

# Bring Back the Duel

By the time you read this, I'll be in deepest Devon playing cricket. Yes, it's a slow game, played over a whole, languid afternoon, with a long tea break and the odd

streaker interrupting the salubrious proceedings. It is an English ritual like no other, where good sportsmanship is all important and where corked bats are as rare as English sunshine. I picked up cricket late in life and am still unfamiliar with the all the rules, but if one keeps one's eye on the ball, one gets along just fine.

Amateur cricket still requires all-white outfits, swearing is a no-no, and the opposite team claps as one comes in to bat. I play two matches a year: one in Devon, in a private ground that belongs to a friend, and one at Badminton, the seat of the Duke of Beaufort, whose team I represent against the village outfit. In all the time I've played, running close to 15 years, I have never heard a swear word or rude remark—and I include the time when a friend of mine smoked a joint in the outfield, fell asleep, and lost our opponents the match. (Not by default—it wouldn't be cricket—but by the ball getting stuck under his immobile body.)

Mind you, this is private, privileged England, during the month of June, and the game is cricket, not soccer. As Peter Hitchens recently wrote in these pages, Britain is now a lawless place, with no-go areas for whites, dangerous drug gangs guarding their respective turfs, and aggressive hooliganism in the football terraces. If, say, Winston Churchill, who died in 1965, came back for a brief visit, he'd assume the Almighty sent him to the wrong place—Palermo at best, or Chicago during Prohibition.

In short, English life and manners ain't what they used to be. So much so that the great Paul Johnson used a whole *Spectator* column some years back to explain his astonishment and delight when a beautiful young woman offered him her place in the Tube. Such gestures, wrote Paul, always generate geniality, and other people notice and are edified. "There is no doubt that good manners are not a superficial activity. They serve a moral purpose. They are the outward and visible sign of an inner unselfishness, a readiness to put others first, and an exercise in self-restraint which defines the essence of civilization." Manners, of course, are the antithesis of brute force. They hide our real thoughts and intentions and subdue our natural belligerence.

The duel was a perfect example of good manners. Instead of brawling and murdering each other in the street,

untimely death. The putative insult to Thornhill was that Cholmley stomped him after a long evening of drinking at a pub. Just before he expired, Cholmley admitted, "This misfortune was my own fault and of my own seeking." That was a generous but quite untrue gesture; it was Thornhill who had issued the challenge, as proven by a letter from him, which was submitted as evidence at the subsequent trial.

I know, I know, we are living in the 21st century and all that, but I certainly wouldn't mind being challenged by such a civilized man, would you? Although Thornhill was found guilty, he didn't serve a day, and Cholmley's dying gesture was recognized as typical gentlemanly behavior. My recurring daydream is that the chivalric days of yesteryear have miraculously returned and I can save face with the weapons of my choice. Just imagine the fun: Christopher Hitchens vs. Sidney Blumenthal; Taki vs. Frum, Kristol, and Podhoretz (simultaneously); Starr vs. Clinton; Mailer vs. Wolfe; Buchanan vs. Rosenthal, and so on. It would beat dishing the dirt

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duelists would fight—at times to the death—under the rules of a strict code, where cheating was forbidden and cowardice unacceptable. If ever there were a dignified way to settle accounts, the duel was it, and it brought out the best in man. My favorite is the duel between Colonel Richard Thornhill and Sir Cholmley Dering, which took place in 1711 and resulted in Sir Cholmley's

in print, and it would provide a great spectacle for those ink-stained wretches covering the Hill and the White House.

The last duel I know of took place between two men I was acquainted with. Both were gay, both in the closet, both talented, gracious, and gentlemanly. The Marquis de Cuevas, of ballet-fame, fought Serge Lifar, the Russian-born choreographer over artistic differences.

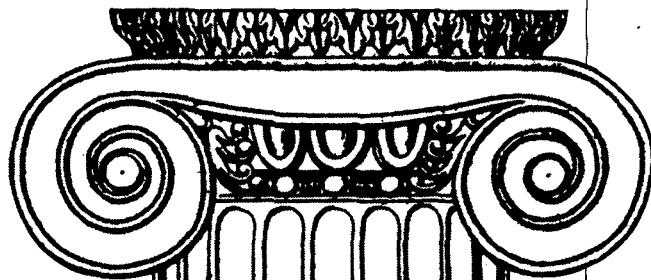
Cuevas was 72 at the time—1958—and Lifar was 53. Lifar had flung his scented handkerchief at Cuevas during the intermission of the Black and White ballet. They met at an estate 50 miles from Paris, and after a lot of weaving and bobbing, Cuevas pricked Lifar in the arm. Then Cuevas burst into tears and collapsed. The bleeding Lifar consoled him. They embraced, and it was all over. Now that's what I call a happy ending. But back to manners.

Nowadays it is normal to assume that etiquette is outdated. The enormous social changes, especially in relationships between men and women and the breakdown of the traditional family, have left people with dilemmas that the old certainties are ill-equipped to solve. (When a modern feminist screams like a fishwife and uses the F-word what is a gentleman supposed to do? Answer in kind? Punch her in the nose? Leave the room? The answer is none of the above. Do not ever come into contact.)

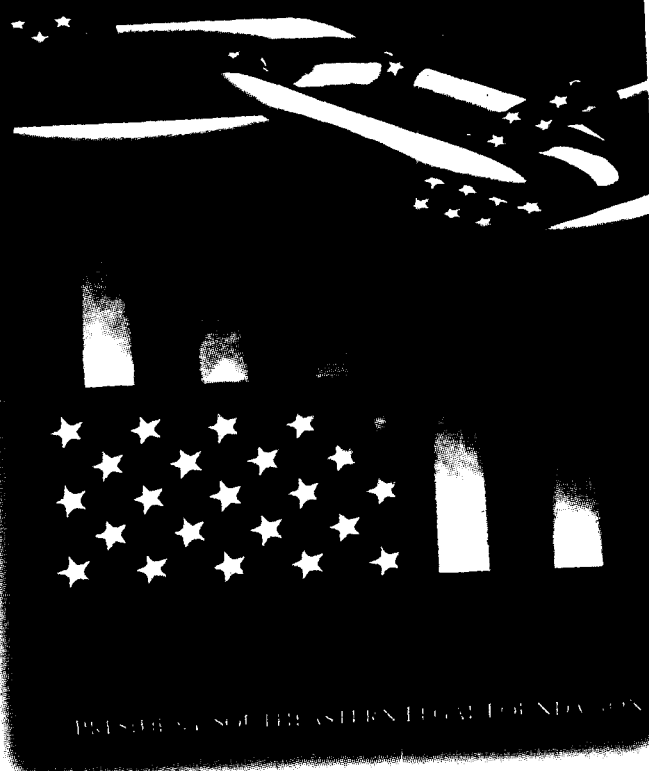
Manners, like the language, are fundamental means of communication and self-expression. Social disintegration comes with the breakdown of etiquette, and nowhere is the collapse more visible than in merry old England. I've been in some pretty rough places during my nightclubbing nights, but London makes me most nervous. At times it feels like anarchy. As Peter Hitchens has written, the cops stay inside the police stations, relying on cameras to record crimes. The bobby on his beat is a thing of the distant past. A lot of it has to do with PC. We in the West have abandoned an ethical basis for society in pursuit of equality of the races and creeds. We expect the government to solve problems that arise from lack of ethics.

When I was growing up in Greece during the war, the individual existed in the context of the family. Government did not have the means to provide for a person what the family best provided. There was no violence to speak of, no crime, no drugs, no vagrancy, no unbecoming behavior in public. Fathers made sure of it. Roger Scruton once wrote, "[T]he principal damage done by liberalism has come from its relentless scoffing at ordinary prohibitions and decencies." The liberal press and Hollywood have been the main culprits in transmitting liberalism's message. In the 1960s the evil duo decided that their mission henceforth would be to champion the deviant, the abnormal, the psychopath, while heaping scorn on the decent, the honorable, and the law-abiding. Family values were laughed all the way to the bank. Step forward all you bald, fat, cigar-chomping Hollywood types.

Now it seems it's almost too late to do anything about it. This is a culture that celebrates meanness as a virtue. It is also the swaggering, boasting, and flaunting of material things by the young, to the glorification of violence as the easy way to acquire these things, to the everyday speech pattern that uses the F-word as an article, an adjective, and a noun. They say that snobbery is really the tribute ordinariness pays to excellence. If that is so, we need more snobbery. It may not be the best way of acknowledging the finer values, but it is infinitely preferable to the pseudo-egalitarianism of denying that they exist. Cricket, however, is still a gentleman's game, and those who play it as amateurs mean to keep it that way. I will keep you posted, but in the meantime, if you plan a London trip, take along your brass knuckles. ■



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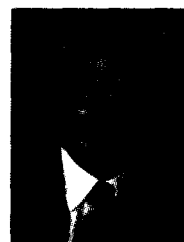
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