

# Why Britain Will Survive\*

BY RALPH WALDO EMERSON

MONTESQUIEU once said, "England is the freest country in the world. If a man in England had as many enemies as hairs on his head, no harm would come to him."

Into English logic an infusion of justice enters, not so apparent in other races—a belief in the existence of two sides, and the resolution to see fair play. There is on every question an appeal from the assertion of the parties to the proof of what is asserted. They kiss the dust before a fact. Is it a machine, is it a charter, is it a boxer in the ring, is it a candidate on the hustings—the universe of Englishmen will suspend their judgment until the trial can be had. They are not to be led by a phrase; they want a working plan, a working machine, a working constitution, and will sit out the trial and abide by the issue and reject all preconceived theories.

I happened to arrive in England at the moment of crisis. But it was evident that let who will fail, England will not. These people have sat here a thousand years, and here will continue to sit. They will not break up, or arrive at any desperate revolution, like their neighbors; for they have as much energy, as much continence of character as they ever had. The power and possession which surround them are their own creation, and they exert the same commanding industry at this moment.

I find the Englishman to be him of all men who stands firmest in his shoes. They have in themselves what they value in their horses—mettle and bottom. On the day of my arrival in Liverpool, a gentleman, in describing to me the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, happened to say, "Lord Clarendon has pluck like a cock and will fight till he dies"; and what I heard first I heard last, and the one thing the English value is *pluck*. The word is not beautiful, but on the quality they signify by

it the nation is unanimous. The cabmen have it; the merchants have it; the bishops have it; the women have it; the journals have it.

The Englishman has stamina; he can take the initiative in emergencies. He has that *aplomb* which results from good adjustment of the moral and physical nature and the obedience of all the powers to the will; as if the axes of his eyes were united to his backbone, and only moved with the trunk. I know no place where any personal eccentricity is so freely allowed. An Englishman walks in a pouring rain, swinging his closed umbrella; wears a wig or a shawl, or a saddle, or stands on his head, and no remark is made. He has been doing this for generations; it is now in his blood.

In short, every one of these islanders is an island himself, safe, tranquil, incommunicable. He is never betrayed into any curiosity or unbecoming emotion. They have all been trained in one severe school of manners, and never put off the harness. In mixed or in select companies they do not introduce persons; so that a presentation is a circumstance as valid as a contract. Introductions are sacraments. The Englishman withholds his name. At the hotel, he is hardly willing to whisper it to the clerk; if he gives you his

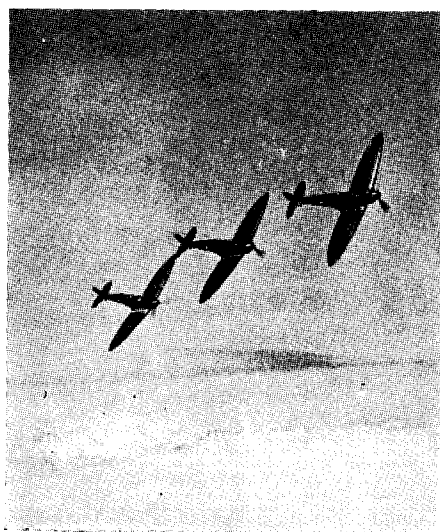
private address on a card, it is like an avowal of friendship.

Domesticity is the taproot which enables the nation to branch wide and high. The motive and end of their trade and empire is to guard the independence and privacy of their homes. Nothing so much marks their manners as the concentration on their household ties. This domesticity is carried into court and camp. Cobbett attributes the huge popularity of Perceval, Prime Minister in 1810, to the fact that he was wont to go to church every Sunday, with a large quarto gilt prayer-book under one arm, his wife hanging on the other, and followed by a long brood of children.

They keep their old customs, and pomps, their wig and mace, sceptre and crown. A hereditary tenure is natural to them. Their leases run for a hundred and a thousand years. They have difficulty in bringing their reason to act, and on all occasions use their memory first. The favorite phrase of their law is, "a custom whereof the memory of man runneth back to the contrary." The barons say, "*Non-lumus mutari*," and the cockneys stifle the curiosity of the foreigner with "Lord, sir, it was always so." All their statesmen learn the irresistibility of the tide of custom and have invented many fine phrases to cover this slowness of perception and prehensility of tail.

A sea-shell should be the crest of England, not only because it represents a power built on the waves, but also the hard finish of the men. The Englishman is finished like a cowry or a murex. After the spire and the spines have formed, a juice exudes and a hard enamel varnishes every part.

The laborer is a possible lord. The lord is a possible basket-maker. Every man carries the English system in his brain, knows what is confided to him, and does the best he can. The chancellor carries England on his mace, the midshipman at the point of his dirk, the smith on his hammer, the cook in the bowl of his spoon. The very felons have their pride in each other's English stanchness. A great



—From "Their Finest Hour."  
Spitfires in Formation

\*The title of this article, of course, is our own. When published originally by Ralph Waldo Emerson almost a century ago, it was called "English Traits." It is published here for whatever pertinency it may have toward our times in general, and today's headlines in particular. This essay appears in condensed form, with changes in sequence for purposes of emphasis and pertinency.

ability, not amassed on a few giants, but poured into the general mind, so that each of them could in a pinch stand in the shoes of the other; and they are more bound in character than differenced in ability or in rank.

In politics and in war they hold together as by hooks of steel. They embrace their cause with more tenacity than their life. These private, reserved, mute family-men can adopt a public end with all their heat, and their strength of affection makes the romance of their heroes. The difference of rank does not divide the national heart. In Germany, there is one speech for the learned, and another for the masses. But in England, the language of the noble is the language of the poor. In parliament, in pulpits, in theaters, when the speakers rise to thought and passion, the language becomes idiomatic; the people in the street best understand the best words. And their language seems drawn from the Bible, the Common Law and the works of Shakespeare, Bacon, Milton, Pope, Young, Cowper, Burns, and Scott.

They are rather manly than warlike. When the war is over, the mask falls from the affectionate domestic tastes. But they know where their war-dogs lie. Cromwell, Blake, Marlborough, Chatham, Nelson, and Wellington are not to be trifled with, and the brutal strength which lies at the bottom of society, the animal ferocity of the quays and cockpits, the bullies of the costermongers of Shoreditch, Seven Dials, and Spitalfields, they know how to wake up.

In war, the Englishman looks to his means. Before the bombardment of the Danish forts in the Baltic, Nelson spent day after day, himself, in the boats, on the exhausting service of sounding the channel. Lord Collingwood was accustomed to tell his men that if they could fire three well-directed broadsides in five minutes, no vessel could resist them; and from constant practice they came to do it in three minutes and a half.

They rely on the simplest means, and do not like ponderous and difficult tactics, but delight to bring the affair hand to hand; where the victory lies with the strength, courage, and endurance of the individual combatants. They adopt every improvement in rig, in motor, in weapons, but they fundamentally believe that the best stratagem in naval war is to bring your ship close alongside of the enemy's ship and bring all your guns to bear on him, until you or he go to the bottom. This is the old fashion, which never goes out of fashion, neither in nor out of England.

This highly destined people, if it had not somewhere added the chamber of patience to its brain, would

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not have built London. I know not from which of the tribes and temperaments that went into the composition of the people this tenacity was supplied, but they clinch every nail they drive. They have no running for luck, and no immoderate speed. They spend largely on their fabric, and await the slow return. Their leather lies tanning seven years in the vat. At Roger's mills, in Sheffield, where I was shown the process of making a razor and a penknife, I was told there is no luck in making good steel; that they make no mistake, every blade in the hundred and in the thousand is good. And that is characteristic of all their work—no more is attempted than is done.

They have a wonderful heat in the pursuit of a public aim. Private persons exhibit, in scientific and antiquarian researches, the same pertinacity as the nation showed in the coalitions in which it yoked Europe against the empire of Bonaparte, one after the other defeated, and still renewed, until the sixth hurled him from his seat.

The nation sits in the immense city they have builded, a London extended into every man's mind, though he live in Van Dieman's Land or Capetown. Faithful performance of what is undertaken to be performed, they honor in themselves, and exact in others, as certificate of equality with themselves. And if all the wealth in the planet should perish by war or deluge, they know themselves competent to replace it. They have made the island a thoroughfare, and London a shop, a law-court, a record-office, and scientific bureau, inviting to strangers—a sanctuary to refugees of every political and religious opinion; and such a city that almost every active man, in any nation, finds himself at one time or another forced to visit it.

And in the complications of the trade and politics of their empire, they have been equal to every exigency, with counsel and with conduct. They are a family to which a destiny attaches, and the Banshee has sworn that a male heir shall never be wanting. They have a wealth of men to fill important posts, and the vigilance of part criticism insures the selection of a competent person. One thing is plain: this is no country for faint-hearted people. Don't creep about diffidently; make up your mind, take your own course, and you shall find respect and furtherance.

Their practical power rests on their national sincerity. Veracity derives from instinct, and marks superiority in organization. Wellington discovered the ruin of Bonaparte's affairs by his own probity. He augured ill of the Empire as soon as he saw that it was mendacious and lived by war. If war

(Continued on page 17)



# The Myths of the Mountains

DARWIN, MARX, WAGNER — *CRITIQUE OF A HERITAGE*. By Jacques Barzun. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 1941. 420 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by RUBIN GOTESKY

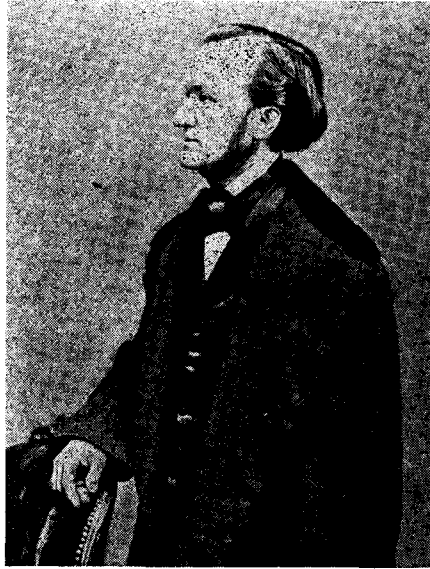
**D**EBUNKING and iconoclasm have recently undergone an inversion. Writers no longer attack only the old, the traditional, the conservative; these have acquired a new respectability. Now writers have discovered that God and Design and Philosophical Idealism and Capitalism, though old and crumbly, still have their saving graces.

A distinguished leader in this new school is Dr. Jacques Barzun who, in a thought-provoking and stimulating book, "Darwin, Marx, Wagner," smashes down these three great idols of modern radicalism. He finds, for example, that Darwin and Marx were not scientists. Wagner he views as a bad aesthete, a degenerate composer of tinsel opera and a philistine. All three seem to him "pilferers" of other men's ideas, conspicuously lacking in originality.

What is the real evil these men have wrought? According to Dr. Barzun, these men were exponents of "mechanical materialism," which he describes as the philosophy of matter which holds that "the source of everything in the universe including life and consciousness." Darwin, for example, sought an explanation for the evolution of life in terms of natural selection. Marx sought an explanation for the evolution of society in terms of production and the class struggle. In the case of Wagner, we have a materialist of a special kind: the "artistic materialist."

What evil does Dr. Barzun see in "mechanical materialism?" Its evil is that the world is made a place of dancing atoms without purpose, mind or creativity. Consequently, mechanical materialism has destroyed ethics, made Machiavellianism the dominant morality and substituted the search after power for the brotherhood of man.

No indictment against three men could be more terrible. If all of Dr. Barzun's essential accusations are correct, then it was the gravest misfortune of modern times that these men were born in the nineteenth century; or, indeed, that they had ever been born. We can grant, certainly, many of Dr. Barzun's premises, but individual interpretation allows for reservations on others. It is certainly true that neither Darwin nor Marx discovered the whole truth about life or society.



Richard Wagner

It is true that Darwin, Marx, and Wagner were influenced by the ideas of other men. But it is questionable whether either Marx or Darwin can be justly accused of plagiarism, for both were scrupulous of their intellectual debts. It is also true that Marx and Wagner were arrogant, self-centered, and ambitious men. But it is not true that Marx's self-centeredness and consequent inability to understand men led him to believe in force as the "midwife of progress."

In attacking Darwin's specific contribution to biology, Dr. Barzun is in reality repudiating only the unwarranted extension of Darwin's theory to society, where it has only a limited application. The author talks of "purpose" in life, of Lamarck and Samuel Butler, but he does not try to discover why experimental biologists have failed to turn *en masse* to Lamarck.

Did Darwin exclude "purpose"? Obviously not. He recognized sex and hunger as the two essential drives in all organisms. But these drives can not explain of themselves the transformation of species; and what Darwin sought was an objective principle, testable by evidence, which would explain evolution. Where could he find such a principle? Only by examining the relation of organisms to their environment. Darwin observed two facts: first, that sex is essentially a function of the ability of organisms to obtain food, and secondly, that the amount of food in any given environment is usually less than the amount required. From these two facts, Darwin inferred a struggle for existence between species and organisms. Is this principle subject to verifiable tests? It is. Further Darwin tried to find an observable

principle for the transformation of species through this struggle for survival.

Darwin found his principle of explanation in the presence of organic differences between members of a species and between species in any given environment which are advantageous or disadvantageous in the struggle for existence. He called these differences *accidental variations*; and with good reason. No one has yet shown that these differences are purposefully produced by organisms or species. Organisms are born with these differences and use them. Darwin assumed that these variations are always small and continuous. He was mistaken, but his mistake in no way invalidates the general principle. In this respect, at least, Darwin was no "pilferer."

Dr. Barzun is correct in saying that Marx is the logical continuator of Darwin's theory of evolution. But Marx made a very necessary correction to Darwin, which allowed space for the action of men's wills and consciousness. Darwinians like Spencer applied the doctrine of natural selection to the social scene without any limitations. Marx, however, recognized that social development had to be explained, not in terms of biological variations, but in terms of social variations introduced into the production and distribution of goods and services in a given society.

In the last section of his book, Dr. Barzun proposes a reform of modern thought which is essentially a return to philosophical idealism. His idealism, however, is compounded with relativism and the pragmatic method. He proposes idealism in order to restore consciousness, will, purpose in the universe, and to provide assurances that nature is friendly to our essential needs and interests. Relativism is recommended because it helps to limit our ideals and hopes within cognizable boundaries. The pragmatic method is included in order to function as a precise test for our ideals and ideas.

The implications of Dr. Barzun's new philosophical trinity are intriguing. We should like to know how God, Will, Consciousness, and Purpose can be theoretically re-established throughout the universe. It would be interesting also to discover the precise pragmatic tests for determining their re-establishment as scientific facts. Finally we should like to discover concretely what good this re-establishment would do us individually and socially. Meanwhile Dr. Barzun has left us with a provocative sketch of his philosophy of the future.