



The English National Character: The History of an Idea from Edmund Burke to Tony Blair

Peter Mandler

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What kind of people are “the English”? What characteristic traits and behavior (if any) distinguish them from other people? This highly original and wide-ranging book traces the surprisingly varied history of ideas among the English about their own “national character” over the past two centuries.

Two hundred years ago, the very idea of a national character was novel and not very respectable. Today, it is again difficult for the many who think of themselves as unique individuals to imagine a “national character” that binds the English together in a national unit. But in between, as Britain became a democracy, “national character” became part of the national common sense, reflected in depictions of "John Bull" and his twentieth-century successor, the "Little Man," and in a set of stereotypes about English traits, follies, and foibles. Not at all shy to talk about themselves, the English have produced a vast outpouring of material on what it means to be English—material on which this book draws: lectures, sermons, political speeches, journalism, popular and scholarly books, poems and novels and films, satires and cartoons and caricatures, as well as up-to-the-minute social science and public opinion research.

In this comprehensive and lucidly argued book, a leading historian of modern Britain challenges long-held assumptions and familiar stereotypes and proposes an entirely new perspective on what it means to think of oneself as being English.

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