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WHAT DO YOU SEE WHEN YOU SEE ME?
NATIONAL IDENTITY IN THE FRAME

From Bill Brandt to Simon Roberts via Don McCullin and Martin Parr - the English as captured by its greatest photographers

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Now the time returns again

A new crop of photobooks takes a timely look at English identity. Peter Hamilton finds they continue a long tradition of national surveys, shot by some of the country’s finest photographers, from Bill Brandt to Simon Roberts.

Englishness has been a constantly recurring theme for documentary photography in recent years. In the last few weeks Chris Steele-Perkins has brought out English, My England, Simon Roberts has contributed My English and Sirinke Leoa-Kindinen Syker Restored. Each slots into a different niche of the national question about who ‘we English’ are, yet all intersect within the larger Venn diagram of photo books about England or Britain. These books seek to define through their selection of images what is distinctive and also typical of both country and people. And although nobody can really decide whether Englishness is a form of Britishness, revolution has given us a British likes in which Irish, Welsh and Scottish national identities justly at their boundaries.

Photography can isolate and encapsulate the ephemera of national identity. It can offer depictions of particular individuals who can stand for abstract groups, and of places that signify heritage or custom. It has a long history of charting what defines Britain or England, going back into the 19th century and too long and detailed to be recounted here. But to be more than a medium for creating bound postcards, it has to be marshalled to present a coherent view of this accepted site and its denizens.

People and place

Setting aside for a moment whether English national identity is better conceived as Englishness or Britishness, the photobook holds itself into two camps. To put it crudely, one is about people, the other about place. The first category generally offers a form of visual anthropology, often stitched together from the authors’ career in photojournalism, or woven from a more detailed and sustained documentation of a community or locality. Sometimes these books are the result of a specific photographic journey, as in Ian Berry’s classic The English (1978). The fruit of the Arts Council’s first ever bursary, it provides a collection of photos that capture Berry’s personal reaction to those who came in front of the lens. Yet his choice is far from random, for the book sits on the cusp of a breaking point. It was made at the end of a certain expression of traditional England – symbolised by society gents, Royal Ascot, a respectable working class on one side, and a new world of youth culture and more marginal lifestyles on the other.

Though far less polemical, Berry’s work is not so far from the spirit that inhabits Bill Brandt’s The English at Home (1936). A compilation of images selected to make a point, it offers a series of contrapuntal views stressing how Englishness is visually expressed through a series of oppositions: rich/poor, urban/rural, high/low-culture, work/leisure, and so on. This was a strong current, an oppositional perspective on Englishness, and among its best expressions are Dan McCullin’s sombre Homecoming (1979) and its descendant, in England (2007), in which we find his bleak but often lyrically expressed perceptions of an England he equally adores and abhors. This is, despite its often savage depictions of poverty and pain, an


The elegiac vision that contains beautiful and sympathetic images of the human detritus of modern Britain.

McCullin’s strong and moralistic vision contrasts greatly with another tradition of work on Englishness first exemplified by Tony Ray-Jones (1941–1972) whose now iconic but posthumous work, A Day Off (1974) is widely seen as the trigger that sent the bullet of a new sensibility through British photography. Martin Parr was and remains the most significant carrier of this strongly surreal take on the British approach to both leisure and heritage, and it informs his work to this day. Ray-Jones had focused on the seaside as a theatre for quaint British rituals around pleasure, and an actual ‘traditional’ rituals themselves as a mechanism for revealing the deeper structures of Englishness (and this could also be said of Parr’s approach).

Greatly influenced by what was going in American photography in the late 1960s, by Robert Frank’s The Americans (1957), and a fan of both Garry Winogrand and Joel Meyerowitz, Ray-Jones proved to have an influence far beyond the bounds of his own work, as a silent but effective prophet of the new vision.

Yet he was far from alone in looking for national identity in customs and celebrations. Probably the best study of English folklore and ritual remains Homer Sykes’, Once a Year (1977). A detailed and fascinating compilation of customs as diverse as the Minehead Hobby Horse, Bacup Coconut dancers, and the Luttrell Burny Man, it was the fruit of a student project begun in 1971 to document the ‘vanishing customs’ of Britain. As Sykes recalls: “I was fascinated by street photography, I’d done the Greyhound bus trip across America in the 1960s, and in love with the work of people like Garry Winogrand and Lee Friedlander, and I wanted to capture these odd and surreal rituals and customs taking place on the streets of Britain.”

The book offers the diversity of such rituals and their typically British settings as a way of seeing that even prosaic Britain is a place of magic and mystery. In 2004 Sykes published Hunting with Hounds, a closely observed documentation of another set of rituals that define a dimension of the English way of life. Hunting – whether fox-hunting patrician or plebian lurcherman – is treated as a custom that maintains an English rural way of life threatened by the encroachment of the metropolitan health and safety culture.

Community ties

Many of the most successful photo books about Englishness or Britishness are those that examine a community or locality in detail, often through the close links that the photographer has with the area. Sirkuu-Lisa Konttinen’s Byker Revisited is a fine example. Produced by the Northumbria Press (which is also responsible for Chris Steele-Perkins’ England, My England, and his earlier Northern Exposure: Rural Life in the North East), this is a well-made collection that charts the Finnish-born photographer’s engagement with the Byker area of Newcastle since the late 1960s, work itself first published...
as a book in 1983. Mingling early black-and-white 35mm reportage with more recent medium format and panoramic images in colour, the focus is on the evolution in ways of life within a working class community. One can’t help feeling that the monochrome people, streets and houses of the 1960s and 70s when Konttinen made Byker her home are more appealing, but this is to give in to the appeal of both nostalgia and the purer vision that Konttinen was able to bring to her work at that time.

Konttinen’s book weaves together a patchwork of images made over 40 years, with a text that helps to understand and chart the very significant change this community has experienced, and in particular its emergence now as a multicultural expression of contemporary Britishness — something that calls out for colour photography. Though a degree of social change is clearly apparent in the similarly long-term study of rural Devon made by James Ravilious, over a period starting soon after his move there in 1973 and ending with his death in 1995, black-and-white was his medium of choice. Ravilious was trained as a painter and always wanted to use colour, but had to recognise the defeat imposed on him by the unremitting and endlessly varied greens of the English countryside. ‘Black and white,’ he once told me, ‘is the escape route from the monotony of green, because its tones and extremes allow one to paint a more interesting and varied set of pictures.’ The deep

and empathic engagement of his photography with the people and landscape of the area manages to convey an important dimension of what many people recognise as a quintessential Englishness. In a few key books (The Heart of the Country, 1980; A Corner of England, An English Eye, 1998/2001, and Down the Deep Lane, 2002/2008), Ravilious grasped this facet of national identity with both humour and an eye for the everyday surreal.

His friend and fellow Devonian Chris Chapman’s documentation of the people and places of

Dartmoor (Wild Goose and Reddon, 2000), offers another take on the hard lives of many of those who make their living from the difficult landscape of this area. He has devoted most of the last four decades to living and working there (with land and livestock as well as cameras and films), and his engagement with his organic but also very strongly seen in images of individuals and places that deliver a coherent and tightly composed essay.

The sympathetic studies of people and place that Chapman, Ravilious and Konttinen produced are also a crossover point to the photo books on national identity that locate their approach in land and buildings, in place as the focus of attention. Yet even this work has its connections to other currents that move among British photography.

The movement that Ray-Jones began and Parr continues is also one in which Simon Roberts is at home. His monumental study We English manages to combine a fascination with social rituals such as St George’s day pageants and visits to the seaside with the type of huge-scale and distant large format ‘grand views’ that appear to come straight out of the American tradition: Joel Meyerowitz being the chief exponent of this approach on the far side of the Atlantic. In exploring his subject, Roberts (a photographer trained as cultural geographer), uses a visual language based in Dutch landscape painting of the 16th century to make multi-layered images about ‘places where groups congregate for a shared purpose’, some of which are iconic landscapes, some of which are great expanses with a hint of the go-kart
For Roberts, landscape is a site of leisure pursuits, and this viewpoint fits well with both contemporary social thought and the consumption-based imagery of much current documentary. But he manages somehow to allow the sublime beauty of many of these settings through, and to make pictures of lasting quality. His work seems to me to be in stark contrast to that of Harry Cory Wright, who has built a reputation for beautifully seen large format photographs in 10x8 colour made on a wooden Gandolfini camera that present a largely unpeopled landscape. The lyrical view of a Britain that we encounter in his Journey through the British Isles (2007) is largely topographical, but the visual sublime in which it deals is not entirely at odds with our concept of national identity, and contrasts well with the sand and the sandwiches of our over-hyped country.

Outsiders’ vision
Perhaps some of the most acute observers of Englishness are foreign. An outsider can stand back from the society and look at it dispassionately, finding equally odd and worthy of note the things the locals take for granted. This was probably why the German-born Reinhold found the juxtapositions of his The English at Home so much grit to his mill. Another fine example is the collaboration between Iizs-Bidermanas and Jacques Prévert, Chambres de Londres (1952), which places in the sense of the great metropolis as a signifier of Englishness.

Made in the great tradition of humanistic reportage by a gifted photographer who was born in Burma, then transplanted to England by his British father at the age of two, its view of the last four decades of British life is that of a man coming to terms with a place in which he lives but in which he is unsure he is at home. The book contains some strong and touching images, and is very good on some key points in the difficult evolution of a multicultural nation, but its focus becomes less clear as the decades roll by. Steele Perkins is a fine colour photographer, but his black and white images (including some from his superb project on The Red) outweigh them in depth and impact. No doubt many derive from reportage assignments, but others are clearly personal and the book needed the hand of a strong editor. I hope this is not his last word on this subject.

Perhaps we English (or even we British) look out at the world with a particular set of visual preconceptions. We like fair play and we are pragmatic, something evident in Ravilious’ wonderful images of the small farmers of rural Devon. We like community, and family, the social glue that runs through these same pictures and those of Kortnee, Chapman and Berry. We are very individualistic, for there is also the deep quirkiness to the English that sets them apart, so well captured by Parr and Sykes. Perhaps this is why we love the rather small-scale delights of English churches, so beautifully grasped by the little known but masterful Edin Smith, image-maker of so many 1950s and 60s books for the general market (see Robert Ellwell’s Exeptions of Place, 2005).

At the end of the day, the English famously have a sense of humour, something which touches so many of these pictures and books. Few English photographers are lauded as ‘great’ in the conventional histories of photography, that is to miss just what makes English photography so notable. By not taking itself too seriously, it has always managed to look at Englishness itself, and the rest of the world, with unjudged eyes.