIP ACROSS THE CHANNEL TONIGHT, A REPRISÉ OF ONE I TOOK SEVERAL YEARS AGO. INDULGE OR NO, HERE WE GO TO

"THIS SCEPTERED ISLE,  
THIS HAPPY BREED OF MEN, THIS LITTLE WORLD,  
THIS PRECIOUS STONE SET IN THE SILVER SEA,  
THIS BLESSED PLOT, THIS EARTH, THIS REALM, THIS  
ENGLAND, THIS TEEMING WOMB OF ROYAL KINGS. . . ."

THESE WORDS OF SHAKESPEARE EVOKE QUITE A VISION OF THE LAND OF MY FOREBEARS. PICTURE TODAY A FELINE MODEL IN UNION JACK JEANS, QUEEN ELIZABETH II BUSSED AND HUGGED BY AN OLD SOUTH AUNT JEMIMA OF SLAVE ANCESTRY, A SKYSCRAPER PARTIALLY BLOCKING OUT ST. PAUL'S DOME, PRINCE CHARLES' CROWNING UNDER A PLASTIC CANOPY WITHIN A CRUMBLING CASTLE IN WALES, A FEMALE MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT FIGHTING IN A LONDONDERRY STREET RIOT, AN ULTRA-MODERN CATHEDRAL SET AMIDST THE BOMBED-OUT RUINS OF OLD COVENTRY. . . .PERHAPS THESE ARE THE SORTS OF SIGHTS THAT BRITISH TRAVEL HAD IN MIND A FEW YEARS AGO WHEN IT BECKONED, "COME TO BRITAIN - ANCIENT AND MOD." MAYBE THERE'S SOME TRUTH TO WHAT DAVID FROST AND ANTHONY JAY WROTE IN THE ENGLISH: "IN ENGLAND NOTHING IS WHAT IT APPEARS TO BE. . . .THE ENGLISH ARE THE MOST PECULIAR PEOPLE ON GOD'S EARTH!"

WHO ARE THE ENGLISH THEN? NOT AN EASY QUESTION. I'M NOT ASKING WHETHER THEY'RE 'REALLY' CELTS, ANGLES, SAXONS, NORMANS,

OR SWEDES - YET, HAVE YOU EVER THOUGHT OF BRITAIN AS A MELTING POT? ALL OF US, OF COURSE, HEARD IN THE 1ST GRADE THAT AMERICA IS THE MELTING POT, AND PROUD OF IT! BUT CONSIDER THIS: THE FIRST ENGLISH MARTYR, ST. ALBAN, WAS A ROMAN SOLDIER; BEOWOLF, HERO OF THE ANGLO-SAXON EPIC THAT NEVER MENTIONS BRITAIN, WAS PROBABLY (IF HE EVER EXISTED) A SWEDE; HENRY VII, THE 1ST TUDOR KING, WAS A WELSHMAN (AND WELSHMEN ARE NOT ENGLISH - CERTAINLY RICHARD BURTON LET THE WORLD KNOW THAT WHILE HE WAS ALIVE!); JAMES I AND THE OTHER STUARTS WERE SCOTS (ALSO NOT ENGLISH!); VICTORIA AND ALBERT (OF SAXE-COBURG-GOTHA) WERE VERY GERMAN; WINSTON CHURCHILL WAS PART IROQUOIS INDIAN AMONG OTHERS. ELIZABETH II IS, OF COURSE, ALSO OF THE VICTORIAN HOUSE OF SAXE-COBURG-GOTHA (BUT NOW THAT'S ANGLICIZED TO "WINDSOR"); HER MOTHER IS A SCOT AND HER HUSBAND A GREEK - AND WHATEVER DOES THAT MAKE CHARLES, HEIR TO THE BRITISH THRONE? PERHAPS I SHOULD REWORD THE QUESTION. WHAT ARE THE ENGLISH LIKE? EACH OF US HAS HIS OWN "IMAGE", NO DOUBT; AS THE CASE MAY BE, A GLITTERING OR UNGLITTERING GENERALITY, A PREJUDICE. BUT FIRST, SOME SO-CALLED ENGLISHMEN HAVE THEIR OWN VIEW OF WHAT THE ENGLISH ARE LIKE.

E. M. FORSTER SAID, "IT IS NOT THAT THE ENGLISHMAN CAN'T FEEL - IT IS THAT HE IS AFRAID TO FEEL. HE HAS BEEN TAUGHT AT HIS PUBLIC SCHOOL THAT FEELING IS BAD FORM. HE MUST NOT EXPRESS GREAT JOY OR GREAT SORROW, OR EVEN OPEN HIS MOUTH TOO WIDE WHEN HE TALKS - HIS PIPE MIGHT FALL OUT IF HE DID!" DAVID FROST AND ANTHONY JAY HAVE THEIR PERSPECTIVE: "ENGLAND IS IMMEASURABLY THE BEST PLACE IN THE WORLD TO LIVE. ITS PEOPLE ARE MORE TOLERANT

AND MORE TALENTED THAN EVEN THEY BELIEVE." GEORGE BERNARD SHAW  
RETORTED: "AN ENGLISHMAN THINKS HE IS MORAL WHEN HE IS MERELY  
UNCOMFORTABLE." AND WINSTON CHURCHILL, SPEAKING AFTER THE BATTLE  
OF BRITAIN: "WHEN I WARNED THE FRENCH THAT BRITAIN WOULD FIGHT ON  
ALONE WHATEVER THEY DID, THEIR GENERALS TOLD THEIR PRIME  
MINISTER: 'IN 3 WEEKS ENGLAND WILL HAVE HER NECK WRUNG LIKE A  
CHICKEN.' SOME CHICKEN. SOME NECK." COME NOW, THE FRENCH ARE  
RARELY WRONG!

MOST OF US HAVE PROBABLY INHERITED THE STEREOTYPE THAT THE  
ENGLISH ARE SMUG, OR AT LEAST COLD - THE TRADITIONAL ICY HAUTEUR,  
AND ALL THAT. LET ME JUST SAY THAT THEY'RE A BIT MORE RESERVED  
THAN WE - OR EUROPEANS - ARE IN GENERAL. BUT I HAVE YET TO MEET  
A CANTANKEROUS OR UNFRIENDLY ONE; JUST DON'T EXPECT MUCH JOLLY  
BACKSLAPPING ON FIRST ACQUAINTANCE.

THE BEST SHORT ANALYSIS OF BRITISH RESERVE THAT I KNOW IS  
ONE BY LEO ROSTEN:

THE ENGLISH ARE PROUD; THE FRENCH ARE VAIN.  
ITALIANS WEEP; ENGLISHMEN WINCE.  
GERMANS BARK; ENGLISHMEN MURMUR.  
SPANIARDS SNEER; ENGLISHMEN FROWN.  
AMERICANS ENTHUSE; THE ENGLISH SIGH, "QUITE."

NOT THAT ENGLISHMEN DON'T ENJOY LIFE. RELIEVED FINALLY OF  
AN EMPIRE, THEY CAN NOW AFFORD TO LOOSEN UP A BIT. DUTY AND  
STIFF-UPPER LIP AREN'T EVERYTHING! FOR INSTANCE, THE ENGLISH ARE  
GREAT LOVERS OF SPORTS AND PETS - PERHAPS EVEN MORE THAN WE  
AMERICANS ARE. OF CONSUMING AND 'KILLING' INTEREST IS  
ASSOCIATION FOOTBALL, ALTHOUGH YOU PROBABLY WON'T BE ABLE TO SEE

A SOCCER GAME IN LONDON DURING THE SUMMER, BUT YOU MIGHT PERHAPS BE ABLE TO SEE A CRICKET GAME. CRICKET, BRITAIN'S NATIONAL SUMMER PASTIME, IS PLAYED ON SATURDAYS AT LORD'S, JUST WEST OF REGENT PARK. ALSO, DURING THE SUMMER: THE HENLEY REGATTA, THE ASCOT FLAT RACING (AS DISTINGUISHED FROM STEEPLECHASE), GREYHOUND RACING, AND THE ROYAL INTERNATIONAL HORSE SHOW. IF YOU THINK AMERICAN FANS GET FANATICAL, YOU SHOULD SEE THE ENGLISH.

COUPLED WITH BRITISH SPORT IS BETTING, WHICH MAY BE THE REAL NATIONAL SPORT! CROCKFORD'S OF LONDON REPORTEDLY DOES A 2-BILLION A-YEAR BUSINESS; AND IT'S ALL QUITE LEGAL, BUT LIKE DRINKING IN A PUB, IT'S HEDGED ABOUT WITH THE MOST ELABORATE RESTRICTIONS. WHICH SUGGESTS THAT THE ENGLISH ARE SOMEWHAT PURITANICAL ABOUT THEIR PLEASURES; FUN YOU CAN HAVE, BUT ONLY IF YOU'RE INCONVENIENCED OR TAXED TO DEATH!

THEIR ENTHUSIASM FOR PETS SUGGESTS ANOTHER SIDE - THEY'RE A BIT SENTIMENTAL. THERE'S THE QUEEN, OF COURSE, WITH HER MARVELOUS LITTLE WELSH SHEPHERD DOGS CALLED CORGIS; IF YOU CAN VISUALIZE AN IMPROBABLE COMBINATION OF GERMAN SHEPHERD AND DACHSHUND, YOU'VE GOT THE PICTURE - A WHOLESOME, HOMELY TOUCH TO ROYALTY. LESS ENDEARING SOME YEARS AGO WAS THE ANNOUNCEMENT THAT THE ROYAL HOUSEHOLD, TO ECONOMIZE, WOULD SELL ITS WORN-OUT HORSES FOR HAMBURGER. THE OUTCRY WAS ENORMOUS - AND THE HORSES WERE RETIRED TO A COUNTRY STABLE.

BRITISH PETS ENJOY AN EXALTED LEGAL STATUS. IT IS SURELY NOT WITHOUT SIGNIFICANCE THAT AS LONG AGO AS 1822 PARLIAMENT PASSED THE FIRST LAW MAKING CRUELTY TO ANIMALS A CRIME, WHEREAS

IT TOOK ANOTHER 67 YEARS TO GET AROUND TO MAKING CRUELTY TO CHILDREN ALSO AN OFFENSE. ONE MIDDLESEX COUPLE'S MARRIAGE ENDED IN DIVORCE BECAUSE THE HUSBAND ACCIDENTALLY KICKED THEIR DOG; AND THE JUDGEMENT WAS REVEALING: "IT IS NO USE TELLING THE COURT THAT A DISPUTE OVER A DOG IS A MATTER OF LITTLE IMPORTANCE. FEW COULD BE GRAVER." AS SOME WAG ONCE QUIPPED: "ALL THE WORLD LOVES A LOVER, BUT THE BRITISH PREFER THEIR ANIMALS."

FINALLY, BEFORE I GO ON TO DISCUSS A FEW OF MY FAVORITE BRITISH INSTITUTIONS, A WORD ABOUT TRADITION AND THE ENGLISH: THE STEREOTYPE, NO DOUBT, IS THAT THEY'RE "HIDE-BOUND". FIRST OF ALL, AS AMERICANS I BELIEVE WE TEND TO PLACE LITTLE REAL VALUE ON TRADITION, GENERALLY SPEAKING. IF ANYTHING, OUR TRADITIONS ARE FRILLS - NICE, BUT NOT VERY USEFUL. FOR EXAMPLE, WE LEAVE THE 4TH OF JULY MOSTLY TO THE AMERICAN LEGION OR THE D.A.R. PERHAPS PART OF THE REASON IS THAT THE AMERICAN EXPERIMENT ISN'T VERY OLD. IN THIS CONTEXT, IT'S INTERESTING TO NOTE THAT THE BRITISH CELEBRATED THE 350TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE PILGRIM FATHERS' DEPARTURE WITH ELABORATE FESTIVITIES. AND NOT PRIMARILY, I THINK, AS A TOURIST GIMMICK. IN ANY CASE, I DON'T RECALL HEARING VERY MUCH AT ALL ABOUT THE PILGRIMS' ANNIVERSARY OVER HERE! MY POINT IS THAT, UNTIL THE MIDPOINT OF THIS CENTURY, AMERICANS HAVE HAD A "PIONEER MENTALITY"; WE'VE HAD TO WORK SO DOGGEDLY JUST TO DEVELOP THE LAND THAT WE'VE HAD LITTLE LEISURE TO CELEBRATE OUR HISTORY. PROBABLY MANY BRITONS - PARTICULARLY YOUTH-MINDED BRITONS - WOULD AGREE THAT MOST TRADITIONS ARE 'IRRELEVANT'; PERHAPS THEY'D EVEN AGREE THAT THE IDEA OF TRADITION IS

IRRELEVANT. LORD COBHAM, A FORMER GOVERNOR OF THE BANK OF ENGLAND, GIVES ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE - ONE MORE CHARACTERISTIC OF THE ENGLISH:

THE HANDLING OF TRADITION IS AN ART AT WHICH THIS COUNTRY EXCELS. WE KNOW HOW TO KEEP WHAT IS OLD AND USEFUL AND TO ADD IN EACH CENTURY WHAT IS NEW AND USEFUL. SO THAT IN THE END TRADITION IS NOT JUST AN ARCHAIC FORM, BUT A PLANT, WITH ITS ROOTS IN THE PAST, WITH A HISTORY OF CONTINUING DEVELOPMENT, AND WITH A LIVELY PRESENT.

TRADITION IS VIRTUALLY AN ART TO THE BRITISH, AND THE ENGLISH ARE CERTAINLY MUCH MORE THAN I HAVE DESCRIBED.

BRITISH SOCIETY IS OFFICIALLY CLASSLESS. ROCK STARS AND MOVIE STARS ARE ENTERTAINED AT BUCKINGHAM PALACE AND ARE AWARDED THE ORDER OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE. FASHION HAS SHIFTED FROM SAVILE ROW TO CARNABY STREET AND CHELSEA. OXFORD AND CAMBRIDGE, THOSE 'HOARY SEATS OF EXCELLENCE AND PRIVILEGE,' ARE OPEN TO WORKINGMEN'S SONS. ROYALTY SWINGS WITH THE MASSES, AND EGALITARIANISM IS 'HIGH CAMP'. BUT LET'S BACK UP: "IN ENGLAND, NOTHING IS WHAT IT APPEARS TO BE. . ." IS BRITAIN REALLY CLASSLESS? YES AND NO. THERE ARE STILL ROYAL HIGHNESSES, GRACES, WORSHIPS, AND RIGHT HONORABLES. THE HOUSE OF LORDS, SOMEHOW, ENDURES. EMPTY TITLES? STAGE MASKS? YES AND NO. ONE OF THE IRONIES OF BRITISH LIFE IS THE GAP BETWEEN POLITICS AND SOCIETY. IT WOULD APPEAR THAT THE ENGLAND THAT LED THE WORLD TOWARD POLITICAL EQUALITY IS NEVERTHELESS INCURABLY CLASS-CONSCIOUS. AND SOME PUNDITS ARE ARGUING THAT THE CLASS DIVISIONS ARE REALLY DEEPER NOW THAT THEY HAVE BECOME ALMOST INVISIBLE.

PARDON ME IF I SOUND ALMOST UNDEMOCRATIC, BUT THERE'S

SOMETHING TO BE SAID IN FAVOR OF CLASS. IT GIVES EVERY MAN HIS PIGEONHOLE; HE PERFORMS OR FAILS TO PERFORM ACCORDING TO SET EXPECTATIONS; HE HAS NO 'IDENTITY CRISIS'; HE KNOWS HIS LIMITATIONS. IF HE FAILS, HE CAN ALWAYS BLAME IT ON THE DEAD-END SYSTEM INSTEAD OF HIMSELF. AND, WITHOUT QUESTION, THE CLASS SYSTEM HAS PRODUCED SOME TOWERING INDIVIDUALS. THE ARISTOCRACY HAS BEEN GIVEN - AND OFTEN HAS FULFILLED - AN ENORMOUS RESPONSIBILITY IN PUBLIC SERVICE.

WHAT ABOUT EDUCATION IN ENGLAND? CONSIDER FIRST THE AMERICAN PUBLIC SCHOOL. WHAT IS ITS REAL REASON FOR BEING? TO PRODUCE EXCELLENCE? ISN'T THE PUBLIC SCHOOL'S REAL FUNCTION TO PUT EVERYONE ON AN EQUAL FOOTING, TO PROVIDE EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY. ISN'T IT REALLY MEANT TO BE AN INSTRUMENT FOR DEMOCRACY RATHER THAN EXCELLENCE? AREN'T MOST AMERICANS BASICALLY SUSPICIOUS OF PRIVATE SCHOOLS?

IN SOME WAYS THE BRITISH SITUATION IS ANALOGOUS. THE MAJORITY OF BRITISH STUDENTS ARE IN UNSELECTIVE, STATE-OPERATED "SECONDARY MODERN" SCHOOLS, AND LIBERALS GENERALLY (AT LEAST OFFICIALLY) CONSIDER THESE SCHOOLS INSTRUMENTS FOR FURTHERLING CLASSLESSNESS. THE LABOR GOVERNMENT ONCE PLEDGED TO 'NATIONALIZE' BRITISH SCHOOLS. AT THE SAME TIME, MOST CONSERVATIVES IN BRITAIN (ROUGHLY EQUIVALENT TO THE WEALTHY, BUT WITH NOT A FEW EXCEPTIONS) REALLY BELIEVE IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (PUBLIC SCHOOLS MEANING PRIVATE SCHOOLS IN BRITAIN) -- AND THAT'S WHERE THEY DIFFER FROM MOST AMERICANS. MOST AMERICANS PROBABLY CONSIDER IT UNHEALTHY TO SEND THEIR SONS AWAY TO BOARDING SCHOOLS

OR ANY OTHER PRIVATE SCHOOL FOR THAT MATTER, EVEN IF THEY COULD AFFORD THE LUXURY OF DOING SO. SO LIBERALS HARP ABOUT INEQUALITY AND SNOBBISM, AND CONSERVATIVES ABOUT EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE - YET THE HIDDEN ISSUE HERE IS CLASS. IN POINT OF FACT, THE SECONDARY MODERN SCHOOL IS OFTEN A SOCIAL DEADEND: IT LEADS ONLY TO THE FACTORY, OFFICE, AND KITCHEN. IT'S THE "BRITISH PUBLIC SCHOOL" WHICH LEADS TO PARLIAMENT AND THE EXECUTIVE SUITE.

THE DUKE OF WELLINGTON ONCE SAID THAT "THE BATTLE OF WATERLOO WAS WON ON THE PLAYING FIELDS OF ETON." HE COULD JUST AS WELL HAVE SAID THAT THE CLASS BATTLE IS WON THERE. OR, AS TIME ONCE PUT IT, "TO RUN ENGLAND'S ETON IS TO TUTOR ENGLAND'S ESTABLISHMENT." IF YOU SAW THE MOVIE IF YOU'VE GOT A SOMEWHAT WARPED PICTURE OF AN ENGLISH PUBLIC SCHOOL. IT'S AUSTERE - IN FACT, THE MORE EXCLUSIVE THE MORE AUSTERE. THE HEADMASTER OF ETON ONLY A FEW YEARS BACK CALLED BEATING 'USEFUL'. USEFUL IT IS WHEN IT LEADS TO THE TOP - AND NOT A FEW LIBERAL POLITICIANS CHOOSE THE LIKES OF ETON FOR THEIR SONS.

AND WHAT ABOUT THE MONARCHY? DISRAELI SAID: "EVERYONE LIKES FLATTERY; AND WHEN YOU COME TO ROYALTY, YOU SHOULD LAY IT ON WITH A TROWEL." PROBABLY MANY AMERICANS CONSIDER MONARCHY A PUT-ON - IN MUGGERIDGE'S PHRASE, "ROYAL SOAP OPERA." WHAT GOOD IS A CONSTITUTIONAL QUEEN; ISN'T SHE JUST A FIGUREHEAD, AND AN EXPENSIVE ONE AT THAT? SOME ENGLISHMEN WOULD APPLAUD, THOUGH PROBABLY NOT MOST. WHETHER ELIZABETH II BE A "BRITANNIC MAJESTY PRESIDING OVER A NON-EXISTENT EMPIRE" OR NOT (MUGGERIDGE AGAIN), APPARENTLY MOST ENGLISHMEN LOVE HER. AND SYMBOLS HAVE THEIR

USES.

NOR IS THE QUEEN POWERLESS; HER PREROGATIVES ARE CONSIDERABLE. SHE OFFICIALLY APPOINTS PRIME MINISTERS, FOR EXAMPLE, AND SHE HAS VETO POWER. NOT THAT IT'S OFTEN USED, BUT BY REFUSING TO SIGN A "MONEY" BILL, SHE COULD CONCEIVABLY FORCE A GENERAL ELECTION. PREROGATIVES ASIDE, SHE IS PROBABLY BETTER INFORMED - BY RIGHT - ON MAJOR ISSUES THAN ANYONE ELSE IN BRITAIN; AND WHILE SHE MUST REMAIN RELATIVELY ALOOF OF MERE POLITICS, SHE IS, WHEN SHE SPEAKS, A VOICE LISTENED TO.

THE CROWNING OF PRINCE CHARLES A WHILE BACK BROUGHT TO THE FORE THE QUESTION OF THE MONARCHY'S FUTURE. WILL THERE BE, OR BETTER, SHOULD THERE BE KINGS WHEN TODAY'S GENERATION TAKES CONTROL? IN AN OPEN LETTER PUBLISHED IN TIME, A CAMBRIDGE STUDENT PUT IT TO PRINCE CHARLES THIS WAY: "IF YOU ARE TO BE A KING AT ALL, YOU MUST BE OUR KING." WHO CAN GUESS WHAT THAT WILL MEAN 15 TO 20 YEARS FROM NOW? PERHAPS, AT THE VERY LEAST, IT MEANS, "YOU MUST SYMBOLIZE US."

CERTAINLY, SYMBOLS HAVE THEIR USES. THE FOLLOWING WORDS, SPOKEN BY AN ENGLISHMAN OF THE ESTABLISHMENT TO AMERICANS, SAY BETTER THAN I CAN WHAT I'M TRYING TO CONVEY HERE:

THERE IS NOTHING QUITE LIKE THE QUEEN IN YOUR COUNTRY. . . HERE OUR SOVEREIGN - PARTICULARLY IN TIMES OF NATIONAL EMOTION, SUCH AS WAR - IS THE LIVING SYMBOL OF ALL THE PATRIOTISM AND FEELING THAT WE HAVE FOR OUR HOMELAND. SHE IS THE VERY EMBODIMENT OF OUR NATIONAL EXISTENCE IN A WAY THAT NO POLITICIAN CAN BE. IN YOUR COUNTRY I THINK ONLY YOUR FLAG QUITE ASSUMES THAT NATIONAL IDENTITY AND ELICITS THAT RESPONSE.

ANOTHER ANCIENT INSTITUTION - THE HOUSE OF LORDS! "THE HOUSE OF LORDS IS USELESS, AND DANGEROUS, AND OUGHT TO BE ABOLISHED" - THAT'S RATHER AN AVANT-GARDE NOTION FOR 1649, BUT ONE RECOMMENDED BY THE HOUSE OF COMMONS IN THAT VERY YEAR. MANY TODAY WOULD SHARE THAT SENTIMENT. THEY WOULD ADD, PERHAPS, THAT THE LORDS TODAY ARE QUITE IMPOTENT. WELL, NOT QUITE: THEIR POWERS HAVE NOT YET BEEN SUMMARILY LOPPED OFF, THOUGH CERTAINLY THEY HAVE BEEN TRIMMED. BUT, DESPITE THE TRIMMINGS, THE LORDS SERVE, - AND SOME WOULD SAY USEFULLY. AT THE VERY LEAST, THEY PUT ON A GOOD SHOW.

IMAGINE A CONGREGATION OF THE TITLED OF THE REALM - DUKES, BARONS, BISHOPS - ALL FURRED OUT IN ERMINE AND CRIMSON, AND WITH THEIR JEWELS FAIRLY GLITTERING. TRUMPETS BLAST, AND THEN THE QUEEN'S MAJESTY HERSELF APPEARS - ALL IN WHITE BUT FOR THE BLUE SASH OF THE ORDER OF THE GARTER.

OF COURSE, EVERYDAY ISN'T STATE OPENING. MORE USUALLY THE RED LEATHER BENCHES ARE A QUARTER FILLED WITH NUMEROUS OLD MEN, USING THE HEARING AIDS THOUGHTFULLY PROVIDED; SOMEBODY ASLEEP; SOMEBODY ELSE SPEAKING; A BISHOP OR TWO; AND ON THE WOOLSACK, THE LORD CHAMBERLAIN, THE ONLY ONE NOW IN ROBES AND WIG - IMPASSIVE. ABOUT 75% COME EVERY DAY (I.E. TUESDAY THROUGH THURSDAY); PERHAPS 150 COME SEVERAL TIMES A MONTH; THE REST OF THE THOUSAND LORDS, INFREQUENTLY. MOST OF THOSE WHO COME ARE OLD, FOR YOUNGER LORDS HAVEN'T THE TIME FOR A DUTY THAT CARRIES ALMOST NO REMUNERATION. AND A YOUNG LORD WITH POLITICAL AMBITIONS WOULD DO BETTER IN THE COMMONS, ALTHOUGH HE WOULD NEED TO RENOUNCE HIS TITLE; AND MORE

THAN ONE HAS DONE SO. EACH LORD REPRESENTS ONLY HIMSELF - NOT NECESSARILY ANY PARTY-LINE OR CONSTITUENCY. AND HE HAS A FEW SPECIAL PRIVILEGES: HE IS IMMUNE FROM CIVIL ARREST, FOR EXAMPLE, AND MAY WEAR HIS HAT BEFORE A JUDGE; AND UNTIL CAPITAL PUNISHMENT WENT OUT, HE COULD BE HANGED WITH A SILKEN CORD.

THE CHIEF POWER OF THE HOUSE OF LORDS IS MOSTLY TO POSTPONE - CURRENTLY FOR A FULL YEAR - ANY BILL FROM THE HOUSE OF COMMONS THAT IT VETOES. CONSIDERING THAT THE LORDS ARE MOSTLY CONSERVATIVES, THIS POWER CAN BE QUITE A THORN IN A LIBERAL GOVERNMENT'S SIDE. ACCORDINGLY, THE LAST LIBERAL GOVERNMENT PROPOSED 2 CHANGES: (1) TO REDUCE THE POSTPONEMENT TO 6 MONTHS, AND (2) TO LIMIT VOTING TO "CREATED" PEERS, I.E., THOSE WHO HAVE EARNED RATHER THAN INHERITED THEIR NOBLE STATUS. THAT WOULD LEAVE THOSE WITH INHERITED TITLES IN THE POSITION OF ONLY ADVISING THE CREATED PEERS. IT IS DOUBTFUL THAT SUCH A PROPOSAL WILL PASS IN OUR DAY AND TIME, BECAUSE THERE IS AN ADVANTAGE TO THE TRADITIONAL SET-UP: A HEREDITARY PEER IS BEHOLDEN TO NO GOVERNMENT AND NO PARTY, AND IS THEREFORE FREE TO DO HIS OWN THING - LARGELY A HARMLESS ARRANGEMENT!

LET ME GIVE YOU JUST A SAMPLING OF THE PERSONALITIES THAT HAVE BEEN IN THE HOUSE OF LORDS OVER THE LAST SEVERAL DECADES: LORD MOWBRAY, HOLDER OF THE OLDEST BARONY IN ENGLAND, WHO, WHEN SUED BY HIS WIFE SOME YEARS AGO, CLAIMED A LORD'S TRADITIONAL IMMUNITY; LORDS DEWAR AND GUINNESS, WHO OPERATE BREWERIES; FORMER PRIME MINISTERS BALDWIN, ATTLEE, AND EDEN; THE ARCHBISHOP AND A HOST OF OTHER BISHOPS, CALLED "THE LORDS SPIRITUAL"; LADY

CLEMENTINE CHURCHILL; "BOOFY, EARL OF ARRON AND FREE-WHEELING ANTI-ESTABLISHMENTARIAN COLUMNIST, AND THE ONLY COMMUNIST EVER, THE BARON OF MILFORD.

SPEAKING OF "NOTHING IS WHAT IT APPEARS TO BE IN ENGLAND..." 'TAKE COURAGE!' BILLBOARDS EVERYWHERE IN ENGLAND ADMONISH. IS THIS A NATIONAL REARMAMENT CAMPAIGN? POSITIVE THINKING? NO, INDEED! "TAKE COURAGE" IS JUST AN AD FOR A BRAND OF BEER NAMED 'COURAGE'. AH! THE BRITISH PUBLIC HOUSE! ANOTHER IMPORTANT INSTITUTION! THE GOOD LIFE IN ENGLAND CANNOT BE DISASSOCIATED FROM FOOD, DRINK, AND THE CONVIVIALITY THAT COMES WITH THESE 2 IMPORTANT MANIFESTATIONS OF WHAT IT IS TO BE ENGLISH.

LET IT BE SAID, FIRST, THAT BRITISH FOOD HAS, UNTIL RECENTLY, GOTTEN SHORT SHRIFT. OR PERHAPS IT WAS SIMPLY ABYSMAL. IN EITHER CASE, EVEN GOURMET MAGAZINE HAS NOW WORKED OUT A GASTRONOME'S TOUR OF BRITAIN. LET ME BE CLEAR ON THIS ISSUE: IT'S NOT SO MUCH THAT CONTINENTAL FRENCH HAUTE CUISINE HAS ARRIVED, BUT THAT BRITISH FOOD ITSELF HAS COME INTO ITS OWN.

REAL ENGLISH FOOD IS SIMPLE AND HEARTY, STARTING WITH BREAKFAST. NO CONTINENTAL CRUST-OF-BREAD-WITH-COFFEE HERE; RATHER, BACON AND BOILED EGGS AND TOMATOES AND STEWED PRUNES AND KIDNEYS AND KEDGEREE AND FRIED BREAD WITH MARMALADE AND COFFEE AND TEA WITH MILK. SLIGHT EXAGGERATION, PERHAPS, BUT IT MAKES THE POINT. A SPREAD LIKE THAT WOULD GET ANY SLUGGARD GOING.

LUNCHEON IS LIGHTER, BUT THEN TEA-TIME'S AT ABOUT FOUR. AND I DO RECOMMEND TEA-TIME WITH GOOD ENGLISH TEA, VEGETABLE AND MEAT FINGER SANDWICHES, AND LUSCIOUS PASTRIES OF ALL KINDS AND

CALORIES. THE TRUEST AND MOST ELEGANT PLACE FOR HIGH TEA IN LONDON IS AT THE OLD BROWN HOTEL. BUT THEN AGAIN THE RITZ IS NO SLOUCH! THE 'PLOUGHMAN'S LUNCH' IS HARDLY HAUTE CUISINE, BUT CERTAINLY TYPICAL - NOT ONLY FOR PLOUGHMEN BUT ALSO FOR CITY OFFICE WORKERS WHO LIKE TO RETREAT TO A PUB DURING THE NOON-HOUR. ORDER IT ALMOST ANYWHERE AND YOU GET: FRESHLY BAKED BREAD SLICED THICK, A WEDGE OF CHEDDAR, A PINT OF FOAMING BITTER, AND PROBABLY A COUPLE OF PICKLED ONIONS -OFTEN FOR LESS THAN A POUND.

EVERYBODY KNOWS THAT THE ENGLISH ARE GREAT BEEFEATERS. REALLY, THOUGH, IN MOST FAMILIES ROAST BEEF IS RESERVED FOR SUNDAY LUNCH. USUALLY, THE PINK ROAST IS COMPLEMENTED WITH HORSERADISH, GREENS, TURNIPS, POTATOES, YORKSHIRE PUDDING, AND A BIT OF SHERRY. NO ELABORATE FRENCH SAUCES FOR THE ENGLISH, AND FEW FRILLS. THE HUMBLEST PROBABLY SUBSTITUTE MUTTON FOR THE BEEF, BUT THE REST IS THE SAME, AND ANY LEFTOVERS GO INTO MONDAY'S "SHEPHERD'S PIE."

FISH AND CHIPS PROBABLY AREN'T EATEN EVERY WEEKDAY IN EVERY HOUSEHOLD, BUT MANY A FACTORY-EMPLOYED MOTHER SENDS ONE OF THE CHILDREN REGULARLY DOWN TO THE CORNER "CHIPS SHOP". YOU MIGHT SAY THAT FISH-AND-CHIPS IS THE NATIONAL ORDINARY-DAY DISH AND THAT ROAST BEEF IS THE NATIONAL SUNDAY DISH. THERE ARE OTHER SEAFOODS, OF COURSE: EELS (DELICIOUS JELLIED), AND COCKLES-AND-MUSSELS IN CIDER-AND-MILK SOUP - FANTASTIC!

VARIETIES OF CHEESE SEEM ENDLESS - EACH LITTLE COUNTRY DISTRICT SEEMS TO HAVE ITS OWN SPECIALTY - SO JUST A FEW NAMES OF MY FAVORITES: CHESHIRE (ALSO BLUE CHESHIRE, FARMHOUSE CHESHIRE,

AND RED FARMHOUSE CHESHIRE), BLARNEY (A PSEUDO-SWISS FROM COUNTY CORK IN EIRE), DOUBLE GLOUCESTERSHIRE, ORANGE LEICESTER, AND DERBY SAGE.

AFTER ALL THAT I MUST QUENCH MY THIRST AND QUAFF A FEW. ON TO DRINK, AND I QUOTE THE REVEREND SYDNEY SMITH, A 19TH CENTURY CLERIC AND WIT: "WHAT 2 IDEAS ARE MORE INSEPARABLE THAN BEER AND BRITANNIA?" OF COURSE, THE BRITISH DO DRINK OTHER BREWS, BUT WHEN THE ENGLISH BARMAID ASKS, "YOUR PLEASURE, GENTLEMEN?" THE ANSWER IS MOST OFTEN, "BITTER". BITTER IS A MEDIUM-DARK DRAFT BEER, STRONG AND YEASTY, AND SERVED AT CELLAR TEMPERATURE. THE NAME PRETTY WELL DESCRIBES THE TASTE SENSATION; A TASTE FOR IT IS ONLY ACQUIRED, AND I NEVER ACQUIRED THAT TASTE. ANOTHER POPULAR DRINK IS "STOUT", A MALT LIQUOR, BLACK AND VERY HEADY. "GUINNESS IS GOOD FOR YOU!" SAY THE SIGNS - AND IT'S SOMETIMES PART OF THE DIET IN ENGLISH HOSPITALS.

CIDER - REALLY A FORM OF WINE - SHOULD BE MENTIONED BECAUSE MANY AMERICANS THINK THAT THIS MEANS HALLOW'EN APPLE-JUICE. NOT SO! CIDER MAY SOUND VERY INNOCENT, BUT IT'S SOMETIMES 8% ALCOHOL AND PACKS QUITE A WALLOP TO THE UNWARY. I COULD WAX ON AND ON ABOUT THE ENGLISH GOOD LIFE AND MY FAVORITE TOPIC, GOOD FOOD AND DRINK, BUT SUFFICE IT TO SAY THAT THE GOOD LIFE IN BRITAIN IS INDEED GOOD, AND APPARENTLY IMPROVES WITH AGE.

DESPITE THE FACT THAT LONDON IS ONLY MY THIRD MOST FAVORITE CITY IN THE WORLD, THIRD ONLY TO PARIS AND FLORENCE, I WILL END WITH WHAT GREATER MEN HAVE SAID OF THIS WONDERFUL ENGLISH METROPOLIS: RALPH WALDO EMERSON HAS SAID THAT LONDON IS THE

EPITOME OF OUR TIMES, AND DR. SAMUEL JOHNSON EXCLAIMED, "WHEN A MAN IS TIRED OF LONDON, HE IS TIRED OF LIFE; FOR THERE IS IN LONDON ALL THAT LIFE CAN AFFORD." IN A VERY REAL SENSE, THEN, THE HISTORY OF LONDON IS THE HISTORY OF BRITAIN - AT LEAST IT'S A MIRROR-IMAGE OF BRITAIN'S LARGER HISTORY. TAKE A VOYAGE, THEN, TO THE "SCEPTER'D ISLE" WHERE "NOTHING IS WHAT IT APPEARS TO BE."