Reviewing The English World in the Times Literary Supplement, the historian Theodore Zeldin wrote that it confirmed his view that “a national perspective cannot be sustained in historical study much longer,” that nations are not, and never were, “distinct entities.” “All our instincts tell us that there is something different between a German and an Italian, but then all our instincts tell us that the earth is flat.” If that analogy were correct, we should all be flat-earthers now. For it is not our instincts alone but history itself that tells us there is indeed “something different” between a German and an Italian—and something different between both of them and an Englishman.

Were it not for the tendency among some historians to belittle and even deny the idea of nationality, the present book—folio-sized, beautifully printed, and lavishly illustrated—might simply take its place among the more worthy coffee-table books of the season. As it is, it assumes a larger significance. The truisms of one time become the bold affirmations of another. The very title, The English World: History, Character, and People, is a challenge to the “new historian,” for whom the idea of an “English world” is as outmoded as the idea of “character.” And the brief introduction by the editor, Robert Blake, is a wanton provocation, starting with a quotation from Churchill to
Ribbentrop, the German ambassador on the eve of the war, “England is a curious country and few foreigners can understand her mind,” and concluding with the hope that the reader will gain a better understanding of “the nature of English civilization and of its impact upon the rest of the world.” There are those who would find in that last sentence intimations of the superiority of “English civilization” (words they would be sure to put in quotation marks), even intimations of a cultural and political imperialism.

The brief introduction by the editor is a wanton provocation. Lord Acton, who was as wary of the idea of nationality as he was of the idea of race, never doubted that there was such a thing as “national character”: “Nobody doubts it who knows schools or armies.” Nor did he doubt the idea of “civilization.” On the contrary, he gave to civilization what he took away from nationality. “The process of civilization depends on transcending Nationality .... Influences which are accidental yield to those which are rational.” Since Acton’s time, we have seen the idea of nationality vulgarized and debased, pressed into the service of a brutal nationalism. But we have also seen how dependent civilization itself is on national character, which is an essential ingredient of nationality; so far from “transcending” nationality, civilization more often seems to reflect it. Whatever other circumstances affect the nature of a particular civilization—geography, technology, economics, religion, politics, war, social relations, and all the other conditions and contingencies the historian can invoke to account for the differences between peoples—something remains that is not accounted for, some quality that may indeed be the product of everything else but that is not reducible to anything else, some quality that—on the average, in the aggregate, and over the long run—distinguishes a people and its civilization from other peoples and civilizations. For want of a better word one is left with the idea of nationality.

This volume is a tribute, sometimes unwitting, to that idea. Edited by Lord Blake, author of an important biography of Disraeli and a history of the Conservative Party, formerly a Conservative Member of Parliament and now Provost of Queen’s College, Oxford, it might be expected to reflect the political disposition of its editor were it not for the fact that it includes among its contributors other leading British historians who do not share Lord Blake’s political views. Some of these contributors do not share his view of what constitutes “the Englishness of England,” as the introductory chapter is entitled, and some do not address themselves to the subject at all. Yet the effect of the whole is to reinforce one’s sense of the unmistakable “Englishness” of the English.

This is not an entirely celebratory volume. If Blake makes much of the individualism that he regards as the most distinctive, valuable, and enduring feature of the English character, he also comments on some of the less agreeable, and no less enduring, aspects of that individualism. He cites the Venetian ambassador to the court of Henry VII who remarked upon the peculiar English custom of boarding out children at the age of seven or eight to serve as apprentices or servants with other families for as long as eight years, after which they were expected to make their own
way, assisted by their patrons rather than their parents. The ambassador had been told that this was done so that the children would learn better manners than they would at home. But he himself was convinced that it was because the parents would be better served by strangers than by their own children and at less cost, since they would not have to feed servants as well as they might feel obliged to feed their own family. Blake points out that this custom prefigured the boarding schools of more recent times, to which boys of “teddy-bear age” were sent for three-quarters of the year. It was a custom conducive to much anxiety and insecurity—and conducive, too, Blake observes, to social mobility, both upward and downward, as younger sons were sent out into the world with the clear understanding that they were to seek their fortunes.

Several contributors point to social mobility as one of the distinguishing marks of the English: the absence of a caste system (the grandson of a duke who might be a plain Mr.), the bestowal of titles for public service, the intermarriage of wealth and birth and of mercantile and landed wealth, the exclusion of knights from the House of Lords (thus precluding the kind of “nobility of blood” that existed on the continent). Others comment upon the typical English response to change, the instinctive habit of preserving the old in the midst of the new. Thus “England’s green and pleasant land,” Richard Muir points out, was never quite destroyed even after the radical transformation brought about by the Industrial Revolution. The villages in some parts of north England, for example, are still set out in a fashion that might date from the Conquest. One might cite as well the English predilection for private houses in the heart of the metropolis, or the passion for flowers and gardens that defies urbanization. “Throughout this story,” Muir remarks, “the landscape historian is confronted by the two key themes of his calling: continuity and change.”

These two themes confront any historian of England, whatever his subject. Indeed they make it impossible for a historian in one area—social, political, economic, cultural, religious—to ply his trade independent of the others, for it is precisely the continuity in one realm that facilitates change in another. One of the great questions for the economic historian is why it was England rather than any other country that had the distinction of being the “first industrial nation.” The answer is to be found not only in the availability of capital, technology, natural resources, and the like, but also in England’s unique polity, society, culture, and religion. Perhaps the most significant fact about the first industrial nation is that it was also the oldest parliamentary nation; thus it had the political stability and harmony essential to economic progress. And its parliament, like its economy, was peculiarly accommodating, capable of embracing the new without abandoning the old, “democratizing” for example the House of Commons, while retaining the House of Lords, and eventually “meritocratizing” the House of Lords, at least in part (always in part) by creating life peerages in place of hereditary titles.

The conjunction of continuity and change explains the ability of the English to tolerate, indeed
thrive on, contradictions and anomalies. Blake’s characterization of the English tradition as “libertarian individualism” strikes a wrong note precisely because it is too rigorous, too consistent; one wants a formula that will incorporate individualism with tradition, liberty with community. Asa Briggs quotes Tocqueville’s puzzlement over one of the many contradictions in the English character: “I cannot completely understand how the spirit of association and the spirit of exclusion came to be so highly developed in the same people, and often to be so intimately combined,”

Tocqueville’s examples were the club, which was cohesive for its members and exclusive in relation to non-members, and the family: “See how families divide up when the birds are able to leave the nest.” That amalgam of association and dissociation, Tocqueville was convinced, characterized most of England’s civil and political institutions. Other commentators have dwelt on other manifestations of the same contrariness. In his chapter, “The English: Custom and Character,” Briggs cites the contradictions inherent in a thoroughly pluralistic society containing an intricate network of voluntary associations; the immense local and regional variety exhibited within a relatively small geographical area; the “paradoxes of progress” evident in the simultaneous enthusiasm for and resistance to technological change; the ambivalence toward money-making even at the height of the Industrial Revolution and among the most enterprising industrialists; the prominence of the aristocracy and gentry well into the nineteenth century; a class system that has been properly characterized as open in a society that is acutely class-conscious; the coexistence of individuality and deference, eccentricity and conformity, secularism and evangelicalism, spiritual aspirations and material comforts.

The via media of the Anglican Church, as Edward Norman describes it, is similarly distinctive—distinctively national well before the Reformation, and distinctively moderate, conciliatory, pragmatic, tolerant of difference, If blood was spilled in the course of the development of that via media, it was far less blood than was spilled in the religious wars on the continent. To be sure, the much vaunted English temper of moderateness needs qualification, as every other generalization does. Briggs cites Geoffrey Gorer’s statement in 1955 that the English people are “among the most peaceful, gentle, courteous and orderly populations that the civilized world has ever seen,” football crowds, for example, being “as orderly as church meetings”—an unfortunate example, as recent football games have demonstrated. Briggs himself reminds us of the London riots of 1736, 1768, and 1780, which gave London the reputation of being more turbulent than Paris. But that reputation hardly survived the French Revolution of 1789—or 1830, or 1848, or 1870. Even by nonrevolutionary standards, riots in England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were not all that riotous. Elsewhere another historian, T. A. Critchley, has commented on the incidence of violence in modern England: “A nation which commemorates 10th May, 1768, when about half a dozen rioters were killed, as the ‘massacre’ of St. George’s Fields, 15th August, 1819, when eleven people were killed, as the ‘massacre’ of Peterloo, and 13th November, 1887, when no one was killed, as ‘Bloody Sunday,’ measures its public violence by high standards.”
A work of this kind tends to elicit simple truths. If *The English World* seems to endorse so many clichés, it is partly because clichés, as another cliché has it, have the habit of being true, and partly because a work of this kind tends to elicit simple truths. It is always fascinating to watch a serious historian compress in twenty or twenty-five pages a subject that would normally occupy a volume or more. Each of the contributors to this book is fully aware of all the scholarly monographs and revisionist theses that amend, qualify, and call into question every statement he makes. Each of them, indeed, is the author of just such monographs and theses. What is impressive is that in spite of the temptation to show how much he knows, how subtle and complicated, original, and interesting his views are, each has nobly resisted that temptation. Abridgement, condensation, summation, here as in all historical works, inevitably entail simplification and therefore distortion. But a much more serious distortion comes from deliberately emphasizing the novel at the expense of the familiar. It takes a true scholar, and a superior character, to refrain from parading his originality, from making an essay in a volume of this sort the occasion for yet another exercise in revisionist history. By comparison with much of the work emanating from France (and increasingly, these days, from the United States), this volume may serve as yet another evidence of the English national character at its best. It may also serve to call attention to a subject that has unfortunately fallen into disrepute in recent years: the ideas of national character and nationality.


Gertrude Himmelfarb was a celebrated historian and public intellectual, and the author of *The People of the Book: Philosemitism in England, From Cromwell to Churchill* (Encounter Books).

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