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PROLEGOMENON

in which the Author wishes himself on the Slow Road through Ideal England, travelling from where he is to where he is from.

I.

GOOD AND QUICKLY SELDOM MEET

The Old Grammarye, Broad Street, Presteigne,
Radnorshire. Sunday, the 29th March, 2020.
A cold day.

One fine day, when all this is over, I will take again the slow road, and drive across England to visit my long-ago family in Sussex.

There is a fast way to drive from here to there. It's 220 miles and, apart from the first fifty and the last thirty miles, it's all motorway. I use it only in dire need. It takes me around six hours; four-and-a-half hours driving, plus an hour or so sulking about in service stations drinking insipid coffee, whilst disliking people just for being there.

The slow road is shorter by about ten miles, but it involves no motorways at all, and will take more like nine hours. This time is made up of six hours of actual driving, and three hours of footling around – a stop for lunch, a poke about in a charity shop or an interesting church, a stop for tea, possibly a nap. I've evolved this slow way over the last thirty-five years. You could put Presteigne to Newhaven into your sat-nav until forever, and you'd still not find the way, not all of it. I cross the Lugg Bridge from Radnorshire into Herefordshire, skirt Leominster and Ledbury, and bridge the Severn at Maisemore. I go round Gloucester, up Birdlip Hill, and onto the fast road to Cirencester. But then, as I come into subtopian Swindon, rather than heading down to the M4 by where the Honda factory used to be, I turn left, and take the road to Fairford.

I always look forward to stopping by the old town. It has easy parking, good coffee, efficient public conveniences, and the only full set of medieval stained glass to be found in any English parish church. Dating from about 1500, when the church was new, the windows depict the life of Christ, from the Old Testament prophecies of His coming, to His sitting in final Judgement. The Fairford windows are a great and glorious expression of Christendom's high noon. They were imported from Burgundian Flanders for the opening of the new church, one of the last 'medieval' churches built in England before the Reformation.

When travelling through northern France and the Low Countries, it's almost commonplace to see glass of this quality, but in England, there is just Fairford. The odd window has survived in other churches, here and there, and the cathedrals have hung on to a fair bit of their medieval glass, but most of the stained glass you see in English parish churches is Victorian or later. The survival of a complete set of late medieval stained-glass windows is a kind of miracle, because 1500 was not a great moment to be depicting the life of Christ in stained glass in England. Before the Reformation, churches were polychromatic with dazzling colour, but by the 1540s the stripping of the altars, the whitewashing of the wall paintings, and the smashing of the glass had begun. It was as if colour were a sin that had to be purged from the body of the Church. Protestant Reformers would condemn depictions of Christ as idolatrous, sacrilegious, and, above all, popish. The only way to learn about God was by reading the Bible in black and white, not by gawping at technicolour windows.

A century later, during the English Civil War,[1] iconoclasm became Parliamentary policy. 'The Committee for the Demolition of Monuments of Superstition and Idolatry' gave an air of respectability to the thugs who were kicking your church in. No one is quite sure how the Fairford windows survived the Civil War, but the best bet is that the churchwarden had the foresight to take them down, and to bury them in a field until the hostilities were through. Every other church got its windows smashed up. Imagine your local church – the windows, the statues, the pictures – kicked in, desecrated, in just the same way, and for just the same reasons, that the Taliban dynamited the Buddhas of Bamiyan.

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[1] The series of civil wars in Britain and Ireland which included the First English Civil War (1642–46) are known to historians as 'the Wars of the Three Kingdoms'. They ran, on and off, from about 1639 until about 1690, followed by a brief revival in 1715, with a final curtain call in 1745.

The Civil Wars were between fathers and sons, friends and neighbours, between this town and the next. Death hid behind every hedge, was waiting down every street. In 1650, the Puritan divine Richard Baxter wrote, 'if you had seen the general dissolution of the world, and all the pomp and glory of it reduced to ashes, if you saw all on a fire about you, sumptuous buildings, cities, kingdoms, land, water, earth, heaven, all flaming about your ears, if you had seen all that men laboured for, and sold their souls for, gone … what would such a sight as this persuade you to do?'

It's a good question. We shall find out, I fear, in our own age of pestilence, famine, and war.

My paternal grandfather, Charles Jesse Marchant, was a carpenter by trade, and he helped to build RAF Fairford during Hitler's War. It was planned as a base from which gliders could be flung into Normandy on D-Day, and it still has a role today. The runway at Fairford is the only one in the UK long and strong enough to host heavy US bombers (or to land the Space Shuttle), so it was used to launch B-52s during both Iraq wars, and also in the illegal 1999 NATO bombings of Belgrade. In July every year, RAF Fairford is home to the Royal International Air Tattoo, where war fans can see their favourite weapons of mass destruction close up, and take selfies with them.

As the warplanes climb into the sky, the Cotswolds open up beneath their wings. There below, like a collage made from antiquated greeting cards, is a vision of Ideal England, a rural idyll of farriers and coachmen and jangling horse brasses and stamping shire horses pulling the plough through the honest English soil; of goodwives in shawls spinning by their open thatched cottage doors, hollyhocks reaching for the never-ending sun; of ruddy-faced yeomen supping nut-brown ale before an open fire in a welcoming inn.

Ideal England has several regions in addition to the Arcadian Cotswolds. There's Grim Oop North, divided into Bluff Yorkshire, moors and mountains and vets and if tha' ever does owt for nowt, do it for thissen; and Breezy Lancashire, donkey rides on the beach for a tanner, Elsie Tanner with a ladder in her stockings, and Fred Dibnah up a ladder on the chimney of a dark satanic mill. There's the Coast, tanned fishermen with wise lined faces sitting on lobster pots mending nets or pointing out to sea with their pipes; and the West Country, which is a cross between Arcadia and the Coast, but with smocks and cider.[2]

And then there is Sussex, good old Sussex, home to some of England's most potent myths about itself. When people think of the white cliffs, they are not really thinking about the Dover cliffs, which are a bit grubby, and overlook a lorry park, but the brilliant white cliffs of the Seven Sisters, a chalk sine wave rising in pitch towards Beachy Head, with the meanders of the Cuckmere River in the foreground. This is probably the best-known 'view' in England, as the dozens of tourists gathered in the car park at Exceat Bridge to take photos against the backdrop of the cliffs attest.

If anyone knows just one date and one place in Sussex history, it's 1066 and All That, the Battle of Hastings, where the last English king, Harold II, died trying to save England from the Conqueror. The story of the English defeat was made into the Bayeux Tapestry, so that, later, Nigel Farage could wear a Bayeux Tapestry tie with his checked shirt and raspberry-coloured corduroy pantaloons.

Dad's Army was set in Ideal Sussex. Walmington-on-Sea is supposed to be in Sussex (though much of it was filmed in Thetford, in Norfolk), and Captain Mainwaring is the best-known (albeit fictional) alumnus of Eastbourne Grammar School. That final V sign, bouncing up and down in the TV show's credits; that's Sussex telling Hitler to fuck off. My stepfather Ralph Foxwell, born in Pevensey in 1926, was in the Home Guard, and he stood sentry duty over the Seven Sisters. He was in an 'Auxiliary Unit' – the platoons of young men who were trained to operate as guerrillas behind the German lines, should the invasion come. He is a trained killer; aged ninety-five at the time of writing, I still wouldn't like to take him on.

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[2] For Americans, one of the most important regions of Ideal England is Scotland. Luckily, the Americans haven't noticed Wales, which has its own fictions to cope with.

I have heard his war stories all my life, and they are all set in the Sussex Downs. One thing that has always struck me about them is the immediacy of the Battle of Britain for people living in Kent and Sussex. The fighting was overhead, sometimes only a few hundred feet overhead, day after day, watched by children in their holidays from school. My stepdad and his brother were (somewhat feebly) strafed by a JU-88 bomber, whilst they were haymaking on the Glyndebourne estate. They watched the dead bodies of Canadian soldiers being unloaded from barges at Newhaven bridge after the Dieppe raid. A week after D-Day, they fished hundreds of life jackets from the Sussex Ouse, carried almost to Lewes by the incoming tide. Doodlebugs grumbled over the Downs and across the Weald, looking like they were on fire, on their way to do one last round of damage to London.

Like most of the few remaining old people who actually took part in Hitler's War, my stepfather is anti-jingoistic and pro-European, but it can be hard sometimes to hear his peaceable Sussex burr above the baying voices of those for whom Ideal England is Alone Then, Spitfires over the White Cliffs of Dover, Two World Wars, One World Cup, giant poppies hung from street lights Oi Oi In-ger-land. This version of Ideal England is the revenant Empire, risen from the grave to possess men in their sixties and seventies who learned history and politics from old copies of *Commando* comic, and who have come to believe that they fought in the war themselves.

Land of our Birth, our faith, our pride,
For whose dear sake our fathers died;

O Motherland, we pledge to thee
Head, heart and hand through the years to be!

That's Rudyard Kipling, from *Puck of Pook's Hill*, published in 1906. Kipling's patriotic fervour for the land of England was, in particular, for the Sussex countryside around Burwash where he lived out his days. Pook's Hill is in Sussex, and Sussex, for Kipling and many of his readers, represented the Motherland.

I'm just in love with all these three,
The Weald an' the Marsh an' the Down countrie;
Nor I don't know which I love the most,
The Weald or the Marsh or the white chalk coast!

Also Kipling, also from *Puck of Pook's Hill*. The marsh is hard to spot these days. Much of it has been built on. The Brighton/Worthing/Littlehampton conurbation is the fifteenth largest in the UK – population 474,485, according to the 2011 census. The M23 divides Sussex in half top to bottom, and the A27 quarters it. Gatwick fills the sky. Red lights pulse from the windfarms out at sea, and on the horizon container ships like floating islands pass up channel on their way from Shanghai to Felixstowe or Rotterdam.

The 'Down countrie' and large parts of the Weald have been institutionalised, and are now part of the South Downs National Park. Folded within its breast is another Ideal Sussex, not just different from, but opposed to Kipling's, which I call Bloomsbury Country. Rodmell village second homeowner, Mrs. Virginia Woolf, despised those she saw as members of the jingoistic and vulgarian hoi polloi. And not just generally, but also in particular. She loathed the people of the Ouse Valley, such as my family, calling them 'white slugs'.[3] Whatever the area around Lewes and Glynde once meant to the Bloomsbury Set (something to do with authenticity, as it usually does with people who want to get their head together in the country), what is left, if you are not careful, is a pale impression of a place, a Charleston Farmhouse tote bag, distressed pastel-painted creative hub in a converted stable block sort of place. A boutique festival sort of place, an artisanal gin Michelin-starred pub, Airbnb *Country Living* place, a defanged, disenchanted landscape where there's a Range Rover Evoque round every nook and corner, and where whimsy is queen.

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[3] Mrs. Woolf called Newhaven the City of the Dead, so it is immune from inclusion in Bloomsbury Country.

And lest you suspect that I'm against whimsy, I live as far away from the real world as I can manage, in a chocolate-box town on the border of Wales and England, in a 500-year-old cottage, where I sit in my book-lined study, smoking my old pipe, writing on an antediluvian word processor. Whimsical psycho-topography is my genre, after all.

There is still a long way to go from Fairford to Newhaven, in every possible sense. I bridge the headwaters of the Thames at Lechlade, then follow the Vale of the White Horse to Wantage, before crossing the high Berkshire Downs to the Newbury suburb of Speenhamland. On past Greenham Common and Watership Down, past Jane Austen's Chawton and Gilbert White's Selborne, I enter West Sussex in a wood somewhere between the villages of Liss and Rogate.

Sussex is where I grew up.[4] It's where my mum and Ralph Foxwell were born and where he still lives. When I was twenty-one, I moved to Hove, and lived there for eight eventful years. My mother died in Brighton, my daughter Charlie was born in Brighton and my daughter Minnie grew up there. Brighton, Lewes, Hastings, and even Peacehaven are full of family and friends, people I like and love and have loved. But Newhaven is my town. I went to school in Newhaven, Meeching County Primary and Tideway School and Sixth Form. I took my class identity from Newhaven and the Lower Ouse Valley; long on proud working class, but with a twist of embittered landless peasant. I had my first kiss and my greatest heartbreak in Newhaven. I played in the best band from Newhaven, ever, and lost the tapes. In the autumn of 1985, in a downland combe running parallel to the A259 between Newhaven and Seaford, I spent a rewarding few days as the Buddha, due to the ingestion of large quantities of Nepalese temple balls. I stopped being the Buddha when I found God in Bishopstone churchyard, manifest in a sea fret that sparkled like Lurex. I have told these stories since I started writing, stories about how I am from Newhaven, and proud. But ...

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[4] It was Sussex until 1974, when it was divided into two counties, East and West.

I never really felt I belonged to Sussex. I was born in Shalford, in Surrey, and lived there till I was five. My birth father, Alan Raymond Marchant, was from Surrey, and so was my grandpop, Charles Jesse. As far as I knew, so were all the Marchants, ever. And my mum might have been born in Sussex, but she lived in the Surrey village of Ewhurst from the age of two until she married my father, aged twenty-three. Even though we moved when I was five to a village in Northamptonshire, I still spent much of my school holidays at my respective grandparents' houses in Surrey, in Ewhurst and Shalford, which became, for me, enchanted places, my own Ideal England.

Ewhurst is tucked under the southern lee of Pitch Hill, and in my memory is surrounded by greenwoods veined by streams and studded in spring with countless primroses, basketfuls of which I would pick with my grandmother, before walking back to her almshouse cottage to make posies tied with wool for me to take round the village to her friends and neighbours. My parents and Ralph's parents were married in Ewhurst church; Ralph's brother was born in the village, and he has an aunt in the graveyard. My grandmother, two aunts and an uncle, and now my mum, are all buried there too.

Shalford was my first home; its places were my first places, the first things of which I was aware. The church with its copper spire, out on the Guildford Road, is the church where I was christened. The Parrot, next to the River Wey, was where my father and my uncle went to after cricket on the green, and so it became the first local, outside which I would be left sleeping in my pram while my dad drank Guinness and my mum had a Babycham. Grandpop Charlie's always mysterious and wonderful builders' yard, smelling of Douglas fir and putty, was the first workplace, and on the first walks, up to St. Martha's, or along the Pilgrims' Way, or on the riverside path into Guildford, I heard my first histories, and my first myths. Surrey was home, my childhood Eden, from which I was plucked.

When I was ten, my parents split up, and my mum took us from Northants to stay with her family in Newhaven, where she married her second cousin, Ralph Foxwell, who ran a small farm with his brother. But Surrey was where I identified with, not Sussex. Really, in Newhaven, my home town, I'm an incomer. In Sussex, I'm from off, from away, just as much as I am here in the largely imaginary Welsh county of Radnorshire, where I first moved aged twenty-eight, because I could no longer hack living in Brighton. Ever since I was a lad, I've had an issue with Sussex, or, at least, with Ideal Sussex, with myths like Kipling's Motherland and Mrs. Woolf's 'Bloomsbury Country'. Neither seemed to match the hard-scrabble existence of Newhaven, or the reality of Ralph's life on the land. Sussex, I felt, was just not for me. I wasn't even from there.

And yet, tonight, I long to drive once more on the slow road through Midhurst and Petworth, Pulborough and Storrington, Steyning and Bramber, through Preston Village and Falmer, and down the Kingston road, through Rodmell and Piddinghoe, and come home at last to Newhaven, where my mum and old Ralph Foxwell will be waiting at the door, anxious for my arrival.

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