

# Watching *the* English

KATE FOX

**H**  
HODDER &  
STOUGHTON

## ACCLAIM FOR THE 2004 EDITION

‘An absolutely brilliant examination of English culture’

Jennifer Saunders, *The Times*

‘Her observations are acute . . . she doesn’t write like an anthropologist but like an English woman – with amusement, not solemnity, able to laugh at herself as well as us.’

*Daily Mail*

‘Brilliant and hilarious’ Grayson Perry, *The Vanity of Small Differences*

‘She is the only popular UK anthropologist of substance since the 1970s.’  
Jeremy MacClancy, *Professor of Anthropology, Oxford Brookes University*

‘This is an entertaining, clever book. Do read it and then pass it on.’

*Daily Telegraph*

‘She is smart . . . raises some serious issues . . . poses a challenge to British social anthropology that we need to meet . . . This book should enter into professional discussions of the future of anthropology . . . Fox has astutely lined herself up to take a leading position in a rethink of the discipline’s object, theory and method.’ Professor Keith Hart, *Anthropology Today*

‘I read it cover to cover in a few days . . . very sharp and witty prose. It really is funny – the sort of humour that makes you laugh out loud on your own!’

Martin Parr, *Vice*

‘Hilarious and insightful’

Daniel Miller, *Professor of Material Culture, University College London*

‘She has not only compiled a comprehensive list of English qualities, she has examined them in depth . . . A delightful read’

*Sunday Times*

‘*Watching the English* is full of anthropological insights, sometimes acquired unconventionally, and always presented hilariously. It’s a fun and provocative read, and does a beautiful job of showing how anthropologists learn about the world.’

Jessaca B. Leinaweaver, *Associate Professor of Anthropology, Brown University*

‘*Watching the English* . . . will make you laugh out loud (“Oh God. I do that!”) and cringe simultaneously (“Oh God. I do that as well.”). This is a hilarious book which just shows us for what we are . . . beautifully-observed. It is a wonderful read for both the English and those who look at us and wonder why we do what we do. Now they’ll know.’

*Birmingham Post*

‘A brilliant and witty account of the underlying logic of English culture, which illuminates many of the main concepts of sociocultural

anthropology – making it a perfect introductory text to the discipline. It is consistently the most popular text I teach, not only because it’s a hilarious page-turner, but also because Fox offers truly insightful glimpses into what a sophisticated anthropological mindset can reveal about human cultural life . . . *Watching the English* embodies the anthropological credo of making the strange familiar and the familiar strange.’

Bianca Dahl, *Assistant Professor of Anthropology,  
University of Toronto*

‘She’s a witty and eloquent writer whose accessible book reads as a scholarly classification of our shared codes of behaviour and an affectionate homage to our foibles.’

*Metro*

‘The book captivates at the first page. It’s fun. It’s also embarrassing. “Yes . . . yes,” the reader will constantly exclaim. “I’m always doing that”.’

*Manchester Evening News*

*Watching the English* is great for a laugh. But even better, it is a fantastic lesson in deciphering culture – not just of the English, but anyone’s. I highly recommend it for both your own personal amusement and as a tool to reflect upon the world we live in.

Dr Erin B. Taylor, *Research Fellow,  
Instituto de Ciências Sociais, University of Lisbon*

‘Fascinating reading.’

*Oxford Times*

‘There’s a qualitative difference in the results, the telling detail that adds real weight. Fox brings enough wit and insight to her portrayal of the tribe to raise many a smile of recognition. She has a talent for observation, bringing a sharp and humorous eye and ear to everyday conventions, from the choreography of the English queue to the curious etiquette of weather talk.’

*The Tablet*

‘It’s a fascinating and insightful book, but what really sets it apart is the informal style aimed squarely at the intelligent layman.’

*City Life, Manchester*

‘Fascinating . . . Every aspect of English conversation and behaviour is put under the microscope. *Watching the English* is a thorough study which is interesting and amusing.’

*Western Daily Press*

‘Enjoyable good fun, with underlying seriousness – a book to dip into at random and relish for its many acute observations.’

*Leicester Mercury*

‘Amusing . . . entertaining’

*The Times*

‘Fascinating . . . excellent’

Lynne Truss, author of *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*

‘Both hilarious and wincingly accurate in its portrayal of English society’

*What’s on in London*

To Henry, William, Sarah and Katharine

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## FOREWORD

I know this is going to sound like typical English false modesty, but I was truly surprised when *Watching the English* became a big bestseller – and I am still amazed by its continued popularity. The book has sold over half a million copies, been translated into many languages, received many rave reviews (as well as a few stinkers, of course) and all the usual hooah.

Why? What can explain all this enthusiasm for a little pop-anthropology book about English behaviour?

Its success is almost entirely down to luck, no doubt, but in this case I think my good fortune may have something to do with what prompted me, ten years ago now, to write this book in the first place. I am often asked why I did it, and can only reply honestly, even though it makes me sound like a frightful geek, that it was because I didn't fully understand Englishness and this was keeping me awake at night. I know, I should have taken this as a cue to get a life. Instead, I read every book, article and research paper I could find on the subject, but still felt puzzled and frustrated – not to mention somewhat grumpy from lack of sleep. There was only one solution: if I really wanted to understand and define the English national character, I would have to do the research and figure it out for myself.

I can only assume that an awful lot of other people are equally perplexed by the English – including hundreds of thousands of English people. They may not be puzzled to the point of severe insomnia, but at least enough to splash out on a book that might help them to understand the inhabitants of this small, soggy, enigmatic island.

Perhaps I am also lucky to have published this book at a time

when we English are having a bit of an identity wobble. Nothing as dramatic as a full-blown ‘national identity crisis’, as some have called it. Both the big fuss and the earnest navel-gazing implied by the term ‘crisis’ would be unseemly and un-English, so I’m sticking with ‘wobble’. But I believe that various factors, including devolution (the ‘loss’ of Scotland and Wales), globalisation and immigration, have caused a degree of uncomfortable uncertainty about our national identity.

Oh – and it probably helped a bit that I obeyed one of the fundamental rules of Englishness, the one I call the Importance of Not Being Earnest. Earnest books about English national identity (some of them truly excellent) have not done so well, despite the wobble. Or perhaps because of it: in times of self-doubt and insecurity, the English take refuge in humour. And although this book has a fairly serious purpose, and is based on many years of solid research, I was writing to entertain the ‘intelligent general reader’, rather than to impress other anthropologists. This was no great hardship for me, as I am very English, find it hard to take things too seriously, and seem to be congenitally incapable of writing even a page without at least one or two little jokes.

Given that I had made no effort whatsoever to impress earnest academics, I was rather taken aback to find that *Watching the English* was being taught on the anthropology syllabus at a number of distinguished universities (and not, as I initially suspected, as a dire-warning example of how not to do anthropology). I found myself giving lectures and seminars at Oxford, Brown, University College London, Sussex, Pisa, etc. – and even the big scary Christmas Lecture at the Royal Geographical Society. At one of the universities where I lectured, the head of department told me that 50 per cent of new applicants cited my book as their inspiration for choosing to study anthropology. Fortunately, enough purist academic anthropologists still thoroughly disapprove of my light-hearted books for me to retain at least some vestiges of my maverick-outsider status.

I make no apology for my continued refusal, in this new edition, to pander to this stuffy minority by trying to show off my extensive reading, command of fancy jargon, mastery of abstruse concepts,

ability to obfuscate simple ones, and all the other stuff that might make the book more palatable to them. Of course, there are many areas where I have no such impressive knowledge to show off, even if I wished to do so – where I am not so much ‘dumbing down’ as just plain dumb. But I firmly believe that any anthropological insight of genuine value or interest can, and should, be expressed in terms that a non-academic can understand – and ideally even enjoy. Whether I’ve achieved anything that might qualify as an interesting insight, or expressed things clearly or amusingly, is another question, but at least I try.

And, much as I enjoy trying, when my publishers asked for a revised edition, nearly a decade after *Watching the English* was first published, I was initially reluctant. ‘I’m sorry,’ I said, ‘I know the world may have turned upside-down and inside-out quite a bit in the past ten years, and here in England we’ve had our share of terrorist bombings, economic crises, political upheavals, the Olympics and so on – but the English haven’t changed. In this book, I was searching for the “defining characteristics of Englishness”, and these should by definition be fairly timeless or, at least, not subject to any radical change in such a short period.’

I pointed out that neither my own continuing research nor any other studies or events had led me to revise my main conclusions. Quite the opposite: my own subsequent research on English behaviour, the findings of other relevant studies, and English reactions to events over the past decade have all actually confirmed and reinforced my original ‘diagnosis’.

On the other hand, I thought, perhaps this new research evidence and these fresh observations might in themselves be of interest, both to readers of the original book and to new readers. On some aspects of Englishness, for example, I now have survey data to add weight to my original fieldwork findings. On others, I have more extensive field-research or experiments to back up early observations and hunches. A few intrepid readers have even taken it upon themselves to replicate some of my experiments, and I can report on their results. The ‘defining characteristics’ of Englishness remain essentially unchanged, but there are now some qualifications to add, some subtle

nuances I hadn't noticed before, some emerging behaviour codes that need deciphering . . .

My publishers wisely left me to argue with myself over this, rather than putting me under any pressure, and eventually, much to their relief, I sort of talked myself into doing an updated edition.

Despite fairly extensive new research on many aspects of Englishness, I have undoubtedly missed many details that may have changed here or there in the past decade. I have continued to study the English, but other research interests and work commitments, and some frustrating health problems, have prevented me from revisiting some of the subcultures and some of the minutiae of English life that I covered in the original research. (Although the inconvenient illness has allowed me long periods as a 'participant observer' in English hospitals – field-research that would otherwise have required a lot of tiresome bureaucratic hassle over access.)

So, the updates are not as comprehensive as I would have wished, but there are over a hundred of them (about 150 new pages) scattered throughout this revised edition, so if you read the original book, you should not feel short-changed, at least in terms of the quantity of new material. The quality is for you to judge, of course.

Someone once said that the purpose of anthropology is to 'make the strange familiar and the familiar strange'. I have received many hundreds of letters and emails from immigrants and visitors to this country, and from foreigners married to English people, who tell me that the book has demystified this unfamiliar culture for them, helping them to understand the very strange behaviour of their English friends, colleagues, employers, neighbours, lovers and spouses. They write saying things like: 'Your book saved my marriage! I thought my English husband/wife must be mentally ill, but now I realise he/she is just being English!'

I also receive a constant flow of letters and emails from English people, telling me that reading this book has made them look afresh at familiar, 'normal' English behaviour, and realise just how strange we really are. Comments such as 'I kept cringing with embarrassment, thinking, Oh, God, *I* do that! and Oh no, that's *me!*' are a recurring theme from these readers, who take a typically English

delight in laughing at themselves. Some of them (like the university applicants mentioned above) have even been inspired to go a bit beyond just laughing, and actually study anthropology.

So, for all its faults, it seems the book may have done at least some of its anthropological duty. I hope that this updated new edition will continue to make strange things familiar, and vice versa.

## INTRODUCTION: ANTHROPOLOGY AT HOME

I am sitting in a pub near Paddington station, clutching a small brandy. It's only about half past eleven in the morning – a bit early for drinking, but the alcohol is part reward, part Dutch courage. Reward because I have just spent an exhausting morning accidentally-on-purpose bumping into people and counting the number who said, 'Sorry'; Dutch courage because I am now about to return to the railway station and spend a few hours committing a deadly sin – queue-jumping.

I really, *really* do not want to do this. I want to adopt my usual method of getting an unsuspecting research assistant to break sacred social rules while I watch the result from a safe distance. But this time, I have bravely decided that I must be my own guinea pig. I don't feel brave. I feel scared. My arms are all bruised from the bumping experiments. I want to abandon the whole stupid Englishness project here and now, go home, have a cup of tea and lead a normal life. Above all, I do *not* want to go and jump queues all afternoon.

Why am I doing this? What exactly is the point of all this ludicrous bumping and jumping (not to mention all the equally daft things I'll be doing tomorrow)? Good question. Perhaps I'd better explain.

### THE 'GRAMMAR' OF ENGLISHNESS

We are constantly being told that the English have lost their national identity – that there is no such thing as 'Englishness'. There has been a spate of books bemoaning this alleged identity crisis, with titles ranging from the plaintive *Anyone for England?* to the inconsolable *England: An Elegy*. Having spent much of the past twenty years

doing research on various aspects of English culture and social behaviour – in pubs, at racecourses, in shops, in night-clubs, on trains, on street corners, in people's homes – I am convinced that there *is* such a thing as 'Englishness', and that reports of its demise have been greatly exaggerated. In the research for this book, I set out to discover the hidden, unspoken rules of English behaviour, and what these rules tell us about our national identity.

The object was to identify the *commonalities* in rules governing English behaviour – the unofficial codes of conduct that cut across class, age, sex, region, subcultures and other social boundaries. For example, Women's Institute members and leather-clad bikers may seem, on the surface, to have very little in common, but by looking beyond the 'ethnographic dazzle'<sup>1</sup> of superficial differences, I found that Women's Institute members and bikers, and other groups, all behave in accordance with the same unwritten rules – rules that define our national identity and character. I would also maintain, with George Orwell, that this identity 'is continuous, it stretches into the future and the past, there is something in it that persists, as in a living creature'.

My aim, if you like, was to provide a 'grammar' of English behaviour. Native speakers can rarely explain the grammatical rules of their own language. In the same way, those who are most 'fluent' in the rituals, customs and traditions of a particular culture generally lack the detachment necessary to explain the 'grammar' of these practices in an intelligible manner. That is why we have anthropologists.

Most people obey the unwritten rules of their society instinctively, without being conscious of doing so. For example, you automatically get dressed in the morning without consciously reminding yourself that there is an unspoken rule of etiquette that prohibits going to work in one's pyjamas. But if you had an anthropologist staying with you and studying you, she would be asking: 'Why are you changing

1. A term coined by my father, the anthropologist Robin Fox, meaning blindness to underlying similarities between human groups and cultures because one is dazzled by the more highly visible surface differences.

your clothes?’ ‘What would happen if you went to work in pyjamas?’ ‘What else can’t you wear to work?’ ‘Why is it different on Fridays?’ ‘Does everyone in your company do that?’ ‘Why don’t the senior managers follow the Casual Friday custom?’ And on, and on, until you were heartily sick of her. Then she would go and watch and interrogate other people – from different groups within your society – and, hundreds of nosy questions and observations later, she would eventually decipher the ‘grammar’ of clothing and dress in your culture (see *Dress Codes*, page 385).

#### PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Anthropologists are trained to use a research method known as ‘participant observation’, which essentially means participating in the life and culture of the people one is studying, to gain a true insider’s perspective on their customs and behaviour, while simultaneously observing them as a detached, objective scientist. Well, that’s the theory. In practice it often feels rather like that children’s game where you try to pat your head and rub your tummy at the same time. It is perhaps not surprising that anthropologists are notorious for their frequent bouts of ‘field-blindness’ – becoming so involved and enmeshed in the native culture that they fail to maintain the necessary scientific detachment. The most famous example of such rose-tinted ethnography was, of course, Margaret Mead, but there was also Elizabeth Marshall Thomas, who wrote a book entitled *The Harmless People*, about a tribe who turned out to have a homicide rate higher than that of New York or Detroit.

There is a great deal of agonising and hair-splitting among anthropologists over the participant-observation method and the role of the participant observer. In a previous book, *The Racing Tribe*, I made a joke of this, borrowing the language of self-help psychobabble and expressing the problem as an ongoing battle between my Inner Participant and my Inner Observer. I described the bitchy squabbles in which these two Inner voices engaged every time a conflict arose between my roles as honorary member of the tribe and detached scientist. (Given the deadly serious tones in which this subject is

normally debated, my irreverence bordered on heresy, so I was surprised and rather unreasonably annoyed to receive a letter from a university lecturer saying that he was using *The Racing Tribe* to teach the participant-observation method. You try your best to be a maverick iconoclast, and they turn you into a textbook.)

The more usual, or at least currently fashionable, practice is to devote at least a chapter of your book or Ph.D. thesis to a tortured, self-flagellating disquisition on the ethical and methodological difficulties of participant observation. Although the whole point of the participant element is to understand the culture from a 'native' perspective, you must spend a good three pages explaining that your unconscious ethnocentric prejudices, and various other cultural barriers, probably make this impossible. It is then customary to question the entire moral basis of the observation element, and, ideally, to express grave reservations about the validity of modern Western 'science' as a means of understanding anything at all.

At this point, the uninitiated reader might legitimately wonder why we continue to use a research method that is clearly either morally questionable or unreliable or both. I wondered this myself, until I realised that these doleful recitations of the dangers and evils of participant observation are a form of protective mantra, a ritual chant similar to the rather charming practice of some Native American tribes who, before setting out on a hunt or chopping down a tree, would sing apologetic laments to appease the spirits of the animals they were about to kill or the tree they were about to fell. A less charitable interpretation would see anthropologists' ritual self-abasements as a disingenuous attempt to deflect criticism by pre-emptive confession of their failings – like the selfish and neglectful lover who says, 'Oh, I'm such a bastard, I don't know why you put up with me,' relying on our belief that such awareness and candid acknowledgement of a fault is almost as virtuous as not having it. Or as Oscar Wilde put it: 'There is a luxury in self-reproach. When we blame ourselves, we feel that no one else has the right to blame us.'

But whatever the motives, conscious or otherwise, the ritual chapter agonising over the role of the participant observer tends to

be mind-numbingly tedious, so I will forgo whatever pre-emptive absolutism might be gained by this, and simply say that while participant observation has its limitations, this rather uneasy combination of involvement and detachment is still the best method we have for exploring the complexities of human cultures, so it will have to do.

*The Good, the Bad and the Uncomfortable*

In my case, the difficulties of the participant element are somewhat reduced, as I have chosen to study the complexities of my own native culture. This is not because I consider the English to be intrinsically more interesting than other cultures but because I have a rather wimpish aversion to the dirt, dysentery, killer insects, ghastly food and primitive sanitation that characterise the mud-hut 'tribal' societies studied by my more intrepid colleagues.

In the macho field of ethnography, my avoidance of discomfort and irrational preference for cultures with indoor plumbing are regarded as quite unacceptably feeble, so I have, until recently, tried to redeem myself a bit by studying the less salubrious aspects of English life: conducting research in violent pubs, seedy night-clubs, run-down betting shops and the like. Yet after years of research on aggression, disorder, violence, crime and other forms of deviance and dysfunction, all of which invariably take place in disagreeable locations and at inconvenient times, I still seemed to have risen no higher in the estimation of mud-hut ethnographers accustomed to much harsher conditions.

So, having failed my trial-by-fieldwork initiation test, I reasoned that I might as well turn my attention to the subject that really interests me, namely: the causes of *good* behaviour. This is a fascinating field of enquiry, which until fairly recently had been almost entirely neglected by social scientists. With a few notable exceptions, social scientists have tended to be obsessed with the dysfunctional, rather than the desirable, devoting all their energies to researching the causes of behaviours our society wishes to prevent, rather than those we might wish to encourage.

My co-director at the Social Issues Research Centre (SIRC), Peter Marsh, had become equally disillusioned and frustrated by the

problem-oriented nature of social science, and we resolved to concentrate as much as possible on studying positive aspects of human interaction. With this new focus, we were now no longer obliged to seek out violent pubs, but could spend time in pleasant ones (the latter also had the advantage of being much easier to find, as the vast majority of pubs are congenial and trouble-free). We could observe ordinary, law-abiding people doing their shopping, instead of interviewing security guards and store detectives about the activities of shoplifters and vandals. We went to night-clubs to study flirting rather than fighting. When I noticed some unusually sociable and courteous interaction among the crowds at a racecourse, I immediately began what turned out to be three years of research on the factors influencing the good behaviour of racegoers. Other largely 'positive' research topics have included celebration, cyber-dating, summer holidays, beauty and body-image, social bonding, embarrassment, corporate hospitality, patriotism, cars and drivers, motherhood, menopause, risk-taking, crying, mobile phones, online social media, sex, gossip, the psychology of smell, the meaning of chips and the relationship between tea-drinking and DIY (this last dealing with burning social issues such as 'How many cups of tea does it take the average Englishman to put up a shelf?').

My professional life has thus been divided roughly equally between studying the problematic aspects of English society and its more appealing, positive elements (along with cross-cultural, comparative research in other parts of the world), so I suppose I can safely claim to have embarked on the specific research for this book with the advantage of a reasonably balanced overview.

### *My Family and other Lab Rats*

My status as a 'native' gave me a bit of a head start on the participant element of the participant-observation task, but what about the observation side of things? Could I summon the detachment necessary to stand back and observe my own native culture as an objective scientist? Although in fact I was to spend much of my time studying relatively unfamiliar subcultures, these were still 'my people', so it seemed reasonable to question my ability to treat them as

laboratory rats, albeit with only half of my ethnographer's split personality (the head-patting observer half, as opposed to the tummy-rubbing participant).

I did not worry about this for too long. After all, I had the advantage of having lived abroad for most of my 'formative years' (from the age of five to sixteen). And friends, colleagues, publishers, agents and others kept reminding me that I had more recently spent at least a decade minutely dissecting the behaviour of my fellow natives – with, they said, about as much sentimentality as a white-coated scientist tweezering cells around in a Petri dish. My family also pointed out that my father – Robin Fox, a much more eminent anthropologist – had been training me for this role since I was a baby. Unlike most infants, who spend their early days lying in a pram or cot, staring at the ceiling or at those dangly-animal mobile things, I was strapped to a Cochiti Indian cradle-board and propped upright, at strategic observation points around the house, to study the typical behaviour-patterns of an English academic family.

My father also provided me with the perfect role-model of scientific detachment. When my mother told him that she was pregnant with me, their first child, he immediately started trying to persuade her to let him acquire a baby chimp and bring us up together as an experiment – a case-study comparing primate and human development. My mother firmly vetoed the idea, and recounted the incident to me, many years later, as an example of my father's eccentric and unhelpful approach to parenthood. I failed to grasp the moral of the story, and said, 'Oh, what a great idea – it would have been *fascinating!*' My mother told me, not for the first time, that I was 'just like your bloody father'. Again missing the point, I took this as a compliment.

### TRUST ME, I'M AN ANTHROPOLOGIST

By the time we left England, and I embarked on a rather erratic education at a random sample of schools in America, Ireland and France, my father had manfully shrugged off his disappointment over the chimp experiment, and begun training me as an ethnographer instead. I was only five, but he generously overlooked this slight handicap: I

might be somewhat shorter than his other students, but that shouldn't prevent me grasping the basic principles of ethnographic research methodology. Among the most important of these, I learnt, was the search for rules. When we arrived in any unfamiliar culture, I was to look for regularities and consistent patterns in the natives' behaviour, and try to work out the hidden rules – the conventions or collective understandings – governing these behaviour patterns.

Eventually, this rule-hunting becomes almost an unconscious process – a reflex, or, according to some long-suffering companions, a pathological compulsion. Some years ago, for example, my fiancé (now husband) Henry took me to visit some friends in Poland. As we were driving in an English car, he relied on me, the passenger, to tell him when it was safe to overtake. Within twenty minutes of crossing the Polish border, I started to say, 'Yes, go now, it's safe,' even when there were vehicles coming towards us on a two-lane road.

After he had twice hastily applied the brakes and aborted a planned overtake at the last minute, he clearly began to have doubts about my judgement. 'What are you doing? That wasn't safe at all! Didn't you see that big lorry?'

'Oh, yes,' I replied, 'but the rules are different here in Poland. There's obviously a tacit understanding that a wide two-lane road is really three lanes, so if you overtake, the driver in front and the one coming towards you will move to the side to give you room.'

Henry asked politely how I could possibly be sure of this, given that I had never been to Poland before and had been in the country less than half an hour. My response, that I had been watching the Polish drivers and that they all clearly followed this rule, was greeted with perhaps understandable scepticism. Adding 'Trust me, I'm an anthropologist,' probably didn't help much either, and it was some time before he could be persuaded to test my theory. When he did, the vehicles duly parted like the Red Sea to create a 'third lane' for us, and our Polish host later confirmed that there was indeed a sort of unofficial code of etiquette that required this.<sup>2</sup>

2. I have since heard about a few Polish drivers being killed or injured in England because they did not realise that their 'third-lane' etiquette doesn't apply here.

My sense of triumph was somewhat diluted, though, by our host's sister, who pointed out that her countrymen were also noted for their reckless and dangerous driving. Had I been a bit more observant, it seemed, I might have noticed the crosses, with flowers around the base, dotted along the roadsides – tributes placed by bereaved relatives to mark the spots at which people had been killed in road accidents. Henry magnanimously refrained from making any comment about the trustworthiness of anthropologists, but he did ask why I could not be content with merely observing and analysing Polish customs: why did I feel compelled to risk my neck – and, incidentally, his – by *joining in*?

I explained that this compulsion was partly the result of promptings from my Inner Participant, but insisted that there was also some methodology in my apparent madness. Having observed some regularity or pattern in native behaviour, and tentatively identified the unspoken rule involved, an ethnographer can apply various 'tests' to confirm the existence of such a rule. You can tell a representative selection of natives about your observations of their behaviour patterns, and ask them if you have correctly identified the rule, convention or principle behind these patterns. You can break the (hypothetical) rule, and look for signs of disapproval, or indeed active 'sanctions'. In some cases, such as the Polish third-lane rule, you can 'test' the rule by obeying it, and note whether you are 'rewarded' for doing so.

#### BORING BUT IMPORTANT

This book is not written for other social scientists but, rather, for that elusive creature publishers used to call 'the intelligent layman'. My non-academic approach cannot, however, be used as a convenient excuse for woolly thinking, sloppy use of language, or failing to define my terms. This is a book about the 'rules' of Englishness, and I cannot simply assert that we all know what we mean by a 'rule', without attempting to explain the sense or senses in which I am using the term.

I am using a rather broad interpretation of the concept of a rule,

based on four of the definitions allowed by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, namely:

- a principle, regulation or maxim governing individual conduct
- a standard of discrimination or estimation; a criterion, a test, a measure
- an exemplary person or thing; a guiding example
- a fact, or the statement of a fact, which holds generally good; the normal or usual state of things.

Thus, my quest to identify the rules of Englishness is not confined to a search for specific rules of conduct, but will include rules in the wider sense of standards, norms, ideals, guiding principles and ‘facts’ about ‘normal or usual’ English behaviour.

This last is the sense of ‘rule’ we are using when we say, ‘As a rule, the English tend to be X (or prefer Y, or dislike Z).’ When we use the term ‘rule’ in this way, we do not mean – and this is important – that all English people always or invariably exhibit the characteristic in question, only that it is a quality or behaviour pattern that is common enough, or marked enough, to be noticeable and significant. Indeed, it is a fundamental requirement of a social rule – by whatever definition – that it can be broken. Rules of conduct (or standards, or principles) of this kind are not, like scientific or mathematical laws, statements of a necessary state of affairs: they are by definition contingent. If it were, for example, utterly inconceivable and impossible that anyone would ever jump a queue, there would be no need for a rule prohibiting queue-jumping.<sup>3</sup>

When I speak of the unwritten rules of Englishness, therefore, I am clearly not suggesting that such rules are universally obeyed in

3. We do, in fact, have some rules prohibiting behaviours that, while not inconceivable, are unlikely or even ‘unnatural’ – see Robin Fox’s work on the incest taboo, for example – cases where a factual ‘it isn’t done’ becomes formalised as a proscriptive ‘thou shalt not do it’ (despite the claims of philosophers who hold that it is logically impossible to derive an ‘ought’ from an ‘is’), but these tend to be universal rules, rather than the culture-specific rules that concern us here.

English society, or that no exceptions or deviations will be found. That would be ludicrous. My claim is only that these rules are 'normal and usual' enough to be helpful in understanding and defining our national character.

Often, exceptions and deviations may help to 'prove' (in the correct sense of 'test') a rule, in that the degree of surprise or outrage provoked by the deviation provides an indication of its importance and the 'normality' of the behaviour it prescribes. Many of the pundits conducting premature post-mortems on Englishness make the fundamental mistake of citing breaches of the traditional rules of Englishness (such as, say, the unsportsmanlike behaviour of a footballer or cricketer) as evidence for their diagnosis of death, while ignoring public reaction to such breaches, which clearly shows that they are regarded as abnormal, unacceptable and un-English.

#### THE NATURE OF CULTURE

My analysis of Englishness will focus on rules, as I believe this is the most direct route to the establishment of a 'grammar' of Englishness. But given the very broad sense in which I am using the term 'rule', my search for the rules of Englishness will effectively involve an attempt to understand and define English culture. This is another term that requires definition: by 'culture' I mean the sum of a society's or social group's patterns of behaviour, customs, way of life, ideas, beliefs and values. And this is essentially what we mean when we talk about 'national character'. Those who insist that there is no such thing often seem to fail to grasp that the term is a metaphor, a colloquial way of talking about 'culture'. Most would accept that there is such a thing as 'culture' and that there are differences between cultures.

I am not implying by this that I see English culture as a homogeneous or immutable entity – that I expect to find no variation in behaviour patterns, customs, beliefs, etc. – any more than I am suggesting that the 'rules of Englishness' are universally obeyed. As with the rules, I expect to find much variation and diversity within English culture, but hope to discover some sort of common core, a

set of underlying basic patterns that might help us to define Englishness.

At the same time, I am conscious of the wider danger of cross-cultural ‘ethnographic dazzle’ – of blindness to the similarities between the English and other cultures. When absorbed in the task of defining a ‘national character’, it is easy to become obsessed with the distinctive features of a particular culture, and to forget that we are all members of the same species.<sup>4</sup> Fortunately, several rather more eminent anthropologists have provided us with lists of ‘cross-cultural universals’ – practices, customs and beliefs found in all human societies – which should help me to avoid this hazard. There is some lack of consensus on exactly what practices, etc., should be included in this category (but, then, when did academics ever manage to agree on anything?).<sup>5</sup> For example, Robin Fox gives us the following:

Laws about property, rules about incest and marriage, customs of taboo and avoidance, methods of settling disputes with a minimum of bloodshed, beliefs about the supernatural and practices relating to it, a system of social status and methods of indicating it, initiation ceremonies for young men, courtship practices involving the adornment of females, systems of symbolic body ornament generally, certain activities set aside for men from which women are excluded, gambling of some kind, a tool- and weapons-making industry, myths and legends, dancing,

4. Although I was given a rather charming book, published in 1931, entitled *The English: Are They Human?* The question is rhetorical, as one might expect. The Dutch author (G. J. Renier) ‘came to the conclusion that the world is inhabited by two species of human beings: mankind and the English’.

5. There is also considerable disagreement on whether or not such ‘universals’ should be regarded as hard-wired characteristics of human nature, but I’ll wimp out of that debate as well, on the grounds that it is not directly relevant to our discussion of Englishness. My own view, for what it’s worth, is that the whole nature/nurture debate is a rather pointless exercise, in which we engage because, as Lévi-Strauss has shown, the human mind likes to think in terms of binary oppositions (black/white, left/right, male/female, them/us, nature/culture, etc.). Why we do this is open to question, but this binary thinking pervades all human institutions and practices.

adultery and various doses of homicide, suicide, homosexuality, schizophrenia, psychoses and neuroses, and various practitioners to take advantage of or cure these, depending on how they are viewed.

George Peter Murdock provides a much longer and more detailed list of universals,<sup>6</sup> in convenient alphabetical order, but less amusingly phrased:

Age-grading, athletic sports, bodily adornment, calendar, cleanliness training, community organisation, cooking, cooperative labour, cosmology, courtship, dancing, decorative art, divination, division of labour, dream interpretation, education, eschatology, ethics, ethnobiology, etiquette, faith-healing, family, feasting, fire-making, folklore, food taboos, funeral rites, games, gestures, gift-giving, government, greetings, hairstyles, hospitality, housing, hygiene, incest taboos, inheritance rules, joking, kin-groups, kinship nomenclature, language, law, luck superstition, magic, marriage, mealtimes, medicine, modesty concerning natural functions, mourning, music, mythology, numerals, obstetrics, penal sanctions, personal names, population policy, postnatal care, pregnancy usages, property rights, propitiation of supernatural beings, puberty customs, religious rituals, residence rules, sexual restrictions, soul concepts, status differentiation, surgery, tool making, trade, visiting, weaning and weather control.

While I am not personally familiar with every existing human culture, lists such as these will help to ensure that I focus specifically, for example, on what is unique or distinctive about the English class system, rather than the fact that we have such a system, as all cultures have ‘a system of social status and methods of indicating it’. This may seem a rather obvious point, but it is one that other writers have failed to recognise,<sup>7</sup> and many also regularly commit the related

6. To be fair, Fox was providing *examples* of human universals, while Murdock was attempting a comprehensive list.

7. Not Hegel, who captured the essence of the issue when he said that ‘The spirit of the nation is . . . the universal spirit in a particular form.’ (Assuming that I have correctly understood his meaning – Hegel is not always as clear as one might wish.)

error of assuming that certain characteristics of English culture (such as the association of alcohol with violence) are universal features of all human societies.

### RULE-MAKING

There is one significant omission from the above lists,<sup>8</sup> although it is clearly implicit in both, and that is ‘rule-making’. The human species is addicted to it. Every human activity, without exception, including natural biological functions such as eating and sex, is hedged about with complex sets of rules and regulations, dictating precisely when, where, with whom and in what manner the activity may be performed. Animals just *do* these things; humans make an almighty song and dance about it. This is known as ‘civilisation’.

The rules may vary from culture to culture, but there are always rules. Different foods may be prohibited in different societies, but every society has food taboos. We have rules about everything. In the above lists, every practice that does not already contain an explicit or implicit reference to rules could be preceded by the words ‘rules about’ (e.g. rules about gift-giving, rules about hairstyles, rules about dancing, greetings, hospitality, joking, weaning, etc.). My focus on rules is therefore not some strange personal whim, but a recognition of the importance of rules and rule-making in the human psyche.

If you think about it, we all use differences in rules as a principal means of distinguishing one culture from another. The first thing we notice when we go on holiday or business abroad is that other cultures have ‘different ways of doing things’, by which we usually mean that they have rules about, say, food, mealtimes, dress, greetings, hygiene, trade, hospitality, joking, status-differentiation, etc., which are different from our own rules about these practices.

8. Actually, there are two: the second is ‘use of mood- or consciousness-altering substances or processes’, a practice found in all known human cultures, the peculiarly English version of which will be covered elsewhere in this book.

## GLOBALISATION AND TRIBALISATION

Which brings us, inevitably, to the problem of globalisation. During the research for this book, I was often asked (by members of the academic/chattering classes) what was the point in my writing about Englishness, or indeed any other national identity, when the inexorable spread of American cultural imperialism would soon make this an issue of purely historical interest? Already, I was told, we are living in a dumbed-down, homogenised McWorld, in which the rich tapestry of diverse and distinctive cultures is being obliterated by the all-consuming consumerism of Nike, Coca-Cola, McDonald's, Disney and other multinational capitalist giants.

Really? As a fairly typical *Guardian*-reading, lefty-liberal product of the anti-Thatcher generation, I have no natural sympathy for corporate imperialists, but as a professional observer of sociocultural trends, I am obliged to report that their influence has been exaggerated – or, rather, misinterpreted. The principal effect of globalisation, as far as I can tell, has been an *increase* in nationalism and tribalism, a proliferation of struggles for independence, devolution and self-determination, and a resurgence of concern about ethnicity and cultural identity in almost all parts of the world, including the so-called United Kingdom.

OK, perhaps not an effect – correlation is not causation, as every scientist knows – but at the very least, one must acknowledge that the association of these movements with the rise of globalisation is a striking coincidence. Just because people everywhere want to wear Nike trainers and drink Coke does not necessarily mean that they are any less fiercely concerned about their cultural identity – indeed, many are prepared to fight and die for their nation, religion, territory, culture or whatever aspect of ‘tribal’ identity is perceived to be at stake.

The economic influence of American corporate giants may indeed be overwhelming, and even pernicious, but their cultural impact is perhaps less significant than either they or their enemies would like to believe. Given our deeply ingrained tribal instincts, and increasing evidence of fragmentation of nations into smaller and smaller

cultural units, it does not make sense to talk of a world of seven billion people becoming a vast monoculture. The spread of globalisation is undoubtedly bringing changes to the cultures it reaches, but these cultures were not static in the first place, and change does not necessarily mean the abolition of traditional values. Indeed, new global media such as the internet have been an effective means of promoting traditional cultures – as well as the global subculture of anti-globalisation activists.

Within Britain, despite obvious American cultural influences, there is far more evidence of increasing tribalisation than of any reduction in cultural diversity. The fervour, and power, of Scottish and Welsh nationalists does not seem to be much affected by their taste for American soft drinks, junk food or films. Ethnic minorities in Britain are, if anything, increasingly keen to maintain their distinctive cultural identities, and even the English are becoming a bit more fretful (in our rather understated, moderate way) about our own cultural ‘identity crisis’. In England, regionalism is endemic – and there is considerable resistance to the idea of being part of Europe, let alone part of any global monoculture.

So, I see no reason to be put off my attempt to understand Englishness by global warnings about the imminent extinction of this or any other culture.

## CLASS AND RACE

When this book was in the planning stages, almost everyone I talked to about it asked whether I would have a chapter on class. My feeling all along was that a separate chapter would be inappropriate: class pervades all aspects of English life and culture, and will therefore permeate all the areas covered in this book.

Although England is a highly class-conscious culture, the real-life ways in which the English think about social class – and determine a person’s position in the class structure – bear little relation either to simplistic three-tier (upper, middle, working) models, or to the rather abstract alphabetical systems (A, B, C1, C2, D, E), based entirely on occupation, favoured by opinion

pollsters and market-research experts.<sup>9</sup> A schoolteacher and an estate agent would both technically be ‘middle class’. They might even both live in a terraced house, drive the same make of car, drink in the same pub and earn roughly the same annual income. But we judge social class in much more subtle and complex ways: *precisely* how you arrange, furnish and decorate your terraced house; not just the make of car you drive, but whether you wash it yourself on Sundays, take it to a car wash or rely on the English weather to sluice off the worst of the dirt for you. Similar fine distinctions are applied to exactly what, where, when, how and with whom you eat and drink; where and how you shop; the clothes you wear; the pets you keep; how you spend your free time; and, especially, the words you use and how you pronounce them.

Every English person (whether we admit it or not) is aware of and highly sensitive to all of the delicate divisions and calibrations involved in such judgements. I will not therefore attempt to provide a crude ‘taxonomy’ of English classes and their characteristics, but will instead try to convey the subtleties of English thinking about class through the perspectives of the different themes mentioned above. It is impossible to talk about class without reference to homes, gardens, cars, clothes, pets, food, drink, sex, talk, hobbies, etc., and impossible to explore the rules of any of these aspects of English life without constantly bumping into big class dividers, or tripping over the smaller, less obvious ones. I will, therefore, deal with class demarcations as and when I lurch into them or stumble across them.

At the same time, I will try to avoid being ‘dazzled’ by class differences, remembering Orwell’s point that such differences ‘fade away the moment any two Britons are confronted by a European’ and that ‘even the distinction between rich and poor dwindles somewhat when one regards the nation from the outside’. As a self-appointed

9. The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of economic, social and cultural capital are more helpful in understanding the English class system, but only if one is *very* specific about the *precise* nature of each type of capital associated with a particular social class.

‘outsider’ – a professional alien, if you like – my task in defining Englishness is to search for underlying commonalities, not to exclaim over surface differences.

Race is a rather more difficult issue, and again was raised by all the friends and colleagues with whom I discussed this book. Having noted that I was conveniently avoiding the issues of Scottish, Welsh and Irish national identities by confining my research to ‘the English’ rather than ‘the British’ or ‘the UK’, they invariably went on to ask whether or not Asians,<sup>10</sup> Afro-Caribbeans and other ethnic minorities would be included in my definition of Englishness.

There are several answers to this question. The first is that ethnic minorities are included, *by definition*, in any attempt to define Englishness. The extent to which immigrant populations adapt to, adopt and in turn influence the culture and customs of their host country, particularly over several generations, is a complex issue. Research tends to focus on the adaptation and adoption elements (usually lumped together as ‘acculturation’ or ‘assimilation’) at the expense of the equally interesting and important issue of influence. This is odd: we acknowledge that short-term tourists can have a profound influence on their host cultures – indeed, the study of the social processes involved has become a fashionable discipline in itself – but for some reason our academics seem less interested in the processes by which resident immigrant minority cultures can shape the behaviour patterns, customs, ideas, beliefs and values of the countries in which they settle. Although ethnic minorities constitute only about 10 per cent of the population of this country, their influence on many aspects of English culture has been, and is, considerable. Any ‘snapshot’ of English behaviour as it is now, such as I am attempting here, will inevitably be coloured by this influence. Although very few of the Asians, Africans and Caribbeans living in England would define themselves as English – most call themselves British, which has come to be regarded as a more

10. I am using the term ‘Asian’ – here and throughout the book – in the British sense, meaning (loosely) originating from the Indian subcontinent.

inclusive term<sup>11</sup> – they have clearly contributed to the ‘grammar’ of Englishness.

My second answer to the race question concerns the more well-trodden area of ‘acculturation’. Here we come down to the level of the group and the individual, rather than the minority culture as a whole. To put it simply – perhaps too simply – some ethnic-minority groups and individuals are more ‘English’ than others. By this I mean that some, whether through choice or circumstance or both, have adopted more of the host culture’s customs, values and behaviour patterns than others. (This becomes a somewhat more complex issue in the second, third and subsequent generations, as the host culture in question will have been influenced, at least to some degree, by their own forebears.)

Once you start to put it in these terms, the issue is really no longer one of race. When I say that some ethnic-minority groups and individuals are more ‘English’ than others, I am clearly not talking about the colour of their skin or their country of origin: I am talking about the degree of ‘Englishness’ they exhibit in their behaviour, manner and customs. I could, and do, make the same comment about white ‘Anglo-Saxon’ groups and individuals.

We all do, in fact. We describe a social group, a person, or even, say, just one of that person’s reactions or characteristic mannerisms, as ‘very English’ or ‘typically English’. We understand what someone means when they say, ‘In some ways I’m very English, but in other ways I’m not,’ or ‘You’re more English about that than I am.’ We have a concept of ‘degrees’ of Englishness. I am not introducing anything new or startling here: our everyday use of these terms demonstrates that we all already have a clear grasp of the subtleties

11. Although I found that in real-life conversation, as opposed to ticking boxes on surveys, many people from ethnic-minority backgrounds tended, in casual discussions about Scotland or Wales, to refer to the English as ‘we’ and the Scots and Welsh as ‘them’. This use of the first-person plural was common even among those who, when asked, would insist that they were British, not English. And that’s not even counting the many ethnic-minority ‘regionalists’ who, like their Anglo-Saxon friends and neighbours, identified themselves more strongly as ‘Geordies’, ‘Scousers’, ‘Brummies’, ‘Mancs’, etc., than as British.

of ‘partial’ Englishness, or even ‘piecemeal’ or ‘cherry-picking’ Englishness. We recognise that we can all, at least to some extent, ‘choose’ our degree of Englishness. All I am saying is that these concepts can be applied equally to ethnic minorities.

In fact, I would go so far as to say that Englishness is rather *more* a matter of choice for the ethnic minorities in this country than it is for the rest of us. For those of us without the benefit of early first-hand influence of another culture, some aspects of Englishness can be so deeply ingrained that we find it almost impossible to shake them off, even when it is clearly in our interests to do so (such as, in my case, when trying to conduct field experiments involving queue-jumping). Immigrants have the advantage of being able to pick and choose more freely, often adopting the more desirable English quirks and habits while carefully steering clear of the more ludicrous ones.

I have some personal experience of such cultural cherry-picking. My family emigrated to America when I was five, and we lived there for six years, during which entire time I steadfastly refused to adopt any trace of an American accent, on the grounds that it was aesthetically unpleasing (‘Sounds horrid’ was how I put it at the time – dreadful little prig that I was), although I happily adapted to most other aspects of the culture. As an adolescent, I lived for four years in rural France. I attended the local state school and became indistinguishable in my speech, behaviour and manners from any other Briançonnaise teenager. Except that I knew this was a matter of choice, and could judiciously shed those elements of Frenchness that annoyed my mother when I got home from school in the evening – or, indeed, deliberately exaggerate them to provoke her (some teenage behaviours are universal) – and discard those that proved socially unfavourable on our return to England.

Immigrants can, of course, choose to ‘go native’, and some in this country become ‘more English than the English’. Among my own friends, the two I would most readily describe as ‘very English’ are a first-generation Indian immigrant and a first-generation Polish refugee. In both cases, their degree of Englishness was initially a conscious choice, and although it has since become second nature,

they can still stand back and analyse their behaviour – and explain the rules they have learnt to obey – in a way that most native English find difficult, as we tend to take these things for granted.

My sister had much the same experience when she married a Lebanese man and emigrated to Lebanon (from America), where she lived for about fifteen years. She became very quickly, to her Bek'aa Valley family and neighbours, a fully 'acculturated' Lebanese village housewife, but can switch back to Englishness (or Americanness, or indeed her teenage Frenchness) as easily as she changes languages – and often does both in mid-sentence. Her children are American-Arab, with a few hints of Englishness, and equally adept at switching language, manners and mores when it suits them.

Many of those who pontificate about acculturation are inclined to underestimate this element of choice. Such processes are often described in terms suggesting that the 'dominant' culture is simply *imposed* on unwitting, passive minorities, rather than focusing on the extent to which individuals quite consciously, deliberately, cleverly and even mockingly pick and choose among the behaviours and customs of their host culture. I accept that some degree of acculturation or conformity to English ways is often 'demanded' or effectively 'enforced' (although this would surely be true of any host culture, unless one enters it as a conquering invader or passing tourist), and the rights and wrongs of specific demands can and should be debated. But my point is that compliance with such demands is still a conscious process, and not, as some accounts of acculturation imply, a form of brainwashing.

My only way of understanding this process is to assume that every immigrant to this country is at least as bright and clever as I was when we immigrated to France, just as capable of exercising free will and maintaining a sense of their own cultural identity while complying with the demands, however irrational or unfair, of the local culture. I could crank up or tone down my Frenchness, by subtle degrees, in an entirely calculated manner. My sister can choose and calibrate her Arabness, and my immigrant friends can do the same with their Englishness, sometimes for practical social purposes, including the avoidance of exclusion, but also purely for amusement.

Perhaps the earnest researchers studying acculturation just don't want to see that their 'subjects' have got the whole thing sussed, understand our culture better than we do, and are, much of the time, privately laughing at us.

It should be obvious from all of this (but I'll say it anyway) that when I speak of Englishness I am not putting a value on it, not holding it up above any other '-ness'. When I say that some immigrants are more English than others, I am not (unlike Norman Tebbit with his infamous 'Cricket Test') implying that these individuals are in any way superior, or that their rights or status as citizens should be any different from those who are less English. And when I say that anyone *can* – given enough time and effort – 'learn' or 'adopt' Englishness, I am not suggesting that they *ought* to do so.

The degree to which immigrants and ethnic minorities should be expected to adapt to fit in with English culture is a matter for debate. Where immigrants from former British colonies are concerned, perhaps the degree of acculturation demanded should match that which we achieved as uninvited residents in their cultures. Of all peoples, the English are surely historically the least qualified to preach about the importance of adapting to host-culture manners and mores. Our own track-record on this is abysmal. Wherever we settle in any numbers, we not only create pockets of utterly insular Englishness, but also often attempt to impose our cultural norms and habits on the local population.

But this book is intended to be descriptive, not prescriptive. I am interested in understanding Englishness as it is, warts and all. It is not the anthropologist's job to moralise and pontificate about how the tribe she is studying ought to treat its neighbours or its members. I may have my opinions on such matters, but they are not relevant to my attempt to discover the rules of Englishness. I may sometimes state these opinions anyway (it's my book, so I can do what I like), but I will try to distinguish clearly between opinion and observation.

## BRITISHNESS AND ENGLISHNESS

While I'm at it, this is a suitable place to apologise to any Scottish or Welsh (or even Northern Irish)<sup>12</sup> people who (a) still regard themselves as British and (b) are wondering why I am writing about Englishness rather than Britishness. (I am referring here to real, born-and-bred Scots, Welsh and Irish by the way, not English people – like me – who like to boast of their drop of Welsh, Scottish or Irish 'blood' when it suits them.)

The answer is that I am researching and writing about Englishness rather than Britishness:

- partly out of sheer laziness
- partly because England is a nation, and might reasonably be expected to have some sort of coherent and distinctive national culture or character, whereas Britain is a purely political construct, composed of several nations with their own distinctive cultures
- partly because although there may be a great deal of overlap between these cultures, they are clearly *not* identical and should not be treated as such by being lumped together under 'Britishness'
- and finally because 'Britishness' seems to me to be a rather meaningless term: when people use it, they nearly always really mean 'Englishness' – they do not mean that someone is being frightfully Welsh or Scottish.<sup>13</sup>

12. Yes, I know, technically Northern Ireland is not part of Britain, but part of the 'United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland' – but I've had letters from Northern Irish people who see themselves as British and complained about not being included in this section.

13. For those who think I am being too glib and dismissive in this summary, the historian Krishan Kumar makes essentially the same points (apart from the confession of laziness, which I'm sure doesn't apply in his case) far more eloquently but at much greater length, in *The Making of English National Identity* – and so did the eminent political theorist and citizenship expert Sir Bernard Crick.

I only have the time and energy to try to understand one of these cultures, and I have chosen my own, the English.

I realise that one can, if one is being picky, pick all sorts of holes in these arguments – not least that a ‘nation’ is surely itself a pretty artificial construct – and Cornish nationalists and even fervent regionalists from other parts of England (Scousers, Geordies, Yorkshiremen, etc., etc.) will no doubt insist that they, too, have their own separate identity and should not be bundled together with the rest of the English.

The trouble is that virtually all nations have a number of regions, each of which invariably regards itself as different from, and superior to, all the others. This applies in France, Italy, the US, Russia, Mexico, Spain, Scotland, Australia – and more or less anywhere else you care to mention. People from St Petersburg talk about Muscovites as though they were members of a different species; east-coast and Midwestern Americans might as well be from different planets, ditto Tuscans and Neapolitans, Northern and Southern Mexicans, etc.; even cities such as Melbourne and Sydney see themselves as having radically different characters – and let’s not start on Edinburgh and Glasgow. Regionalism is hardly a peculiarly English phenomenon. In all of these cases, however, the people of these admittedly highly individual regions and cities nevertheless have enough in common to make them recognisably Italian, American, Russian, Scottish, etc. I am interested in those commonalities.

## STEREOTYPES AND CULTURAL GENOMICS

‘Well, I hope you’re going to get beyond the usual stereotypes’ was another common response when I told people I was doing research for a book on Englishness. This comment seemed to reflect an assumption that a stereotype is almost by definition ‘not true’, that the truth lies somewhere else – wherever ‘beyond’ might be. I find this rather strange, as I would naturally assume that, although they are unlikely to be ‘the truth, the whole truth and nothing but’, stereotypes about English national character might possibly contain at least a grain or two of truth. They do not, after all, just come

out of thin air, but must have germinated and grown from *something*. Most national-character stereotypes are widely accepted or even enthusiastically ‘endorsed’ among ordinary citizens of the nations in question, which does not make them ‘true’, but at the very least tells us something about a culture’s self-image, and therefore about its beliefs and values.

So my standard reply was to say that I would try to get *inside* the stereotypes. I would not specifically seek them out, but would keep an open mind; and if my research showed that certain English behaviour patterns corresponded to a given stereotype, I would put that stereotype in my Petri dish, stick it under my microscope, dissect it, tease it apart, subject its component bits to various tests, unravel its DNA and, er, generally poke away and puzzle over it until I found those grains (or genes) of truth.

OK, there are probably some mixed metaphors in there, not to mention a somewhat hazy notion of what proper scientists actually do in their labs, but you get the idea. Most things look rather different when you put them under a microscope and, sure enough, I found that stereotypes such as English ‘reserve’, ‘politeness’, ‘modesty’, ‘weather-talk’, ‘hooliganism’, ‘hypocrisy’, ‘privacy’, ‘anti-intellectualism’, ‘queuing’, ‘compromise’, ‘fair play’, ‘humour’, ‘class-consciousness’, ‘eccentricity’, ‘tolerance’ and so on were not quite what they seemed. They all had complex layers of rules and codes that were not visible to the naked eye, and not one of them turned out to be a straightforward, unqualified ‘truth’. Some of them nonetheless ended up on my list of ‘defining characteristics’, but redefined with many caveats and qualifications.

A few personality psychologists have wasted a lot of time ‘proving’ that national-character stereotypes are ‘untrue’ on the grounds that they do not correlate with aggregate scores on five personality factors. The supposedly ‘reserved’ English, for example, score high on ‘extraversion’ in personality questionnaires. While it is clear that so-called ‘English reserve’ is far more complex, contingent and contextual than the crude stereotype would suggest (as is its equally famous opposite, ‘English hooliganism’, a rowdy, ‘extravert’ stereotype that these researchers conveniently ignore), it is also part of a cultural ‘grammar’

of rules, norms, customs and behaviour codes that has nothing to do with individual personality traits. In real-life social situations, most people unconsciously obey the rules and norms of their culture, whatever their individual personalities. The term ‘national character’ is a metaphor, which should not be taken literally. A culture is not a person writ large, and cannot be understood or defined by adding up individual personality scores. But, then, ‘When the only tool you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail’, and it is perhaps no accident that the main proponent of this aggregate-personality argument is a psychologist who designs personality questionnaires.

Without getting too carried away by my equally metaphorical DNA analogies, I suppose another way of describing my Englishness project would be as an attempt to sequence (or map, I’m never sure which is which) the English cultural genome – to identify the cultural ‘codes’ that make us who we are.

Hmm, yes, Sequencing the English Cultural Genome – that sounds like a big, serious, ambitious and impressively scientific project. The sort of thing that might well take three times longer than the period originally agreed in the publisher’s contract, especially if you allow for all the tea-breaks.

Joking aside, I should probably explain the semi-scientific approach to understanding our national character that I actually used. It involved three stages:

- First, I used a variety of research methods (including observation studies, participant observation, interviews, discussion groups, national surveys, field experiments, etc., over the course of about two decades) to try to identify distinctive patterns or regularities in English behaviour.
- Then I tried to detect the unwritten social rules governing those behaviour patterns and, where possible, to ‘test’ or ‘verify’ these rules, mainly using field experiments, discussions and interviews.
- And, finally, I tried to figure out what these rules can tell us about Englishness.

The chapters in this book describe the behaviour patterns and unwritten rules relating to different aspects of English life (and in some cases how I discovered them). The brief sections at the end of each chapter are *not* summaries. This is not a textbook, and I would not insult your intelligence by summarising what you have only just read. These sections are where I examine each of the rules I have identified in that chapter, and try to tease out any ‘defining characteristics of Englishness’ these rules might reveal.

As I puzzled this out, methodically, rule by rule, chapter by chapter, many of the same characteristics – the same collective values, outlooks and unconscious reflexes – emerged again and again from the unwritten rules governing each aspect of English life and behaviour. So by the end I could see clearly which were the ‘defining characteristics’ I was seeking.

I have deliberately included this whole puzzling-out process in the book, as this seemed a more honest, transparent way of doing things – a bit like a maths exam at school, where the teacher says you have to show the ‘workings out’, rather than just putting down the final answer. So at the end of the book, if you think I’ve got the final answers to my ‘What is Englishness?’ question wrong, at least you can go back to the ‘workings out’ and see exactly where I made my mistakes.

**PART ONE**  
**CONVERSATION**  
**CODES**



## THE WEATHER

Any discussion of English conversation, like any English conversation, must begin with the weather. And in this spirit of observing traditional protocol, I shall, like every other writer on Englishness, quote Dr Johnson's famous comment that 'When two Englishmen meet, their first talk is of the weather', and point out that this observation is as accurate now as it was more than two hundred years ago.<sup>14</sup>

This, however, is the point at which most commentators either stop, or try, and fail, to come up with a convincing explanation for the English 'obsession' with the weather. They fail because their premise is mistaken: they assume that our conversations about the weather are conversations about the weather. In other words, they assume that we talk about the weather because we have a keen (indeed pathological) interest in the subject. Most of them then try to figure out what it is about the English weather that is so fascinating.

Bill Bryson, for example, concludes that the English weather is not at all fascinating, and presumably that our obsession with it is therefore inexplicable: 'To an outsider, the most striking thing about the English weather is that there is not very much of it. All those phenomena that elsewhere give nature an edge of excitement,

14. For stats-junkies: we (SIRC) recently did a national survey on this, in which, for example, 56 per cent said that they had talked about the weather within the previous six hours, 38 per cent within the previous hour. This suggests that, at any given moment, at least a third of us are probably talking about the weather. And that would be a conservative estimate: I suspect that the real weather-talk figures are even higher, as weather-speak is so automatic for the English that many people may not remember every instance when answering a survey question.

unpredictability and danger – tornadoes, monsoons, raging blizzards, run-for-your-life hailstorms – are almost wholly unknown in the British Isles.’

Jeremy Paxman, in an uncharacteristic and surely unconscious display of patriotism, takes umbrage at Bryson’s dismissive comments, and argues that the English weather *is* intrinsically fascinating:

Bryson misses the point. The English fixation with the weather is nothing to do with histrionics – like the English countryside, it is, for the most part, dramatically undramatic. The interest is less in the phenomena themselves, but in *uncertainty* . . . one of the few things you can say about England with absolute certainty is that it has a *lot* of weather. It may not include tropical cyclones but life at the edge of an ocean and the edge of a continent means you can never be entirely sure what you’re going to get.

My research has convinced me that both Bryson and Paxman are missing the point, which is that our conversations about the weather are not really about the weather at all: English weather-speak is a form of code, evolved to help us overcome our social inhibitions and actually talk to each other. Everyone knows, for example, that ‘Nice day, isn’t it?’, ‘Ooh, isn’t it cold?’, ‘Still raining, eh?’ and other variations on the theme are not requests for meteorological data: they are ritual greetings, conversation-starters or default ‘fillers’.

In other words, English weather-speak is a form of ‘grooming talk’ – the human equivalent of what is known as ‘social grooming’ among our primate cousins, where they spend hours grooming each other’s fur, even when they are perfectly clean, as a means of social bonding.

These conclusions were based on my extensive participant-observation research, but even when confronted about their motives in a formal questionnaire survey (where people tend to try to appear rational and pragmatic) the majority of English people were prepared to admit that they used weather-talk for purely social purposes. And, perhaps even more striking, our survey findings show that this is by no means just an archaic custom practised mainly by older people.

In fact, young people proved to be the most acutely aware of the importance of polite conversation about the weather. The 18–24 age group, for example, was the most likely to say that weather-speak is so popular because it allows us to be nice/polite to people. These young people were also more than twice as likely as their elders to say that weather-talk helps us to gauge other people's moods.

## THE RULES OF ENGLISH WEATHER-SPEAK

### *The Reciprocity Rule*

Jeremy Paxman cannot understand why a 'middle-aged blonde' he encounters outside the Met Office in Bracknell says, 'Ooh, isn't it cold?', and he puts this irrational behaviour down to a distinctively English 'capacity for infinite surprise at the weather'. In fact, 'Ooh, isn't it cold?' – like 'Nice day, isn't it?' and all the others – is English code for 'I'd like to talk to you – will you talk to me?', or, if you like, simply another way of saying 'hello'. The hapless female was just trying to strike up a conversation with Mr Paxman. Not necessarily a long conversation – just a mutual acknowledgement, an exchange of greetings. Under the rules of weather-speak, all he was required to say was 'Mm, yes, isn't it?' or some other equally meaningless ritual response, which is code for 'Yes, I'll talk to you/greet you'. By failing to respond at all, Paxman committed a minor breach of etiquette, effectively conveying the rather discourteous message 'No, I will not exchange greetings with you'. (This was not a serious transgression, however, as the rules of privacy and reserve override those of sociability: talking to strangers is never compulsory.)

We used to have another option, at least for some social situations, but the 'How do you do?' greeting (to which the apparently ludicrous correct response is to repeat the question back 'How do you do?') is now regarded by many as somewhat archaic, and is no longer the universal standard greeting. The 'Nice day, isn't it?' exchange must, however, be understood in the same light, and not taken literally: 'How do you do?' is not a real question about health or well-being, and 'Nice day, isn't it?' is not a real question about the weather.

Comments about the weather are phrased as questions (or with an interrogative intonation) because they require a response – but the *reciprocity* is the point, not the content. Any interrogative remark on the weather will do to initiate the process, and any mumbled confirmation (or even near-repetition, as in ‘Yes, isn’t it?’) will do as a response. English weather-speak rituals often sound rather like a kind of catechism, or the exchanges between priest and congregation in a church: ‘Lord, have mercy upon us’, ‘Christ, have mercy upon us’; ‘Cold, isn’t it?’, ‘Yes, isn’t it?’, and so on.

It is not always quite that obvious, but all English weather conversations have a distinctive structure, an unmistakable rhythmic pattern, which to an anthropologist marks them out instantly as ‘ritual’. There is a clear sense that these are ‘choreographed’ exchanges, conducted according to unwritten but tacitly accepted rules.

#### *The Context Rule*

A principal rule concerns the contexts in which weather-speak can be used. Other writers have claimed that the English talk about the weather all the time, that it is a national obsession or fixation, but this is sloppy observation: in fact, there are quite specific contexts in which weather-speak is prescribed. Weather-speak can be used:

- as a simple greeting
- as an ice-breaker leading to conversation on other matters
- as a ‘default’, ‘filler’ or ‘displacement’ subject, when conversation on other matters falters, and there is an awkward or uncomfortable lull
- as a signal that the speaker wishes to avoid more personal or intimate subjects
- as an excuse for a good moan
- as an opportunity for humour/wit
- as a way of gauging other people’s moods
- as an opportunity to share ‘Blitz Spirit’ stoicism

Admittedly, this rule does allow for rather a lot of weather-speak – hence the impression that we talk of little else. A typical English

conversation may well start with a weather-speak greeting, progress to a bit more weather-speak ice-breaking, and then 'default' to weather-speak joking, moaning, intimacy-avoidance, stoicism, etc., at regular intervals. It is easy to see why many foreigners, and even many English commentators, have assumed that we must be obsessed with the subject.

I am not claiming that we have no interest in the weather itself. The choice of weather as a code to perform these vital social functions is not entirely arbitrary, and in this sense, Jeremy Paxman is right: the changeable and unpredictable nature of the English weather makes it a particularly suitable facilitator of social interaction. If the weather were not so variable, we might have to find another medium for our social messages.

But in assuming that weather-speak indicates a burning interest in the weather, Paxman and others are making the same kind of mistake as early anthropologists, who assumed that certain animals or plants were chosen as tribal 'totems' because the people in question had a special interest in or reverence for that particular animal or plant. In fact, as the anthropologist Lévi-Strauss eventually explained, totems are symbols used to define social structures and relationships. The fact that one clan has as its totem the black cockatoo is not because of any deep significance attached to black cockatoos *per se*, but to define and delineate their relationship with another clan, whose totem is the white cockatoo. Now, the choice of cockatoos is not entirely random: totems tend to be local animals or plants with which the people are familiar, rather than abstract symbols. The selection of totems is thus not quite as arbitrary as, say, 'You be the red team and we'll be the blue team': it is almost always the familiar natural world that is used symbolically to describe and demarcate the social world.

### *The Agreement Rule*

The English have clearly chosen a highly appropriate aspect of our own familiar natural world as a social facilitator: the capricious and erratic nature of our weather ensures that there is always something new to comment on, be surprised by, speculate about, moan about

or, perhaps most importantly, *agree* about. Which brings us to another important rule of English weather-speak: always agree. This rule was noted by the Hungarian humorist George Mikes, who wrote that in England, ‘You must never contradict anybody when discussing the weather.’ We have already established that weather-speak greetings or openers such as ‘Cold, isn’t it?’ must be reciprocated, but etiquette also requires that the response express agreement, as in ‘Yes, isn’t it?’ or ‘Mm, very cold.’

Failure to agree in this manner is a serious breach of etiquette. When the priest says ‘Lord, have mercy upon us’, you do not respond ‘Well, actually, why should he?’ You intone dutifully, ‘Christ, have mercy upon us.’ In the same way, it would be very rude to respond to ‘Ooh, isn’t it cold?’ with ‘No, actually, it’s quite mild.’ If you listen carefully, as I have, to hundreds of English weather-conversations, you will find that such responses are extremely rare, almost unheard of. Nobody will tell you that there is a rule about this – they are not even conscious of following a rule: it just simply isn’t done.

If you deliberately break the rule (as I duly did, on several occasions, in the interests of science), you will find that the atmosphere becomes rather tense and awkward, and possibly somewhat huffy. No one will actually complain or make a big scene about it (we have rules about complaining and making a fuss), but they will be offended, and this will show in subtle ways. There may be an uncomfortable silence, then someone may say, in piqued tones, ‘Well, it feels cold to *me*,’ or ‘*Really?* Do you think so?’ – or, most likely, they will either change the subject or continue talking about the weather among themselves, politely, if frostily, ignoring your *faux pas*. In very polite circles, they may attempt to ‘cover’ your mistake by helping you to redefine it as a matter of taste or personal idiosyncrasy, rather than of fact. Among highly courteous people, the response to your ‘No, actually, it’s quite mild’ might be, after a slightly embarrassed pause, ‘Oh, perhaps you don’t feel the cold – you know, my husband is like that: he always thinks it’s mild when I’m shivering and complaining. Maybe women feel the cold more than men, do you think?’

### Exceptions to the Agreement Rule

This sort of gracious fudging is possible because the rules of English weather-speak are complex, and there are often exceptions and subtle variations. In the case of the agreement rule, the main variation concerns personal taste or differences in weather-sensitivity. You must always agree with ‘factual’ statements about the weather (these are almost invariably phrased as questions but, as we have already established, this is because they require a social *response*, not a rational answer), even when they are quite obviously wrong. You may, however, express personal likes and dislikes that differ from those of your companions, or express your disagreement in terms of personal quirks or sensibilities.

An appropriate response to ‘Ooh, isn’t it cold?’, if you find you really cannot simply agree, would be ‘Yes, but I really rather like this sort of weather – quite invigorating, don’t you think?’ or ‘Yes, but you know I don’t tend to notice the cold much – this feels quite warm to me.’ Note that both of these responses start with an expression of agreement, even though in the second case this is followed by a blatant self-contradiction: ‘Yes . . . this feels quite warm to me.’ It is perfectly acceptable to contradict oneself in this manner, etiquette being far more important than logic, but if you truly cannot bring yourself to start with the customary ‘Yes’, this may be replaced by a positive-sounding ‘Mm’ accompanied by a nod – still an expression of agreement, but rather less emphatic.

Even better would be the traditional mustn’t-grumble response: ‘Yes [or Mm-with-nod], but at least it’s not raining.’ If you have a liking for cold weather, or do not find it cold, this response effectively guarantees that you and your shivering acquaintance will reach happy agreement. Everyone always agrees that a cold, bright day is preferable to a rainy one – or, at least, it is customary to express this opinion.

The personal taste/sensitivity variation is really more of a *modification* than an exception to the agreement rule: flat contradiction of a ‘factual’ statement is still taboo, the basic principle of agreement still applies; it is merely softened by allowing for differences in taste or sensitivity, providing these are explicitly identified as such.

There is, however, one context in which English weather-speakers

are not required to observe the agreement rule at all and that is the male-bonding argument, particularly the pub-argument. This factor will come up again and again, and is explained in much more detail in *Pub-talk* (page 144), but for the moment, the critical point is that in English male-bonding arguments, particularly those conducted in the special environment of the pub, overt and constant disagreement – not just on the weather, but on everything else as well – is a means of expressing friendship and achieving intimacy.

### *The Weather Hierarchy Rule*

I mentioned above that certain remarks about the weather, such as ‘At least it’s not raining’ on a cold day, virtually guarantee agreement. This is because there is an unofficial English weather hierarchy to which almost everyone subscribes. In descending order, from best to worst, the hierarchy is as follows:

- sunny and warm/mild
- sunny and cool/cold
- cloudy and warm/mild
- cloudy and cool/cold
- rainy and warm/mild
- rainy and cool/cold

I am not saying that everyone in England prefers sun to cloud, or warmth to cold, just that other preferences are regarded as deviations from the norm.<sup>15</sup> Even our television weather forecasters clearly subscribe to this hierarchy: they adopt apologetic tones when forecasting rain, but often try to add a note of cheerfulness by pointing out that at least it will be a bit warmer, as they know that rainy/warm is preferable to rainy/cold. Similarly rueful tones are used to predict cold weather, brightened by the prospect of accompanying sunshine, because we all know that sunny/cold is better than cloudy/

15. In support of this (and as evidence of the importance of weather-speak) I would also cite the fact that of the seven synonyms for ‘nice’ in the *Thesaurus*, no less than five are exclusively weather-related, namely: fine, clear, mild, fair and sunny.

cold. So, unless the weather is both rainy and cold, you always have the option of a ‘But at least it’s not . . .’ response.

If it is both wet and cold, or if you are just feeling grumpy, you can indulge what Jeremy Paxman calls our ‘phenomenal capacity for quiet moaning’. This is a nice observation, and I would only add that these English ‘moaning rituals’ about the weather have an important social purpose, in that they provide further opportunities for friendly agreement, in this case with the added advantage of a ‘them and us’ factor – ‘them’ being either the weather itself or the forecasters. Moaning rituals involve displays of shared opinions (as well as wit and humour) and generate a sense of solidarity against a common enemy – both valuable aids to social bonding.

We now have yet another option for ritual humorous weather-moaning: in recent years, moans about global warming have become commonplace. The most popular form of this new moan is to say ‘Huh, so much for global warming!’ or ‘So where’s all this global warming they keep promising us?’ on a cold, grey day.

An equally acceptable, and more positive, response to weather at the lower end of the hierarchy is to predict imminent improvement. In response to ‘Awful weather, isn’t it?’, you can say, ‘Yes, but they say it’s going to clear up this afternoon.’ If your companion is feeling Eeyorish,<sup>16</sup> however, the rejoinder may be ‘Yes, well, they said that yesterday and it poured all day, didn’t it?’, at which point you may as well give up the Pollyanna approach and enjoy a spot of quiet moaning. It doesn’t really matter: the point is to communicate, to agree, to have something in common; and shared moaning is just as effective in promoting sociable interaction and social bonding as shared optimism, shared speculation or shared stoicism.

For those whose personal tastes are at variance with the unofficial weather hierarchy, it is important to remember that the further down the hierarchy your preferences lie, the more you will have to qualify your remarks in accordance with the personal taste/sensitivity clause. A preference for cold over warmth, for example, is more acceptable

16. For those unfamiliar with English culture, Eeyore is the gloomy, pessimistic donkey in *Winnie the Pooh*.

than a dislike of sunshine, which in turn is more acceptable than an active enjoyment of rain. Even the most bizarre tastes, however, can be accepted as harmless eccentricities, providing one observes the rules of weather-speak.

#### *Snow and the Moderation Rule*

Snow is not mentioned in the hierarchy partly because it is relatively rare, compared to the other types of weather included, which occur all the time, often all in the same day. Snow is also socially and conversationally a special and awkward case, as it is aesthetically pleasing, but practically inconvenient. It is always simultaneously exciting and worrying. Snow is thus always excellent conversation-fodder, but it is only universally welcomed if it falls at Christmas, which it almost never does. We continue to hope that it will, however, and every year the high-street bookmakers relieve us of thousands of pounds in 'white Christmas' bets.

The only conversational rule that can be applied with confidence to snow is a generic, and distinctively English, 'moderation rule': too much snow, like too much of anything, is to be deplored. Even warmth and sunshine are only acceptable in moderation: too many consecutive hot, sunny days, and it is customary to start fretting about drought, muttering about hose-pipe bans and reminding each other, in doom-laden tones, of the summer of 1976. Or moaning about global warming.

The English may, as Paxman says, have a 'capacity for infinite surprise at the weather', and he is also right in observing that we like to be surprised by it. But we also *expect* to be surprised: we are accustomed to the variability of our weather, and we expect it to change quite frequently. If we get the same weather for more than a few days, we become uneasy: more than three days of rain, and we start worrying about floods; more than a day or two of snow, and disaster is declared, and the whole country slithers and skids to a halt.

#### *The Weather-as-family Rule*

While we may spend much of our time moaning about our weather, foreigners are not allowed to criticise it. In this respect, we treat the

English weather like a member of our family: one can complain about the behaviour of one's own children or parents, but any hint of censure from an outsider is unacceptable, and very bad manners.

Although we are aware of the relatively undramatic nature of the English weather – the lack of extreme temperatures, monsoons, tempests, tornadoes and blizzards – we become extremely touchy and defensive at any suggestion that our weather is therefore inferior or uninteresting. The worst possible weather-speak offence is one mainly committed by foreigners, particularly Americans, and that is to belittle the English weather. When the summer temperature reaches the high twenties, and we moan, 'Phew, isn't it *hot*?', we do not take kindly to visiting Americans or Australians laughing and scoffing and saying, 'Call *this* hot? This is *nothing*. You should come to Texas [Brisbane] if you wanna see *hot*!'

Not only is this kind of comment a serious breach of the agreement rule, and the weather-as-family rule, but it also represents a grossly *quantitative* approach to the weather, which we find coarse and distasteful. Size, we sniffily point out, isn't everything, and the English weather requires an appreciation of subtle changes and understated nuances, rather than a vulgar obsession with mere volume and magnitude.

Indeed, the weather may be one of the few things about which the English are still unselfconsciously and unashamedly patriotic. During my participant-observation research on Englishness, which naturally involved many conversations about the weather, I came across this prickly defensiveness about our weather again and again, among people of all classes and social backgrounds. Some of us may be too polite, or too inhibited, actually to *express* our irritation when faced with an unimpressed foreigner – although in the SIRC survey, nearly 50 per cent admitted to having 'got a bit defensive' when a foreigner belittled our weather.

In my more informal interviews, contempt for American size-fixation, in particular, was widespread – one outspoken informant (a publican) expressed the feelings of many when he told me: 'Oh, with Americans it's always "Mine's bigger than yours", with the weather or anything else. They're so crass. Bigger steaks, bigger buildings, bigger

snowstorms, more heat, more hurricanes, whatever. No fucking subtlety, that's their problem.' Jeremy Paxman, rather more elegantly, but equally patriotically, dismisses all Bill Bryson's monsoons, raging blizzards, tornadoes and hailstorms as 'histrionics'. A very English put-down.

### *The Shipping Forecast Ritual*

Our peculiar affection for our weather finds its most eloquent expression in our attitude towards a quintessentially English national institution: the Shipping Forecast. Browsing in a seaside bookshop, I came across an attractive large-format picture-book, with a seascape on the cover, entitled *Rain Later, Good*. It struck me that almost all English people would immediately recognise this odd, apparently meaningless or even contradictory phrase as part of the arcane, evocative and somehow deeply soothing meteorological mantra, broadcast immediately after the news on BBC Radio 4.

The Shipping Forecast is an off-shore weather forecast, with additional information about wind-strength and visibility, for the fishing vessels, pleasure craft and cargo ships in the seas around the British Isles. None of the information is of the slightest use or relevance to the millions of non-seafarers who listen to it, but listen we do, religiously, mesmerised by the calm, cadenced, familiar recitation of lists of names of sea areas, followed by wind information, then weather, then visibility – but with the qualifying words (wind, weather, visibility) left out, so it sounds like this: 'Viking, North Utsire, South Utsire, Fisher, German Bight. Westerly or south-westerly three or four, increasing five in north later. Rain later. Good becoming moderate, occasionally poor. Faroes, Fair Isle, Cromarty, Forties, Forth, Dogger. Northerly backing westerly three or four, increasing six later. Showers. Good.' And so on, and on, in measured, unemotional tones, until all of the thirty-one sea areas have been covered – and millions of English listeners,<sup>17</sup> most of whom have no idea where any of these places are, or what the words and numbers mean, finally switch off their radios, feeling strangely

17. Not all of them from the nostalgic older generations: the Shipping Forecast has many young devotees, and references to the Shipping Forecast have recently turned up in the lyrics of pop songs. I met a nineteen-year-old barman with a dog called Cromarty, after one of the sea areas.

comforted and even uplifted by what the poet Sean Street has called the Shipping Forecast's 'cold poetry of information'.

Some of my foreign informants – mostly immigrants and visitors who had been in England for some time – had come across this peculiar ritual, and many found it baffling. Why would we want to listen to these lists of obscure places and their irrelevant meteorological data in the first place – let alone insisting on hearing the entire pointless litany, and treating anyone who dared attempt to switch it off as though they had committed some sort of sacrilege? They were bemused by the national press, radio and television headlines, and fierce debates, when the name of one of the sea areas was changed (from Finisterre to FitzRoy), and would no doubt have been equally puzzled by the national outcry when the BBC had the temerity to change the time of the late-night broadcast, moving it back by a mere fifteen minutes ('People went ballistic,' according to a Met Office spokesman).

More recently, in 2011, the BBC seemed to have learnt their lesson: when the Shipping Forecast clashed with the broadcast of the final wicket in England's Ashes victory over Australia – a near-sacred moment in sporting history – the Shipping Forecast took priority. It was broadcast at its usual time, and cricket fans were advised to retune to digital, internet or medium-wave options to hear the end of this historic match. 'There's a Shipping Forecast heaving into view,' listeners were told, as though it were an approaching storm or some other immutable force of nature, 'Try to retune if you're listening on long wave.'<sup>18</sup>

'Anyone would think they'd tried to change the words of the Lord's Prayer!' said one of my American informants, of the hullabaloo over the Finisterre/FitzRoy issue. I tried to explain that the usefulness or

18. Yes, I know, the Shipping Forecast supposedly provides absolutely vital, potentially life-saving information for seafarers, and this is the ostensible reason for its immovable status. But the controller of Radio 4 himself has been quoted as saying that he would be 'slightly worried about anybody who is bobbing up and down in the Channel whose sole way of keeping from sinking is by listening to us on long wave. My advice would be to invest in a GPS system. But I still won't take it off because it has a glory of its own.'

relevance of the information is not the point, that listening to the Shipping Forecast, for the English, *is* like hearing a familiar prayer – somehow profoundly reassuring, even for non-believers – and that any alteration to such an important ritual is bound to be traumatic for us. We may not know where those sea areas are, I said, but the names are embedded in the national psyche: people even name their pets after them. We may joke about the Shipping Forecast (the author of *Rain Later, Good*<sup>19</sup> observes that some people ‘talk back to it, “Thundery showers good? I don’t think so”’) but then we joke about everything, even, especially, the things that are most sacred to us. Like our weather, and our Shipping Forecast.

#### WEATHER-SPEAK RULES AND ENGLISHNESS

The rules of English weather-speak tell us quite a lot about Englishness. Already, before we even begin to examine the minutiae of other English conversation codes and rules of behaviour in other aspects of English life, these rules provide a number of hints and clues about the ‘grammar’ of Englishness.

In the reciprocity and context rules, we see some signs of social inhibition, but also the ingenious use of ‘facilitators’ to overcome this handicap. The agreement rule and its exceptions provide hints about the importance of politeness and avoidance of conflict (as well as the approval of conflict in specific social contexts) – and the precedence of etiquette over logic. In the variations to the agreement rule, and sub-clauses to the weather-hierarchy rule, we find indications of the acceptance of eccentricity and some hints of stoicism – the latter balanced by a predilection for Eeyorish moaning. The moderation rule reveals a dislike and disapproval of extremes, and the weather-as-family rule exposes a perhaps surprising patriotism, along with a quirky appreciation of understated charm. The Shipping Forecast ritual illustrates a deep-seated need for a sense of safety,

19. It is perhaps also worth noting that *Rain Later, Good*, first published in 1998, became an instant bestseller and has been reprinted many times (including a revised second edition in 2002, because of the controversial Finisterre name-change). More recent books about the Shipping Forecast have also been very popular.

security and continuity – and a tendency to become upset when these are threatened – as well as a love of words and a somewhat eccentric devotion to arcane and apparently irrational pastimes and practices. There seems also to be an undercurrent of humour in all this, a reluctance to take things too seriously.

Clearly, further evidence will be required to determine whether these are among the ‘defining characteristics of Englishness’ that we set out to identify, but at least we can start to see how an understanding of Englishness might emerge from detailed research on our unwritten rules.