

## We English – Simon Roberts

By **admin**, October 28, 2009 2:25 am

**BOOK REVIEW:** Simon Roberts – We English.

Being away from home for any length of time usually results in a longing for the familiar, but for **Simon Roberts** his marathon trip round Russia in 2005 (resulting in the critically acclaimed *Motherland*) raised questions rather than longings. As he explored what it means to be Russian and the relationships Russians have with their landscape, he found himself increasingly considering what his relationship was with his own country and nationality.

Roberts is about as middle English as it is possible to be. Brought up in the the Surrey commuter belt, the son of a Cumbrian woman and a London man, his childhood was one that would be recognisable to most middle class Middle Englanders growing up in the 70s and 80s. His recollections of childhood holidays in the Lake District and at the seaside informed much of his appreciation of the English landscape, inevitably leading to his questioning how much this shaped his own sense of nationality. Indeed, what does it mean to be English, as distinct from Welsh, Scottish, or the more general British?



Cover of We English by Simon Roberts

Facing the sight of Russians at play in the Siberian landscape he began to examine the nature of the relationship we English have with our homeland, and before he had finished shooting *Motherland* his sights were set on the next project. Thus two years later, with Russia well behind him he persuaded wife Sarah and daughter Jemima to join him in a camper van on a ten month journey around England to observe the English in their environment, and possibly find out who he was in the process.

One of the curious things about this body of work is that it is intrinsically more distant than *Motherland*; how is it that an

English photographer could feel more intimate with foreigners in a foreign land than with his own countrymen at home? An obvious consideration is that we are all drawn inexorably to the exotic, it holds greater fascination for us and paradoxically our very closeness to "home" can make photographic intimacy that much harder to achieve. Indeed, Simon has drawn attention to the fact that virtually nothing has been produced on England in the last ten years by British photographers; cheap flights and myriad conflicts having proven a stronger draw for his contemporaries as they set out to make their mark as photographers elsewhere. The strength of *We English* comes from his determination not to battle that awkward closeness, choosing instead to embrace the distance and make it an intrinsic part of the work. He employed the questions he had regarding his own national identity to give a level of objectivity to his work that is arresting. It is perhaps worth noting that Simon is a human geography graduate, and although the artistic approach of *We English* is very different to *Motherland*, it seems clear when taken together with the breadth of his earlier more photojournalistic output where his interests and natural inclinations lie.

In his research Roberts considered the rich history of visual documentary that exists about England, both photographically through the likes of **Tony Ray Jones**, **Bill Brandt** and **Martin Parr**, and in the work of painters like **Turner** and **Constable**; he also took inspiration from further afield, and the influence of the Flemish masters **Bruegel** and **Avercamp** is hard to ignore. To his credit he used this research not so much to provide inspiration for his own objectives, but to gain a deeper understanding of the narratives that different artists have employed. The danger – of which he was all too aware – of setting out on this kind of project is that the work you produce can become either a pastiche or a derivative of what has already gone before.

Roberts was determined that his work should stand on its own merits even if it inevitably alludes to the work of those in whose paths he has walked. Frequently referred to as "this green and pleasant land", a photographic examination of England as landscape alone could easily degenerate to chocolate box sentimentality, but *We English* is not simply about landscape, it is about the place of the English within it. While he chose to stay away from individuals, people are a vital part of the pictures Roberts has made, but the personality portrayed is of the English as a whole, a portrait that is at times touching, curious and barmy. But it is neither critical nor saccharine, only observational.

Much of the imagery is about borders and margins; those places where one thing ends and another begins, and how these delineations make statements not only about the landscape and its uses, but also about the people we are. Sometimes the resulting photographs are inherently beautiful, but more often the beauty lies deeper, in a quiet understanding that while we are each to our own in pursuit of happiness, collectively we are English.

The more you contemplate *We English* the clearer it becomes that Roberts' real artistic allusion is rather clever. He could have pursued the immediacy and reportage style of **Kate Schermerhorn** and her brilliant work ***America's Idea of a Good Time***, but instead chose the more considered approach of large format photography to reflect on the leisure activities that define who the English are within the landscape, rather than who they are forced to be. To put it another way, most of us work to live, and the work we do is often happenstance. But our leisure time, chosen by us as individuals and being so precious, compels us unwittingly to make a personal rather than forced connection with the landscape we inhabit. To that end the work he has produced has more in common with **L S Lowry** than some of the artists Roberts has been compared to. But whereas Lowry was intrigued by the social revolution that was industrialisation, Roberts' "matchstick men" are drawn to whatever green they can find in the name of unwinding. It is here that the fine detail of the large format comes into its own, each image a tableaux depicting numerous events and encounters: each part significant, each image greater than the sum of these parts. A whole play, a whole commentary within an instant. And yet these works are less the decisive moment of Cartier-Bresson fame, and more the essence of a people and place inextricably linked. What Roberts shows us is that England is only what it is by virtue of the people that we are.



Mad Maldon Mud Race, River Blackwater, Maldon, Essex, 30th December 2007

There is another thing that makes *We English* different, and that is the word “we”. Roberts wanted his work to be a collaboration, and while it inevitably reflects his view of things – nothing artistic can ever be truly objective – he knew from the outset that if his journey was to produce anything of substance it would need to draw on the knowledge, whims, and character of the English themselves. Through his **blog** and brilliant use of **The Times**, the **BBC** and many local newspapers, Simon encouraged people to tell him about their England, and the events that shape their lives. As a result *We English* is a collaboration; a genuine reflection of the English at the start of the 21st century.

*We English* has all the hallmarks of a great body of work by a photographer of considerable depth. It shuns the flashy "in-yer-face" tactics so commonplace in favour of quiet thought and subtle observation. It is work that repays the reader through frequent reexamination: full of humour, but more subtle than **Erwitt**; full of commentary, but less judgemental than Parr; full of beauty, but without cliché.

The **book** is large format and elegantly produced (although my copy sadly has a production fault across my favourite image – it must be **someone else's favourite** too!), with exquisitely detailed bordered images set for the most part one to a double page spread, with an insightful introduction by **Stephen Daniels**. But if you really want to get the most from this body of work you need to view the prints at exhibition (the first major exhibition of *We English* in the UK will be at the National Media Museum in Bradford from March 12th to September 5th 2010) and just as importantly spend a lot of time absorbing the wealth of detail and background information on the *We English* **website**.

For all his innate Englishness, Roberts chose to view the English in their landscape from the perspective of an outsider in large part because he was, and remains, uncertain of what it means to be English himself. In short a road trip at home is about discovery of oneself as much as it is about discovery of place. His continuing journey of self-discovery will undoubtedly be welcomed by many, and deservedly so.

We English – Simon Roberts, Chris Boot Publishing, 56 colour photographs, 112pp, Hardback, £40.00, ISBN 978-1905712144. [www.chrisboot.com](http://www.chrisboot.com)

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