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FREE WORLD

Why a crisis of the West reveals the opportunity of our time

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For

Thomas and Alec

For Freedom’s battle once begun
Bequeath’d by bleeding sire to son
Though baffled oft is ever won

These lines from Byron’s ‘The Giaour’ were written on a scrap of paper by an unknown hand, using a translation by Adam Mickiewicz, the Polish Byron, and pinned up outside the gates of the Lenin Shipyard in Gdansk in August 1980, to support the national strike that gave birth to the free trade union Solidarity. The unknown copyist omitted the word ‘bleeding’. This ruined the metre but greatly improved the sense.

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To the reader

If you're a free person, you can work with other free people to make a free world. Nothing can stop you – except the walls of prejudice, selfishness, ignorance and myth that separate free men and women from each other, especially Europeans from Americans, and the free from the unfree. These walls are not outside and beyond us, like the Alps or the Rocky Mountains. Minds built them; minds can knock them down.

In this essay, I first try to chip away at these mind-walls. They are large, and they have grown larger since the '9/11' of fear that marked the true beginning of the twenty first century. My only demolition tool is a small Pilot Hi-Tecpoint rollerball pen. Yet like the Berliners who started to hack away with penknives at the roughcast concrete of the Berlin Wall on the night of 9 November 1989 - the '9/11' of hope that ended the twentieth century - I have the encouragement of hearing many others zestfully hammering away to left and right of me. Won't you join us?

In the last part, I suggest a few good things we can do as we demolish the walls. You are unlikely to agree with everything I propose. Nonetheless, as a free person, please start with me from this simple, shared truth: it's up to us.

Britain comes first in my account not because I think it's more important than other countries but on the principle that honesty begins at home. If you are not British, you may want to begin with your own homeland. Britain can be in the vanguard of this movement for a free world, but so can any other free country, if it chooses to.

Part One

CRISIS

A Crisis of the West

When you say 'we', who do you mean? Not yourself alone, I suppose, unless you happen to be an old-fashioned European monarch - or Margaret Thatcher, who once famously remarked 'we have become a grandmother'[i]. Your immediate family, of course. Then your extended family. Or perhaps you would put your friends before your extended family? As an old joke has it, you can *choose* your friends. Widening the circle, it might be your town or village, your region, fellow supporters of a football or basketball team, fans of a particular music band or television show, your nation, your state, a social or sexual orientation, a political party or tendency ('we on the Left', 'we conservatives'), or those who profess the same religion - world-straddling communions, these, of nearly two thousand million Christians and more than a thousand million muslims, though communions scarred by deep internal divisions.

Now ask yourself this question: 'What's the widest political community of which I say "we" or "us"?' I don't want to be pressing, but can I ask you to write down your personal answer before reading on? For in our answer to that question – or our lack of answers – lies the key to our future.

*

For me, an Englishman born into the cold war, that widest political community used to be something we called 'the West'. We didn't talk about it a great deal. If you had asked us, we could not have said exactly where it ended. Was Turkey part of the West? Japan? Mexico? But we had no doubt that it existed, as Europe existed, or communism. At its core, we felt, were the free countries on both sides of the Atlantic ocean, in Western Europe and North America. Some politicians and writers talked about 'the Atlantic community,' but I don't think we ever said that in ordinary life without the kind of distancing spoken inverted commas that you apply to a rather pretentious phrase. In German they call them 'goose's feet'.

This cold war West was faced by a hostile military and political power that we called 'the East'. 'The East' meant, in the first place, the Soviet Union, its Red Army, its nuclear missiles pointed at us and its satellite states in what was then labelled Eastern Europe. Countries like China, Cuba, Vietnam and North Korea were related parts of this – for me - darkly fascinating communist world, but by the time I became engaged in the attempt to spread political freedom in Europe, in the late 1970s, we didn't think of them as belonging to a single, threatening East.

Occasionally, Western politicians or propagandists tried to persuade us that all the non-communist countries of the world should be described as 'the free world' - even if their governments were locking up and torturing their critics at home, gagging the press, rigging elections, and so forth. We didn't buy that. We never thought that, say, Chile

under the dictatorship of General Pinochet was a free country. Altogether, this tag 'the free world', with its strident definite article, implying that all inside are free, all outside unfree, has seldom been used in public without pathos or in private without irony. 'We're the most hated cops in the whole of the free world,' boasts a Los Angeles Police Department officer in the Jackie Chan film *Rush Hour*.

But the West – yes, that existed. Anyone who travelled regularly behind the iron curtain, to countries like Poland, was confirmed in this belief. My friends there talked all the time about 'the West'. They believed more passionately than most West Europeans did in its fundamental unity and its shared values; they feared it might be decadent and weak. 'We,' they said, 'are the West trapped in the East'. At the time, I felt these Polish, Czech and Hungarian friends were, so to speak, individual members of the West far more than I felt, say, Turkey or Japan were collectively part of it. Others, with different experiences, will have seen things differently. Where you stand depends on where you sit. Everyone had his or her own West, just as everyone has his or her own Europe, America, France, Socialism, Islam, Christianity and so on. There are as many Italys as there are Italians. Nonetheless, Italy exists.

This political community of the West was, like all political communities, both real and imagined. At its military front line, it was as real as real can be. On a cold winter morning, Danish, Dutch, Belgian, British, German, Canadian and American soldiers stood shivering all the way down the frontier between West and East Germany, ready to die together – 'all for one and one for all' – in the event of an armed attack from the East. The community was imagined in the sense that behind these men and women prepared to die together in battle there stood another army of assumptions made by the people who put the soldiers there, but perhaps also by the soldiers themselves; assumptions about what united 'us' and what made 'us' different from the people on the other side of the barbed wire. A mental army of the West.

Many believed, for example, in what they called 'Western values'. The West stood for freedom, human rights, democracy, the rule of law and so forth. These good things, they argued, had grown mainly in the West; they were what we had in common; they distinguished us from others. The (hi)stories we tell ourselves are also the history of our own times - and an unintentional account of our intentions. During the cold war, generations of American school and university students were taught an inspiring story of Western Civilisation, marching onward and generally upward from ancient Greece and Rome, through the spread of Christianity in Europe, the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, the English, American and French Revolutions, the development of capitalism, the bourgeoisie and universal suffrage, two World Wars and the Cold War, to the sunlit uplands of an American-led 'Atlantic Community'. In the grand narrative of 'Western Civ', the West began in Europe and ended in the hands of America. It went from Plato to Nato.

On a dusty bottom shelf in the library of Stanford University in California I once found an example of this story told at its most confident and simplistic. *Life's Picture History of Western Man*, published in 1951, began by asking 'Western Man – who is he and where did he come from?'[ii] The identity of this 'most wonderfully dynamic creature ever to walk the earth' apparently became clear in Europe 'about 800 A.D. (earlier in some places, later in others) and he was ready to set out on his bright-starred mission of creating a new civilization for the world'. In those good old days, Western Man - always capitalised - was 'fair of skin, hardy of limb, brave of heart, and he believed in the eternal salvation of his soul.' Darker-skinned persons, not to mention women, hardly got a look in. Western Man 'worked towards freedom, first for his own person, then for his own mind and spirit, and finally for others in equal measure.' *Life's* handsomely illustrated picture history followed Western Man's progress 'from his first emergence in the Middle Ages to his contemporary position of world leadership in the United States of America.' 'A new vehicle called the Atlantic Community,' it concluded, 'now carries Western Man on his way'.

At once fed by and feeding these assumptions about a shared future written in the past, there developed in the second half of the twentieth century an immense, intricate, close-knit web of special relationships between government and government, military and military, company and company, university and university, intelligence service and intelligence service, city and city, bank and bank, newspaper and newspaper, and above all, between millions of individual men and women, aided by the geometric growth in the speed and volume of air travel and telecommunications. On this teeming worldwide web, each kind of thread had a hundred bi- and multilateral variants, French-American, French-German, British-American, American-Polish, Portugese-Spanish, Slovenian-Italian, New Zealand-Europe, Australia-America, the European Community, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and so on and on. Ever more people met, telephoned, wrote, faxed or emailed each other ever more often for ever more purposes. Start drawing these links in different colours on a map and the map would soon disappear entirely beneath the inky tangle. There was a proliferation of such ties all around the world – people had started to talk about 'globalisation' - but no strands were thicker than those between Western Europe and North America.

If I close my eyes and try to conjure a visual image of this late twentieth century West, I come up with something so mind-numbingly conventional that I immediately open them again. Perhaps your mind generates something more interesting? What I see are those endlessly familiar newspaper photographs of our leaders meeting each other – which they now did all the time, unlike leaders in most of recorded history, who met each other, at most, a few times in their lives. Turning the pages of this mental album, there's first the group portrait of a dozen or more heads of government on the steps of some palace or grand hotel, almost all of them middle-aged white men in dark suits. (Western Man in his Native Dress.) Next come the demonstratively bonhomous, back-patting, arm-clutching, one-on-one symbolic bonding displays between American president and British prime minister, German chancellor and French president, French

president and British prime minister. Here's an old snapshot of four men in tropical wear sitting under a beach umbrella in Guadeloupe, talking nuclear missiles. Shiny new snaps of those open-shirt and jeans encounters at some country retreat, with our leaders serving as unpaid fashion models for Levi's, GAP or Banana Republic. And finally the perennial golf buggy scene, in which, somewhere in America, two middle-aged men, grinning boyishly, snuggle close together in the front seat of a miniature, electric-powered vehicle used for driving around golf courses. The closeness is the message.

'Friendship' is the name diplomatically given to these relations between statesmen or stateswomen and, by two-way symbolic extension, to the relations between the states they represent. If the states are friends, their leaders had better be; if the leaders become friends, that helps relations between their states. These speed-glued, instant, political 'friendships' are interesting to observe. You wonder how real they can possibly be. When Churchill and Roosevelt met on a battleship in Placentia Bay in August 1941, singing 'Onward Christian Soldiers' with their massed British and American crews, they made the original symbolic bonding of the late 20th century West. In what sense were Churchill and Roosevelt ever really friends?

Yet in the modern world we're not condemned to stand around like peasants at the Field of the Cloth of Gold, wondering how the Great Ones are getting on inside the marquee. We're not swineherds nervously contemplating the quarrels of the Gods on Mount Olympus. We make our own history. Whatever the truth about the 'friendship' between, say, Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, Helmut Kohl and Francois Mitterrand, Tony Blair and George W. Bush, Gerhard Schröder and Jacques Chirac, I know that, for me, Pierre in Paris, Helena in Warsaw, John in Washington and Michael in Bonn were, and remain, friends. These friendships were born in the particular circumstances of a time and place. What friendship is not? We stood for the same things and against the same things: not all the same things, all the time, but quite enough to make common cause. We wanted to preserve freedom in the West and win it for people in the East. We had that essential fellow-feeling. We felt that we were 'we'. And so we were.

To be sure, I also had quite a few good acquaintances who thought of the West as 'them'. The bloody Americans, the fucking Tories, the *Scheisschristdemokraten* - imperialist, oppressive, exploitative, corrupt, responsible for the toppling of Salvador Allende in Chile, napalming children in Vietnam and so forth. But even if these acquaintances loathed the West, with its hollow, hypocritical rhetoric of 'the free world,' they did not doubt that it existed. Unless you are Don Quixote, you don't attack a chimera. The cold war West was a reality. If enough people think a political community is real, it's real.

*

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, this West tumbled into crisis. When a group of Islamist terrorists flew two airplanes into the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York on 11 September 2001, it seemed that the most influential prediction for the shape of the post-cold war world was coming true. Here, surely, was the beginning of Samuel Huntington's 'clash of civilizations'. For those planes were aimed at the heart of the West, one of Huntington's 'civilisations', in the name of another, Islam.

At first, the rest of the West rallied to America's side, under a heroic motto proclaimed by the editor of *Le Monde*, 'We Are All Americans'[iii]. But within a year, this crisis for the West had become a crisis of the West. Faced with the problem of how to identify and fight an abstract noun – 'Terror' - the nations of the West did not pull together as they had in the late 1940s against Stalin's Red Army; they fell apart in bitter disagreement. The administration of President George W. Bush decided that the 'war on terror' required a war against Iraq; most Europeans disagreed. By the spring of 2003, we had the unprecedented spectacle of France actively canvassing for votes against the United States in the Security Council of the United Nations, on a question of war or peace that the United States considered vital to its own national security.

Some Americans concluded that France was 'no longer an ally'[iv] of the United States. Many Europeans thought the United States was threatening world peace. 'Is this a free world or Bush's world?' demanded a banner at a million-strong demonstration against the Iraq war in London on 15 February 2003. This was just one of several massive demonstrations in European capitals that day. They seemed, for a moment, to unite the continent in a single European 'no' to America's proposed war.

So the West was divided between Europe and America. Or was it? Certainly, most Europeans opposed the war and most Americans supported it. Political writers on both sides of the Atlantic saw in this an expression of deep underlying differences. Now we were told that the coming clash of civilisations would not be between 'the West and the Rest'; it would be between Europe and America. 'Americans are from Mars and Europeans are from Venus' wrote the American neo-conservative Robert Kagan in an influential one-liner, suggesting as it did that Americans were at once martian, martial and the real men[v]. (The original book title to which his line alluded was *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus.*) Many on the European left hastened to agree: yes, Europeans and Americans are from different planets; yes, Europe, scarred by so many wars – lovely Europa, remembering her bad experience with bulls – proudly represents the female virtues of peace.

On closer examination, things were not so fabulously simple. The West did not split neatly into a European and an American half, like a well cracked nut. A large minority of Americans opposed the war and a large minority of Europeans supported it. More than a dozen European governments gave some endorsement to the American-led action. Crucially, the four countries at the heart of any history of the modern West –

Britain, France, America and Germany – were divided two against two. To put it another way, the countries with the first and fourth largest economies in the world (America and Britain) lined up against the third and fifth (Germany and France).

I was reminded of George Orwell's competing blocs in *1984*, 'Oceania' and 'Eurasia'. This Oceania of 2003 linked the two major European countries that face the Atlantic ocean, Britain and Spain, with the great power on the other side of it. On the eve of war, their leaders met literally in mid-Atlantic, on the Azores islands, with Portugal as proud host. Eurasia comprised France, Germany and Russia, in what the French newspaper *Libération* called 'The Anti-War Axis'[vi]. Yet this nice dichotomy of Oceania and Eurasia also breaks down, since most of the states at the heart of the Eurasian land-mass, in the central zone of Europe between Germany and Russia, supported the American-led war.

Like the earlier 'friendships', these enmities were represented to us, almost in pantomime, by the symbolic acts and body language of our rulers. Word came down from Olympus that for months President Bush had not even spoken on the telephone to Chancellor Schröder. Senior officials fluttered about, giving a passable imitation of courtiers in the time of Louis XIV, telling you '*das Verhältnis ist sehr schlecht*' (the relationship is very bad) and 'Schröder's screwed it completely'. When the heads of the opposed groupings had to meet, at a long-scheduled multilateral summit, newspaper photographs showed presidents Bush and Chirac looking tensely in opposite directions – like Prince Charles and Princess Diana as their marriage broke up.

Behind the pantomime, there was real emotion. I talked to several European leaders at this time. What they said about each other in private was poisonous. At No 10 Downing Street, they called Dominique de Villepin, the French foreign minister, 'Vile Pin'. The prime minister of one major European state (not Britain) described Chirac and Schröder to me as 'a dangerous couple'.

These emotions were not confined to the politicians. A student at Yale University confided in his professor 'I wake up every morning feeling furious at the French'. I met a man in California who told me had cancelled his order for two of the latest Mercedes cars, in protest at German opposition to the war. (He was not, you will gather, a poor man.) I went to my doctor in Oxford with a sore foot and he said 'that Bush is such a cowboy, isn't he?' At every level, from the president to the postman, there was this confusion, or elision, between a particular government or leader and the whole nation or group. Was it Bush you were angry with or 'the Americans'? Chirac or 'the French'?

This confusion, or elision, is typical of nationalism. In the Iraq crisis of 2002/3 we again saw nationalism in the familiar form of the people of one nation getting angry with those of another. Many English people, for example, egged on by some of their newspapers and politicians, got angry with the French - something they had been doing, on and off, for more than six hundred years. But we also saw nationalism in the larger,

transferred sense identified by George Orwell in his 'Notes on Nationalism'. Orwell says that other –isms – his own idiosyncratic list includes communism, pacifism, Catholicism and anti-Semitism - share a common mental structure with nationalism. It is, he says, 'the habit of assuming that human beings can be classified like insects and that whole blocks of millions or tens of millions of people can be confidently labelled "good" or "bad".'[vii]

Now the broader nationalisms that found expression in this crisis of the West could be called, in crude shorthand, anti-Americanism and anti-Europeanism. How can you know when you are in the presence of these broader nationalisms? How can you distinguish them from the positive patriotisms of both Americans and Europeans? Well, it's never easy, but here's a rough and ready test. If you hear someone generalising angrily about '*the* Americans' or '*the* Europeans', the disease is close. And if that someone turns out to be you? Then, please, examine your assumptions. And read on.

*

I am writing soon after these events, when tempers have barely cooled. If you are reading this a few years later, you may be saying 'Oh, but that's ancient history. The war of words over the war on Iraq was just another of those family quarrels that regularly punctuate the life of the West.' Or you may be saying: 'couldn't he see that the West was permanently done for?' Or: 'what about the latest crisis?'

After all, every historian will tell you that what has characterised 'Western civilisation' is its divisions: between Rome and Byzantium, between church and state, between monarchs and feudal lords, between self-governing town and surrounding country, between Protestants and Catholics, between each and every nation state (the nation state being one of modern Europe's most enduring and double-edged contributions to the world), between executive, legislature and judiciary, between the old world and the new. It's precisely these divisions, this diversity, that made the history of Europe and America different from that of, say, China. Inasmuch as there is a historic unity of the West, this is the shared fruit of its own incessant internal partings. Disunity is perhaps the West's deepest unity.

As for the closer political unity of the cold war West, that was only forged in the late 1940s after fierce arguments about how to confront the new threat from 'the East'. Transatlantic solidarity was then shaken again and again by rows that have long faded into the history books - disengagement, Suez, de Gaulle's military withdrawal from Nato, the neutron bomb, Solidarity in Poland, the deployment of Cruise and Pershing missiles – crisis upon crisis, their very names now remembered only by old men and historians. Sleeping-pills for schoolgirls. I have in front of me as I write a yellowing pile of weighty articles, dating back more than fifty years, each averring that the latest crisis is unprecedented, worse than any before, insoluble etc etc. If you look inside even the closest political partnerships of the West, such as the British-American 'special

relationship', you find, documented in the diaries and secret papers, nasty purple rashes of mutual mistrust, resentment and contempt. Yet the West survived.

A few important things were, nonetheless, different at the beginning of the twenty first century. The states of the post-1945 West were no longer held together by a single, massively threatening common enemy in the heart of Europe. The threats they now faced were more diffuse, hidden, ill-defined. There was far more room for disagreement about who or what they were, let alone how best to deal with them. Throughout the cold war, Europe had been more directly threatened by Soviet communism than America; now it seemed that America was more directly threatened by Islamist terrorism than Europe was. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, America became the world's sole superpower; it was, indeed, now the most powerful country in the history of the earth. It was much less clear to Americans than it had been during the cold war that they needed the partnership of Europe to secure their own freedoms.

America and Europe had different '9/11s'. Following its '9/11' – the fall of the Berlin Wall - Western Europe no longer needed the United States to defend it against the Red Army. Instead, the countries that used to be occupied by the Red Army were now joining the European Union. Europeans were struggling to find an emotional glue to hold together this extraordinary project of voluntarily associating twenty five and more very diverse European countries in a single political community. Such emotional glue has traditionally been found, or manufactured, by identifying an alien and threatening 'them' – an 'Other,' in the dread jargon of identity studies, or, in plain English, just a good old enemy – against which 'we' can warmly bond. With the fading of Europe's other traditional Others, of which more below, many Europeans were tempted to find that Other in the United States. We were to define ourselves by what we were not: America! And the wretched of the earth were to be saved not by the hard grind of Americanisation but by the soft charm of Europeanisation.

Like an electric storm, the crisis of the West that began the twenty first century harshly illuminated a jagged landscape – with a question mark on every peak. Was the world now divided between the West and the Rest? Was the West now divided between Europe and America? Could the West be put together again and, even if it could, should it be? What was the right 'we' for our time?

I begin my exploration of this jagged landscape at home, in Britain, which of all the heartlands of the West was the one most painfully torn between Europe and America.

CHAPTER 1: JANUS BRITAIN

Putney

If you had taken the Number 74 bus from Baker Street one summer's day in the early years of the twenty first century, and (avoiding the chewing gum stuck to the seat) sat on the top deck at the front, you would have crossed the River Thames over Putney Bridge. On the south bank of the river, immediately to your left as you came across the bridge from Fulham to Putney, you would have spied a church, half-hidden behind trees. Most of your fellow-passengers – their faces set in the tired, closed mask of the London commuter – would not have spared it a glance. Yet in this Church of St Mary the Virgin, on 28 October 1647, one Thomas Rainsborough spoke words that have resounded through the modern history of the West.

England's revolutionary army – it now sounds wildly incongruous when one combines those three words, as if the Hooray Henry officers of the 14th/20th Queen's Hussars had suddenly become the Viet Cong, so let's say it slowly again, and savour each syllable - *England's revolutionary army* was debating who should have the vote in elections to the Westminster parliament. The so-called Levellers among the officers and regimental delegates were locked in fierce dispute with Oliver Cromwell. According to notes made at the time, Colonel Rainsborough said:

> For really I think that the poorest he that is in England hath a life to live, as the greatest he; and therefore truly, sir, I think it's clear, that every man that is to live under a government ought first by his own consent to put himself under that government; and I do think that the poorest man in England is not at all bound in a strict sense to that government that he hath not had a voice to put himself under.[viii]

The poorest she still did not get a look in, but this was nonetheless a revolutionary statement of the claim for government by consent and equal political rights for all citizens. Here in Putney, in 1647, a plain-spoken English gentleman described and demanded the essence of what we mean today when we say 'democracy'. His claim echoed around the old world – and, even more, into the new. Thomas Rainsborough's sister married John Winthrop, the puritan governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony who declared that New England should be 'as a City upon a Hill'[ix]. His younger brother settled in Boston[x]. The 2003 Boston phone book listed xx Rainsboroughs [or Rainboroughs]. There are six Putneys in the United States[xi].

If you had got off the bus and stepped inside St Mary's, you would have discovered that only the original tower survives of the church in which Rainsborough spoke. Yet in the Victorian nave, with its twentieth century 'theatre in the round' seating, the radical democratic spirit of the Levellers was still being carried forward by the vicar, the very unreverential Reverend Giles Fraser – stocky, bald-headed, pugnacious, dressed in t-shirt, jeans and sneakers. On the 350th anniversary of the Putney Debates, he

organised in-church speeches by the left-wing Labour politician Tony Benn and the Marxist historian Christopher Hill. The anniversary was also marked by a large conference in Washington, DC.

Had you stepped out of the church again, and turned left up Putney High Street, this is what you would have seen: Hot Wok Express, Il Peperone pizzeria, Enoteca (an Italian restaurant), the Odeon cinema (showing American Pie: The Wedding), Sydney (an Australian bar-restaurant), La Mancha (a Spanish tapas bar and restaurant), Texas Fried Chicken, Pizza Hut, Blockbuster video, La Noche (another Spanish tapas bar and restaurant), Superdrug, McDonalds and right next to it the coffee place Costa, Caffé Nero (the Reverend Fraser's favourite observation post), Starbucks, United Colors of Benetton, Pret a Manger, Burger King, Rogerio's café, the Piccolo bar – and that's only up to the railway station.

Inbetween were the old, sturdy British familiars, most of which must already have been there when I first rode down Putney High Street on the top of a red double-decker bus, as a boy in the early 1960s: Thomas Cook's travel agency, Millets, British Home Stores, the Abbey National building society, Boots the chemist, Thorntons chocolate shop, the Halifax, W H Smith's. Halfway down, there was still the pub called Ye Olde Spotted Horse that fascinated me as a child because its first floor frontage boasted, amidst its nineteenth-century faux-Elizabethan white-and-black half-timbering, a large model spotted horse. But when I now stepped inside Ye Olde Spotted Horse this is what I found: on the blackboard, 'Wines of the Day: Merlot – Chile, Pinot Noir – NZ, Rioja – Spain, Shiraz Cabernet – Australia, Cotes du Rhone – France'; on the menu, 'Linguine with Ham and Goat's Cheese Sauce', 'Creme du Menthe Ice Cream Bombes'; on the wall, a poster for a Young's Brewery wine promotion proclaiming 'Win a Trip to Spain'.

You might say this was just the superficial, brand-and-chain Americanisation and Europeanisation that one encountered everywhere in the developed world; what has been called the Euro-American shopping mall. But as I dug a little deeper, I found more evidence of how international the high street of my childhood had become. What used to be the IBM office block, just behind the church, was now full of apartments rented by city firms for their foreign staff. 'A lot of Yanks,' said Rev. Fraser. The French community could be met in St Simon's Church in Hazlewell Road, and there had until recently been a French bookshop in Lower Richmond Road. Nearby, I found the headquarters of Voluntary Service Overseas, which in 2002 sent some 1,600 British volunteers to work in 43 developing countries[xii]. In Upper Richmond Road there was Longview Solutions, a software company promising to provide your enterprise with 'a single source of financial truth'[xiii]. Its other offices were in Toronto, Philadelphia, Chicago, Dallas, San Jose, Atlanta and Madrid.

Longview's receptionist, Stephanie Suffolk, was one of what a local estate agent snootily called 'the Antipodeans'. Australians and New Zealanders – 'thousands of

them,' cried the estate agent, with a mixture of personal disgust and professional delight – packed into rented accomodation and cramming the Sydney bar. No worries. The district [ward] of Southfields, a maze of small streets where I learned to drive, was now a little South Africa. The local MP quoted me an estimate that there were as many as 20,000 South Africans living there. People from the rest of the Commonwealth (that noble republican moniker of the Cromwellian revolution, now incongrously applied to Her Britannic Majesty's former Empire), from Pakistan, India, Africa and the Caribbean, were not as yet so numerous as they were in neighbouring parts of London. Putney could nonetheless already boast a Sikh temple, an African Families Association, and, in Gressenhall Road, the world headquarters of the Ahmadis, a dissident muslim sect originating in Pakistan and claiming millions of adherents in seventy countries. Finally, and resented by many local people, who believed they were taking scarce council housing, jobs and benefits, there were the asylum-seekers from [more detail here].

Island world, world island

What I glimpsed here, in Putney, were the many faces of Britain at the beginning of the twenty first century. Janus, the Roman god of doorways, passages and bridges, had two faces, usually depicted on the front and back of his head, pointing in opposite directions. Janus Britain had four. The back and front faces could be labelled 'Island' and 'World'; the face on the left said 'Europe' and that on the right 'America'. Small wonder Britain's head ached.

'Island' was a face that the whole world knew: 'this scepter'd isle/ This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars'[xiv]. Or, as a German newspaper once less flatteringly put it, 'the largest holiday island in the world'[xv]. '*Messieurs*,' the French historian Jules Michelet used to begin his lectures on British history, '*l'Angleterre est une ile*'.[xvi] He thus perpetuated in four words two hardy continental myths - that Britain was the same as England and that it was just one island. In fact, the history of Europe's largest group of offshore islands had been shaped by the workings of four nations, the English, the Scottish, the Welsh and the Irish. But 'Island' will serve as fitting shorthand for a face that looked back with pride at a version of the British past which, like all national(ist) (hi)stories, blended fact and myth, memory and forgetting, true continuity and invented tradition. That's why, as another great French historian, Ernest Renan, dryly remarked, 'the progress of historical studies is often a danger for nationhood.[xvii]'

'Island' was the Britain, but more especially the England, of the parish church, the pub, the club, the college; of the retired colonel (no Rainsborough he) reading the *Daily Telegraph* and the solicitor reading the *Dail Mail*; of country lanes, cricket, warm beer, and shepherd's pie. Here was an England that saw itself still in the mirror of Orwell's endlessly quoted and imitated sketch *The Lion and the Unicorn*, celebrated itself in that Orwellian celebration. In 1993, the conservative prime minister, John Major, declared

that ‘fifty years from now Britain will still be the country of long shadows on country grounds, warm beer, invincible green suburbs, dog lovers and pool fillers and – as Geoge Orwell said – “old maids cycling to Holy Communion through the mornng mist”.’[xviii] (When did you last see an old maid cycling to Holy Communion through the morning mist? Photographs please to the author, c/o St Antony’s College, Oxford.)

This Britain, understood largely as an extension of England, prided itself on an exceptional history of continuous freedom, self-government and the rule of law. The British, another historian remarked, ‘have a genius for the appearance of continuity’.[xix] Yet, stripped of all sentimental mythology and invented tradition, the facts were still remarkable. There had been an England, and people who called themselves the English, continuously since at least 937, when King Alfred’s grandsons defeated a Northumbrian coalition, including Danes and Scots, in the battle of Brunanburh[xx]. The county or Shire – an old English term now made familiar to hundreds of millions of people around the world as the bucolic homeland of the hobbits in the Hollywood version of Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* - was one of the oldest continuous units of territorial self-government in the world. What people called ‘the law of the land’, that is, English common law, was there already when the Normans came. From Magna Carta to the English revolutions of the seventeenth century, the human and civil rights - including individual property rights – that would come to be seen as characteristic of ‘Western Civ’ advanced furthest and fastest in England. The English parliament *was* the mother of parliaments. These things were true. It was not a mere chimera that generations of continental Europeans, from Montesquieu to Jean Monnet, and generations of Americans had admired. The legacies of these things lived on, at the beginning of the twenty first century, in what British people said and did every day.

‘World’ seemed, at first glance, the opposite of Island. Certainly a Rastafarian evening in Neasden or an Eid ul Fitr among the converted cotton mills and new-built mosques of Bradford was a very long way from the rural England of weekend cricket, church and pub. But the historical connection between ‘World’ and ‘Island’ was direct and simple. The world had now come to the island because the island first went to the world. England expanded, initially absorbing all the other parts of these offshore islands in an internal empire, then scattering across the high seas, to every corner of the earth, its own language, goods, customs and people - now including the Scots, Welsh and Irish as well as the English. In the process, Britain became already by the nineteenth century a ‘world island’, at once stubbornly insular and incurably cosmopolitan, both an ‘island world’ and an island engaged throughout the world.

In the second half of the twentieth century, as Empire folded into that ever vaguer Commonwealth, the peoples of the former Empire came, in growing numbers, to live and work on the island. They brought their own languages, religions and customs to the British, as the British had once exported theirs to them. They strengthened old ties and created new ones, with Pakistan, India and the rest of Asia, with the Caribbean and Africa, with the Middle East, with every corner of the world.

When I wrote this page, in North Oxford, less than a mile from the house where J R R Tolkien penned his fantasy of the Shire, our local newsagent was Mr Mansha, who was born in Pakistan, our pharmacist was Mr Ahmed, who was born in Pakistan and worked for years in Saudi Arabia, our grocer was Mr Ayyub, who was born in India, married a Czech and had a flat in Prague, and our dentist, Mr Sapsford, was a cheery New Zealander. If you retraced Orwell's trip to Wigan Pier, you would find yourself staying often in Asian neighbourhoods. When the Indian state of Gujerat was hit by an earthquake in 2001, the BBC reported that 10,000 families in Britain were directly affected.[xxi] More than 300 languages were spoken in London.[xxii] London was the most cosmopolitan city in the world. (New Yorkers, with their characteristic humility, will be

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SOURCES

These notes only give the references for direct quotations in the text, numerical claims, and points where I have drawn so directly on other people's work that not to acknowledge this would be somewhere between discourteous and dishonest. They don't give any references for non-attributable remarks made to me in private conversations. What eathly use is it for you to keep reading 'personal information' or 'conversation with the author' if I can't tell you who said it and when? Nor do they include the innumerable sources – books, articles, films, television and radio programmes, conversations and journeys stretching back over twenty five years – for assertions that I make in my own voice. [suggestions for further reading on website – updated...]

[i] 'We have become a grandmother' TK [check quote Hugo Young, *One of Us?*]
[ii] 'Western Man…' *Life's Picture History of Western Man* (New York: Time Inc., 1951), quotations on pp 1-2 and 290
[iii] 'We are all Americans' TK [*Le Monde* dated 13 September 2001 – pls xerox]
[iv] 'no longer an ally' Perle quote tk
[v] 'Americans are from Mars…' Robert Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), p 3
[vi] 'The Anti-War Axis' *Libération,* 11 February 2003
[vii] 'the habit of assuming…' George Orwell, *Collected Essays* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1961), p 281
[viii] 'For really I think...' quoted from the original in A. S. P. Woodhouse, ed, *Puritanism and Liberty: Being the Army Debates from the Clarke Manuscripts, with Supplementary Documents.* (London: Dent, 1938), p 53
[ix] 'As a City upon a Hill' John Winthrop's 1630 'Model of Christian Charity', quoted in Daniel J Boorstin, *An American Primer* (New York: Mentor, 1966) pp 26-43, this on p 40
[x] His younger brother... information on his younger brother and his sister from Richard L Greaves & Robert Zaller, eds, *Biographical Dictionary of British Radicals in*

the Seventeenth Century (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982-84), entries on Thomas and William Rainsborough

[xi] Six Putneys... according to a search on mapquest.com

[xii] Some 1,600 figures from VSO Annual Report 2003, on www.vso.org.uk [xk]

[xiii] 'a single source...' quoted from their website, www.longview.com/ourcompany/ accessed on 26 August 2003

[xiv] 'This scepter'd isle' Shakespeare, *King Richard II,* Act II, Scene 1

[xv] 'largerst holiday island' I saw this in a German newspaper in the 1970s. I have unfortunately been unable to retrace it.

[xvi] '*Messieurs...'* quoted by Leszek Kolakowski in his *Main Currents of Marxism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), Vol.1, p 1

[xvii] 'the progress of...' Ernest Renan, *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1882), p 7

[xviii] 'old maids cycling...' John Major quoted in Jeremy Paxman, *The English:* (London: Penguin, 1999), p 142. What Orwell actually wrote was 'the old maids biking to Holy Communion through the mists of the autumn mornings', see George Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1941) p 11.

[xix] 'the appearance of continuity'... Jeremy Black, *A History of the British Isles* (London: Macmillan, 1997), p 325

[xx] Since at least 937... this is the conclusion of Robert Colls, *Identity of England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp 380-81

[xxi] 10,000 families... tk

[xxii] Some 300 languages... report in *The Independent,* 29 March 1999 [ff *Multilingual Capital*.]