

**“Women, the working classes or other ethnic groups might find themselves excluded from dominant or prevailing versions of Englishness” (Giles:p6). To what extent were there particular groups excluded from ideas of Englishness between 1900 and 1939?**

Englishness is a concept that seeks to unite the English nation under a specific set of characteristics to construct the sense of community and belonging. Although the word *England* can be used to define a geographic boundary it can also indicate “the constructed idea of an England” (Giles, 1995). The descriptor *English* also follows this pattern and can either mean originating from the geographical area called England, or can mean an idea built around a set of principles symbolising the English character, the spirit of Englishness. Englishness does not simply relate to the portrayed rural idyll of the countryside, but is a belief that unites the inhabitants of this small island.

Englishness is not a rigid construct. Its definitions and reflections are flexible and can change according to the dominant social group. History tells us that English symbols have developed from the “John Bull” character – the beef eating, ale swilling 18<sup>th</sup> Century man, to the philistine, public school new gentleman of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, to “little Englanders” in the 1930’s, to the cheerful cockneys surviving the Blitz (Giles, 1995). Ford Madox Ford in “The Spirit of the People” in 1907 (Giles pp46-52) describes the English as having : “...morals, quiet cordiality, softness of voice, independence of opinion and readiness of quiet apprehension...all these things to be found united in the Englishman”. Here he could not be talking about the contemporary stereotype of a woman, working class man or immigrant, but the middle class, educated, English male.

The qualities of the traditional English character appear to come from two camps. There is the civilised gentleman – middle class/upper middle class, educated men, or there is the ‘ordinary man’ – the simple, grateful for his lot, labouring man. Both ideas ignore the masses - women (unless you count the English gentlewoman), those living outside the South East, the lower

classes or immigrants. Although the concept of Englishness was fluid and changed with changing social constructs, the idea still centred on the masculine middle class.

Within this essay, discussion will centre on versions of Englishness written by the English about England. It is a narrow and selective view, but the restrictive sources reflect the restrictive sense of Englishness that was prevalent in the period (Giles, 1995). Extracts from contemporary literature throughout the period will reveal the ideas that create the idea of Englishness, and demonstrate whether Englishness was exclusively male or whether there was a place for minorities such as women, the working class or other ethnic groups.

In general, before and during this period, literature refers to Englishness in the masculine form – “...decent, God fearing, God-damning English men.” (William-Ellis, 1925), “to be English is always to be an Englishman” (Giles, 1995). In *War and Peace*, Tolstoy portrays an Englishman as being “...self-assured, as being a citizen of the best-organized state in the world, and therefore as an Englishman always knows what he should do and knows that all he does as an Englishman is undoubtedly correct.” DH Lawrence depicts the English character in *The Kangaroo* in 1923 – “Somers was a true Englishman, with an Englishman's hatred of anarchy, and an Englishman's instinct for authority.”

Nevertheless, there are writers who believe that identity is something that should cross boundaries and be all encompassing. EM Forster in a collection of his letters stated “Realise that the lower class, not the middle, is the typical Englishman” (Giles p33), going on to explain that the middle class may run the country, but the English identity does not incorporate their self-righteousness and it is the lower class that embodies Englishness. Popular literature tended to be written in the majority by male, middle class authors, therefore they are going to portray the Englishness they have experience of, and that their audience want to believe exists and that they themselves embody. Women are weak, working men are uncouth and foreigners are strange – these are not the people who can be the icons of the strong, educated, mannered English.

The tradition of celebrating the wanderer as an English icon also does not correspond with the exclusion of any groups. HV Morton describes meeting a tramp on his travels around England and talks about the tramp giving up his “well-to-do family life” and is happy to drift from town to town, ambitionless but “happier than any millionaire, happier in fact than most of us.” (Giles, 1999). Crowther, in his article *The Tramp*, talks about tramps inducing a mixed reaction. They have a complex identity and mythology surrounding them. Romanticised and sentimentalised in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, it followed that literary accounts of the vagrant promoted ‘suburban wanderlust’. They harked back to a time when the Englishman was close to nature and was not bound by religion, society, law or politics. Tramps evoked a better Englishness, living better than the working man, a romantic character who depicted himself as anything – a gentleman or a poet, full of hope for a better world (Porter 1992).

The rural working class is also used as an example of Englishness, the labourer in the field, the farmer tending his animals and the country pastor. Views of the English rural idyll would not be complete without some element of the agricultural worker. In sport, especially village cricket, the squire and the farm labourer were equalised on the playing field, and together they become a representation of the English character – the cricketer – classless, but full of the elements of Englishness, caution, care, patience and decision. (Heald 2004)

During this period, the national character changed. The disappearance of rural England – which is invaluable to any description of Englishness – with the increase in industrialisation, with the development of mass media, the increasing mechanisation of agriculture and the progress of transportation, the rural idyll was becoming a more imaginary concept, no longer a real representation of Englishness. Combined with the changes in class structure there was a need for the national identity to change. During war time, it was easy to encourage a belief in a set of values that needed to be protected from foreign attack, ‘patriotic heroism’ had a place in the world – it supported the need to fight and for the people left at home to champion those involved in the

war effort, men and women, rich and poor. Once the war was over, there was a feeling of disillusion. Promises of a better world were not delivered; the concept of national progress and the heroic fighting nation could not be sustained. Increasing social, economic and political opportunity for non-middle class people led to the increase of power for these groups, which challenged the historical ideal of Englishness.

Strube's Daily Express cartoons during the Thirties had two functions – one was simply as entertainment and secondly as propaganda to promote the editorial policies of the paper. These policies were for an economic, political and cultural Britain that crossed all classes (Brookes, 1990). Strube and the Daily Express fulfilled an almost instrumental role in changing the perceptions of national identity from that of the John Bull character to that of the Little Man. Whilst other Conservative cartoons were still using the John Bull character to depict the English, Strube used the Little Man to speak to the readership with common sense, explaining policies that were important to the burgeoning working class and the changing middle classes. The readership of the Daily Express grew from half a million in 1921 to almost two and a half million by 1937 (Brookes, 1990) aimed at the new middle classes that were living around London and the South East, although the Editor, Lord Beaverbrook, defines the paper as appealing to "...a particular kind of mind in every class." He goes on to explain that it appeals to those who are not ashamed of their meagre beginnings, but are proud to be aspirational.

The Little Man, although appearing as a lower middle class man, was meant to be identified by his social outlook. He had a set of beliefs and attitudes that the Daily Express believed defined the national character. Brookes believes that the meaning of John Bull supposed an explicit Englishness, but the Little Man's Englishness was the opposite and was implicitly defined by his attitudes. There is also the appearance of the Little Man's wife who begins to replace the party girl flapper or the repressed spinster as the womanly ideal. She was depicted as the "plump, healthy, happy mother". The cartoons she appeared in were trying to represent the family home as one of shared and civilised, of the woman being interested and knowledgeable of events of the

day. The cartoons show a change in the class structure in Britain, where the world now belongs to the man in the street and his wife. This Englishman is the backbone of England, he is the one who controls how England grows, no longer solely the domain of the politicians. The Little Man is the development of a symbol that crosses classes and cultures, that redefines Englishness from the wealthy, privately education gentleman to a more egalitarian, united symbol.

Virginia Woolf, in her book *Three Guineas*, published in 1938 (Giles p114), discusses the fact that patriotism and national identity do not hold the same thrall for middle class women as they do for men. She bemoans the fact that there are opportunities for “daughters of working men” to work in munitions factories or to undertake nursing, but for the middle class woman, there is nothing. She calls for indifference from the middle class woman, who has been neglected by her country within the law, education and protection and has nothing to thank England for – “As a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world.” These middle class women have no longing to be united under the banner of Englishness, the Englishness of heroism, patriotism and militarism, the Englishness that has meant they have been treated like second class citizens. There is a call within *Three Guineas* for a change to the traditional English national identity; inclusiveness is required, for identity to be based on beliefs, not sex or class.

Prior to the publication of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* in 1928, the English identity for women had been that of the moral, uptight, repressed and respectable Englishwoman (Hovey, 1997), partnered with the gentleman to portray the civilised English character. *Orlando* is the story of an unmarried Elizabethan lord who becomes a woman. The novel reconfigures the ideas of gender based national identity by trying to establish a place in English identity for a sexual white female. She is attempting to make the point that even a woman can be representational of the national identity – “The change of sex although it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity” (Kaivola 1999). Even though there was limited suffrage for women by 1918, unmarried women under the age of 30 were not allowed to vote until 1928. Women were still demonised by

the popular literature of the time and the sexual female was believed to be the cause of the decay of English morals. Women were seen as frivolous and shallow, whilst men were deep and serious (Kaivola 1999). For Woolf to portray a strong, independent woman who supports the cultural values of the British Empire and fulfils all the requirements that race, class and gender belonging demand, is a challenge to the ideal of English identity, subverting the contemporary cultural forces, seeming to dispel the tradition that Englishness has to be a single concept that is owned by the middle class male. Although Woolf writes of the frustrations of a woman in the world of men, she herself is a non-working class woman writing for the pleasure of the non-working class audience. Woolf discusses how a woman should be incorporated into the elements of national identity, but she is also being exclusive, as she ignores the working class woman.

Whilst the dominant symbol of Englishness was still male, middle class, cultured and civilised, popular culture of the period was developing alternatives to this. Perpetrators of the “English ideal” were aware that they were being fed by and feeding the national consciousness, and tried to both reflect the state of the nation whilst trying to influence and direct the thinking of English people. Two World Wars, developing industries, a strengthening economy and universal suffrage contributed to the rise of awareness of marginal social groups and to their expansion. This in turn made the current dominant groups aware this new social structure was emerging.

Village boys who went away to war to fight for their country and women who stayed behind and supported the nation through their war effort demanded some recognition, to be identified as English, and this could not be ignored by the groups in power. Churchill's latter war time speeches talk to a more inclusive nation, suggesting that the political powers seem to be realising that the war is not going to be won by public school boys, and the people no longer want to fight to protect the Squires' lands. For the first time, the governing bodies are listening to the ordinary people. The Mass Observation national panels, conducted during World War II (Giles pp 127) included ordinary people who volunteered to observe and record normal daily life. There is a realisation that the ordinary person is what makes England what it is, and this needs to be

represented in the national character. It is a progressive movement, not wanting to go back to the bad old days, but to move forward to an egalitarian English society.

Groups such as the Ramblers Association and The National Trust were attempting to open up the countryside to the working classes, enabling the urban population to enjoy the Englishness of the idyllic countryside. No longer open only to the middle and upper classes, the countryside allowed others to realise what it meant to be English, via the appreciation of the rural landscape. As English developed its industrial powers, it became a wealthy land of opportunity. This made it attractive to those from overseas who came to England to improve their status. As the country submitted itself to those outside the landowning classes, she incorporated a diverse culture, one that offered opportunity and status for those who were willing to take it. With this in mind, it is clear that popular literature could no longer restrict itself to portraying Englishness as it had done previously.

The definitions of a national character can be manipulated by influential groups to strengthen their status, and to bring their qualities to the fore of definitions of Englishness. Social groups define national character in order to suit their own agenda, whether political or social. When contemporary literature and art emphasise a 'gentlemanly' English character, other social groups such as women, working classes, immigrants and other minorities can feel excluded and can attempt to create national characters for themselves. As societal structure changes, this can be reflected in the requirements of a national identity.

Englishness was portrayed in an overt fashion through the Englishman in most print culture, but this doesn't mean that women or the working classes were ignored. The minorities may have not been as centre stage as the middle class man, but especially in rural descriptions there are oblique references to village women and the workers as a part of the landscape that evokes Englishness. They may not have had the stereotypical characteristics of the Englishness, but they are an undeniable part of the landscape, and the landscape inspires Englishness.

Although the minority groups may have been excluded from depictions of national identity prior to and in the early part of this period, disillusion with the political, social, moral and economic state of the country mean that there was no faith in the way that England was progressing, so these minority groups began to gain power themselves. Such a huge change could not go unrepresented in popular culture, and this led to the more obvious appearance of women, the working class and other minorities in imagery of national identity.

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