

with alcohol and ritual. The Christmas moan-fest and bah-humbug rule combine Eeyorishness with courtesy and hypocrisy, while the Christmas-present rules blend courtesy and hypocrisy again. The New Year's Eve orderly-disorder rule is about moderation again, and its close relation fair play, as well as the now very familiar attempts to control social dis-ease symptoms with alcohol and ritual – also evident in most of the minor calendricals. Holidays involve more of the same, and highlight our need to limit excess and indulgence – our need for moderation.

The class rules governing our rites of passage are about class-consciousness, of course, but also involve the usual close relation of this trait, hypocrisy – and in particular that special English blend of modesty and hypocrisy, which all the social classes seem to exhibit in equal degree.

The intimate, private transitional rites represent one of our very few genuine escapes from our debilitating social dis-ease. (The other main escape is sex, also a private matter.) Our fanatical obsession with privacy may be a symptom of our social dis-ease, but we also value privacy because it allows us some relief from this affliction. At home, among close family, friends and lovers, we can be warm and spontaneous and really quite remarkably human. This is the side of us that many visitors to this country never see, or only catch rare glimpses of. You have to be patient to witness it – like waiting for giant pandas to mate.

63. Incidentally, only 56 percent believe in opinion polls.

64. Victor Turner later re-defined 'rites of passage' to exclude calendrical rites, focusing only on transitions in which an individual is socially transformed, but as van Gennep invented the term I feel he should get to decide what it means, and I'm using his rather broader definition.

65. By which I mean an ordinary Anglican funeral – the kind the vast majority of us have, and most English readers will have attended at some point. I do realise that there are many other sorts, but there is not space here to cover all the funeral practices of minority faiths, which in any case could not be described as typically English.

66. We seem to have a habit of re-naming festivals after the main symbols associated with them, rather than the events they are supposed to commemorate – Remembrance Day is more widely known as Poppy Day, for example, after the red paper poppies we wear to remember the war-dead. The organisers of Comic Relief had the good sense to pre-empt us by calling their national charitable fund-raising day Red Nose Day, after the red plastic noses we are encouraged to buy and wear, rather than trying to call it Comic Relief Day.

## CONCLUSION

### DEFINING ENGLISHNESS

At the beginning, I set out to discover the 'defining characteristics of Englishness' by closely observing distinctive regularities in English behaviour, identifying the specific hidden rules governing these behaviour patterns, and then figuring out what these rules reveal about our national character. A sort of semi-scientific procedure, I suppose. Well, systematic, at least. But despite all the confident-sounding noises I was making in the Introduction, I had no idea whether or not it would work, as this approach to understanding a national character had not been tried before.

It seems to have worked. Or maybe that's a bit presumptuous. What I mean is that this approach has certainly given *me* a better understanding of the 'grammar' – or 'mindset' or 'ethos' or '*gemeingeist*' or 'cultural genome' or whatever you want to call it – of Englishness. Now, when I witness some apparently bizarre or ludicrous English behaviour (as I write this, we are in the middle of the Christmas-party season) I can say to myself, for example, 'Ah, yes: typical case of social dis-ease, medicated with alcohol and festive liminality, + humour + moderation'. (I don't usually say it out loud, because people would think I was bonkers.)

But the point of this Englishness project was not to allow me to feel quietly smug and omniscient. The idea was that other people might find it helpful too. As you know, I've been puzzling all this out as we went along, chapter by chapter, so the book has been a bit like one of those maths tests where the teacher says you have to 'show the workings-out' rather than just putting down the final answer. This means that if you think I've got the final answer to the 'what is Englishness?' question wrong, at least you can see exactly where I made my mistakes. It also means that, at this point, you know at least as much as I do about the defining characteristics of Englishness we've been trying to identify. I don't have anything up my sleeve to pull out for a grand finale. You could write this final chapter yourself if you felt like it.

### THE LIST

But I promised, at the very least, a definitive list of our defining characteristics, and at best some sort of model or diagram or recipe showing how they fit together. So let's start with The List. During all the 'workings out', I seem to have developed a kind of shorthand way of referring to these characteristics, using a single word for each ('social dis-ease', 'moderation', 'Eeyorishness', etc.) without spelling out its entire meaning every time, and indeed often expanding, revising and refining my definitions of these terms in the light of new evidence. Much as I love making up new words and playing with old ones, I do realize that there's a danger here of us ending up with enough home-made woolly jargon to knit ourselves a whole pointless new discipline (Englishness Studies or something equally inane), with its own impenetrable dialect. To avoid this, and to save you the trouble of going back to check exactly what I meant by 'empiricism' or 'fair play' or whatever, I'll try this time to give definitive

definitions of each of the defining characteristics. There are ten of these: a central 'core' and then three 'clusters' which I have labelled reflexes, outlooks and values.

## The Core: Social Dis-ease

The central 'core' of Englishness. Social dis-ease is a shorthand term for all our chronic social inhibitions and handicaps. The English social dis-ease is a congenital disorder, bordering on a sort of sub-clinical combination of autism and agoraphobia (the politically correct euphemism would be 'socially challenged'). It is our lack of ease, discomfort and incompetence in the field (minefield) of social interaction; our embarrassment, insularity, awkwardness, perverse obliqueness, emotional constipation, fear of intimacy and general inability to engage in a normal and straightforward fashion with other human beings. When we feel uncomfortable in social situations (that is, most of the time) we either become over-polite, buttoned up and awkwardly restrained or loud, loutish, crude, violent and generally obnoxious. Both our famous 'English reserve' and our infamous 'English hooliganism' are symptoms of this social dis-ease, as is our obsession with privacy. Some of us are more severely afflicted than others. The dis-ease is treatable (temporary alleviation/remission can be achieved using props and facilitators – games, pubs, clubs, weather-speak, cyberspace, pets, etc. – and/or ritual, alcohol, magic words and other medications), and we enjoy periods of 'natural' remission in private and among intimates, but it is never entirely curable. Most peculiarities of English behaviour are traceable, either directly or indirectly, to this unfortunate affliction. Key phrases include: 'An Englishman's home is his castle'; 'Nice day, isn't it?'; 'Oi -what you looking at?'; 'Mind your own business'; 'I don't like to pry, but . . .'; 'Don't make a fuss/scene'; 'Don't draw attention to yourself'; 'Keep yourself to yourself'; 'Ere we go, 'ere we go'; 'Enger-land! Enger-land! Enger-land!'

## Reflexes

Our deeply ingrained impulses. Our automatic, unthinking ways of being/ways of doing things. Our knee-jerk responses. Our 'default modes'. Cultural equivalents of laws of gravity.

### Humour

Probably the most important of our three basic reflexes. Humour is our most effective built-in antidote to our social dis-ease. When God (or Something) cursed us with The English Social Dis-ease, He/She/It softened the blow by also giving us The English Sense of Humour. The English do not have any sort of global monopoly on humour, but what is distinctive is the sheer pervasiveness and supreme importance of humour in English everyday life and culture. In other cultures, there is 'a time and a place' for humour: among the English it is a constant, a given – there is *always* an undercurrent of humour. Virtually all English conversations and social interactions involve at least some degree of banter, teasing, irony, wit, mockery, wordplay, satire, understatement, humorous self-deprecation, sarcasm, pomposity-pricking or just silliness. Humour is not a special, separate kind of talk: it is our 'default mode'; it is like breathing; we cannot function without it. English humour is a reflex, a knee-jerk response, particularly when we are feeling uncomfortable or awkward: when in doubt, joke. The taboo on earnestness is deeply embedded in the English psyche. Our response to earnestness is a distinctively English blend of armchair cynicism, ironic detachment, a squeamish distaste for sentimentality, a stubborn refusal to be duped or taken in by fine rhetoric, and a mischievous delight in pricking the balloons of pomposity and self-importance. (English humour is *not* to be confused with 'good humour' or cheerfulness – it is often quite the opposite; we have satire instead of revolutions and uprisings.) Key phrases include: 'Oh, come off it!' (Our national catchphrase, along with 'Typical!') Others impossible to list – English humour is all in the *context*, e.g. understatement: 'Not bad' (meaning outstandingly brilliant); 'A bit of a nuisance' (meaning disastrous, traumatic, horrible); 'Not very friendly' (meaning abominably cruel); 'I may be some time' (meaning 'I'm going to die' – although, come to think of it, that one was possibly not intended to be funny).

### Moderation

Another deep-seated, unconscious reflex or 'default mode'. I'm using the term 'moderation' as shorthand for a whole set of related qualities. Our avoidance of extremes, excess and intensity of any kind. Our fear of change. Our fear of *fuss*. Our disapproval of and need to limit indulgence. Our cautiousness and our focus on domesticity and security. Our ambivalence, apathy, woolliness, middlingness, fence-sitting and conservatism – and to some extent our tolerance, which tends to be at least partly a matter of benign indifference. Our moderate industriousness and moderate hedonism (the 'work moderately, play moderately' principle we really live by, rather than the 'work hard, play hard' one we like to quote). Our penchant for order and our special brand of 'orderly disorder'. Our tendency to compromise. Our sheer ordinariness. With some notable exceptions, even our alleged eccentricities are mostly 'collective' and conformist. We do everything in moderation, except moderation, which we take to ludicrous extremes. Far from being wild and reckless, the English 'youth of today' are even more moderate, cautious and unadventurous than their parents' generation. (Only about 14 per cent do not suffer from this moderation-abuse – we must rely on these rare risk-seekers for future innovation and progress.) Key phrases include: 'Don't rock the boat'; 'Don't go overboard'; 'Don't overdo it'; 'For the sake of peace and quiet'; 'Can't be bothered'; 'All very well, in moderation'; 'Safe and sound'; 'Order! Order!'; 'A nice cup of tea'; 'If it was like this all the time, we wouldn't appreciate it'; 'Over-egging the pudding'; 'Too much of a good thing'; 'Happy medium'; 'What do we want? GRADUAL CHANGE! When do we want it? IN DUE COURSE!'

## Hypocrisy

Another unthinking 'default mode'. One of the stereotypes I tried to 'get inside'. The English are rightly renowned for their hypocrisy. This is an omnipresent trait, insidiously infecting almost all of our behaviour – and even the 'ideals' we most prize, such as modesty, courtesy and fair play. But under the special microscope I used for this project, English hypocrisy emerged as somewhat less odious than it might appear to the naked eye. It depends on how you look at it. You could say that most of our politeness/modesty/fairness is hypocritical, but also that most of our hypocrisy is a form of politeness – concealment of real opinions and feelings to avoid causing offence or embarrassment. English hypocrisy seems to be mainly a matter of unconscious, collective *self*-deception – collusion in an unspoken agreement to delude ourselves – rather than a deliberate, cynical, calculated attempt to deceive others. (Our 'polite egalitarianism' is perhaps the best example – an elaborate charade of courteous modesty and fairness, a severe case of what a psychotherapist would call 'denial' of our acute class-consciousness.) Hypocrisy comes easily to us not because we are by nature vile and perfidious (or no more so than any other culture) but because our social dis-ease makes us naturally cautious, oblique, indirect, disinclined to say what we mean or mean what we say, prone to polite pretence rather than honest assertiveness. Our hypocrisies also reveal our values. We are no more *naturally* modest, courteous or fair than any other culture, but we have more unwritten rules prescribing the *appearance* of these qualities, which are clearly very important to us. Key phrases: too numerous to list – English conversation is littered with polite euphemisms and other disguises, deceptions and denials – on average, at least every other 'please', 'thank-you', 'sorry', 'nice', 'lovely' (plus smiles, nods, etc.) is hypocritical.

## Outlooks

Our worldview. Our way of looking at, thinking about, structuring and understanding things. Our sociocultural 'cosmology'.

## Empiricism

The most fundamental of this 'outlook' cluster. Empiricism is another shorthand term into which I am packing a large collection of English attitudes. Strictly speaking, empiricism is a philosophical doctrine holding that all knowledge is derived from sense-experience – and its close relation 'realism' should technically only be used to mean the tenet that matter exists independently of our perception of it. But I am using these terms in a much broader, more informal sense, to include both the anti-theory, anti-abstraction, anti-dogma elements of our philosophical tradition (particularly our mistrust of obscurantist, airy-fairy 'Continental' theorizing and rhetoric) and our stolid, stubborn preference for the factual, concrete and common-sense. 'Empiricism' is shorthand for our down-to-earthness; our matter-of-factness; our pragmatism; our cynical, no-nonsense groundedness; our gritty realism; our distaste for artifice and pretension (yes, I realize that last bit rather contradicts what I said about our hypocrisy, polite euphemisms, etc., but I never claimed that we were consistent). Key phrases include: 'Oh, come off it!' (overlap with Humour – English humour is very empiricist); 'At the end of the day'; 'As a matter of fact'; 'In plain English'; 'I'll believe it when I see it'; 'Typical!' (overlap with Eeyorishness, also very empiricist).

## Eeyorishness

More than just our incessant moaning. Quite apart from the sheer quantity of it, which is staggering, there is something qualitatively distinctive about English moaning. It is utterly ineffectual: we never complain to or confront the source of our discontent, but only whinge endlessly to each other, and proposing practical solutions is forbidden by the moaning rules. But it is socially therapeutic – highly effective as a facilitator of social interaction and bonding. Moaning is also highly enjoyable (there is nothing the English love so much as a good moan – it really is a pleasure to watch) and an opportunity for displays of wit. Almost all 'social' moaning is humorous *mock*-moaning. Real, tearful despair is not allowed, except among intimates. Even if you are feeling truly desperate, you must pretend to be only pretending to feel desperate (the unbearable lightness of being English). By 'Eeyorishness' I mean the mindset/outlook exemplified by our national catchphrase 'Typical!': our chronic pessimism, our assumption that it is in the nature of things to go wrong and be disappointing, but also our perverse satisfaction at seeing our gloomy predictions fulfilled – simultaneously peeved, stoically resigned and smugly omniscient. Our special brand of fatalism – a sort of curiously sunny pessimism. Key phrases include: 'Huh! Typical!'; 'The country's going to the dogs'; 'What did you expect?'; 'I could have told you'; 'There's always something'; 'Mustn't grumble'; 'Better make the best of it'; 'Never mind'; 'Blessed are they who expect nothing, for they shall not be disappointed'.

## Class-consciousness

All human societies have a social hierarchy and methods of indicating social status. What is distinctive about the English class system is (a) the degree to which our class (and/or class-anxiety) determines our taste, behaviour, judgements and interactions; (b) the fact that class is not judged at all on wealth, and very little on occupation, but purely on non-economic indicators such as speech, manner, taste and lifestyle choices; (c) the acute sensitivity of our on-board class-radar systems; and (d) our denial of all this and coy squeamishness about class: the hidden, indirect, unspoken, hypocritical/self-delusional nature of English class-consciousness (particularly

among the middle classes). Our 'polite egalitarianism'. The vestigial prejudice against 'trade'. The minutiae and sheer mind-boggling silliness of our class indicators and class anxieties. Our sense of humour about all this. Key phrases include: 'It is impossible for an Englishman to open his mouth without making some other Englishman hate him or despise him'; 'That sort of *background*'; 'Don't say "serviette", dear: we call it a napkin'; 'Mondeo Man'; 'A bit naff/common/*nouveau*/flashy/vulgar/unsmart/uncouth/Sharon-and-Tracey/suburban-semi/petit-ourgeois/mock-Tudor . . .'; 'Stuck-up posh tart (hooray/upper-class twit/old-school-tie/snob/publicschool yah-yah/green-wellie/Camilla . . .) thinks s/he's better than us'; 'What do you expect from a jumped-up grocer's daughter?'; 'That nice little man from the shop'.

## Values

Our ideals. Our fundamental guiding principles. The moral standards to which we aspire, even if we do not always live up to them.

### Fair play

A national quasi-religious obsession. Breaches of the fair-play principle provoke more righteous indignation than any other sin. English 'fair play' is not a rigidly or unrealistically egalitarian concept – we accept that there will be winners and losers, but feel that everyone should be given a fair chance, providing they observe the rules and don't cheat or shirk their responsibilities. Fair play is an underlying theme in most aspects of our unwritten etiquette, not just the games and sports with which it is most famously associated: queuing is all about fair play; round-buying, table manners, 'orderly disorder', driving etiquette, flirting codes, business etiquette, polite egalitarianism, etc. are all influenced by this principle. (Polite egalitarianism is hypocritical, concerned with the *appearance* of fairness, the concealment of embarrassing inequalities and inequities – but at least we care enough about these things to be embarrassed.) Our penchant for compromise, our constant balancing and weighing up of 'on the one hand' and 'on the other hand' – often seen as woolliness, perhaps more kindly as tolerance – are a product of fair play + moderation. Our tendency to support the underdog – and to be wary of too much success – is also about fair play. Our acute sense of fairness is often mistaken for other things – including both socialism and conservatism, and even Christianity. Much of English morality is essentially about fair play. Key phrases include: 'Well, to be fair . . .'; 'In all fairness . . .'; 'Given a fair chance'; 'Come on, it's only fair'; 'Fair's fair'; 'Fair enough'; 'Firm but fair'; 'Fair and square'; 'Wait your turn'; 'Take turns'; 'Be fair'; 'Fair cop'; 'That's not cricket/not on/out of order!'; 'Level playing-field'; 'Don't be greedy'; 'Live and let live'; 'On the other hand'; 'There's always two sides'; 'On balance'; 'Let's just agree to disagree, shall we?'

### Courtesy

A powerful norm. Some of our politenesses are so deeply ingrained as to be almost involuntary – the 'sorry' reflex when bumped, for example, is a knee-jerk response for many of us – but most require conscious or indeed acutely *self-conscious* effort. The English are often admired for our courtesy but condemned for our 'reserve', which is seen as arrogant, cold and unfriendly. Although our reserve is certainly a symptom of our social disease, it is also, at least in part, a *form* of courtesy – the kind sociolinguists call 'negative politeness', which is concerned with other people's need not to be intruded or imposed upon (as opposed to 'positive politeness', which is concerned with their need for inclusion and social approval). We judge others by ourselves, and assume that everyone shares our obsessive need for privacy – so we mind our own business and politely ignore them. But our polite sorries, pleases and thank-yous are not heartfelt or sincere – there is nothing particularly warm or friendly about them. Politeness by definition involves a degree of artifice and hypocrisy, but English courtesy seems to be almost entirely a matter of form, of obedience to a set of rules rather than expression of genuine concern. So when we do break our own courtesy rules, we tend if anything to be more obnoxious and unpleasant than other less 'polite' nations. We are not naturally socially skilled; we need all these rules to protect us from ourselves. Key phrases include: 'Sorry'; 'Please'; 'Thank-you/Cheers/Ta/Thanks' (every culture has these words, but we use them more); 'I'm afraid that . . .'; 'I'm sorry, but . . .'; 'Would you mind . . .?'; 'Could you possibly . . .?'; 'I don't suppose . . .'; 'How do you do?'; 'Nice day, isn't it?'; 'Yes, isn't it?'; 'Excuse me, sorry, but you couldn't possibly pass the marmalade, could you?'; 'Excuse me, I'm terribly sorry but you seem to be standing on my foot'; 'With all due respect, the right honourable gentleman is being a bit economical with the truth'.

### Modesty

The English are no more naturally self-effacing than other nations, but (as with courtesy) we have strict rules about the *appearance* of modesty, including prohibitions on boasting and any form of self-importance, and rules actively prescribing self-deprecation and self-mockery. We place a high value on modesty, we *aspire* to modesty. The modesty that we actually display is often false – or, to put it more charitably, ironic. Our famous self-deprecation is a form of irony – saying the opposite of what we intend people to understand, or using deliberate understatement. It's a kind of code: everyone knows that a self-deprecating statement probably means roughly the opposite of what is said, or involves a significant degree of understatement, and we are duly impressed, both by the speaker's achievements or abilities and by his/her reluctance to trumpet them. Problems arise when the English try to play this rather silly game with foreigners, who do not understand the ironic code and tend to take

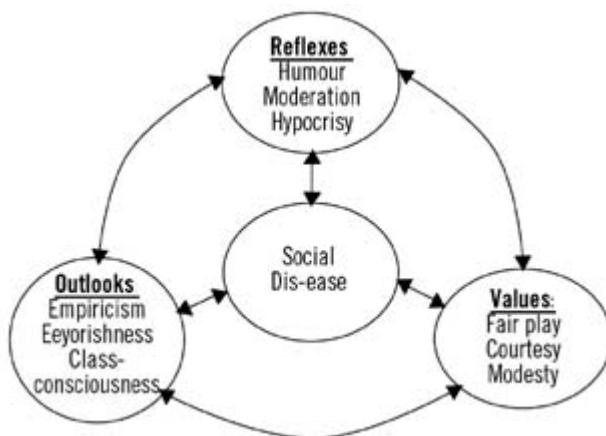
our self-deprecating remarks at face value. Modesty also requires that we try to play down or deny class/wealth/status differences – polite egalitarianism involves a combination of the three ‘key values’ (courtesy, modesty, fair play) with a generous helping of hypocrisy. English modesty is often *competitive* – ‘one-downmanship’ – although this game may involve a lot of indirect boasting. English displays of modesty (whether competitive, hypocritical or genuine) are distinctive for the degree of *humour* involved. Our modesty rules act as a counterbalance to our natural arrogance, just as our courtesy rules protect us from our own aggressive tendencies. Key phrases include: ‘Don’t boast’; ‘Stop showing off’; ‘Don’t blow your own trumpet’; ‘Don’t be clever’; ‘Don’t be pushy’; ‘I do a bit of sport’ (meaning I’ve just won an Olympic medal); ‘Well, I suppose I know a bit about that’ (meaning I’m the acknowledged world expert on it); ‘Oh, that’s all a bit over my head, I’m afraid’ (ditto); ‘Not as hard as it looks/just lucky’ (standard response to any praise for personal achievement).

### THE DIAGRAM

So. There are the defining characteristics of Englishness. They already seem to have arranged themselves into something a bit more structured than a list. We have a ‘core’ and we have identified three distinct categories – reflexes, outlooks and values – each with a ‘cluster’ of three characteristics. Diagrams are not really my strong point (for non-English readers: that is a *big* understatement) but it looks as though I might be able to keep my somewhat rash promise to represent all this visually in some way. [67](#)

It is impossible to show all of the individual interconnections and interactions between the characteristics – I spent several days trying, but it always ended up looking like a tangled mass of spaghetti, only less appetising. And, in any case, I realized that these connections between defining characteristics are only relevant or even apparent *in relation to* specific aspects or features or rules of English behaviour. The money-talk taboo, for example, is a product of social dis-ease + modesty + hypocrisy + class-consciousness (that is, the ‘core’ plus one from each ‘cluster’); the Christmas moan-fest and bah-humbug rule is Eeyorishness + courtesy + hypocrisy (one from each ‘cluster’ again, and all indirectly related to the ‘core’). So, I would have to include all the minutiae of our behaviour patterns and codes in the diagram in order to show these relationships, which would effectively mean including everything in the book.

I think we’ll just have to settle for something much simpler. Ditch the microscope, stand back and look at the big picture. This basic diagram of Englishness won’t tell us anything we don’t already know from the ‘narrative’ list above. It just shows what the defining characteristics are, how they can be classified, and that the ‘clusters’ are all linked both with each other and with the central ‘core’. But the diagram does at least convey the notion that Englishness is a dynamic system rather than a static list. And it gets the whole thing on to one convenient page. For, um, easy reference or something. Englishness at-a-glance. And it looks rather nice and pleasingly symmetrical.



I’m afraid my diagram of Englishness hasn’t come out looking much like a ‘grammar’, or a ‘genome’ for that matter, and it will no doubt be disappointing for those who were expecting something more complex and difficult and scientific-looking. But those genomes and so on were only metaphors, and much as I love to stretch, labour and generally abuse a metaphor, Englishness just would not be shoehorned into any existing scientific models, so I’ve had to make up my own rather crude and over-simplified structure. But it does look a bit sort of *molecular* – don’t you think? – which is quite scientific enough for me. And anyway, the point was not to have a grandly impressive diagram, just something that would help us to understand and make sense of the peculiarities of ordinary English behaviour.

### CAUSES

In our search for this understanding of Englishness, one question remains. If our unfortunate social dis-ease is indeed the central ‘core’ of Englishness, then we have to ask: what causes this dis-ease?

It is as though, throughout the book, I have been a sort of ethnological psychiatrist, examining a patient (‘The English’) who has ‘presented with’ a complex, apparently incoherent and unrelated set of odd behaviours, bizarre beliefs and strange, compulsive habits. After a long period of close observation and a lot of embarrassing questions, I can see the recurring patterns and themes, and eventually arrive at a diagnosis: the condition I am calling the English Social Dis-ease. It is not a severely debilitating disorder; the patient self-medicates quite effectively in various ways, has developed a range of coping mechanisms, manages to lead a relatively normal life

and regards his/her behaviour as perfectly reasonable (often claiming that it is the rest of the world that is odd and out of step). But others find the patient weird and often rather tiresomely anti-social, if sometimes quite charming. Although I cannot provide a cure, my diagnosis may in itself be of some help, at least in understanding the condition and its management.

But the aetiology of this dis-ease still remains something of a mystery. As with many psychological disorders, no-one really knows what causes it. This is not for want of speculation on the subject. Although I believe this book is the first to identify the dis-ease properly – in the sense of giving a name to the odd collection of troubling symptoms that characterize the condition – I am certainly not the first to notice and comment on the symptoms themselves. Every attempt to describe our national character makes at least some mention of 'English reserve', and many also puzzle over its apparent opposite, English loutishness, hooliganism and other anti-social behaviours. My only contribution has been to suggest that these seemingly contradictory Jekyll-and-Hyde tendencies are part of the same syndrome (a bit like the manic and depressive elements of what is now called bi-polar disorder). This diagnosis may be helpful in understanding the English, but identifying and naming a disorder tells us nothing about its cause.

Several possible causes have been proposed by other writers. Many are inclined to blame the English climate. While our weather may indeed be a factor, I'm a bit sceptical about this explanation, as our climate is not really all that different from that of many other Northern European countries – not to mention Scotland, Ireland and Wales – whose inhabitants do not exhibit the same sociopathic tendencies. This does not rule out the weather as a cause (a lot of smokers do not get lung cancer), but it does suggest that there must be other factors involved.

A number of writers point the finger at our 'history', but there seems to be little consensus on what parts of English history might be responsible for our current dis-ease. We had and lost an empire – well, so did the Romans, the Austrians, the Portuguese and number of others, and they didn't all turn out like us. Some suggest that the tendencies I am concerned with are of relatively recent origin (the author of *The English: Are They Human?* blames public schools for the ludicrous excesses of English reserve, and the anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer traces certain aspects of our national character, particularly our self-restraint and orderliness, to the establishment of our Police force). Some even seem to believe that all of our loutish, anti-social traits began, along with sex, in 1963, and that things were different and people knew how to behave when they were a lad. Others, however, cite comments on both English reserve and English loutishness dating back to the seventeenth century, and I have already mentioned reports of medieval football violence. I am not a historian, but as far as I can gather from reading the accounts of those with the necessary knowledge, we would seem to have suffered from this social dis-ease for quite some time, perhaps in somewhat varying forms, and its onset or emergence cannot be attributed to any particular historical event or process.

So, if neither climate nor history can entirely account for our disease, what about geography? The fact that we are 'an island race' has occasionally been put forward as an explanation for some aspects of our national character – such as our insularity. While there may well be some truth in this, I do not think that inhabiting an island can in itself account for much – there are, after all, plenty of other island peoples with very different national characters, although we may have some traits in common. But if we get a bit more specific, and take into account the size of our island and the density of its population, then the geographical argument starts to look a bit more promising. This is not just an island, but a relatively small, very overcrowded island, and it is not too hard to see how such conditions might produce a reserved, inhibited, privacy-obsessed, territorial, socially wary, uneasy and sometimes obnoxiously anti-social people; a negative-politeness culture, whose courtesy is primarily concerned with the avoidance of intrusion and imposition; an acutely class-conscious culture, preoccupied with status and boundaries and demarcations; a society characterized by awkwardness, embarrassment, obliqueness, fear of intimacy/emotion/ fuss – veering between buttoned-up over-politeness and aggressive belligerence . . . Although we are in many ways very different, I have noted a number of important similarities between the English and the Japanese, and wondered whether the smallish-overcrowded-island factor might be significant.

But this crude geographical determinism is not really much more convincing than the climatic or historical arguments. If geography is so important in determining national character, why are the Danes so different from other Scandinavian nations? Why are the French and Germans so distinctively French and German, even when they live immediately either side of an arbitrary border. Ditto Alpine Swiss and Alpine Italians? And so on. No – geography may well play a part, but it clearly can't be the final answer. Maybe our dis-ease is due to our particular *combination* of climate, history and geography – which at least could be said to be unique.

I'm sorry, but I just don't think there is a simple answer. To be honest, I don't really know why the English are the way we are – and nor, if they are being honest, does anyone else. This does not invalidate my diagnosis: I can pronounce the English to be a bit autistic or agoraphobic (or bi-polar for that matter), or just socially challenged, without knowing the causes of these disorders. Psychiatrists do it all the time, so I don't see why self-appointed national ethno-shrinks should not have the same privilege. And you can challenge my diagnosis or offer a second opinion if you disagree.

But before I stop (or get sectioned for metaphor-abuse), I should just issue a health warning: Englishness can be rather contagious. Some people are more susceptible than others, but if you hang around us long enough, you may find yourself greeting every misfortune from a delayed train to an international disaster with 'Typical!', any hint of earnestness or pomposity with 'Oh, come off it!', and new people with embarrassed, stilted incompetence. You may find yourself believing that large quantities of alcohol will help you to shed these inhibitions, allowing you to greet people with 'Oi, what you looking at?' or 'Fancy a shag?' instead. You may, however, be one of the many more fortunate visitors and immigrants whose strong cultural immune systems protect them from our dis-ease. If you still want to fit in, or just have a laugh at our expense, I suppose this book might help you to fake the

symptoms.

The important point, which I hope is now clear, is that Englishness is not a matter of birth, race, colour or creed: it is a mindset, an ethos, a behavioural 'grammar' – a set of unwritten codes that might seem enigmatic, but that anyone can decipher and apply, now that we have the key.

67. If I sound a bit reluctant and grudging about this, it is because I know that (a) people tend to expect rather a lot from diagrams, and may see them as an alternative to the effort of actually reading the book (I know this because I do it myself); and (b) it is much easier to spot flaws and failings in a simple diagram than in 400-odd pages of text, which makes them an easy target for cavillers and nit-pickers.

## EPILOGUE

I'm back at Paddington station, three years later. No brandy this time, as I don't have to do any more bumping or queue jumping. Just a nice cup of tea and a biscuit – which strikes me as an appropriately moderate and understated way to mark the completion of my Englishness project.

Even though I am now 'off duty' – just waiting for the Oxford train, like a normal person – I realize that I have automatically chosen the best observation-position in the station café, with a particularly good view of the queue at the counter. Just habit, I suppose. The thing about participant-observation research is that it does rather tend to take over your whole life. Every routine train journey, every drink in the pub, every walk to the shops, every house you pass, every fleeting interaction with everyone you meet is a data-gathering or hypothesis-testing opportunity. You can't even watch television or listen to the radio without constantly making notes on bloody Englishness.

The book is done; I've left my notebook at home (I'm writing this on a napkin). But look: in that taxi earlier I couldn't help scribbling on the back of my hand something the driver said. I peer at the slightly smudged abbreviations. Something about 'all this rain and now they've issued drought warnings for next summer and isn't it just typical'. Oh great, that must be my seven-hundred-thousandth recorded instance of English weather-moaning. Really useful information, Kate. Pathetic data-junkie. You've cracked the code; you've done your little bit towards resolving the English identity crisis. Now leave it alone. Stop all this obsessive queue-watching and pea-counting and recording random bits of weather-speak. Get a life.

Yes. Right. Absolutely. Enough is enough.

Ooh, but hang on a sec. What's that? A woman with a baby in a pushchair has approached the coffee-shop counter from the wrong end, and there's a queue of three people already waiting to be served. Is she trying to jump the queue, or just having a look at the doughnuts and sandwiches before deciding whether to join the queue? It's not clear. But a jump-attempt here would be too blatant, surely? – not enough ambiguity in the situation. The three queuers are doing the paranoid pantomime – suspicious sideways looks, pointed throat-clearing, shuffling forward . . . Ah! two of them have just exchanged raised eyebrows (but were they in the queue together, or are they strangers? Why wasn't I paying attention?) – one of them sighs noisily – will the pushchair woman notice? – Yes! She's got the message – she's moving towards the back of the queue – but looking mildly affronted – she'd never intended to jump the queue, she was just looking to see what sandwiches they had. The queuers look down or away, avoiding eye contact. Hah! She was innocent all along – I knew it! Now, I wonder if those two eyebrow-raisers are friends or strangers. This is very important – did that apparent queue-jump threat prompt eye contact between strangers or not? Let's see if they order together – damn, that's my train they've just announced! Huh! It *would* be on time for once, just when there's this fascinating queue-drama going on – *typical!* Maybe I could get the next one . . .

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