

The Colours of Patriotism

by FRED INGLIS

Is it still possible to claim oneself, in polite academic company, a patriot? Both the present and the previous Prime Minister have gestured, a bit apologetically but, I think, sincerely, towards such a thing for themselves and even for their parties. Everyone is at pains to dissociate themselves, of course, from the more horrible forms of chauvinism of the kind worn by the BNP, but a mild form of non-aggressive nationalism is usual in Scotland and Wales, much qualified in the North by the failures and disgrace of the national banks. Explicit and boisterous patriotism is pretty well confined to sport, as witness all those cars flying the crosses of St George.

Patriotism is not, absolutely not, a configuration of emotions and thoughts to be measured by attitude survey. It is too submarine and inarticulate in Britain to command a sufficient rhetoric for colloquial expression. Even at highwater moments of history – 1914, 1940 – patriotic language tended, as Orwell pointed out seventy years ago, to commemorate defeats and to be undercut by the truculent bawdy of the marching songs as well as by brutal scepticism.

So if I were to press myself on the sources of a patriotism I undoubtedly feel but am embarrassed to mention, what would they be?

Well, I'm proud to be citizen of a country with our National Health Service. Of course, the filthy yellow press, which is now so flagrant a violation of common decency as to waken the quiet patriot to shame that her country can daily support such vileness and mendacity, will have it that all hospitals are sewers of infection, , their corridors crammed with patients prostrate on trolleys. But common experience refutes all that by way of the cleansing conversation of the culture.

That same conversation still finds plenty to celebrate in the customs and ceremonies of ordinary British life: in the very fact, perhaps, of unaffected contempt for the venality discovered among their political representatives - a negligible item as compared, let us say, with the derisory antics of the Italian Prime Minister. The *Guardian* notwithstanding, I

discover in myself some pride in a courteous and capable police force, in a modestly courageous and obedient military (its means of legitimate violence being an obvious moral test of a polity), and beyond these routine instances, who is there whose patriotic sentiment is not softened into admiration and affection by the massive continuity of such organisations as the Brownies, the Women's Institute, the PTAs (it is the women who save us), the trainspotters, the vintage car maniacs, the utterly admirable legions of the RSPB, recently and lovingly apotheosised as 'Swallows and Anoraks'?

But the love of country which reaches beyond sentiment deep into the sources of action, and which is still effortlessly and speechlessly shared by multicultural millions is exactly that: love of the actual geography, in Philip Larkin's plangent words, "The shadows, the meadows, the lanes / The guildhalls, the carved choirs'. Larkin, however, titled his poem, 'Going, going', and it was a sour threnody on the certain disappearance – "I just think it will happen, soon" – of the loveliest creation of five hundred years of popular culture, the Scottish, Welsh, English and Northern Irish landscapes.

Larkin wrote his poem in 1972; nearly forty years later it hasn't happened, yet. A wonderful May and June this year, the water table high, the bloom and blossom set voluptuously plentiful, bridal white, bridesmaid's pink, the igneous green fields and leaves immediately drew innumerable worshippers out at the weekend to turn a passion for the landscape into the harmless action of the picnic.

II

What have they come to find, to realise, to act out and upon? Surely it is the love of a still unruined, still beautiful landscape? In the same landscape, a destination offers itself to give the outing its purpose: the much-visited, always hospitable ruins and restorations from a quarter-understood past. The worshippers make for Stourhead, Petworth, Dunstanburgh Castle, Caernarvon, Stirling, the Giant's Causeway, the Mousehole Cat, pay their respects and, while eating their sandwiches, offer thanksgiving to the loveliness in front of them, their common wealth.

Such contemplative moments provide the communion of a secular society and, because art is the prior ground of religion, they represent one part of the spontaneous art-making of each individual, his and her inevitable creativeness.

Think of a vantage point not your home but well-known and well-loved to you (probably a holiday place). Maybe it has (as the room in my own such recollection has) what is well-called a picture window. The window is about five feet by eight, about the size of an average Constable or Monet. It gives onto a low dune of whin grasses at the end of a neat, short lawn, beyond which there opens the intimate immensity of the Northumbrian beach, curving north and south, hard, golden-brown, flat, in a huge and lovely arc.

At first sight, the picture is complete: grass, dune, beach, sea, the big sky, and a couple of miles out, the perfectly placed lighthouse and rocky outcrop of the Farne Islands. As you come to know it, the window frames many different pictures. (Remember that Cézanne painted Mont St Victoire more than a thousand times). The clouds move grandly across. The wind blows and the whins wave furiously along the central horizontal of the picture. The gulls wheel and glide across the top half, glittering at times as the sun breaks through. A child trails a long seaweed down to the little waves at the sea's edge.

The details of each picture depend upon the chance volitions of the weather, of the natural life of the place, of other people. Their meaning is not that they are there to be watched. (The child and the gulls are on their own errands.) There is no parade before the watcher. Rather, the watcher is, so to say, diffused into the scene itself, *becomes the scene*, is more like an untaught painter, one who says, as people often do, "I wish I could paint that". The watcher makes the varied life of the scene into his or her own work of art (and constantly revisits it in memory).

The scene mustn't have too much in it. This isn't a matter of too many people. (There are plenty of people in, for instance, Seurat's *Sunday Afternoon at La Grande Jatte*, but it would fit a window.) But too large an event would bring the immensity of space up to the window in a rush, and turn observer into participant. Gazing upon such a scene, we fit the time we have to the area of the place. The fitting of time to space and of both to feeling depends on our natural gift for aesthetics, and the discipline of both the moment and of our selves. When the scene does not fit the time with enough small events, we become bored. (The right

measure of such smallness is to be found in so many impressionist paintings, which is why we love them so. A little girl runs ahead of her mother into a poppy field. A man in a bowler hat lies on the grass and looks at bathers in the Seine.) Unself-regarding observation melts into a happiness indistinguishable from a love of life. We learn the right thing to feel and the right thing to be from what we see. We learn to do this from landscape and the paintings of landscape.

III

There was a famous and crazy piece of research in 1997, by two itinerant Russians, Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, which led them to claim, not without plausibility it seems, that two billion people agree more or less not only that the best kind of painting is a landscape painting, but that such a painting ideally placed the beholder on a green grassy slope overlooking blue water framed by coulisses of dark green trees with amenable animals in view (cows, sheep, deer) and mountains, probably snow-capped, in the distance. Such a view was equally commended in Cincinnati, Jakarta, Gdansk, Nairobi and Kyoto.

We don't have to make too much of this to see that the research endorses our own most commonplace observation. All over the geography of tourism, we find little stalls selling watercolours, linocuts, miniature acrylics, rough crayon sketches, of the local beauty spots. In the hotel rooms of the tourist capitals, there will be luridly awful prints of flowery parks, flowery copses, flowery clifftop walks. This affecting testimony to a universal desire to discover on one's vacation the lost complicity of humankind with natural beauty provides the energy behind the mass production and reproduction of land-and-sea-and-townscape paintings. The longing is universal, insatiable, and finds its satisfaction in the real thing and in hundreds of thousands of represented landscapes ranging in quality from kitsch Hallmark birthday cards and placemats to masterpieces.

It was Ruskin who first made the startling observation that our passion for landscape stems from "mistakes in our social economy", is the expression of a love of freedom which can no longer find satisfaction in public and civic life, and that our feeling for such subjects, natural or represented, is a measure of the victory in values of private over public action and meaning. The point of our rambles and the painting of the grassy slope, the sparkling lake,

the coppice of trees, and the blue remembered hills, is that there is the spot (in Ruskin's words) "where we can lose the company of our friends among the hills".

Ruskin however was surely wrong to the extent that tramping the landscape, sitting beside the shore, ambling round the galleries, even gazing happily at or joining a little watercolour painting expedition for the ten or the seventy year olds, are gratifyingly gregarious, cheerfully communal, multiply *shared* undertakings. These happy practices are the nearest thing we now have to a national religion. Its metaphysics was contrived by the great Romantics, its sacred places are enshrined in the historical landscape, and its liturgy formed by the great works of art which variously reflect and interpret it.

Things are none the worse for this dissolving of old theodicy into the sublime beneficence of a certainly indifferent nature. Indeed, not just none the worse, but lots better. This is a church traditional believers can join anyway, and one whose pieties, devotions, jokes and debauches are not only seemly and kindly ("I'm a water colour orgiast") but entirely without hierarchy, open to everybody, no weapons needed.

What is more, its traditions are still going strong. At a time of much pessimism in the trade union of cultural commentary, landscape painting is still in ruddy health, the giants of its practice – Howard Hodgkin, Len Tabner, David Tress, David Hockney – are all going strong, and as dozens of small town galleries bear purchasable witness, a busily productive cultural industry is thriving in the still strong localism of British life.

If you stop on your passage through dozens of smallish market towns or tourist command posts – through Wells, Moreton-in-Marsh, St Ives (naturally), St David's, Cockermouth, Reeth, Ayr, Fraserburgh – you will find genteelly struggling galleries stacked with respectable landscape paintings, products of painters working in a known tradition towards which, the moment they lose their way on a canvas, they can stretch out a hand and find it there within reach, to steady them and guide them onwards.

It is a great and varied tradition: it showed Turner the way, for sure, mightiest saint of this vast assembly, commemorated in his very own cathedral at the Tate; the great thing is, however, that it is still full of protean, vigorous life, releasing its terrific energy in the temporary stalls of Affordable Art markets all over the capital cities of the country.

Back in 1809 a close painter friend wrote to that most firm and emulable of water-colourists, John Sell Cotman, that "every artist must, to a certain degree, obey his master, the public... Two thirds of mankind, you know, mind more what is represented than how it is done".

Quite right, too. If we know the place in the picture and the picture is some good, we will love it the more. Familiarity should have a strong quotient in aesthetics. The picture hangs there, changeless, changeful, a solace one day, a joy another, a memento always. These qualities, regularly apparent in the *Antiques Roadshow*, are not enough treasured in the awful severities of art history, but they are full of life in the local art exhibitions and galleries.

There, people learn to have their ardent feeling for the landscape corroborated and, it may be, deepened and refined. They learn the correspondence between pigment and emotion, the form of a picture, the poetics of a place, and the proportions of their own lives. They find, perhaps, their own hearts spoken for (or, just as they do when, standing, a bit puffed, above the Sussex Downs, on the slopes of the Old Man of Coniston, at the gates of Glencoe or on the edge of Connemara, they behold, as the book says, the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them.)

Love of one's country then turns out to be the same thing as love of one's countryside, a dose as strong as gin, as restorative as a return to health, as strengthening as friendship, as good as gold. The horizon, the flower and the paint alike make the heart swell to the size of art, and brim over, even if it's a bit shy-making to say so, in brief tears of happiness. Thus patriotism, elsewhere so bitter and horrible, finds it best home.