

Source: England : an address ... at the annual dinner of the Royal Society of St. George
at the Hotel Cecil, London, on sixth day of May MCMXXIV
online on various web pages



**Stanley Baldwin, "What England means to me",
speech to the Royal Society of St George, 6 May 1924.**

Though I do not think that the life of a busy man there could be placed into his hands a more difficult toast than this, yet the first thought that comes into my mind as a public man is a feeling of satisfaction and profound thankfulness that I may use the word 'England' without some fellow at the back of the room shouting out 'Britain'. I have often thought how many of the most beautiful passages in the English language would be ruined by that substitution which is so popular to-day. I read in your Dinner-book, 'When God wants a hard thing done, He tells it', not to His not to his Britons, but to His Englishman;. And in the same way, to come to a very modern piece of poetry, how different it would be with the altered ending, 'For in spite of all his temptations to belong to other nations, he remains a Briton.' We have to-night to celebrate our country and our Patron Saint. It always seems to me no mere chance that besides being the Patron Saint of England, St George was the Patron Saint of those gallant sailors around the shores of the Adriatic, and that in his honour there exists one of the shores of the most beautiful chapels in Venice to-day. The Patron Saint for men of the English stock; and I think to-night amongst ourselves we might for a minute or two look at those characteristics, contradictory often, peculiar as we believe, in the great stock of which we are all members

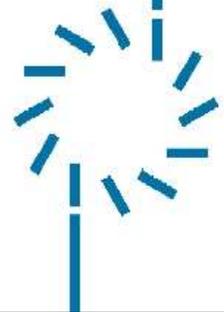
The Englishman is all right as long as he is content to be what God made him, an Englishman, but gets into trouble when he tries to be something else. There are chroniclers, or were chroniclers, who said it was the aping of the French manners by our English ancestors that made us the prey William the Norman, and led to our defeat at Hastings. Let that be a warning

to us not to ape any foreign country. Let us be content to trust and be ourselves.

Now, I always think that one of the most curious contradictions about the English stock is this: that while the criticism that is often made of us is not without an element of truth, and that is that as a nation we are less open to the intellectual sense than the Latin races, yet though that may be a fact, there is no nation on earth that has had the same knack of producing geniuses, and in a nation which many people might think restrained, unable to express itself, in this same nation you have a literature second to none that has ever existed in the world, and certainly in poetry supreme.

Then, for a more personal characteristic, we grumble, and we have always grumbled, but we never worry. Now, there is a very great truth in that, because there are foreign nations who worry but do not grumble. Grumbling is more superficial, leaves less of a mark on the character, and just as the English schoolboy, for his eternal salvation, is impervious to the receipt of learning, and by that means preserves his mental faculties into middle age and old age than he otherwise would (and I may add that I attribute the possession of such faculties as I have to that fact that I did not overstrain them in youth), just as the Englishman has a mental reserve owing to that gift given to him at his birth by St. George, so, by the absence of worry he keeps his nervous system sound and sane, with the result that in times of emergency the nervous system stands when the nervous system of other peoples breaks.

The Englishman is made for a time of crisis, and for a time of emergency. He is serene in difficulties, but may seem to be indifferent when times are easy. He may not look ahead,



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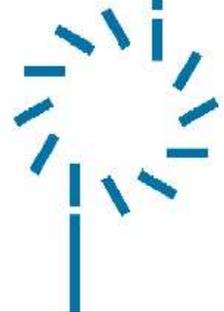
he may not heed warnings, he may not prepare, but when he once starts he is persistent to the death, and he is ruthless in action. It is these gifts that have made the Englishman what he is, and that have enabled the Englishman to make England and Empire what it is.

It is in staying power that he is supreme, and fortunately, being, as I said, to some extent impervious to intellectual impressions as a nation, he is usually impervious to criticism – a most useful thing for an English statesman sometimes. This may be the reason why English statesmen sometimes last longer than those who are not English. I admit that in past generations we carried that virtue to an excess, and by a rebound the sins of the fathers are being visited on the children. For instance, there was a time when this particular epithet was more in vogue in political society, and the Englishman invariably spoke of the ‘damned’ foreigner. Those days are gone, but the legacy has come to us in this, that by the swing of the pendulum we have in this country what does not exist in any other, a certain section of our people who regard every country as being in the right except their own. It largely arises, I think, among a certain section of the population who hold beliefs which they cannot persuade their fellow-countrymen to adopt.

There is yet one other point. I think the English people are at heart and in practice the kindest people in the world. With some faults on which I have touched, there is in England a profound sympathy for the under-dog. There is a brotherly and a neighbourly feeling which we see to a remarkable extent through all classes. There is a way of facing misfortunes with a cheerful face. It was shown to a marvellous degree in the war, and in spite of all he said in criticism of his own people, Ruskin said one thing of immoral truth. He said: “The English laugh is the purest and truest in the metal that can be minted. And indeed

only Heaven can know what the country owes to it.” There is a profound truth in that. As long as a people can laugh, they are preserved from the grosser vices of life, political and moral. And as long as they can laugh, they can face all the ills that fortune may bring upon them.

Then, in no nation more than the English is there a diversified individuality. We are a people of individuals, and a people of character. You may take the writings of one of the most English of writers, Charles Dickens, and you will find that practically all his characters are English. They are all different, and each of us that has gone through this world with his eyes open and his heart open, has met every one of Dickens’s characters in some position or another in life. Let us see to it that we never allow our individuality as Englishmen to be steam-rolled. The preservation of the individuality of the Englishman is essential to the preservation of the type of the race, and if our differences are smoothed out and we lose that great gift, we shall lose at the same time our power. Uniformity of type is a bad thing. I regret very much myself the uniformity of speech. Time was, two centuries ago, when you could have told by his speech from what part of England every member of Parliament came. He spoke the speech of his fathers, and I regret that the dialects have gone, and I regret that by a process which for a want of a better name we have agreed among ourselves to call education, we are drifting away from the language of the people and losing some of the best English words and phrases which have lasted in the country through centuries, to make us all talk one uniform and inexpressive language. Now, I have very little more that I want to say to you to-night, but on an occasion like this I suppose there is no one who does not ask himself in his heart and is a little shy of expressing it, what is it that England stands for to him, and to



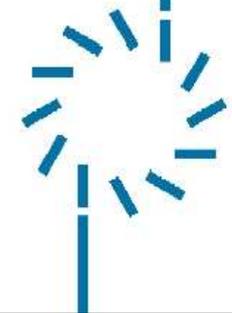
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her. And there comes into my mind a wonder as to what England may stand for in the minds of generations to come if our country goes on during the next generation as she has done in the last two, in seeing her fields converted into towns. To me, England is the country, and the country is England. And when I ask myself what I mean by England, when I think of England when I am abroad, England comes to me through my various senses – through the ear, through the eye, and through certain imperishable scents. I will tell you what they are, and there may be those among you who feel as I do.

The sounds of England, the tinkle of hammer on anvil in the country smithy, the cornrake on a dewey morning, the sound of the scythe against the whetstone, and the sight of a plough team coming over the brow of a hill, the sight that has been in England since England was a land, and may be seen in England long after the Empire has perished and every works in England has ceased to function, for centuries the one eternal sight of England. The wild anemonies in the woods of April, the last load at night of hay being drawn down a lane as the twilight comes on, when you can scarcely distinguish the figures on the horses as they take it home to the farm, and above all, most subtle, most penetrating and most moving, the smell of wood smoke coming in an autumn evening, or the smell of the scutch fires: that wood smoke that our ancestors, tens of thousands of years ago, must have caught on the air when they were still nomads, and when they were still roaming the forests and the plains of the continent of Europe. These things strike down into the very depths of our nature, and touch chords that go back to the beginning of time and the human race, but they are chords that with every year of our life sound a deeper note in our innermost being. These are things that make England, and I grieve for it that they are not the childish inheritance of the majority of people to-day in our country. They ought to be the

inheritance of every child born into this country, but nothing can be more touching than to see how the working man and woman after generations in the towns will have their tiny bit of garden if they can, will go to gardens if they can, to look at something they they have never seen as children, but which their ancestors knew and loved. The love of these things is innate and inherent in our people. It makes for that love of home, one of the strongest features of our race, and it that that makes our race seek its home in the Dominions overseas, where they have room to see things like this that they can no more see at home. It is that power of making homes, almost peculiar to our people, and it is one of the sources of their greatness. They go overseas, and they take with them what they learned at home: love of justice, love of truth, and the broad humanity that are so characteristic of English people. It may well be that these traits on which we pride ourselves, which we hope to show and try to show in our lives, may survive – survive among our people so long as they are a people – and I hope and believe this, that just as to-day more than fifteen centuries since the last of those great Roman legionaries left England, we still speak of the Roman character, so perhaps in the ten thousandth century, long after the Empires of this world as we know them have fallen and others have risen and fallen again, the men who are then on this earth may yet speak of those characteristics which we prize as the characteristics of the English, and that long after, maybe, the name of the country has passed away, wherever men are honourable and upright and perservering, lovers of home, of their bretheren, of justice and of humanity, the men in the world of that day may say, ‘We still have among us the gifts of that great English race.’



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