

Barry's Frenglish Folies

1.The Puritan Factor

1.1 A Dash of Hypocrisy

Our inner Frenchman often imagines he can hear the souls of Calvin, Wesley, Luther and Cromwell laughing their heads off on high (where they were pre-destined to be) at having managed for so many years to terrorize an entire nation into believing that life was far too serious a business to indulge in the sinful vanities of ostentatious display and frivolous pleasure, and that any deviation from the straight and narrow path of strict sobriety and unflinching Sabbatarianism was tantamount to signing your own warrant to be skewered and barbecued in the fires of hell. But what our Frenchman finds particularly deplorable in you English is that a country whose literary heritage includes writers unashamedly vaunting the subtle plays, indeed sensual pleasures of heterosexual love should have allowed itself to be influenced by a mixed bunch of self-righteous prudes to the point of producing a reign – almost a century long - which undertook a

ubiquitous, in-depth, long-term operation to convince our planet it would be a far more decent place to live on if a way were found to perpetuate the species without the slightest contact between male and female. For what other judgement can we have on an era where matters of the flesh were viewed as being so shockingly improper that chairs, tables and pianos were guilty of indecent exposure if their legs were not hidden beneath long woollen socks? Even the most innocent display of heterosexual affection was considered shamefully offensive. As a child, I (we use the pronoun 'I' as this was well before we developed into the Frenglishman we now are) I remember Grandad often telling the story about Grandma and himself when, one spring afternoon, shortly after becoming officially engaged, they were strolling arm-in-arm in the local park. Suddenly they saw Grandma's father striding resolutely towards them. 'What's up wi' thee, lass? Is tha lame?' was his dour reaction to such unbridled debauchery*.

So profound and far-reaching was this rigid sexual morality that even the most innocent reference to the natural consequences of the procreative act was still considered shamefully taboo. The young English boy I then was used to spend a week of the summer holidays with Grandma and Grandad who lived in a small coalmining village in the heart of the then West Riding of Yorkshire. Perhaps it was the influence of the burgeoning Frenchie within (I'd already started learning French at school) which, one Sunday lunch over roast beef and Yorkshire Pudding, prompted him to remark - with only the vaguest of notions as to what it meant - that their next-door neighbour, Mrs Shufflebottom, was *pregnant*. Now, as Mr and Mrs Shufflebottom had been united in holy wedlock for well over a year, and nothing went to indicate that the inseminator was anyone but her husband, Mrs Shufflebottom's condition was above all moral reproach. But, while any French parent would have seized on this heaven-sent opportunity to give a first lesson on the birds and the bees, something in Grandma made the word unmentionably indecent,

especially in the mouth of an eleven-year-old, and he was told with grim firmness never ever to be heard using *that* word again.

However, Grandma's condemnation of all things remotely sexual never put into question her own systematic, protracted and, as the growing boy later came to suspect, delectable post-prandial perusal of the pages of a Sunday newspaper, popularly referred to as the 'News of the Screws', the main articles of which involved the repetitive narration of illicit encounters of the flesh, going at that time (to his utter mystification) under the term *intimacy*, and usually spiced with vaguely perverse details: 'They had their four o'clock Sunday tea, and intimacy then took place on the lambs' wool hearth rug in front of a roaring fire,' or: 'She was in the habit of sucking a piece of Cinder toffee while they were being intimate.' But, as our Frenchman often points out, what more can we expect from drinkers of tea with milk that this strong Puritanical brew should have been served up with a good dash of hypocrisy.

* The Englishman in us is of Yorkshire extraction. For the benefit of readers unaccustomed to the esoteric vernacular of this northern part of England, the Queen's English rendition would be: 'What's the matter with you, my girl? Have you hurt your leg?'

1.2 Play the Game

What is less surprising, then, that those Puritan censors of even the most harmless manifestations of heterosexual attraction should have profoundly modelled your English character, and that, like fish and chips, sexual scandal should have become a staple part of your national diet, served up in generous daily helpings by your numerous popular tabloids?

In this respect our Frenchie has just reminded us of one occasion some years ago when one of these newspapers gleefully disclosed to an avid public the exclusive news that the personal publicity agent (the article included a head and shoulder photo of an attractive, demur-looking brunette) of an English soccer star had made some interesting revelations concerning her employer. The footballer in question had recently been transferred to a foreign club and, according to her, in the absence of country and spouse (she'd preferred to remain in Blighty), had sought and obtained consolation in her arms.

In the following day's edition our footballer (he had hitherto enjoyed a shining public image of model husband and doting father) attempted a brave shot at denying everything *en bloc*. After crunchingly tackling him on this, the young lady counter-attacked by trying to pass herself off as the victim of foul play. At the end of their sporting encounter, she claimed, our soccer star had more than intimated that his official partner just wasn't in the same league, and that the quality of play had been such (apparently even extra time couldn't separate them, and the match was finally brought to a climax in an exciting shoot-out) that he was prepared to consider the contest as more than just a friendly. But now his denial of any form of association other than that imposed by strictly professional requirements caused her to feel cheapened and betrayed. As a result, she was left with no alternative but to come forward and defend her reputation by revealing the whole and nothing but the truth to the great British public who, she was sure, would not hesitate to give our soccer player a red card.

The attractive, demur-looking brunette's credibility was placed in some doubt the following morning, however, when it was revealed she had accepted the tabloid's generous invitation to present an exclusive, fully-detailed, after-match report on the soccer star's on-the-ball performance during the encounter – to appear the next day. But the young lady's plausibility took a really bad knock when the following day's edition showed a prominent

photo of herself, still looking as if butter wouldn't melt in her mouth (together with a much smaller one of a glum-looking soccer star), crouching semi-naked, dog-like on all fours, with a notice dangling from a collar round her neck, proclaiming to all in bold, capital letters that she was **HOT STUFF**. And in true bulldog spirit, the opposite page bore a lengthy, pontificating editorial lambasting the shameful immorality of both!

1.3 Christian Fundamentalism

Not only did Grandma's notion of respectability do its best to erect an impregnable bastion protecting her secret delectation of the carnal from public scrutiny, but surrounded it by a deep moat, the sombre waters of which provided an additional line of defence against any attempt to violate her private affective territory. The result was a general emotional atrophy, characterized by a profound reluctance to express inner feeling of any kind, whether pleasant or not. And in her mind you never even talked, let alone complained about your ailments. You had to 'grin and bear it;' and the only time she really gave vent to her grumbles was when others had the indecency to mention theirs – which automatically prompted an, 'If she had to put up with what I have to, she'd really have something to moan about!'

What exactly Grandma had to put up with always remained a mystery to the child we then were. It was certainly not Grandad, a peace-loving, generous-hearted, mild-mannered sort of man who seemed to go out of his way never to give her the slightest cause for trouble, and outbursts of this kind usually met with bemused resignation on his part. Perhaps in the *oubliettes* of her self-erected citadel there languished a woman of deep passion, and

outraged eruptions of this type were prompted by a subconscious sense of injustice which maintained that, if she made such inhuman efforts to conform to the rigid dictates of Puritanical repression, it was only right that others should try to do the same.

And what is more normal in a country which counts twice as many religious denominations as cheeses that Grandma's efforts to present an appearance of moral seemliness should have been reinforced by membership of a fundamentalist Evangelical sect whose austere creed demanded extreme sobriety of worship (no statues, no musical accompaniment to song, no graven images, no official minister), along with a literal interpretation of the Old Testament, and the strictest plainness of person. For the brethren, the 'respectable' folk of the village, consisting mainly of the mine's managers and deputies (not surprisingly since non-membership of the flock was an insurmountable impediment to promotion), the only road to Salvation involved implacable observance of the Lord's Day in particular, and rigorous abstention from all forms of entertainment in general. As a result, normal distractions such as card-playing, dancing, going to the cinema, playing (even watching) a sport, gambling of all kinds and, above all, imbibing alcohol (at a very early age children were obliged to sign a formal pledge never to touch one single drop of tippie for the rest of their days), were considered so many enticements proffered by Satan.

1.4 Love Thy Neighbour as Thyself

Pleasure-inducing activities of this kind were not only considered to be fiendish traps tempting us away from the straight and narrow but were also associated with the most unacceptable forms of Popery. For on that path of righteousness Roman Catholics, in

their moral levity, and frivolous ritual and ceremonial were so much foreign matter to be swept pitilessly aside.

At least one of these upright servants of the Almighty seemed to have had difficulty in comprehending that the real hard work began once you came home from Chapel. Grandma's nephew, Jacob (a temptation the brethren could not resist was to inflict Biblical names on their progeny), used to tell the story about his father, Israel, a particularly committed member of the sect. As no ordained ministers were allowed, it was chosen members of the congregation who took turns to rise and preach. One Sunday morning, Jacob's father delivered himself of an impassioned sermon on the theme 'Love Thy Neighbour as Thyself'. His verbal endorsement of Christ the Redeemer's exhortations to universal affection among men proved itself rather restrictive in scope, however, when put to a real life test.

Now Jacob, aged around 18 at the time, had recently discovered the innocent bliss of first love with a girl of Irish extraction. Knowing nothing about the young lady, and perhaps with an eye to assessing her eligibility for both the sect and his son, Israel suggested he invited her over for four o'clock tea and cakes the following Saturday. The day duly arrived and, while buttering their scones, Jacob's father, with feigned innocence, asked the girl what her religious persuasion was. On her replying that she was a Roman Catholic, a high velocity bullet could not have matched the speed with which he shot up from his chair and, pointing an imperious finger in the direction of the back door, summoned this daughter of Beelzebub to 'get out of his house right away!' It goes without saying that this enforced departure not only marked a traumatic end to Jacob's romantic idyll, but poisoned all future relations between father and son.

1.5 Childhood Sundays

Nevertheless, our French alter can't stop himself from admiring Calvin, Wesley and crew in a grudging sort of way for having accomplished the awesome feat of turning for so long what could have been a perfectly enjoyable day into such an interminable, daunting ritual for so many. For while on Sundays the French have always been free to do a spot of shopping, go to the cinema, watch a football or rugby match, go for a drive in the country, or simply put their feet up and relax, in a not too distant past, for you English the only alternative to killing time behind a newspaper (or at most, cleaning the car when the weather allowed) was to be frightened out of your wits by grim morning, afternoon and evening sermons on the wrath of God, and the inherent sinfulness of Man.

And since our Dad's parents were also members of this same fundamentalist Evangelical sect, what is more normal that this same strong religious brew should have been forced down his throat during the Sundays of his childhood and early youth? Though in manhood he managed to distance himself from it, this was not enough to spare the young English boy we then were; for even today our Frenglish heart still sinks when we think back to that icy church mustiness, those bum-numbing pews, and the excruciating boredom of the interminable, canting, barely understandable sermons.

So great was his loathing that he would stretch himself out on the sofa after Sunday lunch, and pretend to fall asleep - not because he seriously believed his parents would be fooled by the ploy, but somewhere he hoped that the sight of a little boy reduced to this kind of subterfuge might prompt a modicum of pity. But his attempts to bring to their notice that a forced diet of

morning Church and afternoon Sunday School were more than a little boy could stomach always ended in miserable failure. For an irony-tinged voice would always sound at the appointed hour, 'Come on, wake up, we don't want to be late for Church now, do we?'

Sunday evenings did, nevertheless, provide a slight variation. At that time Dad was employed as a commercial traveller for a wholesale grocery firm, one of whose directors, a Mr Digbert, was an itinerant Methodist lay preacher. Since Mr Digbert didn't drive, Dad, who had just acquired a company car, used to chauffeur him to the different chapels where he was engaged to preach. In return, Mr Digbert bestowed on the family tins of chicken soup and salmon – inaccessible luxuries for most during those immediate post-war years of rationing when families were limited to a packet of margarine and half a dozen eggs per week. Mr Digbert sat in the front, of course, with Dad, while Mum and I sat behind with Mrs May - an attractive, dark-haired woman whose official function was that of Mr Digbert's housekeeper (though the cynicism of later years led us to believe that she probably spent as much time sharing his bed than making it). We still clearly recollect Dad arriving home from work one evening and announcing, thunderstruck, that Mr Digbert had mysteriously vacated his office. Rumour had it that he'd been dismissed for purloining company goods. Whether the allegations were true or not, we never knew: for not only did our Sunday evening revivalist outings come to an immediate end, but the names of Mr Digbert and Mrs May were irrevocably consigned to shameful oblivion.

It was around the age of nine that the deliverance the little boy had so fervently prayed for finally arrived when Dad bought a car of their own. Without further ado, the Lord was sent to the Devil and, like the changing of water into wine, those hated Sundays were miraculously transformed into heady countryside treats and exciting seaside frolics.

1.6 Religion or Superstition?

Even though in later life Dad did manage to dilute that strong religious brew he was obliged to swallow during his childhood and youth he never really eliminated its effects: for they were frequently brought to the rest of the family's notice, usually early on weekend or holiday mornings, in the form of sonorous, painfully out-of-tune renditions of hymns such as *All Creatures of Our God and King*, *Praise My Soul the King of Heaven*, *Onward Christian Soldiers*, *All People that on Earth do Dwell*, to name but a few. Despite the awesome proportions of Dad's repertoire, his particular favourite seemed to be *Love Divine All Loves Excelling*. However, his repetitious singing of the praises of Godly supra-love never enabled him to surmount his own aversion to men with long hair, ear rings, tattoos and, above all, beards (discreetly-sized moustaches were grudgingly tolerated); and to the end of his days he never ceased to castigate this form of facial growth, displays of which were, no doubt, perceived by the Puritan still lingering within as an outward sign of personal vanity in that they were rooted in an excessive concern for the effect produced on others. And though he did his best to suppress these, the results of a rigidly-imposed childhood observance of the Sabbath as a no-work, no-play holy day, devoted exclusively to worship of the Almighty, also re-surfaced whenever he caught sight of a line of washing hanging out on a Sunday morning. On occasions like this, his fury could only be compared to that of a bull close to whose nose a bright red rag was being waved.

It might, nevertheless, be thought that Puritan-inspired Sabbatarianism in Britain is now a thing of the past. Broadly speaking, this is certainly the case. A recent newspaper article,

however, would seem to indicate that, in certain backwaters at least, feelings on the matter can still run deep. A short while ago the remote Scottish Islands of Lewis and Harris almost foundered in a storm which blew up over a decision to launch a Sunday ferry service from the mainland. Unfortunately, the very first ferry happened to break down - an incident which was immediately seized upon by some as a manifestation of divine displeasure. Those who consider religion as little more than an elaborate superstition can only have their views confirmed when they learn that the Reverend Minister of the Islands himself described the mishap as a reminder of 'God's Providence,' while one inhabitant had enough faith in the power of divine intervention to declare: 'Anyone who works on a Sunday is making a mockery of God and His laws, but God says He will not be mocked. He has the power to sink a Sunday ferry.' The skipper, passengers and crew had better make sure they don't walk under any ladders over the next few months.