

BRITAIN TO-DAY



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JOHN BULL'S BEHAVIOUR

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“THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE IS UNDERSTOOD ALMOST EVERYWHERE IN THE WORLD, BUT THE ENGLISH PEOPLE ALMOST NOWHERE.”

THESE words were written in large letters at the entrance of one of the pavilions in the South Bank Exhibition in London. The pavilion was designed to expound the British people, and was called the Lion and the Unicorn—taken from the Royal Coat of Arms, and chosen to symbolize two important qualities of our national character: on the one hand realism and strength, on the other imagination and fantasy. It was aptly chosen, for perhaps more than any other nation the British exhibit these apparently contradictory qualities side by side. Viewed historically, the gaiety and fun of the Elizabethan age can be seen alternating through the centuries with the narrow straight-laced ideas of the Puritans, and deep down in all of us these two strains, the lighthearted and the stern, struggle for supremacy. In one direction there is John Bull, in another there is Alice in Wonderland. From much of our behaviour it would seem that a marriage had been arranged between these most unlikely partners.

It is common knowledge that we rarely show our emotions. This can be illustrated by dramatic examples, such as the way we play bridge as the ship goes down, but much better by the more common everyday things, of which the supreme example is our habit of queuing. However great our desire may be for a seat at the cinema or a bunch of bananas we are content to stand patiently behind somebody else and wait for it. We do not show our desires, nor our enthusiasm, and rarely even our sympathy. The sadness of this is that the English are really a very emotional people. That is why we look with such envy on the carnivals in France, Switzerland or Germany, and why (in secret) we enjoy some of the crazier dances (especially if they are in a place where we are not known!) and why every now and then we burst the bonds we have tied around us and show our emotion in no uncertain way.

Closely allied to our reserve is our fear of being different,

our concern to be correct. Many of us rebel a bit in our minds but not in our practice. We look down the street and see the endless, monotonous procession of sports coats and grey flannels and think how dull they are, and secretly wish we could put on sky blue pink shirts and bright green trousers. But if we should see someone walking down the street in a sky blue pink shirt and green trousers we avert our gaze in shame, and continue to conform with a sigh. The principal reason why our General Post Office makes a handsome profit every year is because before every party everybody telephones to everybody else to make sure that everybody will be in the same sort of clothes.

The English are very proud of their sense of humour. Human beings laugh mainly at two things: the discomfort of others if it is not shared (if it is shared we laugh "on the other side of our face"); and the incongruous or the ridiculous. The English laugh far more at the incongruous than at the discomfort of others, and is this not one point in our favour? The English word "fun" is not an easy word to translate into most languages. On the whole our humour is plain, simple, uncomplicated. It is not usually mixed with tragedy, as it so often is in other countries. This humour is a very important part of our make-up, for it is largely because of it and the detachment that results from it, that as a people we find it so hard to hate. Even during a war we fight to show how much we can love our enemies afterwards. We almost believe that if Marshal Stalin, President Truman, our own Prime Minister and other world leaders could spend an evening in each other's company watching silly symphonies, they could never quarrel again!

The supreme virtue for the Englishman is Common Sense. For us the term "intellectual" is a derogatory one, and even the word clever has a slightly unpleasant ring about it. Almost every Englishman would rather be taken for a fool than a knave and it seems more important to us to have a well dressed Queen than a clever King. In most of our newspapers more space is given to what the Queen or the Princesses (and even, sometimes, the King) wore than what they did or said.

If there is one English phrase that every foreign student knows it is "the Englishman's home is his Castle." This is

true—our home is a sort of impregnable fortress in which, safe from all forms of assault, we can enjoy complete relaxation, lying back in our long chairs and exerting no effort whatever.

The part of our home that fills foreigners with the greatest astonishment is our sitting room. This provides an exception to our famous ability to compromise, for whereas the human body can assume many shapes, varying from the perpendicular to the horizontal, we really only adopt the two extremes. We either stand bolt upright, as in a pub or at a cocktail party, or we lounge in an arm chair—the very word expressing effortless abandon. In our sitting rooms we assemble the most luxurious chairs (sometimes one chair will occupy half the floor space), and we stretch out our full length, not round a table as our continental friends do, but round the fire-place—or the hearth, to use the word invested in the richest associations. In summer we sit round the fire-place and gaze into the empty grate, and in winter we sit round the fire-place and have our chests roasted, while our backs are only prevented from being frozen by the soft embrace of our voluptuous companions, our chairs!

When we go abroad and sit in upright chairs around the central table with the lamp directly above, and the wine glasses sensibly on the table, our backs ache for the soft comfort of our great easy chairs, the roaring fires, and the absence of any table bigger than a footstool. But unfortunately our system is not without a remarkable degree of inconvenience. The way we have tea, for example, displays an odd ignorance of the elementary rules of anatomy. For we apparently believe that the human body is provided with at least half a dozen hands, as we balance a cup of tea in one hand, stir it with another, balance a plate in another, hold a cigarette in a fourth, light someone else's cigarette with a fifth, and shake hands with someone with a sixth. What a mercy we do not gesticulate with all of these six hands as well!

Yet foreign visitors can breathe a sigh of relief when asked to a dinner party, for they will really get a table—a good honest solid table, with a chair for everyone to sit decently at beside it. And the galaxy of eating implements ranging out such a distance on each side of the plate need cause little alarm. It is really quite simple. Separate implements are used for each course

(as though we had a passion for washing up), one works from the outside towards the middle, and a weather eye on the hostess is advised. Soup is drunk from the side of the spoon, and Germans should remember that the sacred potato is cut by the profane knife. The reply "thank you" to an inquiry if one wants some more will elicit a second helping. It is the English who deserve sympathy here, for whereas foreigners may find they have some more put on their plate when they do not want it, it is the other way round with us. We may want some more very much and get nothing. Many of us have learnt that the hard way.

The weather is universally known as the traditional subject of conversation, but it is not always realized that this is of two types. First it is the means of continuing the business of getting used to each other's company which is begun by an introduction, and no judgment, observation, or discrimination is required, or even allowed. There is only one rule. There must be no contradiction. Everything must be smooth and easy. Even on a cold and rainy morning the observation "lovely day" must be countered by "Yes, isn't it?" or the very bold might say: "for the time of year." But the weather is also a serious topic, and can anyone who has been in England in the summer of 1951 be surprised? It is discussed in earnestness; the most abstruse comparisons are made: "more rain fell between 2 and 3.30 in the afternoon at Little Puddle on the Mud, than on any weekday afternoon between March 2nd and April 2nd since 1936." And only too often a hedge is the borderline between two plots of ground (such as a market garden and a cricket ground) for one of which earnest prayers are offered for rain, and for the other of which drought is besought. And so weather, whatever confusion it may cause in Heaven, evokes the most animated conversation in that little part of the Earth known as England.

THE FORTY BEST BOOKS

IN our September number we invited readers to send lists of forty books in prose, written since the year A.D. 100, which they consider have the best claim to be read by intelligent persons in all countries (either in the original or translation). The votes given to each book are being counted. The list of the forty books which have the most votes will be considered as the list selected by readers of *Britain To-day*, and the sender will win our prize.

The results have been coming in steadily, but are as yet far from complete. The earliest replies were of course from countries in Europe, and they were followed by batches from the U.S.A., and then from Latin-America and Africa. As yet we have had nothing from Australia or New Zealand or other very distant countries.

However, the election results up to date are sufficient to show that certain books are sure of a place. We publish, as promised, a provisional list, though we must emphasize that this is not the definitive list, which will be modified by results to come. Here are the first thirty-nine, arranged in order according to the number of votes received, those bracketed together having had an equal number:—

Cervantes: <i>Don Quixote</i> .	Andersen: <i>Fairy Tales</i> .
Tolstoy: <i>War and Peace</i> .	Charlotte Brontë: <i>Jane Eyre</i> .
Swift: <i>Gulliver's Travels</i> .	Darwin: <i>Origin of Species</i> .
Dickens: <i>David Copperfield</i> .	Dostoievsky: <i>The Brothers Karamazov</i> .
{ Defoe: <i>Robinson Crusoe</i> .	More: <i>Utopia</i> .
{ Hugo: <i>Les Misérables</i> .	Pepys: <i>Diary</i> .
Bunyan: <i>Pilgrim's Progress</i> .	{ <i>Thousand and One Nights</i> .
{ Flaubert: <i>Madame Bovary</i> .	{ Lewis Carroll: <i>Alice in Wonderland</i> .
{ Thackeray: <i>Vanity Fair</i> .	{ Gibbon: <i>Decline and Fall of the Roman</i>
{ Voltaire: <i>Candide</i> .	{ <i>Empire</i> .
{ Boswell: <i>Life of Johnson</i> .	{ Manzoni: <i>Promessi Sposi</i> .
{ Dickens: <i>Pickwick Papers</i> .	{ Marx: <i>Das Kapital</i> .
{ Dostoievsky: <i>Crime and Punishment</i> .	{ Stevenson: <i>Treasure Island</i> .
{ Scott: <i>Ivanhoe</i> .	{ Boccaccio: <i>Decameron</i> .
{ St. Thomas Aquinas: <i>Summa Theologica</i> .	{ Emily Brontë: <i>Wuthering Heights</i> .
{ Jane Austen: <i>Pride and Prejudice</i> .	{ Churchill: <i>The Second World War</i> .
{ St. Augustine: <i>Confessions</i> .	{ Kipling: <i>Jungle Book</i> .
{ Thomas à Kempis: <i>De Imitatione Christi</i> .	{ Montaigne: <i>Essays</i> .
{ Macchiavelli: <i>Il Principe</i> .	{ Melville: <i>Moby Dick</i> .
	{ Rabelais: <i>Gargantua and Pantagruel</i> .
	{ Tolstoy: <i>Anna Karenina</i> .

The candidates for place 40 are seven in number, each of whom received an equal number of votes. The competitors for this place are:

Dumas: <i>The Three Musketeers</i> .	Marcus Aurelius: <i>Meditations</i> .
Fielding: <i>Tom Jones</i> .	Pascal: <i>Pensées</i> .
Goldsmith: <i>The Vicar of Wakefield</i> .	Sienkiwicz: <i>Quo Vadis</i> .

At the moment the lead is held by a Swedish competitor. An Italian, a Spaniard and an Englishman tie for second place.

The final result of this literary general election will be announced, with the name of the prize winner, in the next number (January) of *Britain Today*.