

Striving for Jerusalem

WILLIAM BLAKE, a brilliant, often mad, radical artist and printer wrote a poem, which is now known as *Jerusalem*, for the preface of his epic work, *Milton a Poem*. In 1803, the year before Blake wrote *Jerusalem*, he was charged at Chichester for high treason for uttering seditious and treasonable expressions. He was acquitted but his hatred of oppression and injustice ensured that he remained a figure of interest to the government and its spies, but in true radical form, nothing deterred him from speaking the truth as he saw it.

Jerusalem is part of Blake's mystical truth telling. It is not about the divided city at the heart of Israel and Palestine, but the celestial city of milk and honey, the city of universal peace and love. It concerns the Second Coming and whether Christ might have journeyed here, and asks if he might not have chosen England as the site for heaven on earth. It concludes with the prophetic idea that there should be no rest until we have built a heaven on earth in our green and pleasant land. In the political and intellectual world that Blake inhabited these were revolutionary sentiments, worthy of Milton the great poet and diplomat of the English Revolution against monarchical power and the established church.

Unsurprisingly, the poem was ignored and remained obscure until it was included in a collection of patriotic verse by the Poet Laureate in 1916 as part of the imperialist war effort. It was set to music for a rally designed to raise morale in the struggle for the unequivocal defeat of Germany. The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies then started to use the song at rallies and demonstrations; eventually it was taken up as the anthem of the Women's Institute.

Since then, it has been used by the Conservatives, the Labour Party, and at many English sporting fixtures as a popular alternative to the British national anthem, *God Save the Queen*.

It is certainly a grand song, redolent with a love of England, and an ambition for the country and her people to flourish.

And did those feet in ancient time
Walk upon England's mountains green:
And was the holy Lamb of God,
On England's pleasant pastures seen!

And did the Countenance Divine,
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?
And was Jerusalem builded here,
Among these dark Satanic Mills?

Bring me my Bow of burning gold;
Bring me my Arrows of desire:
Bring me my Spear: O clouds unfold!
Bring me my Chariot of fire!

I will not cease from Mental Fight,
Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand:
Till we have built Jerusalem,
In England's green and pleasant Land

William Blake's does not answer his question about whether England was, even briefly, a paradise on earth, but he asserts the prophetic intention that it should both be anticipated and strived for. He knew that England was a country whose crimes rivalled its virtues, and we know that the good and bad have kept pace, neck and neck, ever since.

All countries and nations are subject to such contradictions, but in England, we have an exemplary case of a nation that has wrought as much mayhem in the world as it has done good. In Tory parlance, it has "punched above its weight" for many centuries.

One need only think of our leading role in the initiation and development of the Atlantic slave trade, the great fleets we assembled to consolidate the institution of human bondage in the Caribbean, and North America, which have to be set against the efforts of the Clapham Sect and many others to bring to an end to centuries of torture, brutality, and oppression, in Britain's colonial possessions; the decisions of judges and courts in London, which insisted upon the human status of the slave, and the sterling role played by the Royal Navy in finally crushing the trade in chattel slavery altogether.

It is no wonder that the French have been calling us "perfidious" for the last four hundred years. The sleights of hand of our statesmen, and the duplicity and treachery of our foreign policy, our hypocrisy, has known no bounds as England set out quite deliberately with its concept of Britain, and the British, to destroy the Welsh language, keep a firm grip upon Ireland, and with the able assistance of the Edinburgh bourgeoisie, to wipe out the Highland clans, and consign their atavistic commitment to feudal lordship, Roman Catholicism, and absolute monarchy, to the romantic swirl of high Victorian tartan, and the wailing of bagpipes.

Yet for all this awfulness, our century of Tsarist dictatorship in India thinly veiled by vice regal palaver, our plots and scheming in Egypt and Persia, our murders in Kenya, our transportations and workhouses – the efforts of Pitt, Castlereagh, and Wellington, to strangle trade unionism at birth – at every point there has been a counterpoint in which the English have demonstrated an extraordinary capacity for right judgment, and the founding of institutions, which not only work, but have helped to form the basis of lawful government throughout much of the world.

The journey from the sealing of Magna Carta in 1215 to the Glorious Revolution of 1688, in which the emergent bourgeoisie established the primacy of Parliament and the civil law, was long and bloody. It was however an episodic and turbulent process of

gestation that established common law and the civil rights of the citizen as the basis of sound government and political liberty.

Building on this strong foundation, English Tories, Liberals, radical mill owners, non-conformist churchmen, novelists, essayists, upper class women, and enormous working class agitations, have consolidated the rule of law, gained universal suffrage, and policing by consent, which have created one of the most law abiding and peaceful countries on earth.

The achievements of the English are considerable, not least the capacity, which we have amply demonstrated, despite many ups and downs, to take the extraordinary social transformations, wrought initially by industrialization, then by deindustrialization, by perpetual economic upheaval, and mass immigration, in our stride. Despite occasional riots and baleful influences from Lord Tebbit to Nigel Farage, England, and Britain, has succeeded in sustaining a fundamentally tolerant set of social circumstances in which people can wear what they like, pray how they like, and say what they like.

Of course these rights and liberties are constantly under threat by malign forces, the perpetual vice that runs counterpoint to our virtues, but on the basis of our historical experience we can have every confidence that the English people will, along with the Welsh, Scots, Irish, Eritreans, Somalis, Jamaicans, Bengalis, Poles, Czechs, Latvians, and the dozens of others who have made our marvelous country even more marvelous, “will not cease from mental fight” until the worst is kept permanently in check and our truly grand aspirations are achieved.

One of the abiding virtues of the English, along with queuing and excessive formal politeness, is the way in which we avoid the flagolotry of other nations. Apart from formal parades and football competitions we do not go in for a lot of flag waving, neither that of St George nor the Butcher’s Apron, as the Irish in bloodier times described the Union Jack. Our nationalism, like our militarism is understated. No

doubt this has its origins in our perfidy, but it remains an attractive quality nonetheless.

However, the love of country, the love of the achievements, the absurdities, peculiarities, and idiosyncrasies of our culture and language, which the English, in common with people the world over, share with their own compatriots about their own countries, cannot form the basis of a political posture, cannot rightly be endorsed or supported as nationalism. This is because English nationalism would, like all nationalism, involve a one-sided celebration of our virtues and the papering over of our crimes with the perfidy for which we are justly famous.

An English nationalism would involve, as Scottish nationalism currently does, forgetting our central role in the construction of a system of imperial exploitation, the depiction of ourselves as victims of malign foreign forces whether in London, Brussels, or Washington, the drive to assert a specious unity where none actually exists. Because the truth is that England, like Scotland, is a class society in which working people do not have the same interests of those who own shares in factories, shops, and warehouses, simply because they are English or Scottish.

English society has been divided between the rich and poor, between powerful elites who own the land and much else, and have sought to rule the roost over the rest, for many centuries. It is a tribute to our national development that we have succeeded, as far as we have, in keeping these constantly evolving oligarchies of wealth and power in check. However, there can be no doubt that concepts like “nation” and “national interest” have always served, and continue to serve, our ruling elites by suggesting that we are in some mysterious way, because Scottish, or English, “all in this together”.

This is, of course, a lie. There is no Scottish interest, no English interest, no British interest, which can be understood without reference to the relationships between different groups or classes of people in our countries, and how we stand in relation to the

ownership of capital. Scottish workers have more in common with workers in Tower Hamlets or Warrington than they will ever have with the Edinburgh bourgeoisie. Despite the recent promises of the Scottish National Party to preserve and advance social democracy, and the political carnival whipped up by Nicola Sturgeon and others, propertied elites in Scotland, and the international corporations that own the oil and much of Scotland's industry and infrastructure, will be no more willing to put the interests of ordinary working people first than their opposite numbers in England.