

# Rude Britannia

Twelve years ago, New York literary journalist *Rhoda Koenig* went to England in pursuit of a more civilized way of life. She laments the decline and fall of English manners



ON DECEMBER 31, 1986, I arrived in London to begin not only the New Year but my new life. Everyone thought I was mad. I had a good, cheap apartment and a well-paid job in literary journalism, both great rarities in New York.

Those, however, did not matter as much to me as what made the city increasingly ugly, frightening, and inhumane. When I walked down the street I had to block out all sights and

sounds that were not directly ahead of me. If not, a man might rattle a paper cup filled with coins under my nose, or stare at me, open his mouth, and quickly flap his tongue.

If I went anywhere after dark, I had to be extremely alert, stepping quickly between the front door and the necessary taxi. Every morning and evening, as the subway trains rolled in, I would be reminded by the graffiti that covered them that we were all hostages of

the angry, the wicked, and the mad.

But it was not simply my growing distaste for New York that had brought me there. England called. For several years I had been spending my holidays there and had made many friends. I disliked some English characteristics—dowdiness, pettiness, coldness, defeatism—but felt that these were the defects of English virtues. Unlike America, England was a place where optimism and self-confidence had not reached psychotic proportions. Strangers in England would not assume I wanted to hear their life story or have them call me by my first name.

When the plane touched down, I felt I was coming home. But the England of today is not the one of twelve years ago. It is not simply a matter of some things having disappeared and others having altered. Not only do people behave differently—the assumptions which underlie their behavior have undergone a profound change, making England more and more like the place I left.

As a writer, I have found this useful—feeling that all of England had turned into Cold Comfort Farm inspired me to write a contemporary version of that wonderful novel. Otherwise, though, it's quite another story.

My London home lies in a strip of middle-class territory, a narrow lozenge of three-story, red-brick, late-Victorian terraces halfway down a hill. Our neighborhood is a pleasant one: A New York friend who stayed with me went out one day for the paper and returned in shock—a strange woman had actually smiled at him and said: "Good morning."

But from 8 to 8:30 A.M. each weekday and 3 to 3:30 P.M., my neighborhood is not a pleasant place. At those times the local teenagers (who are nearly all white) go to and from their

school (rated one of the best in the borough) and, as they pass my study, I hear them enunciating emphatically, once every twelve words, or seven, or three, “F— F—in’, Who the f— ?” They are loud enough to be heard from the other side of the street, through the window. The girls are worse than the boys.

The teenagers do not live in our neighborhood. They walk through it from the council blocks lower down the hill, the homes of the—what? The lower class? The lower middle class? The working class? The poor? Each of these phrases has been challenged whenever I have used it. Indeed, the people living in those blocks are too various to be embraced by one simple term. Some go to work each day, but some do not work and are clearly incapable of it. Some have food and furniture that would make others call them poor, but they also have enough entertainment facilities (satellite dishes, videos, music machines, drink) to annoy the entire neighborhood. Some wear more expensive clothes than middle-class people did when I was a child, yet their behavior is the sort that, not long ago, I would have expected only from the violently anti-social or the mentally ill.

A woman of the last type was in the queue at my bank recently. She began a violent quarrel with another woman, who flounced out while she carried on shouting and swearing. I made a remark intended to be soothing, but the woman was outraged. For several minutes she shouted abuse at me while conducting her business with a mechanically smiling cashier.

Others like her train the teenagers of the future. A woman walks past my door with two little girls whose clothing depicts aggressively sexy pop stars. One child drops a potato chips packet.

“Pick it up,” I say, “Put it in the bin.” The mother turns, hostile: “She doesn’t have to if she doesn’t want to.”

For ten minutes a small boy in the local market blows on a whistle loudly enough to cause pain to those around him. Two women giggle at his naughtiness—they are his mother and aunt.

None of these incidents is remarkable, you say? That is my point: We now accept, as a matter of course, an atmosphere that makes us consider all strangers as enemies.

A great attraction of English life was its attitude of *laissez-faire*, of which the most famous example was the eccentric. All sorts of people were tolerated because all (or nearly all) could be counted on to maintain a reasonable level of civility. But now that consensus is gone.

Many people behave as if they are in a soundproof bubble within which they can be as loud and vile as they choose. All feel free to express their emotions, but the emotions most often heard are anger and contempt.

THE RESULT IS that England has become a more fearful and formal place. Old ladies cross the road to avoid even ten-year-olds they don’t know. Rules spring up—no children, no dogs—to counter the worry that members of the proscribed category might misbehave, and that their guardians, instead of being apologetic, will hotly defend them.

Small children can no longer watch trains from the railway bridge near my home—it now has high walls to prevent slightly older children from amusing themselves by trying to murder the driver. The less homicidal scribble words that, except for the obscenities, are indecipherable on our doors and walls. Not long ago a chunk of wood was gouged out of a park bench—a

park employee later found a ten-year-old wandering around with an axe.

People near the bottom of the social ladder may indulge in bad public behavior, but they are not the only ones. The voices braying four-letter words sometimes have accents socially superior to mine. In shops, in restaurants, even in church, middle-class people

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ignore their children running wild.

Once, only the very rich would think themselves more important than the public peace. Now anyone who can pay for a meal or a pair of shoes can do as he likes: We have greatly lowered the threshold of impunity.

What amazes me more than the miscreants’ behavior is the reaction—or the lack of it—from everyone else. British people sing about how they never, never, never shall be slaves, but slaves are what they look like, bowing their heads in silence and glancing away. Once they were diffident, now they are supine.

One could, however, say that this passivity is the result of experience. While a protester might not suffer abuse or violence, he can expect to be ignored or met with an insolent denial of reality. “You don’t like it?” they say: “Don’t listen.” Did their child kick your dog? “I didn’t see him.”

One of the good changes in England is that incompetence is less likely to be considered an important prop of traditional values. But the incompetence that remains is often deliberate

and venal. A friend found that the plumbers who installed her expensive new bathroom had not included an overflow system. She discovered this when her living room ceiling hit the floor.

At least burglars, unlike rogue workmen, don't tell you—when they take your money and destroy your home—that they have improved your property. But the rise in practitioners in both professions shows how little many of the English think of themselves.

Criminals and petty cheaters, however, are hardly the only ones in this racket, one in which the biggest villains remain unseen. One afternoon two drunks staggered onto the local train and began making obscene and racist remarks to the passengers who retreated into the usual cloud of unknowing. At the next stop I ran to the driver's window and told him about the drunks.

"What do you want me to do about it?" he asked. I spelled it out. He could not, he said, throw them off because that was a job for a guard. There were, he added, no guards on the train or at that station or the next several stations.

Yes, the lower-class drunks were disgusting, and the working-class and middle-class people on the train were craven. But the drunks knew they could do as they wished, and the passengers knew no one would help because the people who now own the railways think guards are a needless expense.

Many aspects of our society—drugs, crime, isolation, poor education, too much emphasis on sex—have been blamed for its deterioration. These are problems, but they are only symptoms of the real cause: the obsession with material things that has transformed England in the past generation. Snobbery based on class has

largely withered away, to be replaced by an often more vicious snobbery about money, abetted by fashion.

One can easily purchase, with a house or a handbag, a feeling of superiority that allows one to condescend to those who can't afford such things.

Today's constant reiteration in the media that some over-priced accessory is "essential," something "to die for," cannot help making people feel insecure—especially when consumption is marketed so much more intensely than any morality. Drugs? They are a way of feeling happy simply by making a small purchase.

The worsening behavior of the lower class, and the tolerance of it, can also be seen as aspects of the increased importance we place on money. The middle and upper classes, who sell and buy things the poor are told to despise themselves for not having, allay their guilt by letting the poor express their rage, even if by doing so the poor lose the dignity and self-respect that anyone can have for free.

**S**URELY LOVE AND sex are free? Not really. To get them, we are constantly told, we must buy whatever is being advertised. The most unlikely products are given a sexual connotation, not only to imply that they will heighten the buyer's allure but to encourage a sexual type of purchasing, a quick gratification of impulse, followed by restlessness, boredom, and the desire for another quick fix.

Like the drunkard who said that he drank to blot out his shame at his drinking, parents work hard to buy children things to compensate for their spending so much time at work. But these parents are not just working to buy treats. They may have to pay for private education if they don't want their children to be pregnant,

beaten up or illiterate. Like the increased crime that makes us feel that poor neighborhoods are unsafe, the schools abandoned to bullies and charlatans mean we have to pay dearly for something that was once cheap or free.

Our libraries are closing because it is assumed that only the poor will want to borrow books; the prosperous can buy their own, and everyone else can buy or steal a computer.

The most frightening aspect of this social scene is what it portends. As the over-forties age and die, the idea of a society of private restraint and communal obligation will go too. As public amenities deteriorate, and as the means of education and entertainment are increasingly purchased for use at home, those who cannot pay will become alienated.

One of the most chilling remarks I ever heard came from a nice, bright ten-year-old who had always gone to private schools. He had never heard of a public library. I explained that it lent books and videos, but one had to pay for the videos. He was puzzled. "Shouldn't they make people pay for the books, too?" he asked.

Indeed, *Make Them Pay* is the motto of England now. In our ideal consumer state, every citizen is alone, unhappy, insecure, vulnerable to the claim that his or her troubles will be cured by the application of money. The engines of commerce and government drive us towards this goal. In my imagination, I hear them rumble as, in actuality, I hear the patter of car-window glass on the pavement or see the Mercedes streaked with spit. ♦

*Rhoda Koenig writes for Vogue, the Wall Street Journal, and the Mail on Sunday. This is the first installment in a new TWQ feature, "The Rudeness Patrol."*

# KARLYN, BOWMAN'S Poll Pourri

## BAD REPORT CARD



WHEN ROPER STARCH Worldwide asked about some things that have made the United States a great nation, the Constitution and the free enterprise system topped the list. Schools didn't fare quite so well. Forty-five percent said public education for all citizens is something that made our nation great, but that response was down considerably from 63 percent who gave it when Roper asked the question a quarter century ago in 1974.

This attitude no doubt explains rising support for voucher systems. In 1970, Gallup and the educational society Phi Delta Kappa introduced the idea of a voucher system this way: "In some nations, the government allots a certain amount of money for each child for his or her education. The parents can then send the child to any public, parochial or private school they choose." Forty-three percent favored the voucher system, 46 percent were opposed. By 1983, 51 percent were in favor, 38 percent opposed. In 1993, Gallup and Phi Delta Kappa asked whether people favored or opposed "allowing students and parents

to choose a private school to attend at public expense." That year, only 24 percent favored the idea. In the 1998 survey, 44 percent did. A second question specified that parents could "send their school-age children to any public, private or church-related school they choose," with government paying "all or part of the tuition." In 1998, a majority favored the idea, and 45 percent opposed it. In these questions as in many others about voucher systems, nonwhites are usually more supportive than whites, perhaps because they have had more negative experiences with public schools.

In Wisconsin, where Milwaukee's decision to allow some low-income parents to choose their child's school has been given considerable media attention, support for a voucher system has risen from 45 percent in 1988 to 61 percent in 1998.

## WANTED: PARENTAL GUIDANCE



POLLSTERS HAVE BEEN investigating the public's perceptions of the reasons for the tragedy in Littleton, Colorado. Not surprisingly, the belief that parents should pay more attention to their children's activities has figured prominently in responses. The results reminded me of an interesting Gallup Youth Survey from 1997 that suggested that teens themselves want firm parental involvement in many areas of their lives. When thirteen-to-seventeen-year-olds were asked whether young people under

eighteen should be required to get parental consent on ten different matters, 88 percent said it should be required to purchase a handgun, 81 percent to get a credit card, 79 percent to get married, 78 percent to get an abortion, 72 percent to drive a car, 68 percent to stay out past 11 P.M., 68 percent to smoke, and 66 percent to use birth control devices. A near majority (48 percent) said teens should have to get consent to pierce their ears or other body parts. The one item that didn't garner majority support was dyeing one's hair. Only 35 percent thought parental consent should be required.

## THOU SHALT



OURS IS A deeply religious country, something public opinion surveys document over and over again. In late June, for example, Gallup asked whether people favored allowing schools to display the Ten Commandments. A large majority, 74 percent, favored the idea, and 24 percent were opposed. An even larger majority (83 percent) favored allowing students to say prayers during graduation ceremonies (17 percent were opposed).

In June, NBC News and the *Wall Street Journal* found 64 percent in favor (40 percent strongly) of "allowing religiously-based instruction on values and morals in public schools." A third were opposed (20 percent strongly). ♦

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