

Core values and attitudes of the English



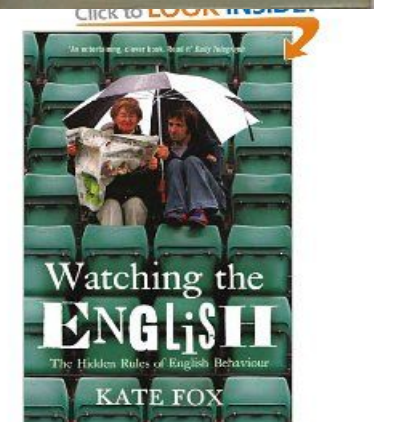
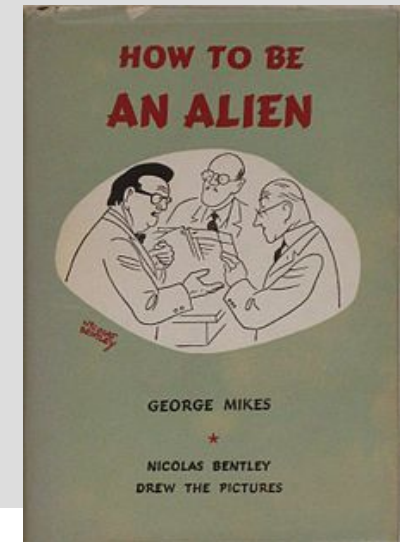
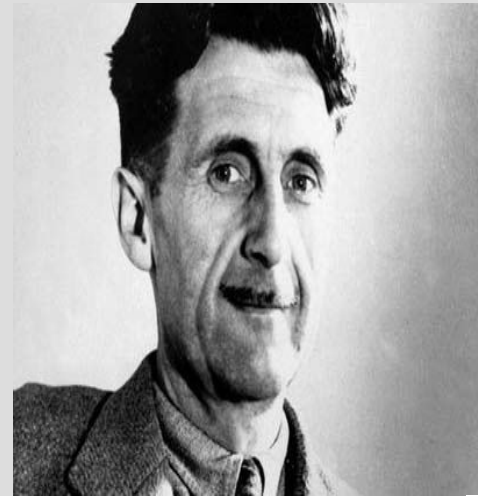
University students enjoying a Whitsunside drink at the turn of the century

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Notable observers of the English national character

- **George Orwell** – a journalist and novelist; author of the patriotic essay *The Lion and the Unicorn*
- **George Mikes** – a Hungarian immigrant and author of the book *How to be an Alien*, humorously describing the English mentality from an outsider's viewpoint
- **Nancy Mitford** – a novelist and author of *Noblesse Oblige: An Enquiry Into the Identifiable Characteristics of the English Aristocracy*, a treatise satirically covering class distinctions, especially as based on language (U and non-U delineation)
- **Kate Fox** – a contemporary anthropologist; author of an in-depth study of basic English attitudes, called *Watching the English*; written with much humour and accessible to the general reader



.... and their observations

George Orwell (*The Lion and the Unicorn*):

“But talk to foreigners, read foreign books or newspapers, and you are brought back to the same thought. Yes, there is something distinctive and recognizable in English civilization. It is a culture as individual as that of Spain. It is somehow bound up with solid breakfasts and gloomy Sundays, smoky towns and winding roads, green fields and red pillar-boxes. It has a flavour of its own. Moreover it is continuous, it stretches into the future and the past, there is something in it that persists, as in a living creature. What can the England of 1940 have in common with the England of 1840? But then, what have you in common with the child of five whose photograph your mother keeps on the mantelpiece? Nothing, except that you happen to be the same person.”

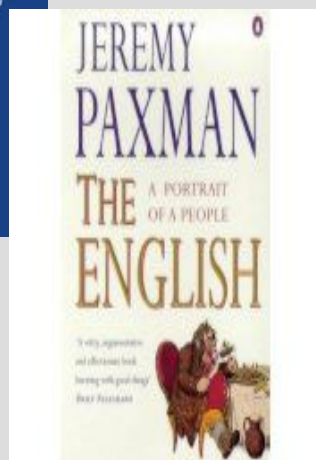
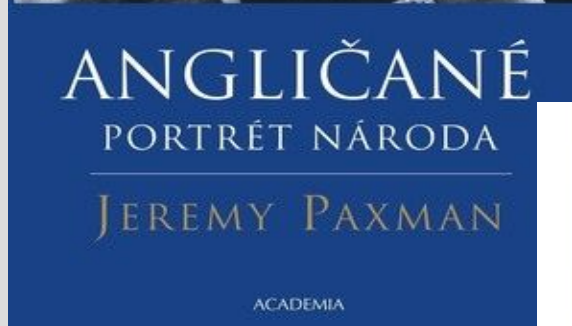
George Mikes (*How to Be an Alien*):

“The world still consists of two clearly divided groups: the English and the foreigners. One group consists of less than 50 million people; the other of 3,950 million. The latter group does not really count.”

“On the Continent people have good food; in England people have good table manners.”

“An Englishman, even if he is alone, forms an orderly queue of one.”

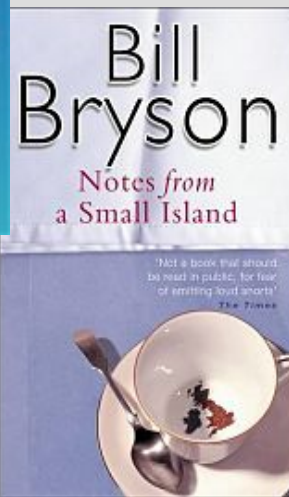
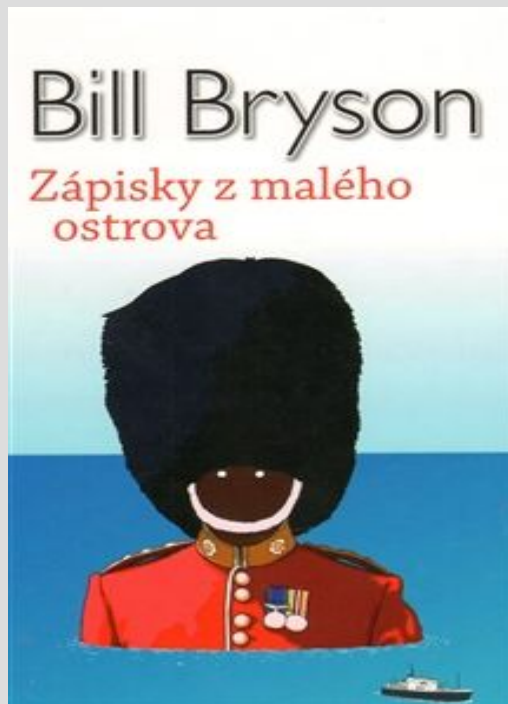
Available in Czech: Jeremy Paxman



Once upon a time the English knew who they were... They were polite, unexcitable, reserved, and had hot-water bottles instead of sex life; how they reproduced was one of the mysteries of the western world. They were doers rather than thinkers, writers rather than painters, gardeners rather than cooks. They were class-bound, hidebound and incapable of expressing their emotions ... Their most prized possession was a sense of honour. They were steadfast and trustworthy. The word of an English gentleman was as good as a bond sealed in blood.

(Jeremy Paxman: Watching the English, p. 1)

Also available in Czech: Bill Bryson



The fact is that the British have a totally private sense of distance. This is most visibly seen in the shared pretense that Britain is a lonely island in the middle of an empty green sea. Of course, the British are well aware, in an abstract sort of way, that there is a substantial landmass called Europe nearby and from time to time it is necessary to go over and to give old Jerry a drubbing or have a holiday in the sun, but it's not nearby in any meaningful sense in the way that, say, Disney World is.

(Bill Bryson: *Notes from a Small Island*, p. 4)

I. Individualism

Individualism – often quoted as a quintessential English characteristic, deeply rooted in English history

Roger Scruton, a conservative philosopher:

“...individualism is the disposition of the English to affirm the right and responsibility of individual action in all spheres of social life.”

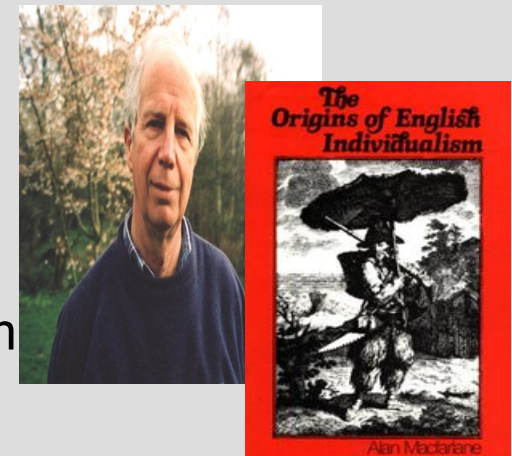


A more detailed definition:

Individualism is a term used to describe a moral, political, or social outlook that stresses human independence and the importance of individual self-reliance and liberty. Individualists promote the exercise of individual goals and desires. They oppose most external interference with an individual's choices - whether by society, the state, or any other group or institution. Individualism is therefore opposed to holism, collectivism, fascism, communalism, totalitarianism and communitarianism, and which stress that communal, group, societal, racial, or national goals should take priority over individual goals. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Individualism>

Individualism – economic, political

- English individualism in historical context – studied by social historian **Alan Macfarlane** (born 1941)
- Controversially for the 1970s, he argued for an English exceptionalism since the Middle Ages > English society has always differed from Continental ones
- Some distinguishing factors:
 - History of trading (the English were unusually market-oriented from medieval times; work for wages, business skills)
 - Common Law system (*law of the land* as opposed to laws imposed by monarchs)
 - Early industrialization
 - Nuclear family, rather than large extended clans > ideal for development of capitalism



Individualism as reflected in liberalism

- Britain – the cradle of social and economic liberalism

“By Liberalism I mean, not a policy, but a habit of mind. It is the disposition of the man who looks upon each of his fellows as of equal worth with himself. He does not assume that all men and women are of equal capacity, or equally entitled to offices and privileges. But he is always inclined to leave and to give them equal opportunity with himself for self-expression and for self-development. He assumes, as the basis of his activity, that he has no right to interfere with any other person's attempts to employ his natural powers in what he conceives to be the best way. He is unwilling to impose his judgment upon that of others, or to force them to live their lives according to his ideas rather than their own.”

Professor W. Lyon Blease (1884-1963): A Short History of English Liberalism, available at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/34713/34713-h/34713-h.htm>

- The freedom of the individual from state interference versus the role of the state as an enforcer of security and greater equality > an issue at the heart of political debate in today's Britain

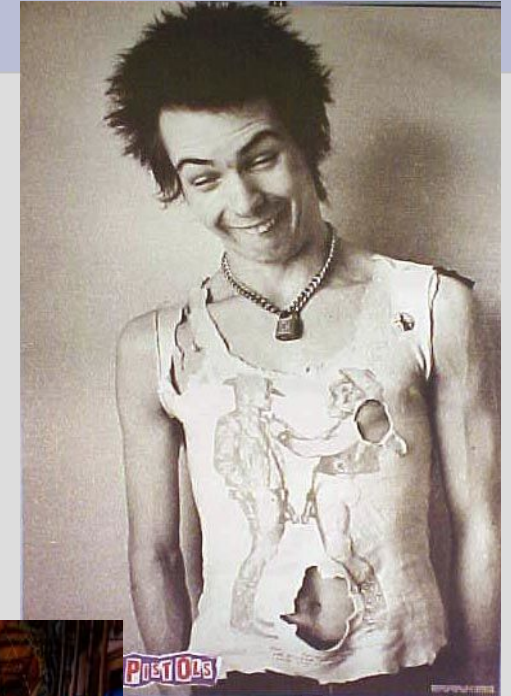
Eccentricity as a manifestation of individualism

- Eccentricity – an often-noted trait of the English
 - a form of rebellion against authority and social conventions > tied to the anarchic streak in the English nature
 - A kind of declaration of independence on a personal level, assertion of a freeborn Englishman's right to be different

"Eccentricity is not, as some would believe, a form of madness. It is often a kind of innocent pride, and the man of genius and the aristocrat are frequently regarded as eccentrics because genius and aristocrat are entirely unafraid of and uninfluenced by the opinions and vagaries of the crowd." - Edith Sitwell, writer

- Some areas of manifestation:
 - youth cultures (punk, mods, goths ...)
 - Fashion&image (Lord Byron, Oscar Wilde, David Bowie, Vivienne Westwood, Amy Winehouse ...)
 - Film (Alfred Hitchcock, Tim Burton, Rowan Atkinson)
 - geeky hobbies (birdwatching, trainspotting, collecting unusual items, spiritualism and UFO hunting, etc.)
 - Interior design (ignoring aesthetic rules)

How to be eccentric



“Kites rise highest against the wind - not with it.”
Winston Churchill

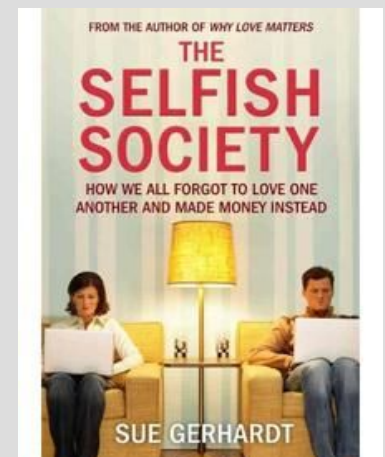
The shadow of individualism – the “me society”

- Recently > a more negative expression in the form of ‘**me society**’ (selfish pursuit of individual choices, loss of sense of responsibility and community, indifference to others' problems)
- A slang phrase frequently used with this kind of self-seeking attitude: **“I'm alright, Jack.”**

*“Attitude of “every man for himself, survival of the fittest, devil take the hindmost”, ... but also, that all the possible advantages (however gained), success (however won) and satisfaction (whatever the cost to others) belong to me first!”
Narrow-focus, narrow-gauge pseudo-Darwinian selfishness glorified as a sensible philosophy of society and life.”*

The Urban Dictionary <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=I%27m%20alright%20Jack>

- Some symbols of the me-society: Margaret Thatcher, Gordon Gekko (character from Wall Street movie), yuppies, 4x4 cars, singles living in new expensive flats



II. Love of Privacy

- “My home my castle” (importance of the comfort zone)

*The Germans live in Germany
The Romans live in Rome
The Turkeys live in Turkey
But the English live at home.*

J.H Goring, *The Ballad of Lake Laloo and Other Rhymes*, 1909



„*Hover above any English town for a few minutes, and you will see that the residential areas consist almost entirely of rows and rows of small boxes, each with its own tiny patch of green. In some parts of the country, the boxes will be a greyish colour, in others, a sort of reddish-brown. In more affluent areas, the boxes will be spaced further apart, and the patches of green attached to them will be larger. But the principle will be clear: the English all want to love in their own private little box with their own private little bit.*“

Kate Fox: *Watching the English*, p. 111

Retreat into homes

The desire for private space – reflected in customs and rituals surrounding English homes

- popularity of front gardens (a buffer zone of separation from the outside world)
- fondness for DIY work (constant home improvement)
- Personalization of homes (family photos on prominent walls, display of objects of nostalgic value)
- Home – plays the role of a retreat from the awkwardness of social interaction
- *'Home is what the English have instead of social skills'* (Kate Fox)



The paradox

- Despite the obsession with privacy > the English simultaneously display a delight in gossip of various kinds
- Example – popularity of reality shows (*Big Brother*) and tabloid sensationalist news
- Kate Fox: explains this paradox by the “forbidden fruit” theory:

As a result, thanks to the inevitable forbidden fruit effect, we are a nation of curtain-twitchers, endlessly fascinated by the tabooed private lives of the 'members of our social setting'. The English may not gossip much more than any other culture, but our privacy rules significantly enhance the value of gossip. The laws of supply and demand ensure that gossip is a precious social commodity among the English.” (Fox, p.44)



Other manifestations of love of privacy

- The English – more reluctant than other nations to share information on:
 - their personal details (marital status, residence, work position)
 - money and business affairs
 - political views
 - religious views
 - private and sex life (the latter is often discussed by means of humour)
- Important – this can vary across classes; the middle classes and the New Rich tend to be the most unwilling to share their private info

III. Humour

- great value attached to humour in social interaction
- dislike of sentimentality and open displays of emotion > humour and irony protect the private self
- a powerful way of fighting the awkwardness of various situations > **cure for social inhibition**
- Strategies: self-deprecation (which can contain indirect boasting), understatement, irony, teasing, mockery, deliberate silliness



Outlawed pomp and required understatement

- *“Pomposity and self-importance are outlawed. Serious matters can be be spoken of seriously but one must never take **oneself** too seriously ... To take a deliberately extreme example, the kind of hand-on-heart, gushing earnestness and pompous, Bible-thumping solemnity favoured by almost all American politicians would never win a single vote in this country“ (Fox, p. 63)*
- *The reasons for our prolific understating are not hard to discover: our strict prohibitions on earnestness, gushing, emoting and boasting require almost constant use of understatement. Rather than risk exhibiting any hint of forbidden solemnity, unseemly emotion or excessive zeal, we go to the opposite extreme and feign dry, deadpan indifference. The understatement rule means that a debilitating and painful chronic illness must be described as 'bit of a nuisance'; a truly horrific experience is 'well, not exactly what I would have chosen'; a sight of breathtaking beauty is 'quite pretty'; an outstanding performance is 'not bad' ... and an unforgivably stupid misjudgment is 'not very clever'; the Antarctic is 'rather cold' and the Sahara 'a bit too cold for my taste' (Fox, 67)*

IV. Moderation

An umbrella term for a variety of attitudes

- conservatism (cautiousness towards change; fondness of the established ways)
- avoidance of extremes, intensity and excess (personal, social, political)
- tolerance
- tendency to compromise

- An exception to the quality of moderation > relationship with alcohol (and, increasingly, drugs)



V. Fair play

- **The sense of fair play** > underlies a variety of social activities: buying rounds in a pub, driving etiquette, business etiquette, flirting, etc.
- One manifestation: support of the ***underdog*** (the weaker party in any situation) > in sports, charity work or concepts of social fairness (origins of Labour Party and Welfare State)

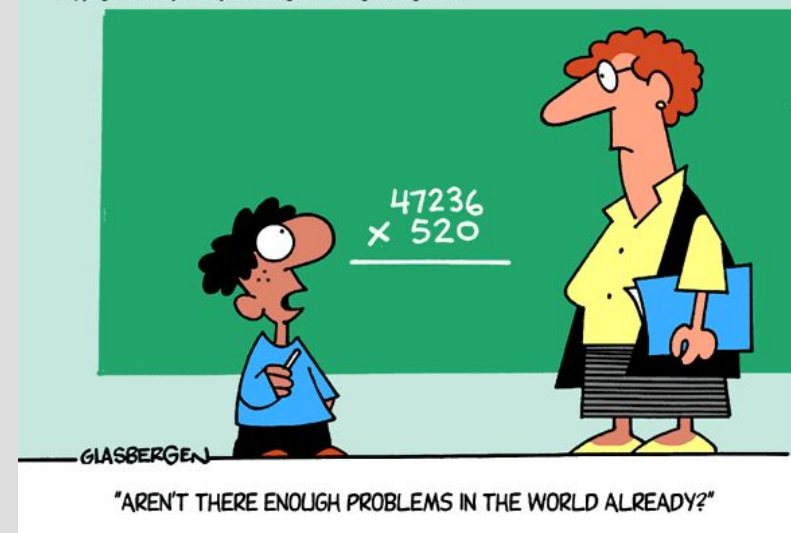


VI. Common sense (pragmatism)

- being down-to-earth, matter-of-fact, anti-intellectual; belief in what's working
- suspicion of intelligence and the Continental-style tendency to theorize (*cf.* France)
- lower respect for university degrees (*cf.* Czech Rep) and the status of a student
- unpopularity of “swots” (pupils too keen to excel intellectually)
- Britain – has produced scientists, inventors and political reformers rather than abstract philosophers, artists or mystics



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VII. Love of nature

- idealized view of the countryside and country life (present in the English mentality from the time of the Industrial Revolution)
- popularity of living in “leafy” areas
- huge fondness for gardening (plus gardening programmes; the biggest celebrity: Alan Titchmarsh, author of the *Ground Force* programme)
- love of animals (esp. dogs, cats, horses and ducks)
- popularity of countryside rambling
- **RSPCA** (*The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals*)
>one of the oldest and biggest British charities



Sources

- Bryson, Bill (1997) *Notes from a Small Island*. London: Harper Perennial.
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