

# What is British?

Birthday Counterpoints

Ziauddin Sardar, Piaras Mac Éinrí, Zrinka Bralo



**British Council 70th anniversary  
essays on cultural relations**

Series editor  
Rosemary Bechler

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Csilla Hős

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# Preface

by the Director-General

The British Council seeks to build long-term relationships between people of different cultures. Our currency is trust. The British Council has been a leader in cultural relations since its founding in 1934. In order to celebrate our 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary, I asked Counterpoint, our think tank on cultural relations, to commission a series of ten sets of essays, each set looking at a central issue from a variety of angles and viewpoints. The issues range from European enlargement to 'Britishness', and from the significance of death to the role of faith and the nature of secularism.

The 34 writers come from all over the world, though at least one in each set is British. Each introduction, with one exception, is written by a member of British Council staff. They testify to the richness of the intellectual and moral resource that the British Council represents.

Our intention is to stimulate debate rather than arrive at consensus. Some essays are controversial. None of them expresses, individually, a British Council viewpoint. They are the work of individual authors of distinction from whom we have sought views. But collectively, they represent something more than the sum of their parts – a commitment to the belief that dialogue is the essential heart of cultural relations.

Dialogue requires and generates trust. The biggest danger in what is often called public diplomacy work is that we simply broadcast views, policies, values and positions. A senior European diplomat recently said at a British Council conference: 'The world is

fed up with hearing us talk. What it wants is for us to shut up and listen.' Listening and demonstrating our commitment to the free and creative interplay of ideas is an indispensable pre-condition for building trust.

To build trust we must engage in effective, open dialogue. Increased mutual understanding based on trust, whether we agree or disagree, is a precious outcome.



David Green KCMG

# Introduction

Csilla Hős

If you were to select contributors to a book on 'Britishness', who might you choose? Take a moment to think . . . given that what the authors of the three essays in this publication have to say on Britishness must reflect who they are, this could be an interesting exercise. Now, let's see how your choice compares with the one made by the editors of this series.

What all three authors have in common is that they hover on the boundary between being insiders and outsiders to Britishness. They occupy what Kramsch calls 'third places' (in *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*, OUP), which afford them a dual perspective on how Brits (whoever they are) make sense of the world around them. Only one was born in Britain. However, if he introduces himself as someone coming from London, Ziauddin Sardar often gets the reply: 'Surely, you're Asian.' Being a Muslim born and bred in Britain, seen by many as an outsider, he enjoys the dual perspective of the boundary, his vision filtered through his multiple identities. Zrinka Bralo, author of the piece 'St George and the Dragon', is on the verge of becoming 'officially British'. By the time this publication is out she is likely to be the passport holder of the country she 'chose to be a part of' when her native country, the former Yugoslavia, had ceased to exist and her Sarajevo stopped being a safe place in which to live. The element of choice is far from present in the early relationship between the third author, Piaras Mac Éinrí, and the 'old enemy'. Yet there remains plenty of ambivalence in this, as he sees it, love-hate relationship between Ireland and Britain, those 'lives entwined'. 'If it wasn't for f...ing England we'd have f...ing nothing' says one of his acquaintances. Ironically or

not, the son of a 'strongly republican household' did choose to live in London, too, in the early 1970s, when he came in search of work to 'the heart of the former empire', before he became a diplomat.

Through their intriguing wealth of backgrounds, perspectives and experiences, it is these three people who share with us their thoughts on what it means to be British. Naturally, while examining 'Britishness' through their prisms, they touch upon many other topics more or less generic: they tell us about themselves, their relationship with the 'many Britains and many kinds of Britishness' they have encountered; about power, class, race, politics. And what do I add to this kaleidoscope? Here I am, a learner and teacher of English, who for 30 years as an ethnic Hungarian enjoyed life in Bralo's vanished country, the former Yugoslavia. Now a citizen of Hungary, I work for the British Council, and see the world and the organisation I am working for through my own multiple identities, as part of a national staff trying to make sense of the British aspect of our work, while successfully identifying with what is universally human in it. Before you enjoy the full treat of reading the three essays for yourself (or maybe afterwards?), let me share them with you, inviting you briefly to see them through the prism of my mind.

Sardar, a British Muslim, has a dream: 'A Britain where more than one way of being human is the norm.' Being the norm does not mean being tolerated or accepted, the norm is an agreed standard. He has a vision of a country where it would be natural for people not to be able to identify with one single culture, where pluralistic identities, like Sardar's, are not seen as identity crises but as a fact of life, as normal. The central metaphor of his piece is the garden, and the critical term, 'symbiosis'. In his garden-Britain, each person knows 'what we need to give and what we need to take to grow and prosper together'. In this Britain people see truth differently depending on their backgrounds and this diversity is appreciated as wealth since no one notion of Truth is to be imposed on everybody. Sardar's is the most universal approach to the topic in this publication. In his vision I find it tempting

to replace the word 'Britain' with 'the world' so that peaceful, enriching co-existence applies globally. On the other hand, his metaphor can also be narrowed down to an organisation, the British Council in our case, prompted by Sardar's own identification of his notion of symbiosis with that of 'mutuality'. Is 'mutuality' the norm in the British Council? At one point the author describes British identity as 'based on an assumption of authority that makes the world a familiar place, a proper theatre in which to continue to be British'. Reading this, I was struck by a sudden recognition of the organisation I'm working for. No, it is not the norm yet, but some British Council staff have a dream. Sardar feels we are closer to his dream of garden-Britain now than when he was a child. This is a far-reaching, optimistic, radical piece, written with sensitivity and confidence: perhaps my personal favourite in this pamphlet.

An outsider, a 'grateful foreigner', a British person 'with or without a piece of paper' – Zrinka Bralo calls herself all of these in her essay. She chose to live in Britain and the reason was simple: she had friends there who helped her in their own quiet, effective ways when she lost all hope. Besides, in this open, receptive country she can now help others at a migrant and refugee organisation. She is grateful to Britain not only because it became her new home, but because this is where her healing process took place. The aspect of Britishness she chooses to focus on is active citizenship, the 'unique culture of civil society' that she feels is Britishness at its best. Of course she is aware of another Britain, which she also describes: it is shallow, selfish, xenophobic, full of gossip and whining – tabloid Britain. Just the opposite of garden-Britain, and very much present. But Bralo has the eyes of a grateful foreigner and what she enjoys seeing is 'amazing people doing amazing things, changing and improving other people's lives'. Again, the feeling of recognising the British Council strikes me: compared to the 'global theatre where Brits can continue to be Brits' view, this is a completely different facet of the same organisation, equally valid. This is an organisation through which 'small revolutions' do happen 'on a daily basis, and no one makes any fuss about it'. I hope with time this facet will prevail.

Mac Éinrí's piece is a powerful description of how complex and blurred identities are and how much they influence each other, even when it comes to such a tense relationship as the one between Ireland and Britain. Black-and-white viewpoints, though they may come in useful during the period of nation building, cannot hold for long – life being too messy, or better, organic. By reflecting on the development of his own notions of identity, Mac Éinrí takes us through crucial realisations he has made about his own nation and that of the British oppressor in 'Occupied Ireland' (Northern Ireland). Despite the troubles, his evolution led him to the gradual realisation that 'the divide was not so neat'. He did protest after Bloody Sunday, but he was also aware of the 'sneaking suspicion that British was somehow better' – better roads, steel, and cars. As he got to know British people, he learnt to respect some British qualities, for instance the spirit of independence, and the 'genuine commitment . . . to the notion of an ethical opposition'. At the same time, he developed a critical attitude to his own state and people, criticising his nation especially for its lack of confidence. What he finds undoubtedly positive about Britain today, however ironical it may sound to tabloid readers, is the 'wonderful and exuberant injection of diversity and otherness' Britain has received recently. This is coupled with the welcome move from the attitude of 'tolerating difference' of the 1960s to a 'more radical inclusion' that makes Sardar and people like him, former outsiders who are now within, a part of the Britain that is shaping Britishness with their ideas and lifestyles. Mac Éinrí explicitly refers to Counterpoint and describes the 'healthy and self-deprecating, even subversive, self-questioning' role which the British Council's internal think tank plays in scrutinising the British Council's own mission.

The publication you are holding, as well as the entire series it belongs to, is a significant contribution to this self-questioning process. The British Council mirrors processes taking place in Britain: but it could also shape those processes. This series, I feel, has the potential to shape.

# What does it mean to be a ‘British Muslim’?

Ziauddin Sardar

*It was a duty I performed with due diligence. Every Saturday morning I would take the 253 bus from Clapton Pond in Hackney, where we lived, to Brick Lane. During the 1960s, Asian grocery shops were rather rare; and the nearest ones from us were in Aldgate East. So that’s where we did our weekly shopping for atta (white flour for making chapattis), dal (various lentils), Basmati rice, and, of course, halal meat. As the eldest sibling in the household, it was my lot to perform this essential chore.*

*The journey to and from Brick Lane was full of hazards. Negotiating the crowded buses while carrying two heavy shopping bags was the easy part. It was much more difficult to navigate past the groups of skinheads that loitered in the area. They were very fond of playing a game they described as ‘Paki bashing’. So, frequently, I found myself being chased, pushed around, and on some occasions, beaten up. The halal meat shops were also a repeated target. On one occasion, I witnessed a shop being vandalised and the shopkeeper attacked by a group of skinheads. The following morning, The Guardian described the incident as a ‘colour brawl’ and reported that ‘three Pakistanis were injured in the fight with a group of skinheads’. The Times, reporting the incident under the headline ‘Pakistanis in Clash’ saw it as ‘a clash between a group of young men and Pakistanis’.*

*I took all the racism around me for granted. My parents believed that suffering, while not an end in itself, was the price one had to pay for being an immigrant. Indeed, as far as my father was*

*concerned there was glory in being racially harassed. Ridicule and violence, he used to say, has been the fate not only of migrants but also of prophets – look at the great suffering and tribulations that the Prophet Muhammad had to endure. This was our defence mechanism, a mechanism borne out of a certain inability to discover or define a role for ourselves in Britain.*

*Once, when I came home wounded, my mother put her arms around me. ‘I know it is very difficult, baitay’, she said, cleaning the blood from my broken nose, ‘but things will change. There will be better times ahead. You will see.’ I remember putting my head on her shoulders, closing my eyes, and thinking of a future Britain. A more accepting Britain – 30, 40 years from that day. A Britain with a plethora of old and new communities. A Britain where more than one way of being human is the norm. A Britain that resembles a garden in full bloom . . .*

Gardens, by the very fact that they are gardens, consist of a plethora – of plants that provide various colours of foliage, or form hedges and borders, or climb up fences, or play architectural roles; fruit trees, and trees that fix the soil and provide shade; grasses that are essential for lawns. What would a garden be without the birds and the bees, or those worms and insects that both enrich the soil and require some form of pest control? All this truly monumental variety of life exists in symbiosis: things nourishing each other and ensuring the overall survival of the garden. And, of course, the garden needs tending.

I desire a Britain where all the vast and varied ways of being human, all the plethora of different cultures – past, present and future – exist in symbiosis just as they do in a well-tended garden. In essence, it is a vision of a Britain of pluralistic identities. But the kind of identities I seek has little to do with ‘identity’ as we have conventionally understood the term.

In Britain, issues of identity have always clustered around otherness. When I was growing up in Hackney, the immigrant

communities were described as 'aliens'. What is alien represents otherness; the repository of fears and anxieties. It was my difference – noticeable in my colour, accent and general demeanour – that was the source of fear; a fear expressed so vividly in the famous 'rivers of blood' speech by Enoch Powell.

Later, during the 1970s and 1980s, when multiculturalism came into vogue, otherness was seen as something we should celebrate. Cultural difference became a hot commodity that made Britannia 'cool' and sold multiculturalism at home and Britain abroad. Difference ceased to be threatening, and otherness was now sought for its exchange value, its exoticism and the pleasures, thrills and adventure it could offer. But in both cases, indeed in all cases, the racial dichotomies of Self and Other are retained, along with power relationships of domination and inequality.

Frankly, I do not want to be celebrated, any more than I want to be an object of racial derision. And I certainly do not want colourful or ethnic labels appended to my person. Throughout my life, I have endured a number of identity labels, each designed to make me compliant to somebody else's definition of who I should become, how I should behave, what I should think of myself. The aim of these labels is to make you accept internally all the idiocy British society has been storing up for centuries as its assessment of what makes the new Britons who they are.

### **Who am I?**

When people ask me where I am from, my standard reply is 'Hackney'. I wasn't actually born in Hackney but Hackney shaped my formative years and provides me with most of my childhood memories. It is home; and that's where I am from. This is difficult for most people to grasp. They look at me and exclaim: 'Surely, you're Asian.'

It is hard to imagine a more ridiculous statement. There is no such thing as an Asian. Asia is not a race or identity. It's a continent,

where more than half the world's population lives. Even in Asia, no one calls himself or herself 'Asian'. If you are not Chinese or Malaysian, then you are an Afghan or a Punjabi. Moreover, the meaning of the term changes from place to place. In the USA, the Asian label is attached to Koreans, Filipinos and Chinese. In Britain, we do not use the term Asian to describe our substantial communities of Malaysians, Indonesians and Vietnamese, even though these countries are in Asia. So, at best, the label 'Asian' is meaningless. At worse, it is a denial of the fact that someone born and bred in Britain is actually British, full stop. Hardly surprising that all those young people constantly described as 'Asians' have problems finding a suitable location for their loyalties. More savvy individuals would look at me and say, 'Oh, you are Indian'. Sixty years ago, before the emergence of Pakistan and Bangladesh, this would have been a passable description. But today, 'Indian' has become almost as meaningless as 'Asian', largely because the two terms have coalesced. They are lazy references to people of Indian sub-continental lineage. But for Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Sri Lankans and Nepalese the label is explosive. By lumping these diverse communities in one monolithic category, we make them invisible.

My problem with the term 'Indian' is that it has a very specific connotation in the English subconscious. India is essentially 'English India', unchanged in the liberal imagination for the last 60 years. An 'Indian' is a product of the Raj, someone who is bizarre but intelligent enough to have accepted 'our' civilised ways. We saw this during the celebration of the 'Jubilee' – 50 years of India's independence. In numerous television documentaries and newspaper articles, India was reconfigured as a romantic, colonial fiction. In this orgy of celebration there was no mention of Pakistan, let alone Sri Lanka or Bangladesh. It is a limited edition, monolithic India.

But there is another reason why I reject this strong emphasis on my ethnic background. Britain imported the notion of

multiculturalism based on ethnicity from America. The very term 'ethnicity' has its roots in the American provenance where, apart from European immigrants, all other immigrants are defined as ethnics. Ethnicity, more than anything else, connotes primordially constituted Otherness in relation to non-ethnics, the Anglo-Saxons, who are the true Americans.

The distinction is between hyphenated Americans – Italian, German, Polish, Irish, Russian – and ethnics: blacks, Hispanics, Latinos and Native Americans. American identity offers the hyphenated Americans the ideal American Dream of inclusion and opportunity. Thus, only hyphenated Americans have ever made it to the White House. In contrast, ethnics make excellent domestic servants. Ethnicity is the politically correct term for race, for a hierarchy within American identity and for the power of definition that is exclusive to white America. Chinese-Americans had their identity neatly stereotyped in the works of Mark Twain and Bret Harte. Japanese-Americans were the only people interned as real 'enemies within' during the Second World War, a reaction that would have been unthinkable to German, Italian or other 'enemy' or 'quisling state' Americans. In Britain too, ethnicity confers the same power relation. As an ethnic, an Asian or an Indian, I am, by definition, an *outsider*.

Moreover the various ethnic labels – 'Asian', 'Indian', 'Black' – are based on the assumption that I must have a single – or at least principal and dominant – identity. But I, along with most people, have multiple identities and I often invoke different identities in different contexts. So I am a Muslim, a British citizen, of Pakistani origins, a man, a writer, a critic, a broadcaster, an information scientist, a historian of science, a university professor, a scholar of Islam, a rationalist, a sceptic, a traditionalist, and a partial vegetarian. All of these collective identities belong to me; and each one is important in a particular context.

### **The Muslim label**

There is one label that I identify with more than any other – that of being a Muslim. Indeed, I have described myself as a Muslim ever since I became aware of myself. During my childhood and adolescent, being a Muslim in Britain was not problematic. On the whole, Muslims were seen as law abiding, docile folk. It was our colour and ethnicity that was a problem. The first time I became aware that my self-description was a cause for concern to wider British society was during the Opec oil boycott in the early 1970s. Suddenly all 'Muslims' became 'Arabs' and all 'Arabs' were shifty, dangerous people determined to undermine civilisation as we know it.

We can thank European history for such perceptions. Throughout history, Europe, and hence Britain, has seen Muslims as a function of its fears and desires. During the Crusades, Muslims presented Europe with religious, intellectual and military challenges. So they were portrayed as infidels, who were ignorant, and bloodthirsty; the barbarians at the gate of civilisation – which didn't actually exist in Europe. During the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Muslims became treacherous, rebellious subjects of the Empire. In the early part of the last century, Arabs were oversexed sheikhs ready to whisk white women off to luxurious desert tents, as portrayed by Rudolph Valentino.

How Muslims were portrayed depended on the desires and fears that the West projected on to them. So, it was hardly surprising that in the aftermath of Opec and the Iranian revolution, Muslims were despotic ogres, dangerous revolutionaries, and violent treacherous thugs bent on undermining decency and democracy. However, while British Muslims were seen as inalienably different, we were not seen as dangerous.

But all this changed after the Rushdie affair. The expression of outrage at the publication of *The Satanic Verses* suddenly transformed the Muslims from a law-abiding, compliant community into a volatile group with little appreciation of good, old British values

such as freedom of expression. Just over a decade later, the atrocities of 11 September 2001 introduced a new dimension: Muslims now came to be widely seen as the danger within. So my Muslim identity not only carries this historical baggage, it is also framed by global events. What happens in the rest of the world – like the ‘war on terrorism’ and the invasion of Iraq – defines and frames the relationship between Muslims and others in Britain. It has a direct bearing on my British Muslim identity.

### **Johnny Foreigner within**

My Muslim identity is also problematic in other ways. In a secular society like Britain, where religion is largely marginalised and relegated to private spheres, people find it seriously difficult to see religion as a badge of identity. This is particularly so when all British notions of identity are expressed in hierarchies of race and class.

It is a little too glib to argue that British identity had the luxury of regarding race as external; the definition of difference beyond its shores. But the exercise of power that created an Empire on which the sun never set, a notion of class that defined and shaped modernity and was not a stranger anywhere in the world, are essential attributes of the conventional notion of Britishness. Without it, the British could not be simultaneously xenophobic, internationalist and parochial: the sort of people who go on Spanish holidays to eat fish and chips and drink warm bitter ale. British identity is based on an assumption of authority that makes the world a familiar place – a proper theatre in which to continue being British. It also produced its own internationalist perspective: Britain has had its share of ‘old India hands’, ‘Africa men and women’ – urbane cosmopolitans who know Johnny Foreigner better than they know themselves.

The problem with this notion of being British is that Johnny Foreigner – that’s me, and folks like myself – is now within. All those other categories by which Britain defined and measured itself – the ‘evil Orientals’, the ‘fanatic Muslims’, the ‘inferior races of the

colonies’, the Irish, the immigrants, the refugees, the gypsies – are now an integral part of Britain. It is not just that they are ‘over here’, but that their ideas, concepts, lifestyles, food and clothes now play a central part in shaping ‘us’ and ‘our society’. How can good old Middle England be comfortable with absorbing all these nefarious identities? What happens to conventional notions of Britishness when there is no yardstick to measure difference and define the (white) British as over and above everyone else?

Clearly, this idea of being British has little space for a Muslim like me. The national story on which this notion is based deliberately excludes unsavoury foreigners and is constructed on the basis of a selective process of memory.

### **A common past?**

British identity was (is?) the acknowledgement of a common past. Sharing and having been shaped by this common past is what makes the British different from all other identities.

The trouble is, history is a deliberate human creation, itself another wilful act of power, artificially constructed to support an artificial identity. Europe engineered a cultural identity based on a common descent from the supposed traditions of ancient Greece and Rome and 2,000 years of Christianity. British history books always began with the arrival of the Romans. So British history begins by submerging, barbarising and differentiating itself from Celtic history. Celt and Welsh are words whose linguistic roots, one Greek the other Saxon, mean ‘stranger’. The history of Britain, as written in the age of devolution, records not a common shared past but continuous contest and conflict within the British Isles. Whatever Britain is, it is the creation of dominance by kings and barons and upwardly mobile yeomen who practiced colonialism at home and, after perfecting the technique, moved abroad.

It was Oliver Cromwell who noted that Britain had its ‘Indians’ at home in what he called the ‘dark corners of Britain’. He was referring,

of course, to the residual Celtic corners. It makes perfect sense that Margaret Thatcher, whom I always regarded as Oliver Cromwell in drag, should propose relocating Catholics to Ireland as the solution to the Ulster problem. This was Cromwell's policy: if they will not reform, be educated and submit, then they have no place within the identity, history and society that is Britain.

That no one seriously proposes sending the Union Jack-waving Ulstermen back to where they came from, or removing the Union from them, itself suggests a strong allegiance to a constructed history – the history of irreconcilable difference. As Orangemen so often say, marching with fife and drum to intimidate and demonstrate their dominance *is* their culture. In an age of the politics of identity, culture has its rights. But how far can you defend the rights of a culture whose only reason for being is to retain dominance?

It really is quite dumbfounding how much of Britishness, and by association Englishness, is based on fabricated history. Consider the whole notion of Anglo-Saxon Britain. Winston Churchill and Rudyard Kipling were devotees of Anglo-Saxon history for a reason. It enabled them to ignore how genuinely European British history has always been. Norman kings hardly ever spent time in Britain, spoke French rather than English, and were most concerned with dominating Europe from their French possessions. Of course, the Saxon bit of Anglo-Saxon has its own problems. After the Welsh Tudors, and Scots Stuarts, a brief quasi-native interlude, German monarchs were bussed in to reign over a Britishness that was to be marked by Englishness alone, and that wanted nothing to do with Europe.

The selectivity of historic memory is part of its inventiveness. Ancient Anglo-Saxon liberties were purposefully invented on a number of occasions to fashion the Mother of Parliaments. This foundational institution was not a true, popular, democratic institution until 1929, and the first election based on universal adult suffrage. Yet, the statue of Oliver Cromwell quite properly stands

outside Parliament. His insistence that ancient Anglo-Saxon liberties rested on property owning was indeed the novel twist that secured class hierarchy, made the Restoration of monarchy easy, and enabled manufactured history to continue its work. The pomp and ceremony of the British monarchy was a late Victorian invention. The Royal Family as the model for the normative family – an ideal for a nation – is a post-Edwardian invention; Victoria's son, Edward, hardly being a suitable candidate for model husband and father. And so it goes on.

Thus, notions of race and class are intrinsic to the self-definition of the English. Without the idea of race, there is little left for English identity to hold on to; being only a disadvantaged minority within Britain – the complete inversion of received history. What works well for youthful addicts of street culture does not suit the aspirations of new English identity, and that's why the appeal to the barricades, sending them back, locking them up, has now to be made.

As recently as 1940, George Orwell could state that, 'when you come back to England from any foreign country, you have immediately the sensation of breathing different air'. Identity as difference is less easy to define in an 'England' that is not the sole preserve of 'the English' any more. The population now is much more heterogeneous, with 'Englishness' (however it is defined) constituting only one segment in a multi-ethnic society. Orwell would find the air somewhat strange in a Britain awash with products of multiculturalism from hip hop to *bangra*, chicken tikka marsala to doner kebab, and *The Lenny Henry Show* to *Goodness Gracious Me*. Moreover, the history and tradition that are associated with Orwell's 'Englishness' – the Empire, House of Lords, fox hunting, the national anthem – are either questionable or meaningless to the vast majority of new-English who now live in England. Worse: this Englishness becomes quite insignificant when it is seen in relation to a new European identity which itself is an amalgam of countless other cultural identities.

It is not surprising that 'the English' feel threatened. Moreover, they feel threatened not simply because they see their identity being eroded. What they are more worried about is the evaporation of the power that that identity confers. But an all-powerful identity is like an all-powerful tree in the garden: it sucks the life out of all other plants. When power is skewed in this manner, it is not possible to exist in symbiosis.

### **A symbiotic shift**

Quite simply we will have to move away from our obsession with difference, towards what I would call 'symbiosis' and others have called 'mutuality'. And this shift must begin with a new, inclusive national story.

If I am to feel truly at home in Britain, and at ease with my British identity, then my story must be seen to be an integral part of the national history. Both Muslims and Asians have had a sizeable presence in Britain for over two centuries and have made a valuable contribution in shaping Britain. But more than that, for over 700 years between the Battle of Tours and the fall of Constantinople, Islam played a vital role in shaping Europe. All of this history, which is crucial to understanding the symbiosis between Islam and Britain, has been rendered invisible. It is during this period that Islam actually transformed Europe and turned it into a world civilisation.

The conventional history, defining this period as the Dark Ages, sees the long gestation of embattled Europe forged by the antipathy that sustained the Crusades. Unwittingly the enemy prompts the rekindling of the flame of civilisation when, phoenix-like, classicism arises from the fall of Constantinople. The warlike intervention by the Turks permits a flood of Greek manuscripts to come to the West. This inspires the Renaissance obsession with all things classical, permitting Europe to recover its Greek roots, invent modernity, discover the rest of the world and recover the destiny of world domination implicit in its Roman ancestry.

It is, of course, all a fabulous fabrication. In reality, the Renaissance would have been unimaginable without Islam. Greek thought would have remained a stranger to Europe without Muslim philosophers, and even that liberal humanism, so cherished by us in Britain, would have remained a pipe dream without classical Islamic thought and learning. This history is an integral part of British heritage and should be an essential component of our national story.

Much is made of the difference in values between the Muslim community and the larger British society. But when symbiosis is emphasised, similarity is brought to the fore. When we look at Islamic humanism, we see that its emphasis on universal education, a free health service, science and learning and free thought and pluralism, responsible and accountable governance are difficult to distinguish from British, liberal values – hardly surprising, since Britain took them from Islam in the first place.

However, we will never see such similarities while we believe in single, uncompromising notions of a Truth or Identity that have to be imposed on all those who call themselves British. Just as a garden does not function on the basis of a single species, so the single Truth of Western liberalism or Western Civilisation or some notion of Englishness – cannot lead us to a viable, sustainable multiculturalism. Ultimately, my idea of a Britain of pluralistic identities comes down to how we all see truth differently, according to our historic experiences and current perspectives, and how we all live the truth in our lives, as individuals and communities, in our uniquely different and cultural ways of being British.

### **Still bigger dividends**

Symbiosis, of course, is a two-way street. A national story that incorporates Islamic history would enable Muslims, particularly young Muslims born and bred in Britain, to appreciate just how much of their – Islamic – values are an integral part of the British way of life. This would be a positive way for my children's generation to

acquire a viable British Muslim identity. But there is an even bigger dividend to be had from Britain's embrace of its Islamic roots, and acknowledgement on the part of British Muslims that British values are an integral part of Islam.

The diasporas have played a very important part in shaping Muslim civilisation. The Prophet Muhammad himself migrated from his hometown of Mecca; and the civil society and civilisation he built in Medina was fashioned by a diaspora. The classical civilisation of Islam was built not by Arabs, but by diasporic communities from central Asia, the Indian subcontinent and Africa. The Abbasid Caliphate, commonly seen as the zenith of Muslim thought and learning, was the outcome of the efforts of a diaspora. The independent Muslim states that emerged in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as Pakistan and Malaysia, were often conceived and created in Britain by a politically active diaspora.

British Muslims can take a leaf from this history and seize the opportunity to reform Islam, in the process changing society in the Muslim world itself. British Muslims are already at the forefront of thinking, writing and articulating contemporary interpretations of Islam as a system of ideas for living. Given the quality of debate on Islamic issues in Britain, it would not be surprising if British Muslims, on the physical periphery of the Muslim world, were to reform and transform the centre.

### **Seeing is believing**

For me to feel at home with my British Muslim identity, I must be able to see the variety of Muslim life in Britain represented in its institutions of government and administration, commerce and business, arts and media. Representation is not only a numbers game, although numbers do matter. Above all, representation is about preventing cynicism, disaffection and the denial of hope and ability.

When I was growing up, one never saw a Muslim face on television, and Muslim representation in the corridors of power was a

distant dream. Now there are Muslim newsreaders, reporters, MPs, MEPs, members of the House of Lords and some hundreds of local councillors. We have made progress; but Muslim representation has significance largely as signs and symbols.

Signs and symbols are important: the first Muslim MP, the first Muslim newsreader, the first Muslim police officer. Minority communities collect and cherish such signs and symbols as conscientiously as the majority – perhaps for different reasons. For the majority they are proof that multicultural Britain is doing well, doing its bit. For the minority the glass is less than half empty. Isolated individual success isn't opportunity for all.

Or as I remember Lenny Henry once saying: 'If you want to be a newsreader – forget it – Trevor got the job.' 'Firsts' are important, but it's the chances of the umpteenth candidates who also want to achieve to their full capability and make their contribution that really matters, and tests the quality of representation.

Cultural plurality based on symbiosis is not just about giving voice to a faith community like the Muslims – it is also about understanding the core role of faith in identity, understanding what we need to give and what we need to take to grow and prosper together. That understanding must begin by appreciating that people are more than a racial category. It's the 'more' that makes us a fully cultured personality and gives us something distinctive to offer – different ways of seeing things, expressing ideas and responding to issues. For me, that's what multiculturalism is all about.

### **Coda**

During the 1960s and 1970s, when I made my weekly excursions, the best known restaurant in Brick Lane was the Clifton. It was as famous for its food as its décor. Pride of place on the menu was given to brain masala, *nihari* (an incredibly rich and fatty broth that was cooked all night) and *payah* (sheep feet): testimonies to the art of conjuring food from the ingredients of poverty.

The walls were covered with huge paintings reminiscent of Indian film posters. The paintings, mostly of semi-clad, generously proportioned women, reminded the regular local patrons of what awaited them back home: a woman inside an oyster lying on a bed of pearls; a woman playing sitar, longing for her lover; a lonely woman catching a fish; two lovers, with the man's head gently laid on the shoulder of a woman. A jukebox incessantly intoned the latest romantic hits from Bollywood. Patrons were often greeted by the owner, Musa Patel, a man whose smile was as generous as his facial hair. To walk into the Clifton was like walking into a street-side café in Sylhet.

Old Musa Patel died in the early 1990s; the Clifton has changed hands a number of times since. Now called Prithi, it is twice the size of the old restaurant. Flock wallpaper and a gaudy red carpet have given way to a wooden floor and Georgian windows. The menu has a strong bias towards seafood, with an accent on Bangladeshi freshwater fish. The restaurant's clients tend to be city types out for a 'Bangla evening'. But the trademark paintings are still there – they have been lovingly restored by a Japanese painter.

So both Britain and Clifton have moved on. 'Things', as my mother had said so long ago, have changed. The skinheads are conspicuous by their absence. The sweatshops have relocated to the Far East; and the Jewish community has moved on to more upmarket neighbourhoods. Far from being tense, the atmosphere around Brick Lane is reminiscent of a perpetual carnival. The young Muslims in this part of London are some of the most successful in Britain: like their parents, the patrons of Clifton, they do not have a longing for home.

They are at home; and they have a strong sense of belonging to the streets where they grew up. Even the new names of the restaurants reflect the transformation and confidence of the Muslim community. In the 1960s and 1970s, Brick Lane restaurants had names like 'Maharajah', 'Curry House' and 'Taj Mahal'; names designed to rekindle images of the Raj and invoke memories of a rich tradition

the Bangladeshis had left behind in the subcontinent. Now, they have names like 'Dawaat' (literally, invitation), 'Alishan' (palatial) and 'Saffron'. These new names indicate not only a certain authenticity of expression, but also the self-confidence of having arrived. In many restaurants, the cooking area is part of the dining experience, not just providing assurance of freshly cooked food, but even more reassuringly bringing back the traditional direct and tactile relationship between the hand that cooks and the hand that eats.

British Muslims are discovering that while identity has historic anchors, it is not fixed to a limited, unchanging set of traditional signs and historic symbols. Both the 'Muslim' and the 'British' segments of 'British Muslims' are a changing feast. And Britain itself is a product of various, diverse and changing traditions – including the centuries old tradition of British Islam. A British Muslim identity is not something we can buy ready-made, or something that can be imposed on an unwilling community. It has even less to do with flag-waving or loyalty tests, such as Tebbit's cricket test, which is based on mindless jingoism.

Rather, it is something that evolves from confidence and symbiosis. It is something from which we learn to change and stay the same, to be true simultaneously to our Muslim roots and British lives. We learn how to live and shape our communities, and discover what has genuine value in a pluralistic society.

So, after 40 years, I open my eyes. And what do I see? A Britain that is not quite a garden yet. We have, however, tackled the basic landscaping, planted a few trees and shrubs, and a sprinkling of hardy perennials. There's a great deal still to be done. But we are getting there.

# Britain and Ireland – lives entwined

Piarras Mac Éinrí

Like many Irish people of a certain age, I grew up in a strongly republican household. To my parents' generation, independence was hard-won and recent. They, and their parents before them, had been involved in different ways in the project of nation building – they remained deeply committed to and intensely proud of it.

Independence may have been hard-won but it was not simple and involved a certain amount of manipulation of our memories, myths and narratives of the past. A black-and-white view of Britishness and Irishness was part of the new official Ireland's self-image; the struggle for freedom became the central myth of nationhood. As a boy of almost 12 years of age my proudest moment in 1966, the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Easter Rising against British Rule, was to read out, in Irish (although it had, of course, been written in English), the proclamation of the Republic, the founding text of the State, over a tinny public address system to the massed crowds of our local parish.

Some weeks earlier, on 8 March 1966, the IRA had blown up Nelson's Pillar, one of the iconic representations of British rule in Ireland, and the best-known public monument in Dublin's main thoroughfare, O'Connell Street. Although our family was politically mainstream, I remember our reaction was one of a certain exultation – another blow against the 'old enemy'. As a West of Ireland family, which formed part of an internal diaspora in a fast-changing, rough-and-ready capital city of unfinished suburbs, our identification with the capital was partial in any case. Georgian Dublin was 'theirs', not ours.

This Manichean division extended to many aspects of our lives and identities, including accent and religion. *The Irish Times's* 2003 obituary for broadcaster and novelist Brian Cleeve recorded that he was dropped as a presenter on national television in 1966, the year of the aforementioned commemoration of the Rising, because 'his "Ascendancy" accent was considered unsuitable for broadcasting'. In those days we would have called it, disparagingly, a 'west Brit' accent. Similarly, the Remembrance Garden in Dublin for those Irish who fought in the First World War was for decades allowed to fall into a state of neglect. On the other hand, there were many who despised the young and unformed new State. Their newspaper of choice was *The Irish Times*, which is nowadays, ironically, often seen as the voice of establishment Ireland, a constituency sometimes disparagingly referred to as 'Dublin 4', the postal code of an affluent suburb.

As a child I was not a total stranger to Northern Ireland/the Six Counties, or Occupied Ireland – my father's preferred description. I was brought north to marvel at red letter boxes, police in strange dark-green uniforms and the ubiquitous Union Jacks flying from buildings and lamp posts. It was extraordinary to me that our own flag was banned by law from being flown there, but my interest was also focused on Opal Fruits, a kind of sweet which could not then be bought in the south, and on the trolleybuses of Belfast, now long gone. Beyond that, it was always obvious when one had crossed the Border – better roads and tidier gardens than were to be seen in the shambolic South.

Over time, my views became a little more nuanced. For one thing, my father, irony of ironies, worked for the British Ministry of Defence. Leopardstown Park Hospital, in south Dublin, was a British military hospital for First World War veterans from such regiments as the Royal Dublin Fusiliers. I have a clear memory of visiting, as a young child, old men in their hospital beds, people for whom life had stood still since 1916 and 1917. Invalided and bedridden since then, some of them had little concept of the modern state outside their window. My father and

mother had a few friends with strange English names like Batts and Sienkowitz, except that later I found out that Sienkowitz wasn't exactly an English name either.

I have no memory of my parents ever having attempted to inculcate any kind of personal animosity towards the British in us. On the contrary, differences were invariably seen as merely political and it would have been unconscionably rude to express any kind of personal hostility to someone on such grounds. Yet, in retrospect, my abiding impression is that of an unconfident state and people, for whom progress, modernity, Britishness, sex, scandal, atheism and immorality were rolled up in one. It was out there, waiting to corrupt us, but we would remain proud, isolated, unsullied and different. Stereotypes and generalisations about the British abounded in Ireland; as a child I thought them strange and alien. The finer points of English, Scottish and Welsh identities were lost on us, even if we did watch Scottish musician Andy Stewart's *White Heather Club* avidly on television, capturing the Ulster Television signal from the North on high antennae in the Dublin foothills.

It gradually came home to me that the divide was not so neat. Perhaps this is best illustrated, in my own case, by my grandfather's story. Sergeant Eddie Henry, from Kilmovee, Co. Mayo, served in the Royal Irish Constabulary or RIC, a police force that was later vilified by some republicans and nationalists as pro-British, although it also contained a fair number of rural Irish recruits for whom a life in policing was a respectable and honest career. I am one of the relatively few people, compared to the legions who used to assert it, who can say with confidence that my grandfather spent Easter Week 1916 in the General Post Office with Connolly, Pearse and their forces. That said, the factors that led to his presence were rather complex. He was wearing a British uniform, as he was at the time on loan to the Dublin Fusiliers to teach them marksmanship. His precise motives are still something of a family mystery, although we know that he roomed with Harry Boland, militant nationalist and later government minister,

and may have been driven by solidarity or curiosity to become involved (another version simply says that Boland feared for his friend as the rebellion broke out and invited him into the GPO for his own protection). In the GPO, as a trained medical orderly, he assisted the grievously wounded Scottish-born socialist leader James Connolly, who was later executed while tied to a chair. *The Freeman's Journal* records that my grandfather and a few others who had been detained by the insurgents as 'prisoners of war' were released towards the end of the week. His career in the RIC continued after the Rising, but he also worked for Michael Collins, passing information about impending Black and Tan raids to the IRA. His house, as an RIC sergeant's house, was never raided, making it an excellent safe house and location for IRA arms. My grandmother never spoke of these times in her long life.

So far, so usual – ordinary people, extraordinary lives. But why did this part-loyal, part-rebel policeman (himself the son of a father who had once been charged with Fenianism) baptise my father, born a few years later, with the rather royalist names George Edward, while bringing him up as a nationalist? I am only partly convinced by my parents' explanation that George was a family name on the Butler side (his mother's) and also reflected a long-standing admiration for George Washington. Perhaps it was also symptomatic of a deeper mystery. Postcolonial nationalism is a strange phenomenon. Brought up to despise everything British (as Jonathan Swift put it two centuries earlier, 'burn everything English except their coal'), we were also imbued with a sneaking suspicion that British was somehow better. In the bleak 1950s Irish authors had little chance of success unless they had a British publisher to back them, while many households switched over to the BBC when Radio Éireann's limited service closed in the mid-morning and mid-afternoon. The best steel was from Sheffield, the best cars were British-made and the best television (in spite of the 'immoral' programmes that were starting to be broadcast by BBC2 in the 1960s) was also British. In fact, in the 1960s, there were campaigns all over the country for access to 'multichannel', that is, British television.

With the advent of the Troubles in 1968, matters became more complicated. After Bloody Sunday in 1972 (when 13 nationalists were killed by the British Army), I was one of the 100,000 protesters who marched on the British Embassy. Some of the crowd torched it with petrol bombs, the first public burning in living memory of an embassy in western Europe. During that period I was also in Newry, at a mass protest, listening as a British Army helicopter droned overhead and a voice in a plummy accent warned us through a loudspeaker that we were participating in an illegal demonstration and that consequently we were 'all under arrest'. The crowd cheered. At subsequent civil rights and protest marches I would occasionally meet well-intentioned British Army officers and soldiers; one fished a tattered copy of *The Price of My Soul*, a ghost-written account of Bernadette Devlin McAliskey's political life, out of his pocket, and told me that he felt he now 'understood a little of the Irish situation'. He, of course, was above it and outside it. I am sure that in my own superior way I snorted to myself, but silently. Shi'a Muslims call this *taqiyeh*; if your adversary's position is one of overwhelming strength, it is acceptable to dissemble. All subaltern peoples practise it, just as they tend to adopt guerrilla fighting tactics such as those of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Irish, who chose not to face an overwhelmingly technically superior English army in the field but were then reviled for not 'playing fair'. Nowadays such tactics are usually labelled terrorism by those who rule the world, and while I would not deny that the term is often a valid descriptor, it is rarely applied to the violent excesses of the mighty.

In the early 1970s I worked for a time in London, my first and rather brutal encounter with the heart of former Empire. Idi Amin had just expelled the Ugandan Asian community, and at the time it seemed to me that most of them were in the same food factory where I was working, in Hammersmith. I had no previous direct experience of racism and racial difference (apart from our own unstated and inchoate anti-Britishness) and it was a shock to find a racial hierarchy in the factory, with English and Welsh on top, the Irish in the middle and an oppressed

category of Black and minority individuals, native-born and immigrant, at the bottom. My memories now are of lectures from patronising if well-meaning, white-coated staff, standing on tables and literally talking down to us about personal hygiene. I remember cold, early morning bus stops where all those waiting, like myself, were foreigners. As in global cities everywhere, there is an iterative daily geography, but also a timetable, of difference. I recall the sheer alienation of living for the first time in a megalopolis, the occasional and shocking experience of explicit racial hostility and a strange quality of Englishness that seemed to me to be both extraordinarily tolerant and apparently callous. But I remember, too, the shabby but friendly solidarity of a London that was down on its luck, perhaps, but fun, and the egalitarianism of Citizens Advice Bureaux, which gave impartial help to all comers. It was all a huge contrast to an Ireland where everyone seemed to know everyone else, where welfare benefits were virtually a state secret and were in any event regarded by the middle classes as little more than a sop to the indigent. Nearly two decades later at the end of the 1980s, it was a shock to return to a post-Thatcher London shiny with new buildings in steel and glass and notable for the numbers of homeless and poor searching the city's rubbish bins for sustenance. It was claimed that there was no longer such a thing as society, but it had existed once.

I got to know a little more about English life when close friends of mine settled in a small English town outside London. They christened their two neighbours 'Pete the car' and 'Pete the house', so called for their obsessive weekend car washing and DIY dedication. To me, this was part of a series of peculiarly English rituals such as winemaking and a concern with self-sufficiency. Personally, I prefer to leave winemaking to the professionals. But I do empathise with the resilience and self-reliance of a generation of many English people, tending their own allotments and holding their own against all comers. Unfortunately this spirit of independence can also deteriorate into self-caricature; the UK Independence Party's farrago of Euro-scepticism is as unattractive as it is xenophobic.

In 1976 I joined the Irish Foreign Service – the Department of Foreign Affairs. Looking back now, my memory of my first posting to Brussels in 1978 is that I expected to find my British counterparts to be somehow more plausible, smoother, and smarter than I was. I am not proud of this, but I believe that many of us in those days subliminally thought something similar. It was a shock, then, to find that we were as good as anyone else and better than some, that our natural counterparts were as likely to be Danish or Dutch as British and that the British had their own difficulties in adjusting to the business of being a middle-sized, post-Empire state off the north-west coast of Europe.

For all our newfound and sometimes self-congratulatory Europeaness, some things did not change. I remember the civil servant in another government department in Dublin, less exposed at the time to the realities of Europe, whose reaction to my telephone call about an upcoming draft EU directive was 'I'll get back to you – I'll just phone my opposite number in London'. I can also recall being told by a senior British official in Brussels, in advance of a new arrival, that 'you'll like our new chap – he's RC, you know'. In retrospect (speaking as an agnostic) I found his attitudes towards the Irish and Catholicism, theirs and ours, both quaint and amusing. In spite of being 'RC', Sir Michael Butler went on to a brilliant career at the highest levels of the British system. He was also possessed of that peculiarly British talent for self-deprecation. As envoy to Iceland during the earlier British-Icelandic Cod Wars, legend had it that he, not a tall man, had climbed on a chair during a visit to the Icelandic Ministry for Foreign Affairs to make a protest at the 'highest level'.

At that time, France, for me and many other Irish people, especially in the urban middle classes, represented a way out of the British/Irish Manichean duality. It was as if our Francophilia enabled us to transcend geography; the Irish Ferries ship from Ireland to France became a metaphor. It was initially reassuring, on being asked in France '*est-ce que vous êtes britannique?*' to note the obvious and

positive change of tone when the reply was '*non, irlandais*'. It took a while before I realised that there were sometimes darker undertones to this, such as an atavistic and childish French anti-Britishness. Mers-el-Kebir notwithstanding, the British contribution to the liberation of France and the defeat of Nazism was and remains their finest hour. Worse, there was in some French right-wing quarters a positively racist and sectarian conviction about Ireland, which saw the country and its people as the last bastion of a vanishing white, Catholic Europe. Later, this French connection was exploited in a particularly tendentious way by disgraced Irish political leader Charles Haughey, an individual who corrupted Irish politics for a generation and who cast his style of leadership in the manner of Napoleon.

That said, my own exposure to French identity, language, politics and cultures, including the partly francophone cultures of Belgium and Lebanon, has marked me deeply. I found republicanism French style to be an attractive ideology for all its sometimes modern secular intolerance. I appreciated the concept of a public domain that belonged to all, compared with a British acceptance of privilege and hierarchy, and Irish cronyism and clientelism. To this day I feel as much of a French republican as an Irish nationalist, having no time for the atavistic ethnicity of traditional nationalisms, Irish or English (as distinct nowadays from 'British', a genuinely more inclusive term, to judge by the reaction of many Black and Muslim people who can live with 'British' but feel excluded as 'English').

Beirut in the early 1980s brought me different experiences. Some of these had a certain piquancy, such as the occasion when I hosted an EU co-ordination meeting during an Irish Presidency and received my British counterpart, senior to me and older, who arrived surrounded by heavily armed bodyguards, all of whom had served their time in Northern Ireland and some of whom I would not like to have met on a dark night. The Lebanese were also a little bemused at the spectacle of an Irish Ambassador (my immediate superior) who faithfully attended Anglican services on Sundays, whereas his British

counterpart was a regular attender at the Roman Catholic church on Rue Hamra. One of my most interesting encounters was with a fellow-countryman, George Simms, an elderly man who had served in the British Army and the British merchant marine for most of his life. He proudly informed me that he was a 'North Kerry Protestant Unionist'. As a young soldier invalided home in the Royal Munster Fusiliers during the First World War, he had been a member of a military guard party assembled in case of subversion or revolt when Roger Casement (former British Consul and dedicated human rights activist turned Irish nationalist) was arrested on Banna Strand, having come ashore from a German U-boat, and been detained by the RIC in Tralee Barracks. Simms had a photographic memory of those present and could name them all. Yet like many elderly people with a fading grasp of reality he could not easily come to terms with the present day. I once brought an Irish Army UN colleague to meet him. As military men will, they got on like a house on fire, but he seemed quite unable to grasp what uniform this man wore or what army and nation he served. He wasn't very sure who I was either.

All of the above notwithstanding, Britishness remained something of a mystery to me, permeated by subtleties of class, accent, mystique and ritual; *Land of Hope and Glory* on the last night of the Proms holds no appeal. A friend's experience as a distinguished academic guest at a Cambridge college dinner seemed to sum it up: having declined a glass of after-dinner port, she was consternated to find that the other diners felt constrained to decline in turn. How was one supposed to know? An English friend who married into an Irish and Irish-speaking family (he learned to speak Irish with an impeccable Home Counties accent) remarked, after a lively and typically argumentative Dublin dinner party, that 'in England, you get to finish your sentence before another person speaks'.

Another question that I had difficulty in understanding is the role of the military in British culture. For all of our own respect for our UN peacekeeping role and our pride in our Army, I was struck by a recent

observation of Olivia O'Leary, a journalist who knows Ireland and Britain well and has broadcast in both countries, that the British relationship with its Army is not unlike that which Catholic Irish people used to have with their Church: it is seen as central, secretive and almost beyond criticism. But I readily concede that, compared with the excesses and sheer ignorance of US forces in Iraq, the British in Basra and other places have shown at least some understanding of the ambiguous role in which they have been cast.

As Ireland itself began to change and old moulds were broken, I only gradually realised that my own views of Britishness were not the whole story, even as seen from a narrowly Irish perspective. There were many Britains and many kinds of Britishness and my own identity and culture was far more influenced by them than I had ever realised or admitted. It was time to think again.

For one thing, there was the matter of class and diaspora. The nationalism of the middle classes who controlled Irish society after independence had little enough to offer the poor and the marginalised. Some of the smug moralists who were such strong supporters of Irish independence were also glad to see the back of these same poor and unemployed who emigrated, if only because, had they stayed, it would have posed a potentially revolutionary situation.<sup>1</sup> In reality those with few prospects left for the neighbouring island in a constant flood for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The reception they got may not have always been the warmest, but as one elderly returned migrant put it to me in Connemara, '*marach f...ing Sasana, ní bhéadh f...ing tada a'ainn*' ('if it wasn't for f...ing England we'd have f...ing nothing'). Such migrants did not have the luxury of unalloyed nationalist politics, or at least they were aware of the hypocrisies and doublethink that could arise. The complexity of national and linguistic identity was brought home to me when we became regular visitors to the Irish-speaking heartland of South Connemara in the late 1980s. We met children who spoke perfect Connemara Irish and broad Cockney English, and adults who sang *sean-nós*<sup>2</sup> and read English

tabloids. This hybridity is, of course, mirrored in turn by generations of Irish in Britain, yet unlike Irish-Americans, they do not even seem to have a name.

Over time, I found other congenial aspects to British culture. In particular, I admired the very British tradition of a 'loyal opposition', compared with our own shifty false consensuses and sometimes windy words. Although I come from the nationalist tradition and have some grasp of the political discourse of Gerry Adams, I have no difficulty in understanding why some find his phrases so perversely flexible. By contrast with Ireland, there seems to be a genuine commitment in Britain to the notion of an ethical opposition, even and perhaps especially within the same party. The form this may take varies, from an extraordinary tolerance for eccentricity and dissent, to a resolute defence of independent media voices such as that of the BBC, to the maverick and courageous stance of former Foreign Secretary Robin Cook over the Iraq crisis. The debate on Iraq in the British Parliament, whichever side one took, was principled and passionate. However, I do not want to idealise this aspect of British culture. While Ireland featured a Taoiseach (Prime Minister) who managed to be for and against the invasion of Iraq at the same time – a not untypical achievement for a member of that particular party – British people protested massively in the streets against the war but a messianic and obsessional Prime Minister still forced the country to take part. Yet that same Prime Minister, whose mother was born in Donegal and who spent his young summers there for many years, persevered for longer and harder than any previous British politician to bring about a new positive phase in relations between Britain and Ireland. It must also be said that the attitude of mainstream Irish politicians of all parties was also principled and constructive.

One of the more attractive forms that oppositionalism can take is the British capability, in spite of a sometimes ossified and moribund tradition, to reinvent itself. Ethnicity is a case in point. It seems to me that the UK has made the transition from the 1960s 'tolerance' of

difference, to quote Roy Jenkins' famous definition of that time,<sup>3</sup> to a more radical inclusion. Embodied in a new multi-stranded notion of ethnicity, this has changed the very concept of Britishness, bringing it well beyond John Major's tepid world of warm beer and cricket. There remain, undoubtedly, hierarchies of power and difference in British society. Moreover such change has been much contested from Enoch Powell to the present-day debates about multiculturalism and social cohesion and, in particular, about the place of the State. But Britain today has been transformed by the wonderful and exuberant injection of diversity and otherness that it received from the *Windrush* onwards, as well as the generations of Irish, Jews and other Europeans who came for centuries before that.

Not the least of the changes that has infected British life and identity, is that which has affected the British Council. The British Council of old is that of Olivia Manning's *Balkan Trilogy*, a world, it seemed to me (probably quite unfairly), of lesser gentry, semi-failed intellectuals, artists and academics, floating in a sea of class, privilege, whimsy and alcohol. Today's British Council is engaged with governance as well as literature and culture and its staff and ethos reflect a new, more open Britain, one that is multi-ethnic and varied. I am sure that this was not achieved without stress and that divisions still remain, but the process at least indicates that something new is happening. This healthy and self-deprecating, even subversive, self-questioning, is exemplified by Counterpoint, the British Council's own internal think tank, whose main purpose would appear to be to scrutinise the British Council's own mission, often from new and possibly eccentric viewpoints.

As nations our histories and even identities have always been entwined, making for complex, hybrid patterns. What has changed in the recent past, perhaps, is a greater openness to admitting these facts, after the difficult and sensitive years of early independence and the trauma of the Troubles. This was very evident in the results of a recent survey commissioned by the British Embassy and the British

Council of Irish views of Britain and British people, *Through Irish Eyes*, which revealed a surprisingly positive overall picture (it would be fair to say that the survey was not fully reflective of all strands of Irish social opinion). Yet the rawness is still not very far away either, at least for my generation. I was struck by the reaction in Ireland last year to the death in action of Private Ian Malone, a Dubliner in the Royal Irish Regiment, a British Army unit, in Basra. The facts were widely reported in the Irish media and revisionist propagandists of the 'let's rejoin the Commonwealth' variety made much of his having 'died to make the world a safer place'. In fact, as had been made clear in a fascinating Irish television documentary about Irish soldiers in the British Army, he was clearly a likeable young man who had joined the British Army from a sense of adventure and might equally have joined the Irish one if they had been recruiting at the time. And yet . . . some part of me still has a difficulty with Irish soldiers in British uniforms, although I know that historically the Irish have frequently been over-represented in Britain's armed forces and have joined many other armies as circumstances dictated. Apart from the fact that my own grandfather wore a British uniform, if briefly, I cannot ignore, on the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of D-Day, the contribution made by all those who wore British uniforms, and their allies of other countries, to the liberation of Europe. There is nothing tidy about past or present.

It is not just Irish cultural gatekeepers (remember Brian Cleeve's 'Ascendancy' accent) who policed a certain rigid idea of culture and acceptable identity in Ireland. 'Regional' accents, especially Celtic ones, were also once rare in the British media. Today this has changed; only consider such Irish examples as Frank Delaney, Terry Wogan, Graham Norton, Gillian Ní Cheallaigh, Fergal Keane, Henry Kelly and many others. In turn English accents, and not just Irish 'Ascendancy' ones, are no longer rare in Ireland. It would be folly to deny that prejudice and discrimination have occurred in both jurisdictions towards the people of the other, but I would like to think that this does embody a new level of mutual respect and appreciation.

Indeed, if the support in Britain for Irish soccer performances and Eurovision entries is anything to go by, the feeling is stronger on the British side; Irish pub supporters of the same events often seem to operate on the ABB (anyone but Britain) principle. As for BBC2 and its allegedly 'immoral' programmes of the 1960s, these days one can see much raunchier material on Ireland's TG4 Irish-language channel, which has a Friday night film spot dedicated to foreign films (usually French), generally subtitled in English and thus popular with Ireland's new migrants from a variety of countries.

Our differences have not disappeared; sometimes small social rituals reveal most. Some years ago an English colleague here in Cork was startled when, on the death of a parent, a number of us proposed to go over for the funeral. Funerals in England, it seems, are occasions of private family grief, although this may vary in different ethnic communities and in Scotland and Wales. In Ireland, by contrast, they are large-scale public events, expressions of communal grief and occasions that no aspirant politician can afford to miss.

Samuel Beckett is famously said to have replied, on being asked if he was English, 'au contraire'. Too often in the past, the British were the 'not' of our identity; being Irish was sometimes collapsed to a mere 'not Britishness'. They were the Outside to our Inside, a reductionist and truncated view of identity that was probably commoner on this side of the Irish Sea than the other one. Confident nations do not need to assert their identity at the expense of others and especially at the expense of the other within themselves. There is more than a little British in the Irish and something of the Irish in the British as well.

Yet nationhood is always in process as well. Britain has not figured out how to reconcile itself to a European future rather than a role as world power. Change in Ireland in recent years has been so rapid that a new sense of anomie and loss of identity threatens to set in. Atavism is never far away, as shown in the casual racism which has become regrettably common in Ireland and in the frequent excesses of the British tabloid press.

I respect and admire many aspects of British life and culture, as often as not for those things that make us different rather than the ways in which we resemble one another. I have no particular wish to rejoin the Commonwealth or to return to a relationship of unequal tutelage with an imperial power. Moreover, we still have unfinished business on this island. But with our increasingly intertwined futures in Europe, even if we see these futures in differently nuanced ways, and our attempts to work towards more inclusive and diverse arrangements for our increasingly mixed societies, we have much to learn from each other.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> There is a legendary story concerning a meeting between veteran socialist and populist Peadar O'Donnell and Eamon de Valera. To de Valera's remonstrance that, under a socialist people's republic, millions would still have emigrated from Ireland, O'Donnell is supposed to have replied: 'Ah yes, Dev, but they wouldn't have been the same people.'
- <sup>2</sup> A formal, elaborate style of unaccompanied singing still practiced in the Irish language.
- <sup>3</sup> As British Home Secretary in the mid-1960s, Jenkins said that integration should be seen as 'not a flattening process of assimilation, but as equal opportunity, accompanied by cultural diversity, in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance'.

# St George and the Dragon

Zrinka Bralo

It was the third week of April when I received a call from a west London local paper. The journalist asked for me by name. Nothing unusual, I thought, as the new Immigration Bill was going through the House of Lords, and I am Executive Director of a migrant and refugee organisation. 'Do you have anything against the celebration of St George's Day?' a polite female voice asked briskly. 'Wwww ... what ... do you mean?' I muttered, surprised as much by the question as the amount of new-found authority it conferred on me.

I have some idea about St George's Day, but was not sure if this was the same dragon-slaying St George that I knew from Slavic orthodox Catholicism. Coincidentally, I was born on St George's Day in the old calendar, and narrowly escaped being named Georgina in its Slavic version. But why had I been singled out for comment? 'I have nothing against any kind of celebration,' I ventured, 'especially if we can squeeze another bank holiday out of them. Who am I to prevent anyone celebrating? But can you fill me in? Tell me more! Why might I object?' 'Well', she said, 'some people want the government to organise a parade as they do with the Notting Hill Carnival or on St Patrick's Day. It is an English holiday. But others feel uncomfortable because of the British National Party's use of the flag and ... then there are these cards in Hallmark now for St George's Day ... but I can't tell you any more, I am Australian.'

'Well that is an article I would like to read – educate both of us,' I said encouragingly. 'If you want to know what I *don't* think – it is that everyone using the British Union Jack or English flag of St George is

a member of the BNP. There is a huge difference between patriotism, pride in national identity and nationalism. One can be patriotic without being nationalistic. And by the way, no one in this country is preventing us from celebrating Christmas, Easter or New Year. But it may well be that the best way to ruin any meaningful tradition is to make it official and commercial.' Needless to say, she went away with no sound bites from me. I almost felt sorry for her. Almost.

As soon as I put the phone down, I logged on and googled St George's Day. The search produced no less than 299,000 sites. Soon assured that it was the same St George celebrated by Eastern Slavs as well as by the Portuguese, Germans, Lithuanians, and many others, I proceeded to learn everything that there is to know about the great warrior, defender of the Christian faith and the patron saint of England since the Crusades. And while I was trying to figure out how I had missed the episode of Simon Schama's *A History of Britain*, which covered this phenomenon, I happened to scroll down the BBC Northamptonshire web page, which sported the following feature:<sup>1</sup>

Is St George's Day ingrained on your heart, if not your arm? Do you care? We're asking people in Northamptonshire what being English means to them.

*Other countries laugh at us because we queue,* said one woman.

*I think people should be more proud of their heritage and more proud of their origins. It's almost politically incorrect to be patriotic. England is held in high regard by other nations, so St George's Day should be celebrated more,* said a young man.  
*I don't actually celebrate St George's Day, but I do believe England has too many asylum seekers. There isn't any Englishness any more. It's all rather cosmopolitan. Being English is just being a mixture; I don't think there is a true Englishman any more,* said another man.

There, in one go, were the most stereotypical of all stereotypes about the English: polite, orderly, self-deprecating, xenophobic and persecuted by the invisible hand of a politically correct thought-police. And of course, it is all the fault of asylum seekers.

A fourth statement rounded it all up in true Reithian mouthpiece-of-the-nation fashion:

*I came to England about eight years ago. I didn't know one word of English then, but the people of Northampton have helped me. I like the English people because they are friendly and have solved my problems. I feel very secure here.*

There it was: a grateful foreigner who likes English people; those people who do not like foreigners or themselves – or both.

### **Advertising kills the dragon**

That night for the first time, I saw a clever television commercial for a credit card that combines St George's Day, the flag, and English football, and trumpets at the end: 'England United – priceless'. The world of advertising had claimed St George's Day for its own, and in a matter of seconds, prised it away from the BNP, crusades and England.

Less than 24 hours after this episode came another phone call. Another peculiar challenge came my way – would I be able to write a few thousand words about Britishness?

This just happened to coincide with the moment when I am about to become British – officially British. It is also a time of war on terror, globalisation, EU enlargement, public hostility towards immigrants, and shocking revelations of torture in Iraq on a daily basis. So, please be patient with me as I take on this challenge.

### **Journey to Britishness**

Over the past ten years, both publicly and privately, I have often

read, written and spoken about immigration, exile, the construction of identities, xenophobia and racism.

I have done so with a confidence and conviction – some might say with an arrogance – that has made many in my audiences think of me as British already. 'I am British with or without a piece of paper,' I have argued on more than one occasion. 'I have been living in Britain for ten years. Bosnia has existed for 12 and I was only there for the first two bloody years of its existence; so there you go.' 'I am a responsible citizen. I work and pay taxes,' I appealed to Thatcherites. 'I recycle. I contribute my time to different charities and campaign for human rights,' I offered liberals. 'I queue in an orderly fashion at the bus stop. I obey the law. I respect others,' I would reassure middle-Englanders. The truth is that I just go about my daily life and share it with the community of fantastic people that I am so privileged to know and interact with in so many different ways. *They* are Britain and Britishness to me. And I love it. This does not mean that I love Sarajevo and Bosnia any less. And luckily, there is no cricket test for me to take, so perhaps we'll never know.

What I am talking about is loyalty to my community, the community that I have chosen to be a part of, and that has accepted me too. That relationship is formalised in my status as a citizen, or as a subject, in the British case. And in my commitment to making it a better place for all of us. What I am not talking about is nationality. Or ethnicity. Let me explain myself.

### **A few words of warning**

Here, I can draw some parallels with my experience in the former Yugoslavia and perhaps clarify my understanding of nationality. For the first 20-odd years of my life, I was a citizen of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia. The name of my language was Serbo-Croat and my parents' nationality was Croatian, although we lived in Bosnia for generations. There were people who identified themselves as Serbs, Muslims, Slovenians, Albanian, Hungarian and

Macedonian, but there were also Yugoslavs, people who were either from a mixed background, communists who despised the notion of nationality as an emotional and political weakness, or people who had no strong feelings or links to any of the nationalities on offer.

I was nothing. In the last pre-war census, I was asked whether this meant that I did not wish to express myself. No, I said, I am expressing myself – as nothing. Being Yugoslav guaranteed me citizenship status, I felt, but as for my identity, safety and sanity, being a member of a nation was not required. Growing up, I had witnessed the end of a communism that had culminated in a rotting, corrupt state of affairs. In my valueless society, I found the business of collective consciousness quite unappealing, and wanted no part of it. I shall come to the business of my rotting society with no values later, but first, let me deal with nationalism. I do know this is supposed to be about Britishness, but bear with me.

My refusal to express myself came from my experience that each nationality brought with it a form of nationalism. To summarise it without sociological terminology, nationalism in basic Orwellian means some are more equal than others. In the case of the former Yugoslavia, nationalism was prohibited by law as the greatest evil of the Second World War. The former Yugoslav peoples displayed a zest for genocide during that war that, on occasion, made the Gestapo and SS units look like amateurs. Each nationalist movement presented itself as the innocent defender of a jeopardised minority, on the verge of extinction by the enemy – other nationalities. Surprise, surprise – the nationalists of the most powerful and dominant groups have always been the loudest in their proclamations of a threat to their nation. Nationalism caused the disintegration of my country, my family and my life. It is all written up in the history books now, and I am sure that over the last decade it has been impossible to avoid these reports of genocide and death.

Before the war, I might have heard the words 'ethnicity' or 'ethnic group', but I cannot remember ever using them in my vocabulary. The

term 'nation' was rather more useful. But it was not until I started working with foreign journalists during the war, that 'ethnic groups' and 'ethnic cleansing' became common currency. It may sound picky, but I have always felt that these terms – ethnic and ethnicity – were inaccurate and misleading. We became a bunch of crazy Balkan tribes fighting over our tribal differences – differences of no consequence to the rest of the world. As we were not nations but mere ethnicities it became a civil war, the most frequent excuse given by the international community for not intervening, and for standing by while genocide happened. I had better stop here, or I will slip into unresolved anger over the injustices done. But it is not difficult to understand why being British seems so appealing. Let us get back to Britain.

#### **Unwelcome Committee 0 : International Brigade 1**

I have learned many lessons from my war, and one of them is about patriotism. It is a grand word but nothing to do with heroism, history, war, ethnicity or nationalism. It is about responsibility, about good versus evil, about the greater good and justice. Romantic? Maybe. But I would rather have the romantic version than the one about which cricket team one chooses to support.

The famous cricket test brings together this notion of nationalism/patriotism and immigration into a full, and some would argue, vicious circle. When I arrived on British shores, I was blissfully unaware of the unwelcome committee. I did not choose to come here: it just happened. I did not know much about life in Britain (I shall spare you the long list of stereotypes about the British that I had absorbed through the mass media and popular culture.)

What I had in Britain were friends. An international brigade of journalists and war buddies, who offered me a spare bedroom and sanctuary. They did it without fuss, as if it was the most normal thing to do, and in fact, they do it all the time. I was nothing special. They adopted me into their families and taught me everything, from which washing-up liquid to buy, to how to apply for a place at university.

I was so clueless about life here that I phoned several London hospitals on behalf of a friend to enquire how much she would have to pay to have her baby delivered. The quotes were between £4,500 and £11,000. As we were contemplating a crash course in home-delivery, British friends enlightened me about the NHS. Was this possible in a capitalist country? My old brainwashed, communist mind was suspicious.

Then I noticed that when a certain Irish bloke spoke on the news, his lips were always out of sync with the sound. The voice of Gerry Adams, explained my British friends, could not be heard on British television. However, a cunning plan had been devised to hire actors to speak a voice-over for Gerry Adams, word for word. The government had to live with it. The voice of Gerry Adams was not heard; but it created a mockery of this attempt at censorship. I was amused by this creativity and impressed by the tolerance with which the government took this blow. I tried to imagine what would have happened to journalists if they had tried something like that in my part of the world. They would have been sacked or 'disappeared', depending on which part of the Balkans we are talking about.

### **Recovering hope**

My heart was broken by the war in Bosnia, and I lost all hope. The world had just stood by, even refusing to sell us weapons to defend or destroy ourselves. My days were filled with news reports of massacres and deaths; my nights were filled with nightmares of what I had seen over nearly two years. Cynicism and anger were one option; depression and despair the other. But what I was seeing around me and learning about life in Britain started an unlikely healing process – I began to recover my long-lost belief in humanity.

This civic initiation began via the immigration debate. I discovered that there are people in this country who find my cosmopolitan, active citizenship offensive and heretical. I do not dwell on that too much. With my Balkan baggage of nationalism and genocide, I have no other option but to choose life, here and now, and to look towards the future.

In an attempt to be accepted and to fit in, however, I have tried to understand what it is that makes some Britons so afraid of foreigners? Why is it that a country that from the outside looks so powerful, strong and important seems to be so confused about itself from the inside? Why are immigrants and refugees perceived as a threat and blamed for everything? As I did not know any Britons who were against immigration, I started to read the tabloids. I wanted to know what it was that they objected to about my presence in this country. Tabloids seemed to be the place where this debate occurs in its most negative form. It is probably happening elsewhere, but I didn't have access to those places or people. In any case, it seemed to me that the tabloids are the self-appointed representatives of that section of the population that would throw me to the lions.

### **Tabloid Britain**

A new world and a completely different Britain were revealed to me. The definition of 'Them' has changed over the centuries from Catholics, Jews, French, Germans, Asians, Caribbeans, Argentineans, Africans, Europeans, asylum seekers, Muslims and terrorists. Not in this order and often combined. As I carried out my research into the myths and inaccuracies of the discourse representing asylum seekers and refugees, several themes emerged. The demonisation and dehumanisation of foreigners was presented as a form of concern and a defence of British values. The main accusations, that foreigners were scroungers and benefits cheats, was just the surface.

Then, there is a category of domestic traitor: the 'political correctness brigade', the 'anti-racism industry', the human rights lobby, politicians, the government and European Union institutions. This lot is conspiring with bogus foreigners and they all have one aim: to destroy the British way of life.

Skimming through the tabloids, I found that the rest of the pages that are supposed to be a reflection of British life are full of doom and gloom. The NHS is collapsing; old people are dying on

stretchers in hospital corridors; all teenagers are sex-crazed and as a result the country is full of young single mothers – and that is an offence against Britishness. Celebrities, the good and the great of the country, are either taking drugs or cheating on their husbands and wives. The food that we eat is poisoning us. Judges are letting criminals off too easily. The government is either incompetent, corrupt, or betraying the interests of the country in favour of the EU. Athletes are taking steroids or failing to win gold and who needs the Olympics anyway? Charities are spending money on foreigners instead of giving it to war veterans . . . the trains are not running properly . . . the list goes on and on. And who is there to blame?

### **Empire strikes back?**

There are large parts of every society in western Europe that feel disenfranchised and disempowered. They can no longer relate to their social and political institutions. The world around them has changed dramatically, in ways not dissimilar to wars or upheavals. As forced migration throws up new identity issues as part of the struggle for survival, globalisation fails to offer a mechanism to create or update contemporary identities in the richer, more developed western European states.

Last year, I attended a conference on global citizenship where a former MP referred to his electorate as consumers. Indeed it sometimes feels like the democratic process of active citizenship has been reduced to a transaction – I pay taxes and I elect politicians to get on with it. The trouble is, they do get on with it and somehow leave sections of the population insecure, scared, cynical, disengaged and disappointed. Some people don't care. Some look to the future and work to make things better. But a lot of people feel that the only path left to them is to look back – to the glorious days of the Empire and the spirit of D-Day.

Meanwhile, many British institutions have been sold out to corporations, which then went global on us. The French could be

supplying us with water, the Germans producing our medication, and the Canadians owning our telephone company. We may watch American television and read an Australian-owned newspaper. Add this to Brussels's conspiracy against farmers, British beef, and fishing. Suddenly the fears and sense of despair illustrated by those Northamptonshire vox pops are no longer surprising. The cultural identity of the host community and the integration of foreigners – these raise important issues.

What we really should be discussing are failing pension funds, the ageing population, long working hours, pollution, affordable housing, inequalities, human rights and electric cars – to mention just a few of my after-dinner favourites.

### **Outsider on the inside**

Look at public discourse as it is conducted by the mass media and political elite, and it is hard to find positive or affirmative representations of life in the UK.

Tabloids are often dismissed as low-brow pulp of little social significance. I beg to differ. Each of the leading tabloids claims a daily circulation of between two and 2.5 million copies; readership is four times as high. That means that between ten and 20 million people in the UK read tabloids on a daily basis. The ideology or discourse that they purvey penetrates the public sphere regardless of how cynically one reads it.

The Britishness some tabloids claim to defend is one of shallowness, selfishness, gossip and whining, with subtle undertones of English nationalism. It is always someone else's fault. The tabloids would have us believe that Britons are gullible, innocent victims of a conspiracy that started in the Vatican in the 12<sup>th</sup> century AD and is still going on. There is an outcry to stop this invasion, defend the country against the enemy, and gain back control from a treacherous government.

This fear of outsiders is not a unique phenomenon. Indeed, I often argue that the sorry nations of the Balkans were united by an

outside threat: 500 years of Ottoman rule, followed by the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which forced small peoples to join together. Later, the fear of NATO and the Warsaw Pact held it together throughout the Cold War. When the external threat was gone, the peoples of the Balkans started to fear each other. Looking at British geography from the outside – it looks whole enough, yet . . .

But if a comparison between the nations of Yugoslavia and that of Britain may seem to be where I am going, it is not. English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish identities may serve as a distant illustration to understand the stupidity of the war in Bosnia, but the way Britain evolved, its history and culture, make it unique and incomparable (as indeed can be said of every other country). Its openness and receptiveness to different cultures, races and creeds, however, marks it out as a more tolerant, more successful and more exciting place to live in than most. After all, if you look at the most successful and powerful countries in the world and the most oppressive regimes, you do not need a PhD in social science to trace a direct correlation between immigration and prosperity. Only compare the USA with Albania: need I say more?

I must admit that the dynamic between the British nations is not something I was aware of from the outside. That is why we foreigners often make the mistake of calling Britain England. And yes, the different national football teams confuse some of us when athletes at the Olympics all compete for Britain. But apart from that, I as an outsider, have always considered it one country, and one identity – British. Having experienced nationalism in its most dangerous form, I must admit that I can't help but feel nervous when I detect any kind of nationalism on my radar. However, if it is conducted in a way that makes me feel safe, there is no danger whatsoever that any nationalism, be it English, Scottish, Welsh and whatever is going on in Northern Ireland, will end up in the balkanisation of Britain. And that is one of the great things about Britain. But there is more, much more.

### **Now for something completely different**

I often wish that those whining, tabloid-reading Britons could see this country through my eyes. Yes, there is poverty and racism, and bureaucracy and institutions that don't function. I am not in denial. As I was growing up in this country I experienced the harshness of the immigration system and the hardening of attitudes against immigrants. But I have also discovered another completely different country. Wherever I go and whatever I do, I meet amazing people doing amazing things, which are changing and improving other people's lives. In this Britain, people are slowly but surely changing – shaping and improving this country and the rest of the world. Small revolutions happen almost on a daily basis, and no one makes any fuss about it. Especially not the tabloids.

Many times over the past ten years, I have attended and organised meetings in the House of Commons. In contrast, I was never allowed into any of the People's Republic institutions and buildings of my own country. Not even as a journalist. I will never take that for granted. I never knew who my parliamentary representatives were or what they were doing. Here, I can approach my MP with my concerns and problems on a weekly basis. And if that doesn't work, I can get together with people in the same predicament and together we can campaign and lobby to change the world from our living room. This is Britishness at its best.

In London in the 1960s, the imprisonment in Lisbon of two Portuguese students, who had raised their glasses in a toast to freedom, moved a British lawyer named Peter Benenson to write an article in *The Observer*. Many British readers were equally moved, and Amnesty International<sup>2</sup> was born. Four decades on and millions of people around the world write letters and campaign for human rights. I cannot even begin to imagine how the world would look without Amnesty International. Do you know anyone who doesn't know about it? Equally, I cannot imagine any other country where this could have happened. Not only because of democratic freedoms and the rule of

law, but because of the community of individuals that share that commitment and responsibility for the advancement of humanity.

I can hear cynics complain that they have not succeeded in eradicating torture. I would say, 'Not yet'. They made it unacceptable; they have made it their business not to be bystanders, they made their own societies re-examine attitudes and activities. They made us talk about it and think about it. Remember, that if a bunch of churchgoers in Vermont in 1777 had not been prepared to set aside their reticence and enter the arena, then American slavery would not have been abandoned, albeit almost a hundred years later. If you are still not convinced, then find the time to meet some of the people around the world who have directly benefited. They are now alive because someone in Great Malvern wrote a letter and faxed it until they jammed the fax machine of a remote dictator. This is just one example of the power of the unique culture of civil society that screams 'British' to me.

The Jubilee 2000 movement<sup>3</sup> is another example. By the end of 2000, rich countries have promised to write off \$110 billion of debt. When 24 million people signed the global Jubilee 2000 petition, governments around the world sat up and listened. This is the country where a stand-up comedian, a liberal peer, and a few immigrants and environmentalists united to save the homes of 17,000 minority Kurds by preventing the Ilisu Dam being built in Turkey.<sup>4</sup> Can you feel the power of that? That is the Britishness that I am proud of and that my friends from the USA are so jealous of.

The people of Britain make justice, fairness and human rights matter. They have changed the political and economic culture of the world forever. Most importantly, their methods of campaigning and influencing change have been welcomed and replicated around the world.

Equally, in the UK, millions of members of different groups from The Women's Institute to organic farming co-operatives engage in making their communities better while agreeing to disagree. The

unique charitable tradition of Britain has evolved into a powerful social and political force that is changing the world. And that is what attracts us foreigners. That is 'Britishness' – valued and respected from the outside, and so overlooked from the inside.

Despite all of its faults, and even its weather, this is one of the very few countries in the world where one can safely choose not to be a bystander. Please do not take that for granted.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> [www.bbc.co.uk/northamptonshire/features/2004/st\\_georges\\_day/index.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/northamptonshire/features/2004/st_georges_day/index.shtml)
- <sup>2</sup> Amnesty International <http://web.amnesty.org/pages/aboutaitimeline-1960s-eng>
- <sup>3</sup> Jubilee 2000 [www.jubileedebtcampaign.org.uk](http://www.jubileedebtcampaign.org.uk)
- <sup>4</sup> Ilisu Dam Campaign [www.ilisu.org.uk](http://www.ilisu.org.uk)

## Contributors

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**Piaras Mac Éinrí** is Director of the Irish Centre for Migration Studies (ICMS), at University College Cork, which over the years has done invaluable research on migration and asylum issues for academic, government, EU, non-governmental (NGO) and other organisations. He designed the ICMS website (<http://migration.ucc.ie>) – the premier source of information on Irish migration issues on the web (approximately 33,000 visitors a year), widely used by academics, NGOs, policy officials and the general public. Obtaining his degree in 1972, Mac Éinrí served in the Irish Foreign Service from 1976–87, to return to academe (geography and migration studies) in 1987. Since then, he has led many research projects and frequently contributed to print and electronic media on immigration and asylum issues. He has designed training programmes and workshops; taught courses; and lectures within and outside University College Cork (Continuing and Adult Education, Department of Geography/European Studies, the National Association of Student Councils (NASC), the Comhlanh

Refugee Solidarity Group, and the African Refugee Network) on anti-racism, interculturalism, immigration and related issues.

**Zrinka Bralo**, a journalist from Sarajevo, has been involved with refugee and human rights since she was exiled in 1993. In the past ten years she has worked as a journalist, campaigner and researcher and has contributed to publications, programmes and conferences focusing on the media discourse and public perception of migration in the UK. At present she is Executive Director of the Migrant and Refugee Communities Forum in west London.

**Csilla Hős** is currently working as English projects manager for British Council Hungary. A teacher of English by qualification, she has taught English as a foreign language in state schools in the former Yugoslavia and Hungary and has facilitated professional development events for teachers and teacher educators in Hungary and the region. Her main professional interest lies in the educational potential of foreign language learning. Csilla is one of the co-authors of *Zoom in on Britain and Hungary* (Swan, 2001), a language course-book based on an intercultural approach to ELT. Recently, she has been involved in the development of the website 'for interculturally-minded teachers and learners' [www.intercultural.hu](http://www.intercultural.hu)

This collection of essays is one of ten celebrating the British Council's 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary by examining some of the most critical issues for the future of cultural relations. A wide range of thinkers provides provocative and stimulating visions of the power and importance of cultural relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They don't look for agreement; their aim, and ours, is to encourage debate and cut new channels for dialogue.

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Recently described as 'a place not a race; a vibe not a tribe', Britain is a more successful matrix for changing identities than almost any other European country. This makes it more, not less, difficult to understand what Britishness is all about; constantly renegotiated, it seems sometimes to be simply the state of play in an endless and almost infinite conversation. Today's take on the word 'we'.

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