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There'll Always Be An England
Anglophilia as Antimodern Leisure
By Michael Plato

North Americans have had a lengthy and often one-sided relationship with Great Britain. Long after the waning of the British Empire and the apex of Britain's exercise of global political and economic hegemony, its cultural influence remains strong. James Bond, *The Lord of the Rings* and Harry Potter all demonstrate that British cultural imagination and values still have a wide and popular appeal. Yet beyond these commercial successes in the box office and the bookstore, there is a much more immersive, even fetishistic and nostalgic, preoccupation with British culture, texts and worldview within North American society, as well as other parts of the world (Tamarkin, 2007). Described as anglophilia, or "Masterpiece Theatre Culture" (Epstein, 2002, p.334), its presence in North America is not wide, at least not as wide as it used to be, but its influence on those who exercise and maintain the traditionally dominant ideology has been significant, especially within the realms of economic and political power (Hitchens, 1990) and academia (Tamarkin, 2007). Indeed, this particular obsession could be seen as defining a whole stratum within North American society. As Joseph Epstein (2002) notes: "Much of what is called WASP culture... has its basis in anglophilia" (Epstein, 1997, p. 328). And Christopher Hitchens (1990) ponders on the relation of a class and its obsessions: "Is it of interest that the terms 'East Coast', 'Establishment' and 'Anglophilia' have been, at certain crucial points, effectively interchangeable (p. 24)?"

This 'philia', or obsessive love, has taken many forms in North America beyond the mere consumption of British cultural products. It is the molding of many North American universities (Harvard, Yale, Queen's, Dalhousie, McMaster, Chicago and the University of Toronto) and private schools (Groton, Choate, Exeter, Ridley, Trinity College School and Upper Canada College) on British examples. It is a deference shown to people of British origin, particularly those who are "titled" (Lyll, 2008) or exhibit the proper accent (Jones, 2001). It is the continued popularity of the monarchy among certain segments of Canadian society, such as among members of the Monarchist League and the United Empire Loyalists. It is Conrad Black giving up his Canadian citizenship for a seat in the House of Lords and replicating No. 10 Downing St. in his downtown Toronto office.

What then is appealing about Englishness from the perspective of the outsider, specifically the North American? To be sure, there are historical and cultural connections which might engender certain sympathies. Both Canada and the United States are former British colonies, the one making its break with the mother country by violent means, the other through a longer period of legislative separation. Many people in North America are also ethnically of British origin. According to Statistics Canada (Statistics Canada, 2006), of the total national population of 31 million, just over 11 million identified themselves of British origin, and specifically 6.5 million identified themselves as English (Statistics Canada, August 26, 2010). There is also the connection by language as English remains the dominant spoken and written language of Canada and the United States. Yet these facts by themselves do not seem to be able to account for the reverence and fascination which mark anglophilia. For one thing, the American Revolution which severed relations between Britain and the United States was accompanied by widespread anti-British sentiment. Still, it was not long after the revolution that anglophilia began to emerge in the United States (Tamarkin, 2007).

One possible explanation of this continued reverence is antimodernism. T.J. Jackson Lears (1981) points out that such enthusiasms may be a complex response to the insecurities of modernity itself:

Far from being the nostalgic fluttering of a “dying elite”, as historians have claimed, antimodernism was a complex blend of accommodation and protest which tells us a great deal about the beginnings of present-day values and attitudes... antimodernism helped ease accommodation to new and secular cultural modes. (p. xv)

Lears (1981) does warn that “it is not very helpful simply to describe antimodern dissent as a ‘reaction’ against modernizing tendencies” as there were many such reactions. However, antimodernism does reflect “not only a particular worldview but also a particular class and position”. (p. xvi). For those who most benefited from modernism through the accumulation of wealth and status, there was a vague feeling that they were being victimized by it as well. Their lives had in some sense been deadened by the pursuit of material comfort and an emerging sense of betrayal, mixed with dissatisfaction with what they had attained and led many to consider what they were now missing:

Amid this atmosphere of upper-class anxiety I discovered longing for a regeneration at once physical, moral and spiritual. Some of these longings led backward, imaginatively invoking the intense experiences of the medieval craftsman, warrior, or saint. (p. xii)

For those elites of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries which Lears (1981) describes, this quest for experience often took the form of orientalism or medievalism, a longing for the forever lost. In very much the same way, the longings which define anglophilia mirror this almost “grail” like quest for the remote yet enduring:

It is the essence of anglophilia that the object of its desire is unattainable. The cult of something at once vanished and superseded is secure against any too abrupt swing in fashion. It is reliable and time tested. (Hitchens, 1990, p. 50)

This is why, in North America at least, it is always the England of the past which asserts itself and why it is uncommon to find self-described anglophiles who admire more recent British cultural imports such as “punk” and “skinhead”. It is why, as Hitchens (1990) notes, the most popular books in the “Great Britain” section of the *Washington Post* Book Review had titles such as: *The English Country House*, *The Book of the Royal Year*, *The English Season*, *Mary Stuart’s Scotland* and *Gloriana: The Portraits of Queen Elizabeth I*. The following eight titles were the first to come up in an Amazon (British Movies, 2010 from Amazon.com) search for “British Movies”: *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, *British TV Victorian Collection*, *The Widowing of Mrs. Holroyd*, *Her Majesty*, *Gentleman’s Relish*, *The British Empire in Colour*, *The Millionairess* and *Lark Rise to Candleford: The Complete Season One* (August 31, 2010). These books and DVDs all reflect Britain’s aristocratic and imperial past and demonstrate a desire for the historical and high class.

England, as Hitchens (1990) again notes, is not just about a place, but also a time and something more:

In the American mind, an indissoluble connection now seems to exist between the idea of England and the idea of heritage, royalty, pageantry and good taste. (p. 51)

The triumvirate of “royalty, pageantry and good taste” gives a sense that what is truly desired from the British is spectacle and leisure. Lears (1981) points out that while antimodernism offered an “intensification” of experience, its pursuit was typically carried out as a leisure-time activity. Unlike certain forms of antimodernism, such as being a monk or a medieval craftsman, the concept of leisure is inherently tied to the aspects of British life that are appealing (p. xvi).

For many of those Americans embedded in the matrix of modernity, they are unwilling or unable to divorce themselves from the imperative to work and consume. As Lears (1981) again shows, antimodernism is not simply escapism; it is defined by an ambivalent or conflicted inability to detach ourselves from “material progress”:

Antimodernists were far more than escapists: their quests for authenticity eased their own and others’ adjustment to a streamlined culture of consumption. (p. xvi)

Part of what defines antimodernism is its “spirit of consumption”. Heritage, or whatever intense archaic experience which is being sought, is still something which can be purchased. As Hitchens’ (1990) observes, “To acquire and display British goods shows how archaic you are” (p. 51).

Ironically, the quest for what is not materially consumable becomes itself an object of consumption. With anglophilia, this consumption is not restricted to the physically attainable, such as “British goods”, as it is so crucially dependent upon the playing out of a way of life. It becomes a form of emulation. The direct manifestation of anglophilia, beyond experience and consumption, is performative. An example of this is the affected accent:

The notion of English superiority extend[s] to English speech... Not a few Americans have attempted English accents, usually with comical result. (Epstein, 2002, p. 330)

Ian Buruma (2000) detects the performativity of anglophilia when he concludes that “Anglophilia is often a matter of style” (p. 19). Greg Dickinson (1997) notes that style is usually preceded by a stage of consumption of memories, but its manifestation is typically as a “creative performance.” As Dickinson notes:

This stylization extends to a whole way of life, not only the acquisition of clothing. Gestures, postures, places of residence, sexuality and the body are all constructed within the confines of style. (p. 5)

Anglophiles, in this regard, can be identified not merely by their great admiration for all things English but by their performativity. “Acting English” becomes a manifestation of this identification and at times it can become not merely superficial, but suffusive of one’s identity. It can be the wearing of English clothes (Harris tweeds, Burberry scarves) and affecting one’s accent, but it can involve participating in distinctively British institutions (attending certain kinds of Anglican churches, sending your children to a British-style private school, even hiring an English nanny). It can even involve outright rejection of national circumstances and making England one’s adoptive country, both geographically and legally. Before Lord Black, the novelist Henry James, the poet T.S. Eliot and the Canadian industrialist, Lord Beaverbrook, perhaps North America’s best-known anglophiles, took this route and made England their permanent home. It should be noted, as Dickinson (1997) points out, that these “performances” were preceded by a stage of consumption. One needs to buy authentic Harris tweeds and to pay for English-style boarding schools, none of which can be acquired cheaply. This expense serves to make anglophilia not only more desirable, but also more exclusive, thus heightening the participant’s sense of detachment from the reality of modernity still further.

Performativity in the context of antimodernism and heritage consumption can be found in other examples and not just anglophilia. Dickinson (1997) finds a quest for Mediterranean and older American heritages in Old Pasadena; Steven Hoelscher (1998) shows that Swiss heritage is represented in the heritage town of New Glarus, Wisconsin; and Joseph Oxendine (1995) even discovers a search for American Indian sports heritage on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. Along with this nostalgic desire for continuity with the past (Mitchell, Atkinson & Clark, 2001), one of the distinct features of anglophilia which separates it from these other “nostalgias” is that of social hierarchy, or “class”. Anglophilia can be characterized by its adoration of the class system in Britain, in particular, the upper classes and their values. With social class an integral part of the anglophile’s definition of Englishness, it increases its exclusivity and cache still further. One does not find, for instance, anglophiles wishing to emulate the life of an 18th century peasant or a modern-day English soccer hooligan. Instead one finds, for instance, many Canadian anglophiles among the Monarchist League of Canada (Monarchist League, 2010) and the United Empire Loyalists (United Empire Loyalist Association of Canada, 2010), which are dedicated to the reverence of that epitome of the British class system, the monarchy itself.

Anglophilia, in short, is a form of leisure which is both consumptive and performative. As an antimodernist tendency it creates nostalgia for an English past, typically a genteel one. As Buruma (2000) notes: “anglophilia is of course a fantasy, like all forms of ‘philia” (p. 12). Like most fantasies it requires the modern infrastructure of technology, capital and above all a consumerist marketplace to manifest itself. What distinguishes Anglophilia from other fantasies of the modern and now postmodern world is its cost.

Anglophilia is a dream, but an expensive one. Like the British class system, which is enamoured by so many Anglophiles, it remains decidedly elitist.

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