Reinventing England

How we became what we are

Dominic Kirkham argues that England has a dynamic gift for self-transformation, yet still remaining recognisably itself.

The other day I was leafing through a book that caught my eye in 'The Works' store. It was about inventions that changed the world. One thing I noticed was how many seemed to originate in this country. In fact once you start to think about it, quite a lot of what changed the world originated in this country: from atomic physics to jet flight, TV and computers to the world wide web, football to pop music – so much of what characterises contemporary global society finds its roots in this small off-shore European island.

In the interests of political correctness it is not always appropriate to mention this. We are told, better to be inclusive in our historical memory so as to banish a tendency to racist arrogance and 'feelings of superiority'. After all every country has its own defining qualities and can probably find reasons for pride in the achievements of its forebears: Mongolia still reveres the memory of Genghis Khan as the world's greatest empire builder, even if to the rest of the world he is remembered as its greatest scourge. So, the Macpherson Report made the recommendation: 'that consideration be given to the amendment of the National Curriculum aimed at valuing cultural diversity and preventing racism.'

Whatever the merits of this country's distinctiveness by way of inventiveness, a tangential thought that struck me about this whole issue was not so much how good this country is at inventing 'things' but just how good it is at reinventing itself! When one looks back over the millennia, the country has undergone more metamorphoses than even Mephistopheles could conjure up on a good night: from a tribal patchwork, via a congealed Romanised Britannica, we reverted to a place of warring chiefdoms, which became welded into an autonomous Saxon kingdom, only to be wrenched into a Norman/French empire then to collapse back into anarchic dynastic wars, which were resolved by the emergence of an English Imperium, that in turn became Great Britain, which then once

The Venerable Bede dreamt up the idea of England

more collapsed back into civil war, only to re-emerge with aspirations to a world empire, having achieved which, it promptly dissolved and devolved itself into the present fragmentation with no clear end in sight. Phew – quite a ride!

If that sounds quite a roller-coaster of a ride, what is even more remarkable is that throughout it all there has been a recognisable vehicle that, despite the traumatic ups and downs, has remained sufficiently intact so as to make the ride possible. And that vehicle is England. An example of this theme can be found in David Starkey's sweeping panorama *Crown and Country,* which shows just how much the monarchy has changed over the centuries whilst still remaining recognisably itself. This institution runs as a central thread throughout the historic tapestry of the English nation: veering from elected leaders to putative divinely appointed despots, its claims were always restrained and contested by the common people, as even that most puissant of monarchs, Edward I, acknowledged in his writ of summons to the parliament of 1295, 'What touches all should be approved by all.' In the modern era, when dynasties collapsed across Europe, it was the populist touch which saved it, to become one of the most distinctive – even idiosyncratic – features of England. Reinvention is the secret of survival.

Strangely, from the outset – and contrary to what many may think – England was an idea that became attached to a place or people. Recently Diarmaid MacCulloch traced this interesting story in his TV series, *How God made the English.* As distinct from other nations, which often arise from a specific ethnicity or culture, the idea of England was dreamt up in the cell of a Northumberland monastery by St.Bede, who thought an 'English people' would be a very good thing as a vehicle for his ecclesiastical aspirations. But why 'English'? It could just as well have been Jutes, Saxons, Mercians, or, as it had formerly been, Britons; after all, Gildas in his saga of post-Roman times, *The Ruin of*

Britain, provided a perfectly adequate conceptual-isation of these islands. Clearly Bede thought otherwise; he was not interested in a British past so much as an English future. It seems that Bede wanted his foundational myth to be that of something quite new: a divine agency for a Roman Christianity, whose apostolic vicar, Pope Gregory, recognised the Angli as its angels, or emissaries. That these 'angels' would be predominantly Saxons was beside the point. Christianity would now also be a central thread of England's historic tapestry.

Because 'English' was primarily an idea, with the 'English people' – whoever exactly they were – only its expression, it had an adaptability that could survive traumatic change. Danes could be added to the mix and then Normans, who would grasp its crown, contemptuously replace its language – which they likened to the barking of dogs – and its governance with a wholly alien feudal nobility. But in time it was England which would swallow Normandy, and much of France with it, to become a primary European power. In fact it was in these national conflicts of fighting abroad that English identity became more clearly defined. England took shape in association with the emblematic chivalric figure of St. George and a penchant for pugnacity: as the fifteenth century diplomat Philippe de Commynes noted, 'Of all the people in the world [the English are] the most inclined to give battle.' Another of those tapestry threads!

In ways that have a resonance today, the fifteenth century proved catastrophic for the identity of the newly emergent nation of England. Within a matter of decades after the death of Henry V in 1422 – who, after the Treaty of Troyes, had been poised to ascend the French throne with England becoming the most powerful nation in Europe – the country had collapsed in on itself, lost everything and become marginalised in international affairs, mocked rather than feared. In the power vacuum created by the minority of Henry VI and then his insanity, the state became impotent – a cash cow for the advancement of grasping families and magnates, like the Woodvilles and Warwicks; a nation so stunned by the loss of its French empire that a century later monarchs were still claiming the title to the French throne; a nation which began to tear itself apart in regional conflicts. Into this maelstrom were drawn mercenaries from all and sundry – France, Burgundy, Flanders, Wales, Ireland and Scotland. England became rent between Yorkist south and Lancastrian north, culminating in 1461 in the bloodiest battle in English history – Towton, where the casualty rate was greater than the first day of the Somme, and like the Somme, resolved nothing!

Despite this debacle, within decades a new England was emerging. In 1487 a tellingly entitled 'Imperial Crown of England' was commissioned by Henry VII: it would accompany the Tudors and Stuarts in their quest for absolute sovereignty and power, being painted by Van Eyck at the right hand of Charles I. Not only did England reassert its dominance in its own islands but began to re-orientate itself away from Europe to new lands in the West. Imperial inventive-ness was now even accompanied by claims of divine supremacy, as Henry VIII remoulded Bede's primal myth of England's Roman fidelity to one based on a re-reading of the Bible, whereby it is kings who are ordained to be the bearers of spiritual power, not priests or prelates. Such Protestant inventiveness was truly innovative: the world looked on bemused by this amazing piece of chutzpah.

But for England this was not the only new beginning. With James I came a further inventiveness, again inspired by the Bible. Not only would he restore Christian unity between warring states and factions, providing a foundation on a great authorised trans-lation of the Bible, he would also bond the kingdoms of Scotland and England into one nation to fulfil Biblical prophecy that 'all shall be one'. This quote appeared on his new currency of 1604 together with a new entitlement, replacing the previous title of 'King of England, France, Ireland and Scotland' with a simpler one, 'King of Great Britain'. Already, court astrologer John Dee had floated the idea of a 'Bristish Empire', referring back to the lands ruled by King Arthur as the rightful domain of the monarch: had Henry VII's eldest son been given this unusual royal name with this in mind? Now James also commanded a new flag to be flown – subsequently nicknamed after him, the 'Union Jack' (Jack being the Anglicised diminutive of Jacobus) – which would symbolise this reunited kingdom. At first the English didn't quite know what to make of all this and parliament was horrified that the inventiveness of James threatened to completely marginalise its status. Still more aggravating were the constant demands for money by this 'for-eigner', much of it for Scotland, as if there were no limit on the amount, as one MP complained, that could 'flow thence by private Cocks.' In contrast to today, it was England that bridled at the Union dreamed up by a Scot and, not for the last time, the complaint was of Scotland sponging off England!

With a new understanding of Britain in the ascendant, antiquarians began rummaging around historical memory for some authentication of just who their ancient 'British' predecessors were. Apart from some Classical references in Caesar and Tacitus, no one had much of a clue. More promising was, again, the Bible. In his *Historiarum Britanniae* of 1607 Richard White has the arrival of a race of pre-Diluvial giants, who built the megalithic monuments. There was talk of a mythical kingdom, Albion – perhaps an early

example of 'white-cliff syndrome', seeking to distance this sceptred isle from Europe: Aylett Sammes has the Cimbri coming from the Black Sea escaping across Europe to the safety of Albion after the Flood. There was the suggestion that in fact the lost tribes of Israel had come here by the same route, to the island which had been providentially set aside and prepared for them with an abundance of resources. A sense of divine election of the British now began to take root; as Sammes wrote in 1676, 'Nature has set BRITAIN such distinct Bounds and Limits, that its Empire is preserved entire and as it abounds in all things, both for the necessary delight and support of Man … a distinct WORLD in itself.' A new mythical substitute for Bede's influential precursor of national identity had been born, which would indeed see England, under that mantle of Britannia, transform the world.

Olympic Opening Ceremony. Sir Tim Berners-Lee, inventor of the world wide web, tweeted: 'THIS IS FOR EVERYONE.'

This world has now once more collapsed in on itself. As in the fifteenth century, an empire has been lost and the people perturbed, self-enrichment by greedy opportunists empties the public purse, regional differences threaten once more what was once a puissant realm, and the coherent identity of a powerful industrial pioneer has been eviscerated.

So what is to be done? What England has always done – reinvent itself! And there are signs that this process is well under way, none clearer than the glorious sporting extravaganza of the Olympics and Paralympics. Not only was it the satisfaction of seeing the distinctively named 'Team GB' so near the top of the medal charts or the superbly engineered stadium come alive with the story of a nation in constant travail, but rather the embracing sense of welcome, particularly manifested by the volunteers and supportive crowds, which extended to all and sundry. Here the world could comfortably be at home in a cosmopolitan city and society epitomised by the thrilling sportsmanship of Mo Farah: when asked by an African journalist if he would rather not have run for his home country (Somalia), Farah replied, 'No mate. This is my country now and I'm proud of it, very proud.'

The multiculturalism now reshaping England is as profound as that which followed the collapse of the Roman imperium. There are inevitably those, like

Gildas, who bemoan this, but the reality is that things are now changed – not necessarily worse, for thus has it ever been in this land of tumultuous dreams. All this was nicely encapsulated in Danny Boyle's opening Olympic drama: the industrial world, which ripped up the rural idyll (in reality always something of a fantasy), was focused on Kenneth Branagh quoting Shakespeare whilst impersonating Isambard Kingdom Brunel, the son of a French refugee, whose titanic figure dominated the new industrial age, made possible through the remorseless labour of countless migrant workers. If there had been time, a perfect complement to this would have been that other colossus of the Victorian age and offspring of refugees, Augustus Pugin, who almost single-handedly crafted its totemic Gothic culture. So also with the paralympic movement, inspired by the amazing German refugee Dr Ludwig Guttmann.

It seems our national identity has always benefited from the capacity to absorb and express the gifts of others, providing the opportunity for creativity and inventiveness: it allows for a cultural osmosis. And England is good at osmosis. Like a sponge, absorbing other people's cultures and foods, the most quintessentially English things like fish and chips with a cup of tea turn out to be entirely 'foreign' (respectively Jewish, French and Chinese): the nation's current favourite meal is a curry – an Anglo-Indian concoction. A trip around an English country garden is often no less than a horticultural world tour, as we inspect the plants. The fact that England never seems to have a fixed identity is exactly what makes it so different, and identifiable. If England has a bit of everything, it is also a bit of everybody's, which is why it continues to generate such interest.

The 'trouble' with England is that it has never been one place. It has never been just one people or nation or culture: diversity has always been of its essence. This could make for violent antagonisms, particularly in Wales and Ireland, but it also made for dynamism and vibrancy – a Shakespearian world of diversity. Despite the accusations of racism which continue to circulate, England has become one of the most open and cosmopolitan societies in the world: a trip though any of England's cities can offer a kaleidoscope of all the major cultures and faiths of the world: each is allowed a space to be itself. This is one of the most distinctive features of England's liberal and secular tradition. In a world of violent antagonisms and sectarian rage, England is well placed to deliver what we may call a 'situated cosmopolitanism' based on a humanising view of the individual.

The phrase is that of Lorenzo Simpson who, in his book *The Unfinished Project – Towards a Post-Metaphysical Humanism*, argues that if humanity is to be salvaged from political Manichaeism and bigotry, then it is necessary to recast what it means to understand 'the Other'. The rise of a global sense of humanity and the language of universal human rights has delivered a world where it is possible to talk a common language. Despite the fanaticism of extreme zealots, a 'dialogical humanism', characterised by the fluid interchange of opinion which recognises individual wellbeing, is still possible amongst the majority. Instead of monolithic allegiances or absolute options, the media – and again this is something in which England excels – can allow a fluid interchange of opinion that, through disputation and critique, allows both the reappraisal of 'the Other's' difference and the modification of one's own preconceptions.

England, with its Commonwealth connections and global financial status, already has all the elements of a globalised, cosmopolitan state – more so perhaps than any other. In the words of one American visitor to the Olympics, 'This is the nearest thing to peace on earth'. Tellingly, refugees desperately trying to find a way across the English Channel, having followed routes across Europe reminiscent of those mythical 'lost tribes', have as their destination a place they call 'Hopeland', still recognisably the 'Albion' of Aylett Sammes. It may be a cliché to say that periods of the breakdown of the old are also opportunities for a breakthrough to something new, but it does indicate that uncertainty and change are no bad things in themselves: they give room for new dreams. Like Prospero, England will continue to dream, to innovate and invent. It is why it will also continue to reinvent itself.

Dominic Kirkham is an interested follower of the SOF movement who, being now redundant, has more time to think about the issues involved.