

Julian Barnes's *England, England* (1998) – excerpts

Sir Jack Pitman

Between the airy, whispering space created by the architects and the snug den demanded by Sir Jack lay a small office – no more than a transitional tunnel – known as the Quote Room. Here Sir Jack liked to keep visitors waiting until summoned by his PA. Sir Jack himself had been known to linger in the tunnel for more than a few moments while making the journey from outer office to inner sanctum. It was a simple, austere, underlit space. There were no magazines, and no TV monitors dispensing promo clips about the Pitman empire. Nor were there gaudily comfortable sofas covered with the hides of rare species. Instead, there was a single high-backed Jacobethan oak settle facing a spotlight slab. The visitor was encouraged, indeed obliged, to study what was chiselled in Times roman:

JACK PITMAN
is a big man in every sense of the word.
Big in ambition, big in appetite, big in generosity.
He is a man whom it takes a leap
of the imagination fully to come to terms with.
From small beginnings, he has risen like a meteor
to great things. Entrepreneur, innovator,
ideas man, arts patron, inner-city revitaliser.
Less a captain of industry than a very admiral,
Sir Jack is a man who walks with presidents
yet is never afraid to roll up his sleeves and get his hands dirty.
For all his fame and wealth, he is yet
intensely private, a family man at heart.
Imperious when necessary, and always forthright,
Sir Jack is not a man to be trifled with;
he suffers neither fools nor busybodies.
Yet his compassion runs deep.
Still restless and ambitious,
Sir Jack makes the head spin with his energy,
dazzles with his larger-than-life charm.

These words, or most of them, had been written a few years previously by a *Times* profiler to whom Sir Jack had subsequently given brief employment. He had deleted references to his age, appearance and estimated wealth, had the whole thing pulled together by a rewrite man, and ordered the final text to be carved on a swathe of Cornish slate. He was content that the quote was no longer sourced: a few years ago the acknowledgment 'The Times of London' had been chiselled out and a filler rectangle of slate inserted. This made the tribute more authoritative, and more timeless, he felt.

Now he stood in the exact centre of his double-cube snuggerly, beneath the Murano chandelier and equidistant from the two Bavarian hunting-lodge fireplaces. He had hung his jacket on the Brancusi in a way that – to his eye, at least – implied joshing familiarity rather than disrespect, and was displaying his roundedly rhomboid shape to his PA and his Ideas Catcher. There had been some earlier institutional name for this latter figure, but Sir Jack had replaced it with 'Ideas Catcher'.

[...] A rebel at heart, he liked to think. A bit of a maverick. A man who bends the knee to no-one. Yet a patriot at heart.

'What is there left for me?' he began. Paul Harrison, the Ideas Catcher, did not immediately activate the body-mike. This had become a familiar trope in recent months. 'Most people would say that I have done everything a man is capable of in my life. Many, indeed, do. I have built businesses from the dust up. I have made money, few would deny that. Honours have come my way. I am the trusted confidant of heads of state. I have been the lover, if I may say so, of beautiful women. I am a respected but, I must emphasize, not too respected member of society. I have a title. My wife sits at the right hand of presidents. What is there left?' (pp. 29-31)

[...] 'Is my name ... real?' Sir Jack considered the matter, as did his two employees. Some believed that Sir Jack's name was not real in a straightforward sense, and that a few decades earlier he had deprived it of its Mitteleuropäisch tinge. Others had it on authority that, though born some way east of the Rhine, little Jacky was in fact the result of a garage liaison between the shire-bred English wife of a Hungarian glass manufacturer and a visiting chauffeur from Loughborough, and thus, despite his upbringing, original passport, and occasional fluffed vowel, his blood was one hundred percent British. Conspiracy theorists and profound cynics went further, suggesting that the fluffed vowels were themselves a device: Sir Jack Pitman was the son of a humble Mr and Mrs Pitman, long since paid off, and the tycoon had allowed the myth of continental origin slowly to surround him; though whether for reasons of personal mystique or professional advantage, they could not decide. None of these hypotheses received support on this occasion, as he supplied his own answer. 'When a man has sired nothing but daughters, his name is a mere trinket on loan from eternity.' (pp. 32-33)

Commodification of a nation

Jerry Batson (Ideas Catcher): 'You – we – England – my client – is – are – a nation of great age, great history, great accumulated wisdom. Social and cultural history – stacks of it, reams of it – eminently marketable, never more so than in the current climate. Shakespeare, Queen Victoria, Industrial Revolution, gardening, that sort of thing. If I may coin, no copyright a phrase, We are already what others may hope to become. This isn't self-pity, this is the strength of our position, our glory, our product placement. We are the new pioneers. We must sell our past to other nations as their future!' (pp. 39-40)

'It's [the theme park] a pure market state. There's no interference from government because there is no government. So there's no foreign or domestic policy, only economic policy. It's a pure interface between buyers and sellers without the market being skewed by central government with its complex agendas and election promises.' (p. 183)

The replica

French philosopher: 'It is well established – and indeed it has been incontrovertibly proved by many of those I have earlier cited – that nowadays we prefer the replica to the original. We prefer the reproduction to the work of art itself, the perfect sound and solitude of the compact disc to the symphony concert in the company of a thousand victims of throat complaints, the book on tape to the book in the lap [...] the world of the third millennium is inevitably, is ineradicably modern, and that it is our intellectual duty to submit to that modernity, and to dismiss as sentimental and inherently fraudulent all yearnings for what is dubiously called the "original".' (pp. 53-5)

Dr Max: '[. . .] is it not the case that when we consider such lauded and fetishized concepts as, oh, I throw a few out at random, Athenian democracy, Palladian architecture, desert-sect worship of the kind that still holds many in thrall, there is no authentic moment of beginning, of purity, however hard their devotees pretend. We may choose to freeze a moment and say it all "began" then, but as an historian I have to tell you that such labelling is intellectually indefensible. What we are looking at is almost always a replica, if that is the locally fashionable term, of something earlier.' (p. 132)

The list

Sir Jack: "Top fifty characteristics associated with the word England among prospective purchasers of Quality Leisure. Serious targeting. I don't want to hear about kids and their favourite bands." (p. 60)

The Subject was asked what happened at the Battle of Hastings.

Subject replied: '1066.'

Question was repeated.

Subject laughed. 'Battle of Hastings. 1066.' Pause. 'King Harold. Got an arrow in his eye.'

Subject behaved as if he had answered the question.

[...] It seemed to Dr Max positively unpatriotic to know so little about the origins and forging of your nation. And yet, therein lay the immediate paradox: that patriotism's most eager bedfellow was ignorance, not knowledge.' (pp. 80-82)

The Fifty Quintessences of Englishness were:

1. ROYAL FAMILY
2. BIG BEN/ HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT
3. MANCHESTER UNITED FOOTBALL CLUB
4. CLASS SYSTEM
5. PUBS
6. A ROBIN IN THE SNOW
7. ROBIN HOOD AND HIS MERRIE MEN
8. CRICKET
9. WHITE CLIFFS OF DOVER
10. IMPERIALISM
11. UNION JACK
12. SNOBBERY
13. GOD SAVE THE KING/ QUEEN
14. BBC
15. WEST END
16. TIMES NEWSPAPER
17. SHAKESPEARE
18. THATCHED COTTAGES
19. CUP OF TEA/ DEVONSHIRE CREAM TEA
20. STONEHENGE
21. PHLEGM/ STIFF UPPER LIP
22. SHOPPING
23. MARMALADE
24. BEEFEATERS/ TOWER OF LONDON
25. LONDON TAXIS

26. BOWLER HAT
27. TV CLASSIC SERIALS
28. OXFORD/ CAMBRIDGE
29. HARRODS
30. DOUBLE-DECKER BUSES/ RED BUSES
31. HYPOCRISY
32. GARDENING
33. PERFIDY/ UNTRUSTWORTHINESS
34. HALF-TIMBERING
35. HOMOSEXUALITY
36. ALICE IN WONDERLAND
37. WINSTON CHURCHILL
38. MARKS & SPENCER
39. BATTLE OF BRITAIN
40. FRANCIS DRAKE
41. TROOPING THE COLOUR
42. WHINGEING
43. QUEEN VICTORIA
44. BREAKFAST
45. BEER/ WARM BEER
46. EMOTIONAL FRIGIDITY
47. WEMBLEY STADIUM
48. FLAGELLATION/ PUBLIC SCHOOLS
49. NOT WASHING/ BAD UNDERWEAR
50. MAGNA CARTA (pp. 83-85)

Anglia

Jez Harris, formerly Jack Oshinsky, junior legal expert with an American electronics firm obliged to leave the country during the emergency. He'd preferred to stay, and backdate both his name and his technology: nowadays he shoed horses, made barrel hoops, sharpened knives and sickles, cut keys, tended the verges, and brewed a noxious form of scrumpy into which he would plunge a red-hot poker just before serving. Marriage to Wendy Temple had softened and localized his Milwaukee accent; and his inextinguishable pleasure was to play the yokel whenever some anthropologist, travel writer or linguistic theoretician would turn up inadequately disguised as a tourist. (pp. 242-3)

All quotations taken from Julian Barnes, *England, England*, London, Vintage Books, 1998.