The English Postman

Tom Nairn discusses past, present and future of Anglo-British identity

'A mentally invisible man...Nobody ever notices postmen somehow', said Father Brown, '...yet they have passions like other men, and even carry large bags where a small corpse can be stowed quite easily.' G.K Chesterton, 'The Invisible Man', in The Annotated Innocence of Father Brown (Oxford 1987, originally 1911) The old postman's uniform is known as 'Britain', often prefixed by 'Great': archaic Victorian coat with red cuffs and collar, trousers and durable boots, complete with epaulettes, buttons, a splendid cap with the Crown, and naturally a capacious shoulder-bag sagging with packages from all round the globe. It used to be carried by lots of different men and women, including Australians (winter style), but the numbers are shrinking fast. Chesterton's point was of course that the uniform can eclipse the bearer, until he himself is hardly noticed: Have you ever this - that people never answer what you say? They answer what you mean - or what they think you mean...All language is used like that; you never get a question answered literally, even when you get it answered truly. His central figure, red-haired Scotsman John Angus, told 'four quite honest men' to look out for a man going into a house, and they reported seeing nobody - '...whom they could suspect of being your man'. However, someone did go into and emerge from the house (committing a murder en route): the 'invisible man' or postman. The Great-Brit uniform used to be shared, as an imperial vestment wearable by archipelago minorities - Scots, Welshmen, Irishmen - as well as by colonies and representatives of the UK's 85per cent majority of Englishmen and women. In the 20th century the overseas possessions mostly departed, and the minorities have begun to resign from the burden, seeking their own roads to emancipation (which will eventually including their own postal services and stamps). But this leaves the abandoned majority with a most unusual configuration of passions, assumptions and interests - or (as is now routinely said) an unusual 'identity' and self-imagery. The central wearer of the old costume has worn it so long it can't imagine abandonment: nudity and disorientation might result -a nation lost rather than liberated. In that sense the Royal Mail represents a world-view: a has-been with considerable if diminishing vitality - enough for more than mere survival. 'Royal' means 'larger than', transcending both the bearer and what he has done, and bestowing inclusion in a wider, even a universal, realm of social being. It still means meaning. In Central Europe, this vital dimension was once provided by the Hapsburg or Austro-Hungarian empire - the high road to world impact and significance, irresistible to politicians and intellectuals (whether they admired or deplored its results). That meaning-imperium collapsed after World War I, but certain structures both east and west of it survived, via metamorphosis. The Tsarist order mutated into Communism after 1917, and would survive in the redesigned uniform until 1989. The Anglo-British world system has lasted much longer, through many losses and traumas - so that something of it has endured into the present. It has proved tougher and more adaptable than predecessors like the French and Hispanic states. The explanation of such endurance lies in a unique bond between the English nation and its acquired external habitat of uniformed 'Britain' - a 'habitus' in Bourdieu's sense, acquired so early, and listing so many victories over three centuries, that it has come to feel simply natural to most inhabitants. In 1962 US statesman and advisor Dean Acheson said that Britain had 'lost an empire but not yet found a rôle' in post-imperial times. The implication was of course that the British state as it was - the veteran of industrialism, colonisation, and world wars - should find or invent such a stance and function, advised by local wise men like Acheson. All theories and histories of nationalism stress the indispensable role of cross-class communication and literacy in forming nation-states. 'Communities' have to be 'imagined' in order to work; and the imagining requires a vehicle of intimacy, beyond kinship and village. But the greatest poet of early-modern times, William Shakespeare, happened to write in Elizabethan/Jacobean English. While from a linguistic-science angle 'English' may appear in lists alongside 'Slovak', 'Welsh', 'Urdu' and so on, in Chesterton's sense this counts as merely true, rather than meaningful. No derogation of other writers and languages is implied in pointing out that this is bigger than inheriting a means of communication and social solidarity. The French term for it is 'rayonnement', shining forth, the conversion of particularity into universal recognition or validity. Both they and the English led Europe in nation-building, because they had enough of it. A population inheriting a large enough dose of the drug alongside the pragmatics of cohesion, joint activity (etc.) will naturally resists retraction into 'itself' - , that is, the ordinary or standard-issue mechanics of nationality-development. Liah Greenfeld has indicated England's place in the latter, in her analysis of Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity (1992). It was ahead of the French after Queen Elizabeth - in fact, 'God's First-born'. France and then the others found themselves driven to meet the challenge by emulation - each community in turn forced to imagine post-mediaeval nationhood, necessarily in 'its own terms' as well as those imposed by the archipelago threat. However, the English 'model' also remained just that: what it was, rather than 'typical'. It reacted to the global success of its post-17th century impact, naturally, but at a deeper level essentially unlike its never-ending progeny. At present, we find the archipelago fragmenting into something like the pre-Elizabethan condition, with fairly 'typical' nationalisms discovering themselves in Wales and Scotland, as previously in Ireland. But it is wrong to believe that England (or 'little England', as many contemptuously describe it) can or should follow that well-trodden path. Pursuing the metaphor farther: it built the path originally, and takes it for granted, but for that very reason is most unlikely to take it in the standard 19th-20thcentury sense. This has always been disconcerting for nationalists of the archipelago periphery. These find themselves faced with an archaic (or at least, early-modern) stance, naturally somewhat hostile to their antics but (after the Irish independence struggle) less inclined towards repression or assimilation. 'Devolution' was invented to solve the problem: limited regional self-rule to defuse rising discontent with the Westminster postman's decline. The latter has continued, if anything accelerating after 2000. But it must be remembered that 'decline' is nothing like defeat. The latter provoked new constitutional starts in Spain, France, Germany, Italy and the USSR. The staged retreat of Anglo-Britain, by contrast, brought a compensatory turning to pastness. Non-Identity? Identity is of course a collective metaphor; but metaphors are malleable, and re-usable (part of their point) and in this case they have awarded a strangely rural dimension to the past of the first industrial nation-state - as Greenfeld says, the principal parent of urban capitalism and commerce. The story is best recounted by Krishan Kumar in his chapter on 'The Moment of Englishness'in the best book on the subject, The Making of English National Identity (Cambridge U.P. 2003). This 'moment' was in the last third of the 19th century, when the British state found itself in need of what one might call internal reinforcement. Its economic foundation was moving away from industry towards international finance-capital; and it had to compete in a 'world of nations' - the nationality-politics provoked by its own earlier impact, and now generalized as the nation-state order. Strangely enough, it had to become more of a nation-state itself, with credentials less tied down to the primitive accumulation of capital and the industrial revolution. The dilemma was resolved by what one might call a second-stage imagined community: the rurality once marginalized by manufacturing returned as a confected 'soul' or source. The identity-change was brought about by popular romantic culture, broadcast via a new intelligentsia and the developing educational system. A partly fake 'civil society' was dreamed up to support an over-extended state. Of course 'Englishness' was indispensable to that shift: the non-English periphery had no option but to follow the overwhelming majority- absurd as it seemed in Glasgow, Belfast and Cardiff. Here, the culture factor - literature, and now to a noticeable extent music as well - was important. Its resources enabled the mutation, and thus saved the 'bigger than' identification mode imperialism and finance-capital required. So the Westminster 'postman' could carry on his daily rounds, into the age of world wars. The minority nationalities stayed within his reinforced and more capacious bag, albeit less happily and amid mounting resentment. Unfortunately, Kumar's 'moment' is still with us Surprising as such persistence seems, there is still another factor that helps explain it. We need to bring in something that figures prominently in academic international relations, and diplomatic histories, but comparatively rarely in culture theories. That is, the 'deep-structure' special relationship of Great Britain to the United States. Mentioned (and criticized) often enough in specific policy agendas, like the Cold War, and recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, it also deserves a broader framework. Again, the end of Austria-Hungary may be an appropriate point of reference. Disoriented by the post-1918 disappearance of the huge imperium based on Vienna, Austrian politicians and intellectuals sought compensation by turning to closer alliance with the greater Germany of Wilhelmine times. Competition was replaced by collusion, even subordination: full of problems, yet preferable to Central European ordinariness, semi-invisibility. Naturally enough, the episode has been occluded from contemporary view by its disastrous consequences: Imperial Germany turned into the Third Reich, and the budding special relationship of the 1920s became the Anschluss of 1937. Honorary Americans? In the same post-World War I era, Britain's equivalent was of course the relationship with the emergent Great Power over the Atlantic: a more enduring 'special relationship' cemented during World War II, which has endured right down to the present. When Gordon Brown at last became Prime Minister two years ago, his first important move was a visit to Washington D.C., where he declared to a joint Congress-Senate session that 'no power on earth' would ever come between the USA and Britain. He made manifest a degree of prostration hitherto unknown, in the quite long history of Anglo-American accords. Sycophancy of that order goes far beyond diplomatic or even military cooperation. It's more like an identifying choice of 'civilization' - the 'American way', as ultimate goal of the shrinking British way (which Brown had already been labouring to rebuild for years). It was at the same time a refusal of any European goal, the other alternative avenue simultaneously being opened up via modes of E-U sponsored 'integration'. Like Tony Blair before him, Brown was reassuring the Washington public he intended to remain an 'honorary American', not an 'ex-American', or anything else. No doubt he also hoped that the new President Obama would notice, and eventually reciprocate in policy terms. In truth, few in today's USA notice or care much about it: obedience is appreciated, but not confused with specialness or identity. No American feels Britons to be honorary Yankees, and most would deride the notion. The point here is not to mix up either Bush's or Obama's America with what became of inter-war Germany. However, there is a parallel: it is surely arguable that this deeper-level identification has bourne the United Kingdom into inextricable association with a declining great power. Ironically, Brown's proffered slavishness was to a grander reiteration of Britain's own past fate. In a world of mounting great-power contestation, the master equivocator has both shackled his own country to the only contestant certain to be 're-dimensioned' and prevented (or at least discouraged) from contributing more strongly to the confederation of middle-powers likely to keep and augment its place in the new globalising balance: Europe. While England might conceivably 'find a new role' there, the pathetic Anglo-British postman appears doomed to the tragi-comic posture of treading water in the new delta of globalization - and inevitably, sinking under the weight of that sacred non-discardable uniform. The English nation's need for rediscovery and re-start as a polity isn't based on mere convenience to European Union, or obligation to the Scots and Welsh, or simply a wish to be normal. Much deeper currents are at work. By definition, Greenfeld's primacy could never be restored: surrogates are futile, like contrived nostalgia and imagined specialness. And yet, the combination of factors mentioned - literary and musical culture, fading rayonnement, a willed externality meant to outlast empire, enough periphery quiescence - have been sufficient to preserve the limbo of Englishness, and bear it forward into the globalising times. None the less, there are now signs of the 'moment' ending relatively quickly, in terms of the secular cadences that built it up, both historically and geographically. Ostriches Forever? Plenty of people would be happy for it not to end. In The Politics of Englishness (Manchester 2007), Arthus Aughey describes Englishness as an 'absorbative patria' favourable to interpenetration and inclusion, such that everyone in the U.K. is 'half English' as well, with most enjoying the fate. Why shouldn't this continue, unless '...politicians choose to make it impossible for such messiness to continue', especially nationalists from the periphery? Aughey winds up his plea with a statement indistinguishable from those of most old Tories, as well as Labour conservatives: 'The uncodified British constitution has been more resilient than its written counterparts, and its conventions often more robust than strict formalities,its monarchical gloss less significant than its democratic substance' (p.214). The author was driven to write the book by worry that the reappearance of the English national flag (the Cross of St George) at football internationals and similar events, instead of the composite 'Union Jack', might indicate an awakening of majority political nationalism. In areas like Northern Ireland this would be contentious (putting it mildly). But it's too soon to worry, he concludes, eching Robert Hazell's introduction to The English Question (Manchester 2006): the problem 'is not an exam question which the English are required to answer...and it can remain unresolved for as long as the English want'. (quoted on p. 202 of Aughey, op.cit.). Reviewing the same book in Public Law (Spring 2007). Vernon Bogdanor pointed out how 'Exhorted by polemicists both on the Right and the Left to become lions.(the English) prefer to remain ostriches, and when the polemicists insist on an answer, they simply refuse to acknowledge that there is a question'. But can ostrich indifference really be unaffected by what the other non-English peoples want? At the time of writing, the First Minister of the Scottish government has proposed holding a refendum on full independence for Scotland. The Welsh Assembly is planning a vote on fuller self-government for Wales in 2011. These votes will almost certainly take place under renewed Conservative government at Westminster, with little or no representation from the countries concerned. Whatever their result, they are certain to reinforce what one might call the referendal process and mentality among the minorities, and unlikely to be satisfied by minor or symbolic gestures. That process will be the reversal of the long-term one which fostered the singularity of 'bigger than', 'absorbative', 'indeterminacy', 'half-this' or that - and all their kindred. However strong inertia and past-hypnosis may seem, is it conceivable that they will simply endure forever? English Empiricism? This kind of speculation confines the argument to the imponderables of collective feeling and psyche. But there is in any case another dimension likkely to obtrude, above all via Scotland. Aughey's admiration for resilience and conventions hinges upon the absence or unimportance of 'strict formalities'. He forgets that the whole Anglo-universe of informality is itself based upon a formal, international agreement between states: the Treaty of Union of 1707. The 'substance' he discerns as outlasting formal rhetoric would probably vanish rapidly after any such vote (if not before). It has always depended on other states accepting England as de facto Britain or the 'United Kingdom'. The aim of the Scottish National Party is usually described as 're-negotiation' of the 1706-7 accord, a replacement of it (i.e. of the United Kingdom) by something other and better. Whatever that formula turns out to be ('confederation'? reciprocal recognition of statehoods? appeals to a grander international tribunal?) it will undoubtedly make it possible for all third parties to disown the existing set-up. Naturally, others would 'rally round'. But how many would be happy to declare suspension or hostility, towards a professed lackey of American power and NATO? One suspects, a growing number, for a growing variety of motives: the obverse of 'bigger than' was always exposure to a range of denunciations and ridicule. The conviction of inevitability attaching to an ex-great power, however pretentious and down on its present-day luck, has been insufficient to arrest relegation thus far. How would it fare after a successful separation, and the possibility of supporting new states in their demands for recognition and international membership? Another implication of the argument suggests itself here: nothing less than outright separation is likely to make a difference. The Postman régime has sought to stave off fate via its Calman Commission (June 2009) recommending still more devolution: practically anything short of independence. Michael Russell responded for the Scottish Executive by saying: 'The best way to resolve the debate about improving Scotland's governance is the free and fair referendum that the Scottish Government propose for next year, when we will offer people the opportunity to choose independence and equality for Scotland.' And generally, the Calman last ditch gesture aroused more derision than argument about the supposed new choices. The demise of Aughey-Hazell Englishness can no longer be postponed by more devices of this kind. In which case, a different formula for an English polity must surely be sought, distinct from the ancient equivocations. And probably a Scottish vote - or simply determined persistence along Russell's indicated route - is the trigger likely to make it happen. But once it does, I suspect that the genuinely native-English tradition of philosophical empiricism will re-emerge and quietly take over. The best guide to how this might come about is probably Patrick Hannan's A Useful Fiction: Adventures in British Democracy (Seren, 2009). He ends up reminding readers that England has already produced an ideal Postman-Anglo-nationalist in the form of John Enoch Powell - 'He was about as British as you could get and Enoch was wrong', is his conclusion (p.200). What is so plainly indicated by realities will not only impose itself, but (in a short time) be welcomed as necessity: facts of the matter that just have to be accepted, and made the best of. Whatever the problems 'Englishness' poses, it would surely be surprising if they could not find answers, in an archipelago already remarkably reconfigured. Last century the question of Northern Ireland seemed insolvable by anything short of military victory by one side or the other. Today, the success and endurance of the Belfast Peace Agreement has come to be almost taken for granted. Another multi-cultural country looks like contributing to the new settlement, alongside reborn Scotland and Wales. As for post-postman England, the historic first of nationalism's world can't help being last in the transition to post-nationalism (or more exactly post old-nationalism). And that also will be a challenge, and a kind of emancipation. Tom Nairn is one of Scotland's most distinguished writers and is currently working at the RMIT university in Melbourne