

## Last orders

GK Chesterton, who saw the traditional inn as a symbol of freedom, has often been invoked by politicians addressing questions of English identity. But, writes Patrick Wright, behind his quaint vision of thatched cottages, rolling roads and stoical natives lies an unsavoury xenophobia

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It is largely thanks to Gordon Brown that some of the more thoughtful political speeches of 2004 were concerned with British national identity, and the values around which a more devolved and various United Kingdom might cohere. Using platforms provided by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (February 18) and the British Council (July 8), the chancellor argued for a culture that should be at once enterprising and attentive to the "golden thread" running through British history. Careful to dissociate himself from backward-looking nostalgia, he argued for an open and renewable sense of national identity in which prominence is given to civic values and the sense of duty and fair play.

That vision of a "New Britain", where economic prosperity is harmonised with social justice, may indeed be something over which to fight an election. Yet until last month, when our former home secretary David Blunkett came out fighting for "a New England", the thought of a resurgent Englishness had definitely not inspired Brown, nor any of his Cabinet colleagues, to comparable flights. It is surely not just because both Brown and Blair are Scottish that "the English question" has been met with palpable silence in government circles. Nor is that silence merely a neutral acknowledgement of the difficulty (also faced by the monarchy as plans were drawn up for today's Royal wedding and, for that matter, by the compiler of the bestseller *The Pocket Book of Patriotism*) of invoking Englishness without undermining your wider appeals to British identity.

In recent years, the thought of Englishness has provoked a positive sense of embarrassment of the kind that, during Blair's first term, made the rebranded politicians of "New Labour" comically reluctant to be photographed near anything resembling an old building. It has been permissible to emphasise the virtues of regionalism within Europe, but English nationalism has been denied, as Blunkett felt licensed to complain from his new position on the sidelines, as an incorrigibly primitive beast: "festering, resentful" and best kept carefully locked up in its cave.

Blunkett sounded his own cautions about Enoch Powell, and the xenophobic fulminations that defender of the realm launched in the 1960s. Yet if there is good reason to resist the idea of "little England", it may also be connected to the continued circulation of a famous couplet from a poem written before the first world war:

"Smile at us, pay us, pass us; but do not quite forget.

For we are the people of England, that never have spoken yet."

In 1997, those lines from GK Chesterton's "The Secret People" were brandished by Martin Bell as he opposed Neil Hamilton in the Tatton by-election. In June 1999, James Gray, the Scottish Tory MP for North Wiltshire, quoted them as he argued against the injustice of a post-devolutionary situation in which MPs for Scotland, now established under its own national parliament, nevertheless retained power to make decisions over England. In February 2002, they were used by Iain Duncan Smith on behalf of farmers whose animals were beset by foot and mouth disease. Favoured by fox-hunting militants, they have also appeared on the banners of Countryside Alliance marchers: brandished as the slogan of a rural population considered to be oppressed by the values

of the urban majority and a Labour government that has no respect for rural traditions. They have been recited by the "Campaign for an English Parliament" and also by the UK Independence party, for whom Chesterton's "secret people" are patriots oppressed by the remote decision of the European Community.

If these lines from Chesterton remain one of the most persistently quoted expressions of English identity, this may be because their definition of Englishness differs from other well-known examples. Various figures, including most famously the Tory prime minister Stanley Baldwin on St George's Day 1925 and George Orwell in 1940, have reached their definitions of national identity by drawing up lists of characteristic qualities or traits. Chesterton had his preferences too, but the Englishness of his "secret people" is not just an inventory. It is, instead, a defensive stance adopted against the power of the state and the transformations that follow in the wake of modernisation and change. As such, Chesterton's version of Englishness has proved more easily adjustable to changing times than Orwell's more static list of smoky towns, clattering clogs, red pillar-boxes, autumnal mists and bicycling old maids (a collection of "characteristic fragments" that seemed threadbare and sadly exhausted when John Major tried to reorientate them towards "middle England" in the early 90s). It has also shown far greater persistence than the horse-drawn ploughs that Baldwin declared to be an eternal and primordial English sight just as the usurping tractor was coming over the hill, on St George's Day in 1925.

Far more emphatically than Orwell's or Baldwin's, Chesterton's "Englishry" finds its essence in an adjustable sense of being opposed to the prevailing trends of the present. It is a semi-instinctive theory of encroachment that allows even the most well-placed man of the world to imagine himself a member of an endangered aboriginal minority: a freedom fighter striking out against "alien" values and the infernal works of a usurping state.

So what are the sources of this defensive and surprisingly persistent way of thinking about English identity? Chesterton's "The Secret People" was first published in 1907 in a magazine called *The Neolith*. Its "secret" Englishmen can be imagined as a group of Anglo-Saxon men seated in an unrenovated pub: slow but steadfast, unschooled but instinctively wise. These representatives of native common sense have sat there, silently drinking their undoubtedly real ale while the centuries have unfolded outside and sometimes come crashing in through the door. They have seen the comings and goings of sundry invaders, and gained nothing through a long succession of rulers - from Norman barons to the triumphant puritans of the civil war. Some may have put down their glasses and wandered off to fight with Nelson at Trafalgar ("dying like lions to keep ourselves in chains"). In general, however, these English natives have not responded enthusiastically to those who have tried to rally them to the defence of their own interests: "A few men talked of freedom, while England talked of ale."

Chesterton, who died in 1936, cannot have seen "binge-drinking" of the kind that nowadays tends to alarm even half-drunk observers of the English Saturday night. He did, however, find his own way of coming down on the side of the alehouse. He treated beer as both the desire and customary right of the increasingly put-upon native Englishman. He developed this idea in his argument with the Fabian socialists who imagined building up a strong and expert state as an instrument of enlightened social reform. Working-class alcoholism was a matter of concern for the Fabians (as it was for many European socialist parties seeking a wider, and non-drunken, franchise at the opening of the 20th century). With his long-standing friend Hilaire Belloc, who also praised the traditional pub as "a fortress of virtue" in a degenerating present in which "nothing ... is capable of endurance", Chesterton argued strongly against these meddlesome Fabian reformers. Writing in AR Orage's journal *The New Age* in 1908, he declared "Drink and property have been swelled in our world into abominations ... The proposed abolition of personal property has its only practical parallel in teetotalism." So this curious Edwardian symbolism grew up, in which beer came to be associated with traditional English freedom, while the joyless and over-intellectual Fabian meddlers such as HG Wells and George Bernard Shaw put themselves to bed with warm cocoa.

Far from being an outcrop of Tory thinking, Chesterton's idea of England's "secret people" originated as part of this dispute within Edwardian socialism and the radical

Liberalism of that time. Chesterton and Belloc came to be known as "Distributists", arguing, against both monopoly capitalism and state socialism, that property and ownership of the "means of production" should be as widely spread as possible. Their vision was variously shaped by Catholicism, anarchism, Chartism, and also the decentralising thought of guild socialism, a movement that followed William Morris and John Ruskin in finding inspiration in the craft guilds of the medieval age. Their beleaguered "England" was on the side of the people against industrialism, monopoly capitalism and the rules and bureaucrats of what Belloc called "the servile state". Chesterton and Belloc would join the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings in seeking to preserve traditional "thatched" roofs against the big businesses that could spend fortunes pushing synthetic alternatives. Yet if theirs was emphatically a "little England", this was also because it entailed a strong rejection of British imperialism.

Chesterton elaborated on this aspect of his Englishness in an article entitled "On Rudyard Kipling and making the world small", included in his book *Heretics* (1905). Here he took issue with the epigram in which Kipling asked "what can they know of England who only England know?" It was, contended Chesterton, "a far deeper and sharper question to ask, 'What can they know of England who know only the world?'" As an imperial "globe trotter", Kipling may certainly "know the world; he is a man of the world, with all the narrowness that belongs to those imprisoned in that planet. He knows England as an intelligent English gentleman knows Venice." Insisting that Kipling's devotion to England was the outcome not of love but of critical thought, Chesterton values it far less than the "real" (by which he means instinctive and unreflected) patriotism of the Irish or the Boers, whom Kipling had recently "hounded down in South Africa".

Belloc, who had also strongly opposed the Boer war and British colonialism in Africa, shared Chesterton's insistence that "the 'large ideas' prosper when it is not a question of thinking in continents, but of understanding a few two-legged men". It was in the same spirit of epic belittlement that Belloc pronounced, after passing through Ely on an excursion into the fens, that "the corner of a corner of England is infinite, and can never be exhausted".

This attempt to dissociate "England" from the British empire may indeed sound attractive. Yet it remained a thoroughly defensive definition of Englishness - one that was formulated in bitter awareness that the world was actually moving in the opposite direction. Its anti-imperialism was less a critical engagement with the British empire, than an act of retreat and even denial. Though presented as a cosmic locale, Chesterton's England was actually also a last ditch, no sooner occupied than it had to be defended against all sorts of encroaching modern forces.

Chesterton himself demonstrated this in 1914, when he published his comic novel *The Flying Inn*. This work shows beleaguered English virtues lined up against a host of parodied modern absurdities. It opens with Humphrey Pump, whose ancient pub, *The Old Ship*, lies by an apple orchard in a little village named Pebbleswick. All would have remained well in this organic English nook, except that the British government, thanks to an over-intellectual Cabinet minister named Lord Ivywood, has succumbed to alien influences. In what may have been intended as a comment on the cranky faddishness of Fabian intellectuals, Ivywood has fallen under the spell of a zealous Islamic prophet, and imposed a ban on alcohol. *The Old Ship* may long have been a refuge for those who wished that, in Belloc's phrase, "the fear of mutation should be set at rest". But close it must, so Pump and his friends uproot their pub sign, take a barrel and a large cheese and set off around the country: coming out of hiding to erect their pub sign at a series of fugitive locations, and then melting away again as the authorities catch up.

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

boundaries almost by intuition". "The deepest thoughts are all commonplaces," as Chesterton writes, once again lining up unreflected English instinct against the detached and artificial cleverness of the ruling elite: "If they have to choose between a meadow and a motor, they forbid the meadow."

The Flying Inn is still admired as a prescient comedy: an early assault on "political correctness", the taste of pretentious elites, and the interfering mentality of the centralised state. His position on alcohol will surely be approved by ex-ultra-leftist Times columnist, Mick Hume, who uses this month's issue of Roger Scruton's bulletin, *The Risk of Freedom*, to declare himself a convert to the cause of binge-drinkers against the nanny state. Chesterton was also insightful on less frothy themes. His dislike of the scientifically organised state alerted him early to the dangers of eugenics. His mistrust of the Fabians was at least partly vindicated in the 30s, when too many of these self-important thinkers followed the Webbs in embracing Stalin's Soviet Union as the "New Civilisation" where centralised state planning had really come into its own. There was nothing fictitious about many of the degradations he and Belloc opposed in the English landscape; and his doubts about democracy ("government by the uneducated") did not automatically convert into a Tory worship of the aristocracy ("government by the badly educated"). His novel *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* (1904) is said to have inspired Michael Collins in the struggle for Irish independence.

Chesterton's lines about "the people of England, that never have spoken yet" have also found a variety of democratic applications over the years. They were forcefully evoked in the House of Commons on September 2 1939, during a heated debate that challenged Neville Chamberlain, together with his policies of appeasing Hitler (who had just invaded Poland). When the leader of the Labour Party, Arthur Greenwood rose to speak, Leopold Amery shouted "Speak for England, Arthur!" from the Conservative benches.

In 1977, the Scottish writer Tom Nairn used the couplet from Chesterton's "The Secret People" in his book *The Break Up of Britain*. He quoted it at the head of a chapter arguing for a new and critically informed conception of English identity (to be produced by such initiatives as the folk music revival and Raphael Samuel's History Workshop movement) that would enable the English majority to dissociate their sense of identity from the unitary British state, thereby making Scottish independence a less threatening prospect. In 1988, Chesterton's lines helped to inspire a modest "Movement for Middle England", founded in Leicester shortly before the idea of "Middle England" was taken over by John Major and identified with the Conservative middle classes. This initiative (subsequently relaunched as "Devolve!") announced itself an anti-chauvinist campaign, which aimed for the "empowerment of ordinary people" and aspired to give native East Midlanders a cultural vitality of the kind possessed by immigrant communities in the region.

The Movement for Middle England may not have been racist, as some observers suspected at the time. Yet the dangers of Chesterton's way of thinking about England as an organic realm threatened by modern forces were also evident from the start.

In the poem, "The Ballad of the White Horse" (1911), the malevolent encroacher is only a weed creeping inward to obscure the ancient horse carved in the chalk of a Wessex hillside:

"The turf crawled and the fungus crept,  
and the little sorrel, while all men slept,  
Unwrought the work of man."

Yet in "The Secret People", the ever-present agents of destruction had already been given human form. They appear as the nullifying bureaucrats of the modern state:

"Lords without anger and honour, who dare not carry their swords.  
They fight by shuffling papers; they have bright dead alien eyes."

The racial alien is also dragged in: "the cringing Jew," accompanied as so often in anti-semitic iconography, by his loyal sidekick "the staggering lawyer".

These lines, which are generally not excerpted in dictionaries of quotations, indicate that qualities distinct from Pump's "incorruptible kindness" may be found at the heart

of Chesterton's England. Indeed, they suggest it may be impossible to adopt the values of secret "England", without also recognising a current of fear and loathing that brings a whole series of "alien" destroyers streaming by.

Anti-semitism makes all too many appearances in the work of both Chesterton and Belloc. Admirers of their Englishness have tried to minimise this uncomfortable fact, insisting that Chesterton was not a doctrinal anti-semite of the Nazi variety, and pointing out that anti-semitism was more or less endemic in the culture of the time. These apologies won't do. Chestertonian Englishness is founded on an apprehension of alien threats, which are built into its very heart. Like the Muslim prophet, the rapacious industrialist, the officious state bureaucrat and the interfering Fabian intellectual, the Alien Jew (treated as the personification of a locally destructive international financial system) is not just an unfortunate "period" detail. He is a constellating force without which Chesterton's beleaguered "England" would lose not just its freedom to snigger but also its clarity and moral definition.

If the Chestertonian idea of England has persisted, so too have its defining phobias.

Chesterton's "The Secret People" was an inspiration to This England, the widely distributed heritage quarterly, which, since its launch in the late 60s, has accompanied its celebration of steam engines, hedgerows, cathedrals and choirboys with editorials expressing a horror of immigration and "multiculturalism". An ostensibly comic strand of fiction persists as well. In 1995, the journalist and historian Andrew Roberts published *The Aachen Memorandum*, a slight but symptomatic novel in which an "English Resistance Movement", consisting mostly of Roberts and his thinly disguised friends, rise up against a German-dominated European super-state, which bans Christmas trees, Hollywood films, and elaborates interfering rules concerning the right, or otherwise, of native English women to shave their armpits. Pursuing the same theme of bunkered Englishness, Richard Littlejohn came up with *To Hell in a Handcart* (2001), a sniggering fulmination directed against predictable targets - from the political correctness of the state functionary to racism awareness training. This book serves quite adequately to bring us up to a present in which Chesterton's "The Secret People" appears unexpurgated as "poem of the month" on the British National Party's website.

Chesterton's vision of "secret" England dates from nearly a century ago, but it expresses a way of thinking about identity and change that remains influential to this day. It is by no means a dominant outlook, yet its persistence in an age increasingly defined by global mobility, transnational identities, and a comparative weakening of the nation-state, justifies the sense of caution that many feel about English nationalism. In polarising the past from the present, it can only produce a kippered idea of England in which the very thought of difference or change is instantly identified with degeneration, corruption and death. Chesterton and Belloc may have associated their "remaining" England with Catholic values, but it was too often also a Philistine England, in which "native commonsense" becomes indistinguishable from "unspoken" prejudice; and in which the elegiac spirit is no longer content to linger over real ale in unmodernised pubs, but becomes militant and vicious. In too many versions, it is a secret England not because its people are genuinely too oppressed to speak, but because they prefer to sit muttering over their glasses: sharing "unspeakable" ideas that are neither remotely adequate to the issues they pretend to address nor capable of commanding public debate.

This vision of England as a beleaguered organic community does nothing to clarify the problems it addresses. Instead, it wraps them in a grossly simplified narrative of (old) authenticity and (new) corruption, and then sends out its followers in search of scapegoats. In 1914, Chesterton's roving commonsensical publican Pump made do with a pub sign, a cheese and a barrel of beer. But, if last year's Labour party conference is anything to go by, his instinctive, fox-hunting descendants prefer to dump dead animals in the streets of Brighton, and to snarl anti-semitic insults at Gerald Kaufman. Let us, by all means, look forward to greater political and cultural vitality within England. Nobody, however, should mistake a democratic general election for a Chestertonian seizure in which terrorists, immigrants, travellers, contaminating NHS "superbugs", binge-drinking jobs and "Europe" are used, either explicitly or "secretly", to promise a

national recovery organised around Michael Howard's assertion that "the first responsibility of government is to control the nation's borders".

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