

The Road to Little Dribbling

More Notes from a Small Island

B. Bryson

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Three for two. The Blackwell outlet at the Wellcome Institute. Light reading. Maybe ideal for the deal. A kind of secret indulgence, not good for you for being delightfully sweet, but if no one sees it, what harm will it do? What no one knows, will never hurt you. Apparently the book is a follow-up of a hugely successful writing and publishing endeavor from the 90's. The title makes you think of Orwell's classical report about coal miners. But surely this is very different indeed.

This is travel reporting, and as such it follows a certain formula. Space and time, geography and history. First there is an itinerary, a list of places following a more or less haphazard selection of stops on the way making up a chain of consecutively spatially linked ones. With modern air travel, the spatial relation between the different places may be discarded, but for that, luckily, the island is after all too small. Yet, in real travel, the traveller follows his or her itinerary faithfully and without jumps and hiatuses, just as you follow your life journey, without interruptions; but for this rule the author is far too busy and successful to abide with, instead the travel as an actual event is a shame, just an artful illusion (although the author is honest enough to admit it) made up of pieces of travels added up. Now each place is an excuse for a digression or two in any classical account. Those digressions tend to have nothing to do with each other, there is no thematic unity, only haphazard associations brought fourth by an accidental succession of places. Therein lies the charm of the genre, the freedom to pick and choose what you decide to do not so much due to the whims of the author, which may be hard to accept, but by the inescapable logic of the sequence of places defining the journey, something which the reader is much more liable to accept. And reading is a matter of being accepted, and Bryson is if anything accepted. Why is that?

Here he is, a quintessential Midwestern American, and more American than that you cannot be. The inhabitants of New York and California are marred by a certain sophistication, or at least suspicion of such, but no one is going to accuse a guy from Iowa to be sophisticated. He is definitely of my generation, our birth dates do not differ by much more than than a year. He came of age in the early 70s, discovered England, fell in love with the country, and in order to cement his union, he married an English woman (although he would not necessarily agree with the sequence of implications). Thus the book is above all a declaration of love for England, which he thinks is the most beautiful country in the world, (which if you come to think of it is not such a preposterous assessment as it may seem on first sight, but to that I will return), and nowhere else, he adds, do you find such a concentration of interesting things (it surely beats Iowa). Every author worth its salt has a distinct voice, and the voice of Bryson is a grumpy old fellow, with whose disaffections most of his readers can share. Too much traffic on the roads, the threat of

urban sprawl, the decline of biological diversity, the degeneration of village life. Indeed the classical stores disappear, and great chains take over, making country life less romantic (if not necessarily less convenient). He looks back with nostalgia on the time of the early seventies and his own first encounter. At times he displays scathing wit, such as when describing the notion of Holiday Camps, already initiated in the mid 30', but not taking off until the early 50's and the immediate post-war years, remarking *Butlin had invented the prisoner-of-war camp, and this being Britain, people loved it..* Then alluringly he hints at the real reason for its popularity, stomping its cheapness and the convenience of the all-inclusive, namely the sexual allure of what was really going on, and that the ostensible waitresses serving the needs of the vacationers were actual prostitutes. In the end horny and unruly teenagers took over and families fled, and the vacation form eventually fell out of favor with the availability of cheap flights to exotic places, a reason why most traditional sea-side resorts in Britain have come on hard times, especially their epitome - Blackpool - with its famous pier.

The route is not entirely haphazard going from the south to the north, In fact, the author claims to have found the longest inclusive chord of the island, meaning a chord lying entirely within the island, and hence only intersecting the coastline in two points, calling it with mock modesty, the Bryson line, going from Bognor Regis in the very south to Cape Wrath up at a windswept peninsula in northern Scotland. It would be folly to literally follow such a straight line, so Bryson zig zags up, spending I think, an inordinate amount of time, at least as measured by pages, in the south. So there are a fair amount of villages and small towns mentioned. Some are charming, some are dismal and in permanent decline, such as Grimsby which I recall gloomily from my first visit to England in 1966, but as I am to understand from his account, its decline had not yet started in earnest at the time. Typically he lists the names of the hotels he avails himself of, maybe even the standard of their services, along with the notable stores in the town, or those conspicuously missing (from earlier visits), paying particular attention to bookstores. And of course pubs get their shares of attention, and not too seldom does he has a pint too many, but who cares, he will not inconvenience the reader, yet it could all be rather tedious, but he manages to avoid such pitfalls. On the other hand some amount of tedium is always reassuring to the reader who does not want to get challenged all the time. Thus places are never really evoked, although he does make an effort at times, it is more a case of name dropping (maybe even dripping?) and as many readers, including myself, have been to many of the places, in my case even including Buxton and Matlock on a bike trip in 1983, it does not really matter, you can trust the reader to nod in agreement. Bryson does not bicycle, instead he takes a car, hired or private, occasionally a bus or a railway, as on his last leg, more or less starting from scratch. Of course never a flight, which is fine with me.

Now is the English landscape so beautiful as he claims. I think so, I have always found it so. It is not spectacular, nor sublime as people would have said two hundred years ago, but instead on a very human scale, and hence eminently adaptable to walking or bicycling, Being very human, it also becomes very cosy. It is not wild nature, which too often turns desolate, except possibly in Northern Scotland, but tamed one, adapted to human needs. But for how much longer? The sentiments and attitudes which have shaped this landscape, not to mention the kind of life which let it come about in the

first place, are becoming out of date. But even Constable found that, and his painting is really a celebration of nostalgia, trying to put on canvas a way of life that was ebbing out during his life time. After all, England was the first country really to undergo an industrial revolution, so drastically changing a tenor of life, which had survived from medieval days, even from before. Much of England is of course ugly, but its ugliness has never been allowed to sprawl indiscriminately, and what remains of the ugliness of the old now almost appears quaint. But you be sure, the ugliness of the future will not be quaint, only sleek. Yet it is not here yet. But sure it will be coming.

But what happened to industrial Britain which ones supplied the lions share of manufactured goods in the world. It was until fairly recently an empire and a world power, but its world power was lost already as a consequence of the First World War, but it did not realize, and during the Second World War, for all the bluster of a Churchill, it played but a marginal role. Afterwards the Empire was soon gone, not with a big Bang but with a whimper, it lost what edge it had, yet it managed to devise its own hydrogen bomb, the author notes proudly. Now in spite of its decline, it seems wealthier than ever, wealth actually being the common source for all those things which make author and reader alike to grump. Although the author does not seem to be aware of it, or more likely pretends he is not. And in spite of the boorishness of its people when it comes to spelling and grammar, it still boasts the best universities in the world, and on top of that in spite of niggardly educational spending as well. So some things at least it makes right.

And on the proud note, the author happily having reached his goal in northern Scotland, concludes his book and journey. Maybe a little wiser, if not much. And the reader having eagerly turned the pages in pleasant anticipation, is left in the lurch. The book is like a conversation, which you have found very congenial, yet after it is concluded, you hardly remember anything. But that is not the point, conversations are normally about small talk and being social, not about edification and instruction, then we are talking about other things, more demanding and challenging. But it all points to the source of the authors success, based on coming across as a social fellow you would not mind sharing a walk with.

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