

The English as Reformers: Foreign Visitors' Impressions, 1750–1850

PAUL LANGFORD

THE KIND OF WRITING THAT DESCRIBES nations other than the writer's own is notoriously problematic as historical evidence: one reason, perhaps, why it holds such fascination for the 'postmodern' student of cultural studies, especially when gender and post-colonialism are in question. But it may be that the problem is even greater when the rich literature of European perceptions of other Europeans is considered. Let me give you one admittedly rather extreme but revealing example.

I am thinking of a book entitled *England und die Engländer* published in Germany in 1818.¹ This did not purport to be an original work, but a translation of a French publication, *L'Angleterre et les Anglais*, by the monarchist Joseph Antoine de Gourbillon in 1817. No matter, you may say, a French view of England is not less interesting than a German one, even if it loses some of its flavour in the translation. But Gourbillon's book was itself a translation of a work published in 1807 ostensibly by a Spaniard, though in an English version. The title had been *Letters from England: by Don Manuel Alvarez Espriella*. And here, if not before, you may well spot the irony. *Letters from England* is part of the *oeuvre* of the poet Robert Southey, not indeed the work of the mature, high-flying, high tory Southey, but none the less an idiosyncratic and satirical impression of his own countrymen. So Southey's self-distancing as a supposed Spanish visitor passes through two further filters, in the process losing countless nuances of perception and description. Not that only nuances were involved. Gourbillon generously inserted over a hundred pages of his own observations, on subjects that he believed Southey had strangely ignored, principally the vices and virtues of English women. To complicate matters further, incidentally, the same work was published in New York, with additions by an unnamed American

¹ Trans. J. A. Bergk (Leipzig, 1818).

editor.² Palimpsests of this kind are common enough in the history of letters, but it is difficult to gauge the effect that this one can have had on the ultimate end-user, for example the German reader who picked it up at Leipzig in 1818. And how can we make a judgement as historians about the processes of assessment and the intentions of the assessors in cases of this kind?

To go further and attempt sampling a hundred years of such foreign commentary on British life is a hazardous business, not least because the volume of commentary and the range of biases makes it hard to know how representative the opinions gathered are. However, casting caution to the winds, let me suggest a line of argument based on this evidence. To move from the mid-eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth is to observe a shift not only in the accounts themselves but in the expectations that lay behind them. In the third quarter of the eighteenth century most literate foreigners came expecting to be impressed by Britain and its institutions. In the second quarter of the next century they came with much less easily classifiable expectations. The range of appraisals was greater, the difference of view sharper, and, by and large, the disposition to criticize more pronounced.

This shift bore heavily on the reputation of the British as reformers. In a period which figures as one of growing preoccupation with questions of reform, the contemporary view of outsiders was to say the least ambivalent. Reforms advocated or accomplished were often dismissed. And in contextualizing them the impression was given of a society that showed little interest in change. In the process some of the claims of continental Anglophiles were not only confounded but turned on their heads, transforming a nation of pragmatic revolutionaries into a nation of pusillanimous conservatives. This did not fit well with some more optimistic domestic judgements. Sir Richard Phillips, publishing his tour of the United Kingdom in 1828, described it as 'the most improved country that ever existed in the world'.³ Such bombast would have seemed far more plausible in foreign eyes a century earlier.

One reappraisal concerned the ordinary people who would have had to provide the standard-bearers of reform and if necessary the infantry of revolution. Continental commentators were increasingly scathing about the revolutionary potential of plebeian Britons. Remarking on events in France and Belgium in 1830, Princess Lieven observed 'this sort of thing cannot do in England, because the masses (*canaille*) here are cowardly and the classes are courageous'.⁴ The baron d'Haussez also impugned the courage of the English lower orders. 'Taken collectively, the populace of England is

² *Letters from England* (2nd US edn, 2 vols, New York, 1808).

³ *A personal tour through the United Kingdom* (London, 1828), p. i.

⁴ *Letters of Dorothea, Princess Lieven, during her residence in London, 1812–1834*, ed. Lionel G. Robinson (London, 1902), p. 372.

remarkable for its cowardice.⁵ By this time the orderliness of an English crowd was something to behold and its submissiveness in the face of constables armed with nothing but a stave or the new-fangled Peeler's truncheon astonishing.⁶

Their betters seemed all too ready to do duty on the streets in an emergency. In 1830–1, Fenimore Cooper was impressed by the flood of travellers returning from the continent to be at their posts in the event of revolution. The English gentry would not have abandoned Paris to the mob in 1792, he remarked.⁷ The events of 1848 provided still stronger evidence. So did the seeming insouciance of the propertied classes in the presence of plebeian unrest. Theodor Fontane was amazed to witness a performance of *Coriolanus* at Sadler's Wells shortly after a working-class demonstration in Smithfield. Such an anti-mob play in such sensitive circumstances would have been thought most injudicious in absolutist Prussia.⁸ All in all, Cavour's judgement of 1835, that the British were incapable of revolution, appeared a convincing one.⁹ These are, of course, matters on which it was easy for outsiders to miss the subtleties. The veteran traveller J. G. Kohl was one of the few who tried to grasp them and perceived the brinkmanship that could occur in Britain on both sides of the class barrier. 'It is one of the most remarkable characteristics of the British constitution and of the national character, and one not sufficiently estimated by foreigners, that a course of agitation so nearly approaching to insurrection can be tolerated, without any serious mischief following.'¹⁰

Correct or not, these judgements contrasted with older images of the ordinary Englishman. He had been expected to be barbarously violent, brutally courageous and temperamentally insubordinate. His personal incivility, his beastly recreations and his mobbish tendencies all diverged from patterns of continental behaviour among the lower sort. To meet an Englishman on the streets of London, where most foreigners formed their opinion of the English lower orders, was to encounter a being quite unlike his equals elsewhere. The indignities and indeed injuries inflicted on visitors form one of the most dependable items in eighteenth-century accounts. So does the boisterous behaviour of an election mob. And it was easy to move from the particular to the general. The people formed a powder keg perpetually

⁵ *Great Britain in 1833* (2 vols, London, 1833), I, pp. 280–1.

⁶ Heinrich Meidinger, *Briefe von einer Reise durch England, Schottland und Irland im Frühjahr und Sommer 1820* (Stuttgart, 1821), p. 9; G. Crapelet, *Souvenirs de Londres en 1814 et 1816* (Paris, 1817), pp. 224–5.

⁷ J. Fenimore Cooper, *England* (3 vols, 1837), II, p. 103.

⁸ Rosemary Ashton, *Little Germany: exile and asylum in Victorian England* (Oxford, 1986), p. 249.

⁹ *Souvenirs du Baron de Barante*, ed. Claude de Barante (8 vols, Paris, 1890–1901), IV, p. 180.

¹⁰ Johann Georg Kohl, *Ireland* (London, 1843), p. 145.

ready to explode. Perhaps as a result, foreign opinion seems to have been less shocked than British opinion by the Gordon riots of 1780.

Underpinning such views was a dual assumption, largely a French assumption, I should perhaps add, that the British were barbarians by nature and libertarians on principle. The principle was as worrying as the nature. Under the *ancien régime*, English liberty was seen in France as a dangerous infection, just as later on, after the French Revolution, French equality was seen as a dangerous infection in Britain. Anglomaniacs were assailed on these grounds, as malevolent quacks bent on introducing an alien incubus into a healthy body politic. English liberty, not least of the kind associated with the internationally famous John Wilkes, was denounced for threatening to transform the French national character itself.¹¹

The revised view that was arrived at by the early nineteenth century was very different, suggesting not merely subduing the mob of an earlier age, but turning its loyalties in new directions. Older depictions of the English showed them as natural republicans who had finally accepted monarchy only on terms they dictated themselves. From the execution of Charles I, through the expulsion of James II, and the sullen tolerance of successive revolution kings, William III, George I, George II, ran a consistent line that made it easy to contrast the pride of an English citizen with the servility of a French subject, not to say a German, Spanish, Italian, or Russian one. But there seemed little sign of this between the 1820s and 1850s. Perhaps the most telling episode, featuring in the recollections of those numerous travellers who descended on London after the Napoleonic wars, concerned the coronation of George IV. In English histories, this appears often as the nadir of monarchy, the humiliation of a British king by a mistreated queen and an alienated populace. But foreigners were startled by the evident popularity of the coronation. 'What of English liberty with all this fascination with royalty?' asked Édouard de Montulé. 'John Bull is humbled by his love of ceremony.' How had a northern and phlegmatic people come to acquire so Gascon a spirit, he wondered.¹² When the adulation extended even to foreign royalty, as in the reception accorded the allied sovereigns in 1814, similar surprise was in order.¹³ The days seemed to have gone when, as in 1734 during the visit of the Prince of Orange, or in 1768 during that of the King of Denmark, the main interest of a royal tourist was to draw unfavourable contrasts with the British ruling house.

Evidence of servility was sought in all kinds of places, including the armed forces. Charles Dupin, who toured British military establishments

¹¹ *Gazette de Leyde*, 7 Aug. 1770.

¹² Édouard de Montulé, *Voyage en Angleterre et en Russie, pendant les années 1821, 1822 et 1823* (2 vols, Paris, 1825), 1, pp. 246, 250.

¹³ Crapelet, *Souvenirs de Londres en 1814 et 1816*, pp. 76 ff.

after the Napoleonic wars, was intrigued. 'Perhaps there is no army in Europe in which the distinction of rank is so strongly marked as among the British troops.' He thought the military consequences significant. A French soldier saluted only the officers of his own regiment. But in the British army a private obeyed any officer, and for that matter a corporal obeyed any sergeant. This was not the result of terror, he thought, despite the notoriously brutal code of discipline that obtained in the British forces. It was innate.¹⁴

Deference was not confined to respect for men of authority and standing. Eighteenth-century visitors had admired the independence of English servants, even if at times they had found it rather irritating. Their successors were as likely to find their meekness surprising. The American William Austin was particularly offended by the slavishness of English servants. He saw it as evidence of a nation that had had its chance of liberty in 1688 only to throw it away with predictable consequences for the national character. The English were traitors to their own history. 'They are utterly incapable of enjoying what their valor has so frequently accomplished.'¹⁵ The fact that this servility was part of a commercial mentality, and that respectable young men would lower themselves to well-rewarded but menial tasks in London's most prestigious clubs and restaurants, merely proved how far the ancient pride of an Englishman could sink.¹⁶

The English obsession with rank and title dismayed many nineteenth-century Anglophiles. This was quite the reverse of earlier observations, which had stressed the Englishman's lack of interest in status. Voltaire had famously delighted in the prestige enjoyed by Sir Isaac Newton, a man of lowly origins whose celebrity could only have occurred in a country where rank counted for nothing and merit for everything. For Louis Simond, who came to London eighty years later, it was Newton's social apotheosis that was most distressing. 'The English do not say *Newton*, but *Sir Isaac Newton*. I cannot well express how much this *Monsieur le Chevalier* Newton shocks the ear of a foreigner.'¹⁷ Others saw in this tendency a significant cast of mind. For the baron de Staël-Holstein England was 'a country eminently aristocratic. It is so by its institutions, opinions, and manners.' He thought habits of deference ingrained in all ranks of society, uniting them in a common sense of hierarchy. The respect that in a polite drawing room led the Younger Pitt to defer to a marquis of twenty or William Wilberforce to a

¹⁴ Charles Dupin, *A tour through the naval and military establishments of Great Britain, in the years 1816-17-18-19 and 1820* (London, 1822), p. 106.

¹⁵ *Letters from London: written during the years 1802 and 1803* (Boston, 1804), p. 86.

¹⁶ *L'Angleterre et les Anglais, ou petit portrait d'une grande famille; copié et retouché par deux témoins oculaires*, transl. Joseph Antoine de Gourbillon and T. W. Dickinson (3 vols, Paris, 1817), III, pp. 280 ff.

¹⁷ Louis Simond, *Journal of a tour and residence in Great Britain, during the years 1810 and 1811, by a French traveller* (2 vols, Edinburgh, 1815), I, p. 31.

fox-hunting baronet was the same that made the masses rush to see titled people.¹⁸ He was not alone in being taken aback by the way blue blood took precedence over all considerations of age, sex, and frailty. 'I get awfully scandalized in England,' wrote Mary Clarke, the Paris-educated daughter of a Scottish Jacobite, 'when I see a whipper snapper of 20 above a respectable man of 80.'¹⁹ Nor was this the custom only in the highest circles. Self-stratification was taken to be characteristic of all classes. In any social situation, it was noticed how different ranks sorted themselves out remarkably quickly.²⁰

The ostentatiousness of English wealth and rank astonished even well-born visitors, as it had not during the eighteenth century. The duchesse de Dino, in England in 1830 as the wife of the French ambassador, was staggered by the extravagance of aristocratic life.²¹ But more interesting still was the perception that British noblemen had grown insensitive to their own overblown opulence in a country that displayed numerous scenes of poverty. How, asked Victor Hennequin in 1844, could the British plebeian tolerate the immense aristocratic estates so offensively visible up and down the country, and this 'in the middle of the nineteenth century'.²²

Centuries of parliamentary politics might have been expected to provide a counter-weight to such deference. But, as perceptive observers noted, the electoral system itself could work to strengthen aristocratic institutions. Mme d'Avot thought it revealing that the populace elected Burdett, not a man of the people but a country gentlemen. 'Everything finds its level in a free and constitutional government, and ends by partaking of stability.'²³ And why did popular election tumults produce so little disorder in the body politic? asked her countryman Haussez:

The reason may be gathered in the predominance of the aristocratic principle in the midst of this democratic effervescence. These elections are not made by the people, but sold by them to the better classes of society, who buy them so dearly that they can only fall to the lot of those whose rank gives them a deeper interest in maintaining order and upholding the institutions of the country.²⁴

Moreover the sheer irrationality of the electoral system, which contrived to grant power in some places to the urban scum while leaving the respectably

¹⁸ A. de Staël-Holstein, *Letters on England* (London, 1825), pp. 104, 123, 131, 132.

¹⁹ Marion Elmina Smith, *Une Anglaise intellectuelle en France sous la Restauration: Miss Mary Clarke* (Paris, 1927), p. 126.

²⁰ Christopher Mulvey, *Travel literature* (Cambridge, 1990), p. 150.

²¹ *Souvenirs du baron de Barante*, iv, p. 10.

²² Victor Hennequin, *Voyage en Angleterre et en Écosse* (Paris, 1844), pp. 300–1.

²³ Mme d'Avot, *Lettres sur l'Angleterre, ou deux années à Londres* (2nd edn, Paris, 1821), p. 175.

²⁴ Charles Le Mercher de Longpré, baron d' Haussez, *Great Britain in 1833* (2 vols, London, 1833), i, p. 167.

propertied in many others voteless, worked paradoxically to the advantage of aristocracy in giving potential middle-class reformers a horror of democratic forms.²⁵ In such a system small wonder that foreigners were impressed by the toryism of tory radicals and by the constraints that seemed to operate on other radical dogs, who, as Heine remarked of Cobbett, could not break away from their chain.²⁶ Giacomo Beltrami put the point about deep-seated habits of deference neatly. 'Every class in England is radically aristocratic', he wrote. 'Even the radicals in this respect are eminently aristocratic'.²⁷

Other features of the political process might be interpreted in similar fashion. The English horror of centralization could be seen as the particularism of a landed aristocracy. Government would be the last thing to be rationalized in the world's greatest empire, as Léon Faucher noted when he discovered in 1838 that *The Times* had reported a rural uprising in Kent before the home secretary was told of it.²⁸ Perceptive foreign observers, such as Luigi Angiolini, argued that, in Britain, government was not about the imposition of public priorities on private practices, but the modelling of public institutions on private associations. Reform in such circumstances would have required a radical revision of the English approach to life, which was essentially based on the agreement of the club rather than the authority of the governor.²⁹

Above all it was thought that a certain aristocratic spirit deprived authentic reformers of any prospect of success. What was at issue was an entire mentality. Prominent in this was the obsession with the formation of character rather than the moulding of mind. Since this was a growing preoccupation of educational reformers in all kinds of public and private schooling it fitted such analysis well. Some foreign critics tried hard to recognize the merits of character, and certainly thought it helped make Britain a formidable competitor in world markets and warfare. But the damage it did to intellectual rigour could not be gainsaid. Typical is the verdict of V. A. Huber on the university system. Huber devoted two gigantic volumes to close scrutiny of Oxford and Cambridge, and concluded with a rather backhanded compliment.

Our own sincere conviction, founded, as it has been, upon the most conscientious investigation, and mature reflection; devoid also as it is of every prejudice or consideration foreign to the matter; is, that upon an average, and setting aside a few periods of very short duration, the immorality and folly at the

²⁵ *Journeys to England and Ireland*, trans. George Lawrence and K. P. Mayer, ed. J. P. Myer (London, 1958), p. 57.

²⁶ Heinrich Heine, *English fragments*, trans. Sarah Norris (Edinburgh, 1880), ch. 9.

²⁷ J.C. Beltrami, *A pilgrimage in Europe and America* (2 vols, London, 1828), I, pp. 353–4.

²⁸ *Études sur l'Angleterre* (2 vols, Brussels, 1845), I, p. 19.

²⁹ Luigi Angiolini, *Lettere sull'Inghilterra*, ed. Guido di Pino (Milan, 1844), p. 99.

English Universities is not greater than, considering the whole state of the nation, must be reasonably calculated on, as the price paid for the development of character.³⁰

Huber underestimated the prospects of university reform and indeed provided useful ammunition for some of the reformers, including Newman, his translator's brother. But his judgement is revealing of the approach of many such painstaking critics of English institutions.

Anti-intellectualism was, of course, a common characterization of the English, supported very often by the thinnest and most impressionistic of evidence. The absence of a coherent body of enlightened men of science was a recurrent observation. Where was the Bureau d'Esprit of Paris or the formidable bureaucratic and academic elites of Germany? Savants there were, but they seemed to be distributed randomly through all classes, never bringing their combined force to bear.³¹ This might sound a ludicrous characterization of British intellectual life, but it took more than the Scottish school of the eighteenth century or the political economists of the nineteenth to displace it. It represented not only a powerful strand in foreign perceptions but one that seemed to go well with an aristocratic system, in which status mattered more than systematic reflection. Some advantages were conceded. It could be pointed out that informed opinion in Britain was close to the opinion of the masses. In other societies intellectuals had invented languages and discourses that were philosophically superior but incomprehensible to the multitude.³² Even so, the result was a refuge for dilettanti rather than a recipe for serious thought.

A common belief was that the empiricism of the English mind combined with the parochialism of the political process to deprive the idea of reform of most of its general interest. 'England is the country of details, of isolated facts; each parish has its administration, its usages, we might say almost its laws.'³³ Even questions that raised issues of principle were rarely treated as such. Listening to the debates on Catholic emancipation, Staël-Holstein was astonished by what he called 'this disposition of the English to confine all questions within the sphere of the circumstances peculiar to England'.³⁴ Perhaps the most damning witness was von Raumer, whose unvarying goodwill and desire to find in England the embodiment of all that was best

³⁰ Victor Aimé Huber, *The English universities*, ed. Francis W. Newman (3 vols, London, 1843), II, pp. 313–14.

³¹ Louis Dutens, *L'ami des étrangers qui voyagent en Angleterre* (Londres, 1787), p. 25.

³² Lothar Bucher, *Der Parlamentarismus wie er ist* (3rd edn, Stuttgart, 1894), p. 10.

³³ Eugène Buret, *De la misère des classes laborieuses en Angleterre et en France* (2 vols, Paris, 1840) I, p. 147.

³⁴ De Staël-Holstein, *Letters on England*, pp. 33–4.

in ancient Germanic tradition finally balked at the barrenness of adversarial politics on the British model. He found

such rooted prejudices, that to a German and especially a Prussian, it is often impossible, at first, to understand the facts or the arguments he hears. So long as most Englishmen regard their own point of view as the sole, unalterably, and inviolably right, and that of their opponent as absolutely wrong, each party loses sight of that higher ground which overlooks both, and which it ought to be the aim of all civilization and all government to reach.³⁵

Our assessment of von Raumer might be affected by his public statement that Frederick William III in the 1830s was 'the greatest and best Reformer in Europe'. However his earnestness is not in doubt.³⁶

Others were less polite. Maurice Rubichon, who endured two long exiles in Britain, the first during the Revolutionary wars, the second after the fall of Charles X, thought that the aimlessness of English debate transcended even the famed national trait of taciturnity and reserve. The English were mere parrotting schoolboys whose politics embraced no genuine reading or knowledge. The effect resembled clouds of smoke with no sparks. 'England may be the country of Europe in which least is said, yet it is that in which most ineptitudes are uttered.'³⁷ And most of all there was the crippling fact that all political change had to be shaped to meet the requirements of Parliament, whose members regarded rationality as the last thing to be considered and anything resembling an idea as suspect: in English ears the phrase 'foreign ideas' was almost a tautology. Prince Albert's adviser Stockmar was puzzled by what he called 'This English mania of making all political wisdom to consist in the art of satisfying Parliament.'³⁸ The baron Riesbeck was also disparaging about, 'Englishmen, who think that the essence of liberty consists in babbling, and giving vent in parliament to every species of ill-humour.'³⁹ Some favourite assumptions of eighteenth-century Anglophiles on such subjects were increasingly challenged. The famed power of the British press, for instance, did not impress everyone. Fontane remarked that 'the cleverest Englishmen if they are not politicians by profession and party members, are merely 100,000 echoes of the Times'.⁴⁰ His compatriot Niebuhr sought evidence of English enlightenment with scholarly scrupulousness but announced himself foiled. 'The praise which Jacobi accords to the

³⁵ Friedrich von Raumer, *England in 1835* (3 vols, London, 1836), I, p. 158.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

³⁷ Maurice Rubichon, *De l'Angleterre* (London, 1811), pp. 138–40.

³⁸ *Memoirs of Baron Stockmar: by his son Baron E. Von Stockmar*, ed. F. Max Müller (2 vols, London, 1872), II, pp. 99, 450.

³⁹ *Travels through Germany, in a series of letters: written in German by the Baron Riesbeck*, transl. Rev. Mr Maty (3 vols, London, 1787), I, p. 52.

⁴⁰ Theodor Fontane, *Bilderbuch aus England*, ed. Friedrich Fontane (Berlin, 1938), 18 Oct. 1855.

philosophical spirit of the English nation is quite undeserved, and founded on ignorance.⁴¹

Of course, some critics would never have been satisfied. Heine, for instance, was a genuine radical, though of a somewhat eccentric kind, and considered the pragmatic evolution of political rights in Britain as a distraction from the serious business of rebuilding humanity. Adjusting the form of the state could never revolutionize society.⁴² But there were many others for whom reform in the English fashion looked too much like mere expediency, a succession of unavoidable concessions in which solid reasoning played no part. Lothar Bucher built one of the most devastating critiques of parliamentarianism on this reasoning. The British constitution was a rambling, ruinous edifice in which the simple beauty of its ancient Anglo-Saxon outline could barely be discerned. Every so-called reform merely complicated and weakened its structure. The Reform Act itself was no exception. Far from purifying politics it had merely created a new sump of corruption. Bucher was writing in 1856 when there was beginning to be talk of further reform. Would it result in fundamental reconstruction of the state, he asked. His answer was predictable. 'The past and the nature of the people speak against it.'⁴³

Running through Bucher's argument was an assumption that this state of affairs resulted from centuries of aristocratic dominance. The English form of government was a gigantic conspiracy by the great to cheat the people of its ancient inheritance while pretending to serve it. Pragmatic, unsystematic reform was their weapon. Oligarchy depended on it. As the historian Bernard Sarrans put it, 'The science of aristocracies consists in avoiding the discussion of rights.'⁴⁴ It was evidently this that did much to explain the frivolity and prejudice that constituted so-called public opinion. The Swede Geijer was utterly baffled when he visited Britain in 1809 to find that the most controversial question of the day was the price of seats at Covent Garden Theatre. 'In all my life I have not heard or read so much about British freedom as in connection with this dispute.'⁴⁵ The notorious 'Old Price' riots resulted, of course. And an uneducated populace could not be expected even to applaud such reforms as were implemented. When Joseph-Alexis, Vicomte Walsh, whose Jacobite ancestors had once been banished from England, visited their homeland in 1829 at the time of Catholic emancipation,

⁴¹ *The life and letters of Barthold George Niebuhr* (2 vols, London, 1852), 1, p. 139.

⁴² Nigel Reeves, *Heinrich Heine: poetry and politics* (Oxford, 1974), pp. 104–5.

⁴³ Bucher, *Der Parlamentarismus wie er ist*, pp. 273–4.

⁴⁴ B. Sarrans, *De la décadence de l'Angleterre et des intérêts dédératifs de la France* (Paris, 1840), p. 149.

⁴⁵ Erik Gustaf Geijer, *Impressions of England, 1809–10*, intr. Anton Blanck (London, 1932), p. 99.

expecting a newly enlightened climate of opinion, he found instead 'No Popery' scrawled on the walls.⁴⁶

The literature in which Englishmen paraded the aristocratic nature of their own system is not the most quoted by historians, but for foreigners it was of understandable interest. Bulwer Lytton's *England and the English*, by a novelist as well known abroad as at home, was published in 1833, a year after the Reform Act. His central theme, aristocratic government in a commercial country, was employed to generate numerous examples of the way in which a society with a hugely vigorous middle class and notoriously independent plebeians could remain so securely aristocratic in its essentials. Partly this was the traditional faith in property, which invaded the language itself.

The root of all our notions, as of all our laws, is to be found in the sentiment of property. It is *my* wife whom you shall not insult; it is *my* house that you shall not enter; it is *my* country that you shall not traduce; and, by a species of ultramondane appropriation, it is *my* God whom you shall not blaspheme!

And secondly there was the long-standing social mobility that permitted the humble to rise high, though only at the cost of others of their own estate. 'England has long possessed this singular constitution of society, — the spirit of democracy in the power of obtaining honours, and the genius of an aristocracy in the method by which they are acquired.'⁴⁷ The coping-stone to this intellectual edifice is usually attributed to Tocqueville, namely the remark that the English were more fearful of the insults of those below them than the oppression of those above them, but in various forms it was something of a commonplace of contemporary analysis, well expressed by Mill.⁴⁸ 'They do not dislike to have many people above them as long as they have some below them.'⁴⁹ An eighteenth-century traveller, Christopher Harvey, had put it still more simply, 'The common people even in England like to take orders, that they may become gentlemen'.⁵⁰ Or, in modern terms, this seemed the natural mentality of a society that had retained its essentially aristocratic institutions while commercializing its social relations.

The results could be viewed in quite different ways, of course. To a conservative statesman like Guizot it was remarkable how the British aristocracy had submitted to a succession of reforms that in effect conceded most of their independence of action in return for the privilege of retaining

⁴⁶ *Lettres sur l'Angleterre ou voyage dans la Grande-Bretagne en 1829* (Paris, 1830), pp. 33–7.

⁴⁷ *England and the English* (2 vols, New York, 1833), I, pp. 15–16, 21.

⁴⁸ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, II (iii), ch. 2.

⁴⁹ Ashton, *Little Germany: exile and asylum in Victorian England*, p. 49.

⁵⁰ Christopher Hervey, *Letters from Portugal, Spain, Italy and Germany, in the years 1759, 1760, and 1761* (3 vols, London, 1785), III, p. 296.

their nominal role as leaders. The aristocracy, he observed, were now 'merely a governing class'. It is an intriguing insight and not without point, but others were less disposed to make distinctions between dominance on the one hand and mere rule on the other. For most the perception was that society itself, in accepting that continued leadership, had displayed its own inherently aristocratic cast of mind.⁵¹

That a society experiencing the most extraordinary economic turbulence could be profoundly aristocratic was no paradox. A whole school of French critics pointed out the logic that made England in essence a feudal state whose dynamics rendered industries so many feofs, and proletarians the new serfs. Here was a new and brutal class of employers, a manufacturing aristocracy alongside a landed aristocracy. The result was degrading to the human spirit: urban deprivation, child labour, demoralizing impoverishment worse than negroes endured. Appalled by what he called evidence even of racial degeneracy, the historian Michelet knew where to seek the sources when he was in England in 1834. 'Looking at the colossal chimneys of Leeds, Halifax, Liverpool, I said to myself. "Here are the towers of the new feudalism."' ⁵²

Moreover this system owed as much to commercial reformers as to died-in-the-wool conservatives. 'Behold humanity such as radicalism has made her' wrote the former minister of Charles X, d'Haussez.⁵³ Or, from a different perspective, that of Eugène Buret, England as an aristocratic society had misery, whereas egalitarian France had only poverty. The result was 'une voie sans issue' a society that could not be reformed but could only be abolished by revolution. France, by comparison, had every prospect of redemption by means of predictable economic reforms.⁵⁴

Viewed from this perspective most of what passed for reform in the early nineteenth century was simply rearranging the chains of industrial oppression in order to bind them ever tighter. 'Here civilization works its miracles, and civilized man is turned back almost into a savage.'⁵⁵ The utter uselessness of the British bourgeoisie was a predictably common cause for dismissal. Two forces had sapped it of any promise in this respect, two forces that might have been expected to be in conflict but in England were part of one coherent system: religion and materialism. Engels probably had a closer acquaintance with this class than almost any foreign-born commentator of his day.

⁵¹ François Guizot, *Memoirs of Sir Robert Peel* (London, 1857), pp. 370-1.

⁵² *Sur les chemins de l'Europe* (Paris, 1893), p. 159.

⁵³ Le Mercher de Longpré, *Great Britain in 1833*, II, pp. 34, 43.

⁵⁴ Eugène Buret, *De la misère des classes laborieuses en Angleterre et en France* (2 vols, Paris, 1840), I, pp. 19-20, 59, 206-8, 237, 475, 485.

⁵⁵ Steven Marcus, *Engels, Manchester, and the working class* (London, 1974), p. 66.

I have never seen a social class so deeply demoralized as the English middle classes, I have never seen a class so incurably corrupted by egotistic self-seeking, so inwardly corroded, or rendered so incapable of progress . . . For it, nothing exists in the world that does not solely exist for the sake of money — itself not excepted — for it lives for nothing except making money.⁵⁶

Not least interesting about this famous judgement is the fact that it reflects a perception shared by many less articulate commentators and expressed long before systematic analysis by the Marxian school. The numbing materialism of the British bourgeoisie was a feature of a swelling body of commentary from at least the 1780s on.

Of course, not every view was pessimistic. But when visitors were impressed, what impressed them most was not necessarily the accumulation of demands for reform, the mounting of a case for rational improvement, or even the prudent concessiveness of the whig aristocracy. Rather they were struck by the characteristic idiosyncrasies of British society in so far as they served reforming causes.

Late eighteenth-century travellers were greatly taken with the quantity and quality of British benevolence. The leading role played by private individuals and public associations, with no help from the state and little from the church, marked this out as a uniquely caring society.⁵⁷ Visitors plainly came expecting to have their sensibility gratified. Even so, there were some discordant voices before the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and a substantial body of sceptics thereafter. A standard criticism was that, contrary to the proverb, charity did not begin at home. Numerous travellers were appalled by the state of the poor amidst stupendous wealth. If Bruce in Abyssinia or Park in Africa, observed Austin, had found conditions described by Colquhoun in London 'I will do the English the justice to believe they would instantly open subscriptions, and enterprise an expedition to their relief: yes, even to the source of the Nile.'⁵⁸

Admiration at the disinterested philanthropy of the British often gave way to dismay at their vanity and egotism. It did not go unnoticed that charity depended heavily on the publicity that attended giving, and that charitable associations operated primarily as a self-imposed tax on snobbery rather than a spirit of selflessness. From the nobleman who could not endow his parish without emblazoning his virtues on the church wall, to the humble subscriber whose ambition was to dine once a year with the great and good, or see his name enrolled among them in the newspapers, the object was self-advertisement.⁵⁹ The patronizing and rather conveniently propertied

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 231.

⁵⁷ Gabriel François Coyer, *Nouvelles observations sur l'Angleterre* (Paris, 1779), chs 6, 7.

⁵⁸ *Letters from London: written during the years 1802 and 1803*, p. 86.

⁵⁹ René-Martin Pillet, *L'Angleterre vue à Londres et dans ses provinces* (Paris, 1815), pp. 131–2.

assumptions of charitable institutions angered those familiar with a less self-interested system of church charity abroad, even if they rejected its spiritual foundations. Marat was shocked that letters of recommendation were necessary to get into hospital.⁶⁰ Spiker, the librarian to the king of Prussia, who dedicated his book on Britain to 'The friends of England', thought the practice of having better rooms for rich patients in lunatic asylums disgraceful — 'all should be equally good'.⁶¹ And the insularity of English practice made it hard to see what lessons states with a different tradition could learn. British reformers seemed characteristically rooted in their national small-mindedness. Even John Howard, whose pioneering investigations were genuinely international, was accused of a xenophobic bias.⁶²

Hypocrisy was detected and condemned by relatively impartial observers, such as Adolphe Blanqui. The British believed themselves the most benevolent nation on earth, yet this was a nation for whom animals were objects of cruel sports, a nation that invented hulks for prisoners of war, and a nation whose army was disciplined with punishments as bestial as those of Muscovy.⁶³ Subjected to criticism of this kind the proudest boasts of English reformers could be rendered empty indeed. Flora Tristan's grim catalogue of horrors in her *Promenades dans Londres* of 1842 took care to sabotage anything that looked in the least creditable. For her the British model of progress was 'the greatest obstacle to the advancement of Europe and the rest of the world'. Prison reformers were among those she systematically dismissed for their ameliorations. At Newgate she found 'they exhibit the systematic spirit which is peculiar to them in practising essays of benevolence at the expense of the unfortunate beings who crowd their prisons'.⁶⁴ Cold Bath Fields, supposedly a country mansion compared with Newgate, was notable in reality chiefly for its peculiar torture of the tread-wheel and the unproductive idleness it imposed on its inmates. Unsurprisingly, the fact that her countryman Marshal Soult had pronounced his satisfaction with the prison left her unimpressed. Millbank, one grade higher on the register of prison improvement, was remarkable for the refinement of its cellular organization, but without visible effects on its inmates. For Flora Tristan it was not necessary to see to condemn. She had been told that the slaves emancipated in the West Indies after fifty years of abolitionist campaigning had merely been 'turned into proletarians on the English model'. The

⁶⁰ Frances Acomb, *Anglophobia in France, 1763–1789: an essay in the history of constitutionalism and nationalism* (Durham, N.C., 1950), p. 42.

⁶¹ Samuel Heinrich Spiker, *Travels through England, Wales, and Scotland, in the year 1816*, transl. (2 vols, London, 1820), I, p. 84.

⁶² Pillet, *L'Angleterre vue à Londres*, p. 37.

⁶³ Adolphe Blanqui, *Voyage d'un jeune français en Angleterre et en Écosse pendant l'automne de 1823* (Paris, 1824), pp. 92–4.

⁶⁴ Le Mercher de Longpré, *Great Britain in 1833*, I, p. 11.

extreme hypocrisy of emancipation was characteristic of the English. As for the numerous new schools of which the British boasted, they were but a pale imitation of their French counterparts, and ludicrously obsessed with scriptural education.⁶⁵

Ironically much of the evidence that was cited by those who refused to believe in the redeemability of the British was provided by the British themselves. Indeed it was in the nature of reform in the English fashion, building patiently on bricks of closely constructed factual evidence, accumulated by royal, parliamentary and public bodies of information gatherers, that it generated material not readily obtainable elsewhere, however short it was on philosophical principles. Some of the most hostile foreign treatments were dependent on such material. Ledru-Rollin's notorious *De la décadence de l'Angleterre*, which gave great offence in Britain, was in fact based on the findings of Henry Mayhew, originally published in the *Morning Chronicle*.⁶⁶ Ledru-Rollin provided much of this material in book form to a French audience before Mayhew himself produced it in a collected edition in London. If this was an indictment, it was certainly not fabricated by a foreigner. As the radical George Holyoake observed

had the great Republican lawyer entitled his volume, "Extracts from the *Morning Chronicle*", or "England drawn by Henry Mayhew", or the "Fall of the English Foretold by Themselves", any one of these titles would have expressed the character of the work. But because the author employed another title, the public were entitled to take offence at the book.⁶⁷

Rosemary Ashton has pointed out that official statistics and reports were often employed more by foreign exiles than by the English themselves.⁶⁸

Self-exposure of this kind went back some decades before the age of blue books, and helped prepare the way for this growing belief that the more the British required reforming the less they were likely to be reformed. If there was a decisive moment it was in the 1770s, when the War of American Independence, a notable era of parliamentary eloquence and unprecedented international publicity for British politicians, combined to create novel conditions. Brissot claimed the credit for exploiting them, if credit is the right word, in that it was he who contributed so much to the success of the journal *Courrier de l'Europe*. He was an ironically appropriate figure for this purpose, having as a young man been induced by his enthusiasm for all things English to change his somewhat bogus title of Ouarville to Warville, in order to 'to give my name an English air', as he put it. The *Courrier*, he said,

⁶⁵ *The London journal of Flora Tristan*, trans. Jean Hawkes (London, 1982), pp. 10, 135–42, 160.

⁶⁶ Alexandre-Auguste Ledru-Rollin, *De la décadence de l'Angleterre*, (2 vols, Paris, 1850).

⁶⁷ George Jacob Holyoake, *Sixty years of an agitator's life* (2 vols, London, 1893), II, pp. 261–2.

⁶⁸ Ashton, *Little Germany*, p. 6.

made England known as it had never been known before, except through the distorting spectacles of a few travellers. 'Up to the moment of the publication of the *Courrier*, England had been truly a foreign land for the rest of Europe.'⁶⁹

Brissot exaggerated the significance of the *Courrier*. It was by no means the first newspaper to report English events at length. A number of Dutch journals, read or reprinted across the continent, had done so for decades. What was new was the effective failure of the House of Commons to stop detailed reporting of parliamentary debates during the 1770s. There is no doubt that the *Courrier*, which seems to have been financed by both the British and French governments, each in the belief that it was thereby contributing to the downfall of the other, was well placed to carry the resulting debates far and wide.⁷⁰ The censors of absolute governments made no attempt to restrict the flow of information that was assumed to be disadvantageous only to the British government. The result was that when Burke, Sheridan and Fox trumpeted the faults of George III's government, they were unintentionally addressing an audience that dwelled as far afield as Rome, St Petersburg, and Copenhagen. The last great patriot opposition of the 1730s had signally failed to influence continental opinion in this way.

During the following decades, Anglomania was battered down by an unlikely alliance of assailants, not all of them on the radical or revolutionary left. These included men as far to the right as Joseph de Maistre, who believed that English contractualism had lured Frenchmen into abandoning their sacramental faith in monarchy,⁷¹ and Bonapartists such as Joseph Fiévée and René-Martin Pillet, who considered that the luminaries of *ancien-régime* France had been corrupted by the British government into a propaganda campaign on its behalf.⁷² But most of all, Anglomania suffered from its own success.⁷³ It was all too tempting for a new generation of commentators to write off their most celebrated predecessors — Voltaire, Montesquieu, Delolme, Archenholz, Gentz, as mere panegyrists of Britain.⁷⁴

Admirers were precisely those whose conservatism made them the least impressive of champions in the eyes of liberal reformers. Charles de Rémusat

⁶⁹ *Mémoires de Brissot* (Paris, 1877), pp. 30, 118–19.

⁷⁰ Hélène Mespero-Clerc, 'Samuel Swinton, éditeur du *Courier de l'Europe* à Boulogne-su-Mer (1778–1783)', *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, 57 (1985), pp. 527–31; N. A. M. Rodger, *The insatiable earl: a life of John Montagu, 4th earl of Sandwich* (London, 1993), p. 210.

⁷¹ F. Holdsworth, *Joseph de Maistre et l'Angleterre* (Paris, 1935).

⁷² Pillet, *L'Angleterre vue à Londres*; Joseph Fiévée, *Lettres sur l'Angleterre, et réflexions sur la philosophie du XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1802).

⁷³ Josephine Grieder, *Anglomania in France, 1740–1789: fact, fiction, and political discourse* (Geneva, 1985); Michael Maurer, *Aufklärung und Anglophilie in Deutschland* (Göttingen, 1987), ch. 12.

⁷⁴ *Londres et les Anglais par J.L. Ferri de St.-Constant* (4 vols, Paris, an. XII [1804]), iv, pp. 362–7.

was one such. He was a moderate royalist who made it his mission to revive that admiration for British institutions that had inspired the Anglomaniacs of Louis XV's reign. 'Once England was our study. We came in search of government here as we went to Italy in search of arts.'⁷⁵ But now the French had fatally fixed their attention on America, a much more dangerous guide. For the British had achieved reform without social conflict, preserving the essentially aristocratic nature of their society, averting the class conflict that revolution had unleashed on two continents, and adapting an ancient constitution painlessly to the requirements of change. Rémusat's ideal was an English government in a French society. Its outstanding boon was the abandonment of speculative principles. 'Every principle is identified with certain forms, attested by certain facts, which convert it into legal truth and historic truth.' This was more or less a list of the features of English government that others found objectionable, but Rémusat was nothing if not a friend of England. His essays on Bolingbroke, Horace Walpole, Junius, Burke, and Fox, revealed the depth of his knowledge of eighteenth-century English life, and his account of its philosophers his admiration of its modes of thought. Lamartine's more qualified admiration had a not dissimilar basis. Returning to England after twenty years' absence, in 1850, he was impressed by the effects of the intervening reforms. But he saw their essence as compromise and conciliation rather than genuine change, preserving intact the historic English triad of liberty, aristocracy, and monarchy. This 'socialisme conservateur', as he called it, was a treaty between rich and poor, not a new society of equality and justice.⁷⁶

For some German reformers in search of a project that steered clear both of Jacobinism and Bonapartism it was the organic vitality of the British constitution as represented by the involvement of propertied people at every level of government that was so appealing. The state that Friedrich Vincke scrutinized on two fact-finding visits to Britain in 1800 and 1807 was one that needed no fundamental reform because it held within itself an ancient formula for self-renewal, defying central planning. The voluntary service of an aristocratic class naturally had considerable attraction for those who regarded bureaucracy and democracy as different but equal evils. Vincke described it as the true secret of what he called English 'Besonderheit'.⁷⁷

There were others during the following decades who admired this spirit but they would not have been regarded as particularly liberal either in Britain or elsewhere. The ultimate accolade is perhaps the published and translated

⁷⁵ *L'Angleterre au dix-huitième siècle* (2 vols, Paris, 1856), I, p. 1.

⁷⁶ Robert Mattlé, *Lamartine voyageur* (Paris, 1936), pp. 281, 297.

⁷⁷ Friedrich Ludwig Wilhelm Philipp, [Freiherr von Vincke], *Darstellung der innern Verwaltung Grossbritanniens*, ed. B. G. Niebuhr (Berlin, 1815), p. 6.

account of the Saxon Carus, who visited England in 1844, and was delighted by the moral tone that absence of bureaucracy helped generate.

All this greatness, however, would be inconceivable, were it not that, in the general administration of the country, a certain elevated tone of simplicity prevails, which is as far remote as possible from what may be called the dillettantism of governing, which seeks for its renown in a multitude of petty regulations, and in a peculiarly artistical structure of the state machine. It strikes a stranger with astonishment when he hears how small a number of individuals compose the efficient force of the executive; with what simplicity and brevity the communications between the respective ministerial departments are made; how little verbal communication takes place, and how limited the number of the whole official staff is, which in Germany is so inordinately increased. There is, perhaps, no country in which, relatively speaking, the number of paid officials is so small as in England, and where the direction of the public affairs is conducted *on so elevated a scale*; and in this respect in particular, it must undoubtedly furnish an interesting object of study for the diplomatists and statesmen of all nations. I must still add, that it is this very elevated mode of conducting public affairs, which opens up the widest and richest field for the appearance of men of the highest talents and character.⁷⁸

Perhaps the absence of bureaucrats was a matter on which diverse authorities could agree. Charles Cottu, who came to Britain to examine its legal system, consulted Samuel Romilly closely and yet found almost nothing that needed reforming, called this a nation governing itself without agents of government.⁷⁹ At any rate before the civil service reforms and Whitehall office-building of the mid-nineteenth century this was one of the most striking of all impressions. There was, after all, something very peculiar about a country in which the most important government building, Somerset House, was shared by Treasury clerks on the one hand and Fellows of the Royal Academy on the other, as Amédée Pichot observed. 'By thus crowding clerks and artists together, England sufficiently reveals the scarcity of her public buildings. Perhaps, however, the government offices in England dispense with that host of clerks who with us have nothing to do but to mend pens for our ministers.'⁸⁰ Again, the closest student of parliamentary reform, Duvergier de Hauranne, was more than anything else struck by the English success in minimizing the influence of executive government. For him, the glory of English reformers was their success from the time of Queen Anne up to the 1840s, when he was writing, in gradually curbing the power of ministers and

⁷⁸ C. G. Carus, *The King of Saxony's journey through England and Scotland in the year 1844*, transl. S. C. Davison (London, 1846), p. 36.

⁷⁹ *De l'administration de la justice criminelle en Angleterre, et de l'esprit du gouvernement anglais* (Paris, 1820), p. 220.

⁸⁰ Amédée Pichot, *Historical and literary tour of a foreigner in England and Scotland* (2 vols, London, 1825), 1, p. 45.

office-holders in Parliament.⁸¹ He might be forgiven for not predicting that precisely the reverse process would soon be under way.

There are, of course, other standpoints altogether, even more negligent of the theme of reform than those I have discussed. Harping on Britain as a bulwark of Burkeian stability during the Revolutionary wars was one such, creating a climate of opinion that was reluctant to look for evidence of reform and unlikely to find it. Friedrich Gentz was one of those for whom all other considerations were submerged by the requirement to fight the principles of the French Revolution to the death. Gentz not only defended Britain's role in European politics, but even glorified its seemingly cynical exploitation of continental wars to extend its commerce and colonies. Its ancient constitution and commercial supremacy were synonymous with European civilization. 'No enlightened European', he wrote, 'will be able to perceive England's prosperity without exclaiming with that dying patriot: *Esto perpetua!*'⁸²

For Gentz the triumph of Britain was the taming of modernity. Once the English had been seen as unleashing it. But almost regardless of vantage point, this was certainly not the early nineteenth-century view, notwithstanding the innovation associated with industrialization. It is an interesting case of the way that political perceptions can overshadow all kinds of alternative impressions. For the foreigners who came, saw, and went home, Britain as a pillar of legitimacy and stability in a changing world seems to have had more evocative power than Britain as the leading edge of a new form of civilization. Or perhaps there was all the stronger sense of the underlying continuities of British life as a result. Many of those who wrote about Britain were more interested in its cultural message than any other, and themes such as rage for the Gothic, the obsession with heritage, the cult of everything old English, naturally made an impression on visitors more interested in Sir Walter Scott or the English country house than Lord Grey and Sir Robert Peel. Some of them connected such trends with the innate sense of hierarchy and the obsession with heredity that seemed characteristic of all classes in Britain. Self-conscious antiquity appeared to such travellers the most striking of all English characteristics. It evoked some of the most powerful of all tributes, including the ultimate masterpiece in the genre, Emerson's *English Traits* of 1852. Whether English or not, Britain needed reform: doubtless an interesting question to Britons. For many of the foreigners who chose to characterize them it was either beside the point or positively misleading.

⁸¹ *De la réforme parlementaire and de la réforme électorale* (Paris, 1847).

⁸² Paul F. Rieff, *Friedrich Gentz, an opponent of the French Revolution and Napoleon* (Urbana-Champaign, 1912), p. 81; Frederick Gentz, *On the state of Europe before and after the French Revolution; being an answer to the work entitled De l'état de la France à la fin de l'an VIII*, transl. from German by John Charles Herries (2nd edn, London, 1803), pp. 41–2.