England whose England? – Andrew O'Hagan

In the winter of 1941, whilst doodlebugs sped through the dark overhead, George Orwell explored the strange compendium of strictness and laxity that goes towards making up the English character. His essay 'England Your England' summons a living nation on the brink of its own destruction.

Orwell's England was a place of passionate moralists and inveterate gamblers. The English were a practical people with no world-view: a more or less temperate collection of Blimps and hypocrites, foul speakers and pointless intellectuals, horny-handed sons of toil and blind lovers of legality. He showed a nation of people with no artistic temper and bad teeth; he spoke of an upper class that would easily opt for fascism. He summoned the clatter of clogs in the Lancashire mill towns, queues outside the Labour Exchanges, battalions of old maids biking to Holy Communion through the mists of the autumn mornings. Yet the English were not seriously religious and they cared more for their back gardens, the price of butter, and 'a nice cup of tea'. It was a world of graded snobberies, each to his own, but where a certain unmistakable gentleness infused the day.

Yet for all the long goodbyes and the nervous hellos that characterise Orwell's famous essay, he never could have foreseen the end of meaningful commonality as we have come to know it. He knew enough about Eton to know that the Battle of Waterloo had been won on its playing fields, and that all subsequent wars had been lost there, but the end of Empire had greater magnifications in store. Orwell saw a nation of sleepwalkers, but sleep is nowadays something to be stolen from a culture of perpetual wakefulness, wherein every Englander is devoted to living larger than before, making the world his very own, and existing in an almost supernatural relation to the task of everyday life. The English have gone from being the most class-ridden people on the face of the planet to being, with the Americans, the most mediated, not so much living in reality as being haunted by it, dreaming of how to escape. England is no longer a nation so much as a notion: people live here to catch the breeze from Europe and America and eventually China, believing in nothing so much as the certainty that there will be weather, increasingly extreme weather, something to drown or bake the English fantasies. For all these years, hidden in the nation's small talk, exchanged by elderly gentlemen at bus stops and spoken by women over garden fences, has been our last gift to the Empire: our obsession with weather, the subject most likely to dominate the global experience of 2041.

In the years between Orwell's England and ours a new kind of British imagination was born. It first came with Victory and the end of rationing, when people learned how to express the new hungers born of deprivation. In this way, a short history of the banana in England would tell you almost as much as a treatise on the evolution of the land-owning classes. The Second World War didn't so much begin a new phase for the English as bring down the shutters on an old one. The 1950s were to prove the years zero for the older kind of make-do-and-mend mentality: suddenly people wanted more children, and wanted more for their children, believing them to be worthy of lives that involved not armaments and absences, but domestic appliances and inside toilets and spectacles on the National Health. If the English grew paranoid about peace in the 50s, they also grew deeply acquisitive, learning that life and its products had the monopoly of glee over death. In 1957, the birth of the Common Market coincided with the birth of the Teenager, a confluence that changed forever what it meant to be alive in England: in the future, everybody could seek to be owner-occupier of their own destiny, stuffed shirts go hang.

Philip Larkin was right: by 1963, somewhere between the end of the Chatterley ban and The Beatles first LP, sex and consumerism, entitlement and the teenager, became the hallmarks of the new aristocracy. The old ruling class decayed in the same way that parenthood did, becoming fossilised in their functionless roles, whilst England learned better how to spend both its taxes and its pocket money. The Queen of England began her slow descent into the arms of the people, for whom she has become that great symbol of heritage and nostalgia, the pantomime dame. Orwell was able to assume, in 1941, a stable if somewhat ludicrous structure for English society, but that structure has since been shaken down by generations for whom veneration can only exist as a form of sickness and self-denial. The English would learn to appreciate the royal family again only when the royals conformed to the rigours of modern spite and learned to commune with the nation at its lowest level – the level of sentiment and celebrity and family dysfunction. If lineage means nothing to the modern English, fame means everything, especially the sort of fame which can end up leaving the public feeling much entertained and much better off than the people they once looked up to.

Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair together gave the English a new sense of morality. Neither of them really believed in the habits of society, preferring a version of English character that sought instinctively to follow the promptings of economic self-interest and the pressure of personal conscience to form a

whole. Thatcher and Blair may be judged interesting leaders, not only because of the equal terms of office they served, but on account of the way each of them had an affect on England that was as much cultural as it was political. They altered the temper of their times, the basic feel of Englishness, and were similar in having the notion of a reduced role for England in the world. Thatcher's war in the Falklands might have seemed easier to glorify than Blair's war in Iraq, but each was a struggle for influence that ended by making England seem littler that it used to. I think Gordon Brown is the more intelligent of the three, but he may feel forced to surrender his analytical powers to a gargantuan effort at remaining in power. We already see evidence of this in his attempt to promote 'British Day', a defensive ploy to inform English people that he is not merely a product of Scotland. It would take a politician of brave and reckless talent to show the English how to live in a state of good faith with the past – and to show them the part England has played in its own troubles. Thatcher and Blair ran in the opposite direction, lighting fires, not putting them out, and Brown may have the gift, but perhaps not the opening, to stimulate new national values.

In Orwell's world, English people were defined by the kind of work they did and by how they spoke, by where they went to school and what they left to their children when they died. Some of that is still true, but people are more frightened of their children than they used to be, frightened of their disapproval, and people are in general defined as much by leisure as by work. How did youth and spare time get to hold so much power in England? It's hard to say, except that we always seemed, in the post-war period, to have a natural talent for youthful rebellion: perhaps we had a great deal more to rebel against than other nations. In any event, there is no culture in England now for people over 60, and the concerns of people in their late teens are seen to dominate the airwaves and mock the value of intellectual enquiry. The Daily Mail is now a factory for the manufacture of hatred and misunderstanding, and many other papers are emblazoned with the sort of ill-written, low rent gossip and interminable cliché that would have been found wanting had they appeared in the Penny Dreadfuls enjoyed by Orwell's grandfather. You have to look very hard to find a moral centre in the English press today: most of it is complicit, sometimes unwittingly, with the newly malevolent forces of political cynicism and economic ruthlessness. It was once taken for granted that the public had things to learn from the press; today the press exists in a state of perpetual anxiety about what it might be failing to learn from the public. Some editors are vain enough to call this democracy: in actual fact it is simply cowardice.

Orwell could refer to ‘your England’ as if both England and the people who might own it were stable entities. But that is no longer the case: there are now many Englands, many sorts of Englishness, and any number of new ethnic and immigrant groups who would claim ownership over parts of the nation whose existence is invisible to the English press. England is now one of Europe’s most under-described territories; increasingly, there are lives being lived that see themselves as having nothing to do with liberal or conservative opinion and due process. If Orwell were alive today I believe he would be out in the byways of England, trying to conjure this world of fruitful aliens, these pockets of English life where community – the community of allotments and warm beer – had faded away to the point where the country had become unrecognisable. He would see American language creeping over the Northern vowels, and the violence born of leisure on every housing estate. He would see global food chains joining the dots of the conurbations and the white working class in elasticated trousers, dressed not in overalls but in sports and leisure gear, with nothing to do, nowhere to go, and mobile phones holding the tribes together.

England is a place where it is easy to find oneself foreign. Everyone is foreign. There is no national feeling, and the English poor are not really part of English society but of the economically disenfranchised across the world; the rich belong to a global economy; Muslims see themselves as joined not to the mix of England but to an international brotherhood; millions of Christians believe they are linked to an American-led ‘coalition of the willing’; kids on Facebook see the like-minded not in the same street as themselves but in a street somewhere else in the world, where someone likes the same bands and hair styles as them. England has spread with the World Wide Web into the Internet’s catchment area, which is everywhere, whilst shrinking away from the differences that exist at close quarters. When it comes to questions of ownership and identity, it is the meaning of proximity that has changed: English people are no longer together as a result of being neighbours. In fact, neighbourhood can define separation. Faith and class and leisure and sex have uprooted from the actual land, and such alliances can now exist in cyberspace.

So what is lovely about England? People sometimes speak of a native fairness, but that is romantic, England is not remotely fair. Yet to me the nation is both funny and comforting. As a rule, English people know they fail to ask the most demanding questions of life or themselves; they know they

are low in moral ambition and high in self-regard; they know they crave reassurance before they ask for anything challenging or original; they know they are both protective of their bad habits and defiant about them; they know they are bigoted, mob-minded, lazy, and sentimental. But somehow the knowledge of these things amongst the English has always served to alleviate the crime. Nobody in England thinks they are beyond improving. Nobody thinks they are more important to posterity than to their Aunt Sadie. And that is the quality more common to England than to any political notion or article of faith: the knowledge that we all come from somewhere and are all dying anyway and that most of all we are nothing if not the sum of our imperfections.

The English are cowed by authority but are not frightened of dying. In this respect they are the very opposite of the French. The English make too little of what they eat but do not require much sustenance from God. In this respect they are the very opposite of the Italians. The English don't put too much store by sex and secretly they enjoy their sporting defeats. In this respect they are the very opposite of the Spanish. The English are rubbish with money and enjoy the stories of their native inventiveness. In this respect they are the very opposite of the Germans. What is lovely about England is the sense that being funny or being hopeless is more important than being right, and this is what has saved what remains of the English ruling class, which has given very little to native comfort but a great deal to the proliferation of laughter and the flowering of style.

In this period of 67 years, some English people have gone from being children to being grandparents, a significant number to being great-grandparents. And if the English expect much more from life nowadays, they probably expect much less from each other. We always expected quite a lot from the state and quite a lot from our neighbours – everything from rubbish collection to 'good morning' – but the English have adapted very well both to the service economy and to the kind of interruption of privacy represented by CCTV. The great English defect in Orwell's day was to be a nosey parker, but now we are all nosey parkers and we visit Homebase to stock up on further equipment to make our nosey parkerism better and more visible than our neighbours. By the time of the London Olympics in 2012, we will be the most enthusiastically self-observing nation on earth. We are still waiting for the positive effect this was hoped to have on crime figures: since 1941 one is 1000 times more likely to find oneself robbed at knifepoint or burgled while we sleep.

Yet England might always beat every other European nation when it comes to taking the piss out of ourselves. We have irony to burn, and anybody who thinks this is a small bonus should try living in America. Some English people get through their whole lives without ever making an earnest remark, and this must be counted a blessing in a world where ordinary human experience is constantly under threat from those who wish to discuss it, especially if that means discussing it on television. Yet in the midst of so much snooping and such rampant individuality as has covered the country since the war, England is still a nation where most people would not step over a person who has fallen down in the street. On a personal level, we are not yet fully afraid of other people's misfortunes.

Yet the English people love newspapers and politicians who are more degraded than themselves: we are not yet so far gone as the Italians in this respect, but we share a similar species of vicarious enjoyment at the bouts of gladiatorial horror presented in the public sphere. Someone who didn't know England at all would get the impression in 2008 that it was a nation of people obsessed with paedophilia and a country run by politicians who never said what they meant and never acted on what they believed. This is the kind of England stirred into view by the tabloids and by the kinds of political operatives who think like the tabloids. We see it every day but it is in some respects a mirage: ordinary Englanders don't know anything about child abuse and they don't really care about the coarse machinations of politicians; they simply enjoy the cartoon violence of the press for its own sake, feeling a little better, perhaps, about their own normality as they turn the pages.

In the days before jet engines and Thompson Holidays, the English were most English in their own homes. But now they only really become English abroad, when the opportunity to establish a smear of commonality in foreign climes asserts itself every summer. It may be the most modern of all the ironies of Englishness: they are least provincial whilst stuck in the provinces, but give them a case of lager and a Spanish hotel and you will see what the English mean when they speak of the national spirit. In some respects it was ever thus. The boys who made it back from the First World War did not, as Orwell observed, come back speaking French and appreciating wine, but today's English travellers are known to be the worst in the world. In ways the poets never considered, they want to make the corners of every foreign field forever England, and only when back in the shires and behind their own net curtains do they know how to detach from that strange contagion.

Heroic England's dead and gone; it's with George Orwell in the grave. I believe he wrote his essay in the belief that England might be scuttled by its own aristocracy and perhaps saved by its working class. He couldn't have known that both were done for in England at the moment of victory. The interesting battle has been the peace, where England has become a dangerous fantasy and a comic confection at one and the same time. It may struggle to hold itself together as a nation, but it will hold its stomach while the struggle goes on, gently laughing at its contradictions in the solemn mirror of the coming day.