Douglas Goldring's Little England

by Patrick Wright

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Great British Bus Journeys: Travels through Unfamous Places by David McKie, Atlantic, 359 pp, £16.99

In 2000 the Royal Institute of British Architects hosted a public meeting at which various contenders for the new office of London mayor were invited to argue their case for election. If the event remains memorable, it's thanks largely to the Conservative candidate, Lord Archer, who betrayed no inkling of the perjury charges that would soon ditch his campaign and carry him off to jail. Instead, the irrepressible huckster proposed to take advantage of London's recently introduced system of 'red routes' by establishing a new super-fast bus service tailored to the needs of his busy friends in the City. He envisioned a fleet of sleek new vehicles, equipped with modem-ports and work stations, which would enable the nation's champions to sail back and forth without being fouled by the lesser movements of their fellow citizens.

Though it sounded implausible at the time, Archer's proposal was in line with the more baroque – perhaps pre-Cameronian – tradition of Tory thinking about public transport. It was in the same genre as the rumour – even David McKie has been unable to turn up a precise source – that Margaret Thatcher once remarked that anyone who rode a bus after reaching the age of 26 was a failure. It also reminded me of a story Ken Livingstone liked to recite when he was leader of the GLC. One day, he had found himself taking the Underground in the company of a Tory MP. The arriving train was heavily congested and the unaccustomed Tory – who may or may not have been Alan Clark – recoiled from the throng revealed by the opening doors, suggesting that they might do better to walk along the platform to the restaurant car.

Jeffrey Archer may have dreamed of routes as straight as an executive jet's runway, but McKie knows that a true bus journey is a wandering, much interrupted affair that takes for ever to arrive at anything resembling a destination. Characterised by diversions, digressions and unlikely encounters, it's also liable to breakdowns: moments of mental as well as mechanical failure in which all momentum is lost. For him, the bus is undoubtedly the

way to go: slow, indirect and, in its own grinding and unreliable manner, as conducive to the stream of consciousness as the train was in Turgenev's novel *Smoke*.

In postwar Leeds, the city in which McKie grew up, the corporation buses were green – a colour chosen, he recalls, because the Conservatives objected to the implicit socialism of the city's red trams. The buses helped to define the town: 'Their corporate presence spoke of continuity, civic pride and a sense of place, where the liveries of their successors speak simply of money.' The more recent privatised bus service may have 'zest and variety', but McKie finds its vehicles too diverse to project an idea of Leeds as a 'proud and distinctive entity'.

After drinking a cappuccino at the West Yorkshire Playhouse, built on the site of the demolished but once brave new Quarry Hill Flats (into which his mother had refused to move as a war-widowed evacuee from London), he boards an Arriva bus and quits Leeds via Hunslet, which also appears more or less obliterated since Richard Hoggart, who described its working-class culture so memorably in *The Uses of Literacy*, grew up there. Next comes Woodlesford, where McKie gazes round for any trace of the rhubarb for which the place was once well known, and we chug onwards to Wakefield, where George Gissing is not commemorated as fully as he might be – too 'grim', perhaps, and too heavily challenged, like many formerly industrial towns and all socialist novelists, for a happy ending.

McKie's purpose is not so much to deny that present-day Britain is full of 'crap towns' and rebranded 'non-places' as to demonstrate that even the most depleted stretches of the British scene can still be thickened up, particularised and made interesting – at least for as long as it takes Arriva, First or Stagecoach to haul him on to the next location. He is generally not inclined to discover his stories by canvassing public opinion as he goes. Instead, he relies on a curious process of historical subsidence, sinking down through the road into a vaulted underworld filled with spectral presences from a largely forgotten past. His bag is bulging with ancient guidebooks – among his favourites are Betjeman's Shell county guides – and his technique is comparable to that used in Adam Thorpe's short story 'In the Author's Footsteps', in his new collection, *Is This the Way You Said?*[*] Here an obstinately backward-looking rambler uses old maps and guidebooks acquired from second-hand bookshops to plan his assaults on present-day England. Guided by a volume from 1949 entitled *Buckinghamshire Footpaths*, he decides to hike to Milton Keynes: 'a homely place. Fields encroach upon the dusty by-lane, and brim over the scattered cottages.' He is soon clambering over the M1, through a vast Tesco storage depot, and into the

Gyosei Japanese boarding-school in Willen, where he is apprehended as a trespasser. Undeterred by such difficulties, he turns up a copy of *Rambles through Middlesex* (1929), and sets his sights on a 'slumbering hamlet' named 'Heath Row'.

Like Thorpe's radically anachronistic English rambler, McKie sets about his task in a spirit of heroic virtuosity. He relishes famously despised places such as Slough, where he sympathises with the concerned residents who, in 1870, already suspected that their new town might fare better if named Upton Royal. Thomas Hardy is hoisted aboard and driven past Weymouth to the Isle of Portland, a rocky place where Marie Stopes was once to be found retired among stoneworkers still accustomed to testing the fertility of potential brides before finally consenting to marry them. In Lichfield, the geographical centre of Middle England, a statue of Captain Edward John Smith of the *Titanic* stands in a park bestowing dangerous blessings on newly-wed couples emerging from the nearby register office.

In McKie's version of England the past is generally not allowed to assert itself as a moral yardstick, a measure of decline or a spur to progress. It appears, more characteristically, as a collection of disconnected bits and pieces, which can be used to cast a light-hearted sense of discrepancy over the contemporary scene. England turns out to be an old curiosity shop disintegrating among the gleaming hangars of a brand new retail park. McKie is the grizzled proprietor, momentarily bringing past and present together to produce ironical effects, and smiling as he lets them spring apart again.

Despite his tactical disavowal of earnestness, McKie knows his Defoe, Cobbett and Priestley, and his book is littered with indications that the 'state of the nation' is a matter of some concern to him. Following his habit of recovering forgotten precedents, I decided to continue the inquiry with the help of a writer who started using buses to investigate the condition of England seventy years before McKie embarked on his travels. Entitled *Pot Luck in England* and published in the spring of 1936, Douglas Goldring's first 'haphazard tour' of England entailed no preliminary 'staff-work' and no list of recommended inns: 'I never knew in the morning where I should sleep at night. I jumped off one bus when I was sick of it, or when it stopped. I jumped on another when the spirit moved me to proceed, sometimes without enquiring where it went.' His improvised route was the bus-traveller's equivalent of the zigzag walk (first left, first right ad infinitum) that Stephen Graham had earlier recommended, in *The Gentle Art of Tramping* (1926), as a way of manoeuvring the modern city into new patterns of disclosure.

Starting at Victoria Coach Station, Goldring boards a bus that is about to depart for Essex, a county he has scarcely seen since his days as a severely flogged yet still uncompliant boy at Felsted School in Great Dunmow. Finding Chelmsford buried in industrial muddle, he mounts a green double-decker and is relieved when London's sprawl finally seems to end at Great Baddow, where he is pleased to discover the silvery gleam of the Thames no longer confined by factories and warehouses as at Wapping.

He makes his first proper stop at Maldon, overlooking the Blackwater estuary. Here he books himself into an inn and, having encountered a vicar's Conservative wife in the Eastern National Omnibus Company's office, notes that, in purely individual terms, he often finds his political opponents more congenial than those who share his pacifist and left-wing views. After scrutinising the British Union of Fascists' shopfront in the High Street and paying too much for a gin and lime at the Blue Boar Inn, he goes for a walk with a man in plus-fours, discussing local history, the League of Nations and the increasing likelihood of another war. Returning to his inn, he finds himself to be the only guest and tries to stave off depression with the help of Herbert Tompkins's *Marsh-Country Rambles* (1904). From this source, he learns that Maldon's first Congregational Chapel had been built in the late 17th century by a 'pugnacious evangelist and hot-gospeller' called Joseph Billio, said to have been the inspiration of the phrase 'fighting like billy-o'.

And so this seasoned travel writer goes on, boarding country buses and peering out of the window as England struggles by. After reviewing the Essex coastline, he enters East Anglia and then rides west through Lincolnshire to Derby, Buxton and Shrewsbury. Having avoided the North in its entirety, he turns south along the Welsh border, visiting Bristol, Somerset and Bath before heading back to London, where he closes with a passionate conservationist diatribe against development in central London, berating a 'Parliament principally composed of businessmen' for allowing 'the commercial exploiter and the alien "realtor"' to demolish even 'the best examples of the architecture and town-planning of the past'.

Like McKie, Goldring liked to meander, and to view present-day England through the often accusing lens provided by antiquated guidebooks. He gives the impression, however, that he travels by bus because he is scarcely in a position to afford anything else, just as he is driven by necessity to stay at ordinary inns and to eat in common restaurants. For him, the 'state of the nation' is hardly to be avoided, closely connected as it is to the condition of his own pocket, which obliges him to add further detours to his route in order to visit various provincial post offices in the hope of intercepting passing cheques at the poste-restante counter.

Pot Luck in England was published as a travel book, and churches, castles and other conventional attractions are duly described in it. However, it's also a caveat about the miseries awaiting the visitor to the English provinces and countryside. The restaurants are generally unspeakable: the smarter they are the worse the food is likely to be, and the visitor's best bet may be to opt for 'high tea' at a plain dining-room of the sort patronised by commercial travellers. Readers are warned to avoid railway station 'refreshment rooms', where they will be lucky to find a stack of stale ham sandwiches curling upwards under a Victorian glass dome. Meanwhile, it is not only in Trust House hotels that they should expect to be treated as nuisances whose inquiries about the possible interest of the surrounding town will be taken as proof of idiocy. Even the most staid middle-aged couples asking for a room must learn to bear the scrutiny of gimlet-eyed receptionists on the lookout for illicit fornicators.

Goldring had spent most of the 1920s abroad, with long periods in Sweden and France – 'democratic countries with a cultural atmosphere wholly different from that of England' – and he makes full use of the comparative perspective in compiling his indictment of English hospitality. But he was also a determined 'Little Englander' who placed himself in the tradition of those who had tried to separate 'England' from the imperial British state during the Boer War. Influenced by the very Englishly expressed Victorian socialism of William Morris, H.M. Hyndman and Robert Blatchford, the cause had been taken up and redirected by G.K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc in the first decade of the 20th century. It had been resumed in the 1920s by various other figures, including H.J. Massingham, a former guild socialist who employed an amalgam of anthropological, archaeological and poetic sources to create a compensatory postwar cult of the southern English chalk downs, and also by Stanley Spencer, whose paintings of the Berkshire village of Cookham had much in common with Chesterton's defensive advocacy of England: the smaller and more localised the better; the less your knowledge of the wider world, the more profound your experience is likely to be.

Little England had been aligned with anti-imperialism in Chesterton's quarrels with Kipling, yet it was also imagined as a secret desire, shared by a silent majority who, in the words of Chesterton's famous poem, 'never have spoken yet'. Since this England could hardly be identified with the institutions of the British state, its people had no political articulation, no formal systems of representation, no law-making machinery, no dedicated press or diplomatic service. Submerged in this fashion, Little England could only persist as a more or less instinctive sense of identity, rooted in history and ethnicity, and sustained in the present by localised customs, poems that still rhymed, Falstaffian folk memories, traditional landscapes and buildings.

In the absence of Goldring's more 'democratic' means of expression, its people were inclined to identify themselves through narratives of belonging and otherness, of heritage and danger. Little England spurned BBC English, preferring its own slow-tongued dialects and elevating common sense over book learning. Its assemblies could hardly be mustered in Westminster, so, for Goldring, as for Chesterton, Belloc and Massingham, they took place informally in the public bar of every unmodernised ale house in the country.

The exponents of this outlook were inclined to imagine England as the innocent and unchanging heart of an imperial British history for which they denied all responsibility. By the 1960s, the result was a 'battered cliché-ridden hulk', as Tom Nairn claimed when condemning Enoch Powell's conjuring of England as a 'mother country' that had remained essentially unaltered through the entire course of the British Empire. Little England would often serve as an excuse for bigotry and wilful stupidity of the kind that Orwell associated with the English ruling class of the 1930s. Even when motivated by radical ideas, and claiming descent from Magna Carta, or the Levellers and Diggers of the 17th century, it remained the product of an antithetical mode of thought in which England was envisioned not as a complex and transforming society, but as an organic inheritance threatened in the present by a vividly imagined cluster of contaminants and invaders, not all of them embodying the British state.

As a self-declared member of this tendency, Goldring starts counting the encroachments as soon as his bus enters Essex. To begin with, it's a matter of industrial sprawl, 'bungaloid growth', and the signposts recently placed to identify footpaths for the benefit of increasingly assertive urban hikers. Soon enough, however, it becomes apparent that the threat also takes human form. In *A Stranger in Ireland* (1918), Goldring had described the 'English English' as 'really a numerically small people, embedded and half-swamped in a waste of alien humanity, plundered by their quicker-witted neighbours in Scotland, Wales and Ireland; exploited by the Jew; at the mercy of any alien confidence trickster who can afford a third-class ticket to their capital city'.

Anti-semitism disfigures many early 20th-century attempts to embrace England as a heritage threatened by modern forms of alienation. Yet fear of Jewish influence was by no means the loudest bee in Goldring's bonnet. Indeed, he came to see the dangers of that way of thinking and unambiguously condemned both anti-semitism and the Fascism carrying it forward. The Celts, however, were a different matter. The Welsh were bad enough, as had been demonstrated by Lloyd George, with his insistence on pressing on with the war in search of a final 'knock-out blow', and then allowing 'war fever' to be embedded in the Treaty of Versailles. Yet Goldring

was more vexed by the influence of 'quick-witted' and 'naturally tyrannical' Scots. In his autobiography, *Odd Man Out*, published in the same year as his bus tour, Goldring had compared these immigrant 'plunderers' to the 'verminous' grey squirrel busily exterminating our 'lovely indigenous red'. Having 'never been able to make their own country habitable', they had, over the past three hundred years, moved south in large numbers to take advantage of 'our higher form of civilisation and greater wealth'. At one point he would attribute their flight south to the clan system, suggesting that it encouraged a large proportion of Scots to feel that their sons were high-born, and therefore naturally suited to the English public schools in which they would often prove crueller, as well as more ruthlessly intelligent, than their English counterparts.

Some of these clambering Scots had gone on to run the empire. Not content with 'bullying the natives', the Scottish imperialist had set up 'crude Nova Scotias which he proceeds, by his religious intolerance, to make uninhabitable to English settlers'. Those who stayed in England waged the same puritanical war against the liberties and pleasures of the common man. Fired by the memory of his strict lowland Scottish mother, Goldring detected Scottish influence behind Britain's most tyrannical laws, from the wartime Defence of the Realm Act to the more recent Emergency Powers legislation and the licensing laws, which he saw being enforced with grimly proscriptive zeal by Scots serving as magistrates in England. Others achieved their purposes by rising to the top of the professions – whether as lawyers, doctors or newspapermen. Then there was Ramsay MacDonald. Once among the great hopes of the rising Labour Party, he was, by 1935, thoroughly exposed as its first enormously disappointing prime minister. In *Odd Man Out*, Goldring dismisses him for having made 'a strange career of personal aggrandisement, of ambition realised with Scottish persistence'. In the hope of lifting this Celtic yoke and encouraging its representatives to go home, Goldring urged all Englishmen to support the Scottish Nationalist movement. He embraced this cause with a double-edged enthusiasm similar to that with which Churchill and others had earlier argued for the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine.

Goldring had his own inventory of encroaching threats, but he also differed from other Little Englanders in the virtues he chose to invest in the idea of an endangered England. He was on familiar and largely Conservative ground when he noted, as a bus hauled him into Chepstow, that the 'rural England of long traditions, tranquillity, settled habits and abiding loveliness' was being swept away. However, he was also registering the death of a contrary idea of England he himself had developed in the wake of the First World War.

Writing in 1920, he had remembered how, provoked by Germany's overwhelming invasion of neutral Belgium in August 1914,

England became suddenly actual to the English, England – with its green fields and hedgerows, its sleepy country towns, its villages and duckponds and lazy rivers, its orchards, its velvet lawns, its cottages with gay front gardens, its absurd sprawling hills – was realised as something so inexpressibly dear, that any of her sons would readily lay down his life for her.

Having himself volunteered in that 'shining crusade', Goldring had fallen seriously ill before he had time to march off to war. Spared service, he had become a pacifist objector by the time conscription was introduced in 1916. After joining the anti-war movement led by E.D. Morel and the Union of Democratic Control, he had been greatly heartened when in November 1917 the Bolsheviks seized control of the Russian Revolution, pulled Russia out of the war and urged the international working class to end the struggle between Europe's empires by converting it into a revolution in their own countries.

In those years, Goldring's pacifism was combined with a 'dawnist' fantasy of international revolution, yet his idea of Little England would be shaped by a different influence. Having moved to Dublin shortly after the Easter Rising, he lived there for three or so years, helping to run the Abbey Theatre and watching as the Black and Tans pioneered fascist techniques, including the excuse that their victims were 'shot while trying to escape'.

Goldring's vision of England was transformed by his encounter with Sinn Fein. Irish republicans had cried 'Ourselves Alone' and yet, following the inspiration of their executed leader James Connolly, had also linked their nationalism to the international struggle for socialism. Having lost all appetite for the patriotism that had been harnessed to the propaganda machine of the British state, Goldring imagined an England of the same stripe: an 'English England' that would come to itself not through a belittling abandonment of politics, but by detaching itself from the British state and embracing the universal Brotherhood of Man. He dreamed of 'an English Sinn Fein movement', which was not to be confused with the sentimental 'Sussex' pastorale promoted by Chesterton and Belloc, both of whom, Goldring insisted, wrote 'purely as foreigners'. He identified this cause with the historical liberties defended by the anti-war movement, whose members had opposed conscription and maintained their objection despite imprisonment and a torrent of abusive propaganda. Such were the sources from which he had imagined a new England arising. Its values included a longstanding

commitment to freedom and justice, a libertarian tradition of civilian courage rather than imperial state power, Hogarthian sincerity and an uncompromising contempt for aristocratic affectation.

As the war ended, Goldring imagined this inspiration to be 'retained shyly like a secret in those English hearts which have not entirely lost consciousness of nationality'. He also hoped it would soon be resurgent and looked forward to the emergence of a 'new English nation, of which the skilled artisan class forms the backbone', and which would prove to be both strongly anti-militarist and inclined towards 'Bolshevism'. Its ambassadors included Edward Carpenter, whose *Towards Democracy* was full of new English premonitions, H.G. Wells and, above all, D.H. Lawrence: *Sons and Lovers* had impressed Goldring as the best embodiment of the 'curious, indefinable, essential English spirit'. In those early postwar years, Goldring had yearned for a 'rebirth' in which the recovery of England would be combined with a 'complete suppression in the minds of the great mass of the British public of all imperialist ambitions which could possibly disturb the peace of the world'. As an advocate of 'Home Rule for England', he had dreamed of a 'really English parliament' and an English nationalist party that would fly the flag of St George, setting aside the Union Jack to await a future in which it might conceivably be recovered as the standard of a 'United States of England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland'.

A few years before embarking on his brief bus tour, Goldring had tried to launch a weekly publication dedicated to this singular cause. Entitled 'The English Freeman', it would have been English 'in the same sense that Scottish and Welsh periodicals are respectively Scottish and Welsh, and primarily concerned with the defence and preservation of freedom'. Anti-Fascist and against all race hatred, it would have opposed the laws interfering with English liberties, and campaigned for pleasure-enhancing initiatives of the kind that George Lansbury had tried to establish when he was first commissioner of works in Ramsay MacDonald's second Labour government. There should be not just lidos but restaurants and cafés in public parks, and theatres should be free to open on Sunday. Measures to preserve rural England and secure the nation's architectural heritage should be combined with ambitious slum clearance schemes, reform of the divorce laws, and a determined defence of the rights of the pedestrian. By lifting the Celtic yoke, Goldring hoped to make England so much more congenial that it might even develop a profitable tourist trade, which 'The English Freeman' would promote under the slogan 'See England First'. The project failed when the proposed paper's only likely funder backed out, declaring himself to be a long-standing Welsh teetotaller.

It's hardly surprising that, by 1935, Goldring should confess that his eye had become jaded. The thought of the 'idle rich' and the smart literary novels devoted to their lives continued to make him 'see red – in fact they make me see the sickle and the hammer on a red ground'. He had, however, long since vacated his dream of Lenin as the new Messiah (expressed in his 1920 novel, *The Black Curtain*), just as he recognised that his England had failed to 'arise' in the manner advocated in Carpenter's famous song.

Shortly after the war, D.H. Lawrence had written 'The Blind Man', a story (collected in *England, My England*), in which a disfigured war veteran, who resembles a grotesquely tumescent penis, moves about darkly between his farm animals, his wife and an irritating Scottish visitor named Bertie. Goldring, however, would find no redeeming 'phallic consciousness' to praise in postwar England. Instead, he sees the British state, still swollen and tyrannical, scattering its toxic debris over the face of a supine people. It's there in the War Department, taking over or retaining land for military firing ranges and bombing sites, in the retired civil servants who seem to be monopolising select coastal towns, and in the new systems of state education, which were ensuring that knowledge of the natural world was dying in the country as well as the city. The corporate state, meanwhile, was represented by the BBC, condemned for its 'Celt-boosting', its American dance music, its 'variety' programmes, in which dire comedians were kept afloat by regularly cranked spasms of 'artificial laughter' and its sermons with their 'reek of Glasgow Nonconformity'. Proprietorial war profiteers smiled across England's velvet lawns and rapacious developers eyed up its sleepy country towns. As for the younger veterans, who had come home determined to transform the world, too many of them now seemed concerned only that they should be allowed to retain their wartime titles as 'captain' or 'major'.

While mapping failure and defeat, Goldring was still keen to challenge the thought that English public opinion was aligned with the shabby politics of a national government that seemed bent on appeasing Fascism and drifting towards another world war. Unlike McKie, who reports on overheard conversations but rarely engages directly himself, Goldring would seek people out and provoke them into political discussion. He interrogated vicars and commercial travellers and, faced with a blustering brick-faced Fascist in Shrewsbury's Crown Hotel, harried him into conquered silence. As the 1930s advanced, Goldring persisted in his activities as a libertarian pacifist. Many of his letters to newspapers were left unpublished (thanks, he suggested, to the fact that many British editors were Nonconformist Scots), so he developed the habit of reprinting them in his books. He also kept up his efforts as a campaigner. Immediately after the First World War he had worked for the Fight the Famine Council, an organisation that campaigned for the lifting of

the Allied blockade against Germany and also gave rise to the Save the Children Fund, for a while run from a room in Goldring's house in St James's Terrace.

D.H. Lawrence had mocked him for his involvement in such Bloomsburyesque 'pamphlet shops', but Goldring carried on. Indeed, at the end of the 1930s, he described 'England's committees' as a last 'stronghold' where the English, rather than the Scots, were still dominant. He remained an active member of the National Council for Civil Liberties, an organisation with which he had been associated since 1916, when it was founded to protect the legal rights of citizens during the war, and which he had later (in 1934) helped to refound in opposition to racism, the Special Powers Acts governing policing in Northern Ireland, and the abuses of teetotal licensing magistrates. By 1936, he was also redirecting his defence of England into architectural conservationism, where the idea of an endangered heritage had a direct application. Concerned that (often Scottish) developers were free to tear their way through England's Georgian buildings, he used the medium of letters to editors to take them on, along with their apologists, such as the (Scottish) commentator Hamilton Fyfe. His first victory was No. 6, Old Palace Yard, a stone-faced Georgian house behind Westminster Abbey, threatened by the George V Memorial Committee, who wanted to remove it to clear space for a statue of the late king.

At the same time as fighting that battle on the correspondence pages, he was also setting up the Georgian Group as a new committee of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings. He found the experience arduous, and all the worse thanks to the aristocrats and Mayfair socialites he felt obliged to bring onto the committee. It was certainly a difficult encounter. When I met James Lees-Milne in the 1980s, he was still wondering what it was that had made Goldring so chippy. The answer isn't hard to find. In establishing the Georgian Group, he subordinated himself to a committee of indolent and astonishingly snobbish patricians who had no conception of the public interest and expected him, a menial underling, to do their bidding and pay his own bills as he went. It's not clear how much this group, chaired by Lord Derwent and including the young Robert Byron, knew of Goldring's activities as a pacifist and left-wing 'propaganda novelist'. However, a working relationship was never achieved and Goldring took his leave as soon as the group was established and ready – having initially refused to associate with any controversy – to take credit for the success of his first noisy campaigns.

I sometimes think of Goldring's optimistic idea of Little England when I drive through Rutland on my way to Nottingham, where I teach. I take the road that Goldring himself travelled when he embarked on a second bus tour in

the spring of 1948, a year before he was included as a 'disappointed careerist' on the list of Communists and fellow travellers drawn up for the Foreign Office by the dying George Orwell.

It remains a traditional-looking landscape, with brick barns, grey stone cottages and green hills. Having recently been extracted from Leicestershire, into which it was incorporated despite much objection in 1974, Rutland is once again, at scarcely more than 16 miles across, the smallest county in England. Though recently expanded, its county town, Oakham, still feels like a village. As Goldring claims in *Home Ground*, the chronicle of his later 'Journey through the Heart of England', even Rutland's most famous historical personage, Sir Jeffrey Hudson, was a dwarf (allegedly only 18 inches tall, he was taken into royal service after being served up in a cold pie before Charles I and Queen Henrietta Maria).

Rutland had too many military airbases for Goldring, a pacifist opponent of the Cold War, yet he was by no means insensitive to the charms of this miniature county. The fact that its countryside was dominated by aristocratic parks and estates – and not yet by Rutland Water, now promoted as 'the largest man-made lake in Western Europe' – pleased his conservationist sensibilities, although he was inclined to hope they would in future be preserved under state ownership. Oakham's Crown Hotel, where Goldring provoked some fox-hunters into a ferocious argument about the death penalty, is now gone. Not so the railway station which, with its level crossing and dag-edged canopy, might belong in a watercolour painted by Edward Ardizzone for Graham Greene's children's story *The Little Train*. It's here that Goldring gives up on the bus and buys a ticket for Peterborough. As his train steams away, he's still thinking of the aggressively defensive gentlemen in the saloon bar: 'The talk confirmed me in my belief that Rutland, with its thatched roofs, its association with the Cottesmore and the Quorn, its noble parish churches and its traditional preoccupation with stock breeding, grazing and barley growing, is one of the last remaining bits of untouched rural England.' The Crown Hotel is now a residential home for elderly ladies; its courtyard has gone into service as a shopping arcade.

Oakham recedes as I drive on towards Melton Mowbray, whose pie-makers have resorted to the European Commission in their attempt to gain exclusive rights to apply the name of the town to their products. Yet it's not so easy to leave Little England behind. In recent years, Goldring's Celtic Yoke has given way to Labour's 'Scottish Raj', as Jeremy Paxman put it in March 2005. Paxman's target was Tony Blair's 'attack dog' John Reid, a Glaswegian former Communist who, having enjoyed the hospitality of Radovan Karadzic in 1993, now concentrates on bullying civil servants in the Home Office. The Scottish

Raj has included Blair and Gordon Brown from the start; posthumous membership should no doubt be awarded to John Smith, Donald Dewar and Robin Cook. The reformulation of Britishness remains high on their devolutionary agenda, but New Labour politicians can be seen carefully distancing themselves from the English question just as, in the dawn of their power, they used to avoid, on the advice of the rebranding experts, being photographed in front of old buildings. As for the rural imagery that remains so central to the repertoire of Englishness, switch on the news and you might come to suspect that every English farmer is a psychotic maniac, itching to gun down house-breaking travellers or queuing up to follow David Lucas from Suffolk, who has compensated for the decline in agricultural subsidies by manufacturing gallows to sell to Mugabe's and other vile regimes. ('Business is business,' Lucas remarked.) David Cameron, whose Conservative Party commands little support in Scotland, hardly needs reminding of the opportunity presented by the idea of the English as a politically disenfranchised people who 'never have spoken yet'. Advisers may well already have urged him to stop referring to his Scottish surname as if it were necessarily an advantage.

Footnotes

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