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10. Turning Inward: Brexit, Encroachment Narratives and the English as a 'Secret People'

Patrick Wright

I spent much of 2016 going back and forth between two parts of England and wondering, increasingly, as the 'Brexit' referendum campaign divided them into camps of contrary and perhaps irreconcilable opinion. For much of that time I was at home a mile or two outside Cambridge – an area that was strongly in the 'remain' camp. The local squire is a socially liberal man whose response to the referendum was to fly a huge European Union flag from the top of the manor house. We have got booming science parks, international schools as well as universities and a rapidly expanding biomedical campus, acres of expensive new housing and many other signs of prosperity and educated confidence about the future. Catch sight of a Polish food shop in this part of England and you just might mistake it for a delicatessen catering to the cosmopolitan tastes of the prospering middle class. As for politics, I remember the question of a visiting plumber: 'what kind of town is it,' he mused of Cambridge, 'where the Vote Labour stickers appear in the windows of the biggest houses?'

When not at home in Remainland, I have been researching on the Isle of Sheppey, which lies on the outer reaches of the Thames estuary in North Kent. Sheerness, which is the unofficial 'capital' of Sheppey, is a small, once naval town built on low-lying marshland and surrounded by relics of an imperial and military history that retains very little purchase on the present. The naval dockyard around which the town developed was closed with proportionally huge job losses in 1960. If the mural

recently added to the seaside park is to be believed, the most telling legacy of Sheerness's cancelled naval history is the curse (and, of course, dark tourist attraction) of a partly sunken Liberty ship which remains stuck on a submerged sand-bank where it got stranded in 1943, near the main shipping channels, still packed with a huge cargo of bombs that are judged too dangerous to move. 'Welcome to Sheerness,' the mural proclaims: 'You'll have a blast'.

One of the few national companies that has recently put money into Sheerness High Street is Wetherspoons, which has opened a well-used pub, the Belle and Lion, in which pro-Brexit beer mats were provided to confirm customers in their decision. It was impossible to miss the same message while working at the microfilm reader in the public library. Unlike its equivalents in Cambridge, Sheerness library is not a place where people speak in hushed tones if at all. Residents come to this fine establishment to talk as well as to read, get warm or attend advice sessions on the presentational skills necessary in the search for employment. The fields and windows of Sheppey were well planted with posters announcing UKIP's slogan 'we want our country back'. There was graffiti too, sourly proclaiming that Warsaw is not the capital of Sheppey. It was, however, these unrestrained conversations in the library that revealed the strength and passion of the support for Brexit in places that have born the brunt of George Osborne's 'austerity'.

I heard no discussion here of the fine points of the question – of exactly how, say, the powers of the EU were divided between the European Central Bank, the European Commission or the European Court of Justice. Neither was there any bandying of acronyms to distinguish between the EEA and EFTA, or between Brexit and the 'Fleksit' variant advocated by the Conservative Bow Group. Instead, the conversations were driven by an overwhelming sense of grievance: an enraged patriotism, in other words, itself shaped by a sense of abandonment and betrayal that was often expressed in the traditional terms of estuarial geography. The enemy may certainly have included bureaucrats in Brussels (which one geographically shaky drinker in the Belle and Lion thought could be dealt with by sending a gunboat up the Seine) and Polish workers and other immigrants who had found their way across the Channel. However, the referendum was also embraced as a chance to hit back at powerful interests upriver in London – rich bankers, no doubt, but also the politicians and bureaucrats who had presided over recent decades of perceived misrule. 'They've given us a vote,' as one man proclaimed to the nodding group at his table, 'and I'm going to use it.'

In the weeks after the referendum, I tried to understand the Brexit rebellion with the help of Robert Ford and Matthew Goodwin's *Revolt on the Right*, the book that launched the idea of the white working class as the 'left behind' who were increasingly moved by the appeals of UKIP and the 'radical right'. I don't doubt the claim that the white working class has been particularly hard hit by 'deindustrialisation' and the more recent combination of globalisation and 'austerity'. In the wider Brexit debate, however, this idea of the 'left behind' has come to stand in the way of adequate understanding. As a motif that has so quickly gone into extraordinarily wide circulation, it imposes an abstract identity on people who are actually different and far from supine in their attitudes (it is, as I was robustly informed when I tried it out on a drinker in the Belle and Lion, another 'insult' aimed at people who might be better respected as the 'stayed behind'). It creates a sense of blameless victimhood where questionable qualities may also be involved, including wilful ignorance, xenophobia and more or less violent bigotry. It obscures the social diversity of the pro-Brexit vote, reducing it to what was surely only one of its constituents, namely the white working class. In the wake of the referendum, it has become customary for the cause of the 'left behind' to be twinned with condemnation of an equally generalised 'liberal elite' in which defenders of post-war social democracy are corralled together with bankers and plutocrats and declared responsible for the consequences of economic and social policies they may actually have long opposed.

The referendum may have squeezed the idea of the 'left behind' into a million articles and speeches around the world (the phrase was soon enlisted by the Trump campaign), but it is not just in Sheerness that some Brexiteers have opted for a more resistant idea of the English people. Their preferred text is a poem named 'The Secret People', written by G.K. Chesterton and first published in an obscure literary magazine named *The Neolith* in 1907:

*Smile at us, pay us, pass us; but do not quite forget;
For we are the people of England, that
never have spoken yet*

The poem shows England's long-suffering common people oppressed by one alien 'elite' after another, from the invading Norman conquerors to the bureaucratic Lords of the modern State. It is, effectively, a poetically simplified history lesson, sustained by the thought that the English – for so long used, betrayed and put upon – may one day rise

up in even fiercer wrath than was displayed by the French and Russians in their earlier revolutions. The poem was quoted by diverse journalists immediately after the referendum: Libby Purves in both the *Times* and the *Sun*, Richard Littlejohn in the *Daily Mail*, Andrew Marr in the *New Statesman* – all of them joining Catholic websites and the blogs that hailed Chesterton as the true prophet of Brexit.

If Brexit spoke for the not quite lost solidarity of the ‘people’ in this distinctly Chestertonian way, it was also presented as a recovery of the national landscape from the dismal grip of ‘Europe.’ Immediately after the referendum, Allison Pearson of the *Sunday Telegraph* joyfully recited a list of evocative English place names, imagining liveliness and vigour flowing back into ancient English settlements as they escape from the EC’s version of the old Norman yoke. A few months later Daniel Hannan, the Brexiteering MEP for South-East England, felt moved to write about the ‘beautiful melancholy’ of the English autumn, quoting C.S. Lewis, *Watership Down* and an ancient Anglo-Saxon maxim, in an article for the *Telegraph* that seemed to imply that the English autumn had rarely been so beautiful as it was in the wake of the referendum result. In another post-Brexit contribution, this one recorded for the BBC website, he found a different way back to the traditional English countryside, likening the day of Brexit to the experience of a man who had spent 44 years trapped in ‘a dark and cramped room’ but was suddenly now free to step out into a sunlit ‘meadow.’ Hannan (whose life as MEP for South-East England surely can’t be that miserable) would not be alone in yearning for a recovery of English nature. The director general of the National Trust, Dame Helen Ghosh, had already spoken out at the beginning of August 2016, welcoming Brexit as an opportunity to ditch the subsidised monocultures of the Common Agricultural Policy and return to a more variegated English countryside in which species decline might be reversed and considerations of wildlife and environment given new priority. If Brexit gave new hope to England’s remaining ‘meadows’ as well as to its upland moors and woodlands, it might also help to protect the national landscape from invasive immigrants. On the *Today* programme in early November 2016, the Chief Executive Officer of the conservation body Buglife could be heard pointing out the threat posed by an invasive Brazilian flatworm, fortuitously named the Obama worm, which has spread through Europe and is now arriving in the UK hidden in pot plants imported from Holland and emerging to destroy native earthworms and snails. Mr. Shardlow’s concern was entirely reasonable, but I sensed a hint of Brexit-fired optimism in the enthusiasm with which he looked forward to the possibility of restricting plant sales to British nurseries.

If the liberation of the English landscape is one theme within Brexit's associational field, so too is a recovery of the national past. While still dizzy with their unexpected victory, the Brexiteers were quick to reach out for historical bearings, laying claim to historical traditions that, before their victory, might well have been raised against them. They were, perhaps, on safe ground claiming the legacy of the Peasants' Revolt, in which lawyers and other well-heeled 'experts' did indeed find themselves in trouble. However, they also signed up the suffragettes (the historian, Andrew Roberts, made that claim a day or so after the vote in the *Sunday Telegraph*) and even the 19th century abolitionists who campaigned against slavery in the British Empire (that was Daniel Hannan again). The memory of the Second World War was enlisted by the Brexiteers – Priti Patel stood by and smiled at the *Sun's* photographer as RAF veterans pleaded with voters that they should not 'give away everything we fought for'. Additional historical resonances were found in the fact that the referendum coincided with the centenary of the Battle of the Somme. Poppies were worn with particular vigilance by politicians when Remembrance Day came round in November.

Many Brexiteers invoked the memory of British power – it was there in references to the imperial past, in the often recited claim that the world needs us more than we need them, and in musings about the renewal of the Commonwealth from which, as I was reminded by an old fellow in The Belle and Lion, 'we' once imported our staples (including the 'beef, bread and butter' that once furnished working class tables). Yet the Brexit campaign was also characterised by a resurgence of English identity, hauled out of its silencing merger with the British state and displayed in all its regional variety – was, with some reason, presented as a return of the repressed. Under Gordon Brown's leadership, which came to such a humiliating end in 2010, every emphasis was placed on asserting a modernised and socially progressive idea of 'British' identity against the claims of Scottish nationalism. In speeches drafted by Michael Wills, then the MP for Swindon North, Brown set out to fashion a new British patriotism from the 'connecting thread' of democratic values that George Orwell, writing in 1940, imagined might (just) be strong enough to rally the people of both Britain and the empire to the war against Nazism. Brown's 'new Britain' offered a 'patriotic alternative' to Scottish independence based on justice, liberty and fair play, with the NHS at its centre – it found its best witness in 'Isles of Wonder,' Danny Boyle's show for the opening of the London Olympics in 2012. While designed to be inclusive and multi-cultural, a resurgent sense of Englishness would find little accommodation in this vision. Anyone who pushed

beyond the modestly powered and largely unwanted 'regional assemblies' offered as consolation to members of the silent English majority who might have felt irked by the devolution of powers to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, was likely to be viewed with suspicion – as if they were fellow-travelling members of Nigel Farage's UKIP or Nick Griffin's BNP, which did indeed produce a magazine called *Identity*. A good few such English patriots were faced down by John Prescott, a Deputy Prime Minister who was sent out to order these muddled upstarts to look at their passports and accept that there was no such thing as English nationality. Gordon Brown met his English nemesis in April 2010, when he was recorded dismissing Maureen Duffy, a long-standing Labour supporter in Rochdale, as a 'bigoted woman' after she questioned him about immigration. A comparable embarrassment returned to haunt Labour in 2014, when Emily Thornberry (an MP who, as the tabloids know well, lives in Islington) was obliged to resign as Shadow Attorney General, having tweeted a superior comment attached to a picture of a white van parked outside a working class house in Dartford, Kent, that was heavily draped with English flags showing the Cross of St. George.

While the Brexit campaigns have rightly been condemned for its appeals to xenophobia, and for the lies, misrepresentations and sheer opportunism of its leaders, there is more to be said than that. To the considerable extent that this resurgence of English identity has been engineered by partisan politicians, campaigners and journalists, it has also been activated by the deployment of allegorical narratives that work by simplification and polarisation. In these encroachment narratives, the traditional nation and its way of life is typically squared off against a vividly imagined and probably advancing threat – be it immigrants, bureaucrats, Europe, 'experts' etc. Where the reality addressed is likely to be complex and full of nuance, encroachment narratives of this kind press that reality into a brutally simplified and prejudged opposition between good and evil. They often defend a traditional idea of community against modern forms of society and political organisation. They tend to favour common sense and instinct over long words, abstract knowledge and expertise. They make a virtue, particularly in the English context, of insularity and shrinkage. They champion the small, the grounded and the localised, as opposed to the large and mobile sweep of internationalisation and cosmopolitanism. They are highly resistant to any possibility of compromise or synthesis between their opposed terms.

I am not making the standard post-structuralist point that narratives are more real than reality itself. However, in the present populist climate, we surely do need to understand their power in shaping understanding of modern political realities. While polarising encroachment narratives are well suited to the age of Twitter, we should recognise both that they have long been used instrumentally on both sides of the political spectrum, and also that they themselves form part of a characteristically English mode of thought that the Brexiteers appear eager to reinstate in the present. In earlier times as now, however, they have also proved highly problematic in their articulation of political realities.

Encroachment narratives abound in the writings of William Cobbett (1763–1835), the campaigning journalist and furious defender of the beleaguered Georgian countryside, whom Raymond Williams would place among the founders of a characteristically English idea of culture, and whose name now appears as a proto-Brexiteer in blog posts. He conducted his ‘rural rides’ as the agrarian revolution proceeded in the 1820s, producing a fulminating account of England as he saw it at this moment of transition. As Karl Marx would observe not long afterwards, Cobbett placed too much expectation on parliamentary reform as the cure of diverse ills, and had little understanding of the new capitalism whose consequences he was observing with such furious dismay. As G.D.H. Cole would assert much later, he also lived before it became apparent that the urbanisation and industrialisation, which Cobbett saw as entirely hellish, would eventually open new possibilities of working class politics. As it was, Cobbett raged against everything he could blame for the destruction of the traditional rural community: the Reformation, the national debt, tea drinking, decadent MPs sitting for rotten boroughs, the genteel fashion for mahogany furniture, sofas and picturesque views in which the countryside was dissociated from utility, the abolitionists (accused of being more ‘concerned’ about distant slaves than about native English labourers) and, as some of Cobbett’s admirers still struggle to accept, Jews. The list is long, varied and disconcerting, even after Cobbett has bundled up everything on it to produce the overwhelming biblical monster he named ‘the thing.’

Polarised allegories also feature strongly in the writings of G.K. Chesterton, who may well appeal to the Brexiteers not just as the author of ‘The Secret People,’ but as the man who turned being a ‘Little Englander’ into a positive virtue. At the beginning of the 20th century, as during the ongoing discussion of Brexit, that phrase circulated as an insult that scarcely anyone was happy to tolerate. It was used by Tory imperialists

to denigrate Liberal politicians who opposed the British Empire's assault on the independent Boer republics in the Second Boer War of 1899–1902. There were noisy 'pro-Boer' rallies in Britain, in which the government was fiercely condemned for rounding up women and children and starving them in 'pestilential camps' – allegedly for the commercial gain of the 'Stock Exchange contingent'.

For the rising journalist and writer Chesterton, however, 'Little England' was to be embraced as a badge of honour marking a return to true democracy. An anti-imperialist who would be dismayed by the British State's conduct in Ireland, as he had been over its pursuit of the 'white man's war' in South Africa, he was all for 'making the world small'. Within a year or two of the Boer war he was arguing against Rudyard Kipling, whom he engaged as the poet of British imperialism. In his poem on 'The English Flag', Kipling had asked 'what they can know of England who know England only', but Chesterton countered with a different question, 'What can they know of England who know only the world?' 'There is nothing large about painting the map red,' he declared, condemning Kipling as a cosmopolitan globe-trotter whose knowledge was abstract and bound to convert every unique place into nothing more than another 'destination'. Chesterton's Little Englander may never have travelled, but he knows how to see the world in a grain of sand. He has a grounded and intensive outlook, localised and commonsensical, physically confined and yet familiar with the big questions about life, love and stars in the sky, etc. '[Kipling] thinks of England as a place. The moment we are rooted in a place, the place vanishes. We live like a tree with the whole strength of the universe'.

Having converted 'Little England' into a virtuous and positive cause, Chesterton went on to adjust the idea of the encroaching State. Having earlier opposed the military state defended by Jingoistic Imperialists, within a few years he was defending England against the monster that he and his friend Hilaire Belloc named the 'servile state' – a more domestic instrument with which Liberal and Christian reformers, and also Fabian socialists such as George Bernard Shaw, imagined disciplining and improving the lives of the British working class. Considering how extensively anti-statist feeling has migrated to the right in our time, it takes an effort of will to realise that this argument originated as a dispute between two variants of socialism. On one side were the Liberal reformers and leading Fabian socialists, future-orientated people like the Webbs and George Bernard Shaw, who championed the state as an instrument of social progress. On the other was G.K. Chesterton,

a guild socialist who was convinced, as he wrote in the *Daily Herald* in 1913, that 'the darkness comes from above rather than below', and who judged the state to be an alien and alienating force imposed on the English working class by an elite acting in a spirit of 'evil innocence'.

Although Chesterton is now hailed as a Catholic saint-in-waiting, his poem 'The Secret People', so much loved by the Brexiteers, was written by a man who would continue to believe that 'the socialist movement was the biggest and best thing that happened in my youth' and, as he also wrote in the *Daily Herald* in 1913, to believe that 'the Trade Union as the only really English institution of modern times'. Yearning for an English version of the French Revolution, he declared himself in favour of 'the rise of all honest men against a system that has a disease of dishonesty'. His views were condemned at the time by the Liberal barrister and future government minister C.A. McCurdy, who recognised Chesterton as 'a syndicalist in his hatred of the state' and worried that his was a 'vision of war' rather than of social improvement.

There is much more to be said about Chesterton and the way his thinking developed in the years before the First World War, but the point to be made here is that, like Cobbett, he adopted some deeply unsavoury positions in the course of his defence of England's 'Secret People'. Indeed, if the pair of them can be embraced as forebears of Brexit, this is at least partly because the anti-semitism to which both subscribed demonstrates the dangers of organic thinking when applied to human societies, while also anticipating the hostility to immigrants that was deliberately stirred up and aggravated by Nigel Farage and some other Brexiteers as they invited the people to 'Take Back Control'. This is definitely not the recovery of England that Tom Nairn imagined in the late 1970s, when he placed a quotation from Chesterton's 'The Secret People' at the head of a chapter of *The Break-Up of Britain* (1977), hoping that the English would one day reclaim their political identity from the British state, thereby opening the space in which a new Scottish nation might also emerge.