

The Passing of the English

by [Ralph Berry](#) (February 2023)



Changing the Guard, Edward Bawden, 1925

CHORUS: *He is an Englishman!"*

BOATSWAIN: *He is an English man!
For he himself has said it,
And it's greatly to his credit,
That he is an Englishman!*

*For he might have been a Roosian,
Or French, or Turk, or Proosian,
Or perhaps Itali-an!*

CHORUS : *Or perhaps Itali-an!*

BOATSWAIN: *But in spite of all temptations
To belong to other nations
He remains an Englishman!*

That was *H.M.S. Pinafore* in 1878. To be English was at the top of the world's rankings, as all agreed. With the people went their homeland. England was the domain of that chosen people, co-inhabited by a handful of deserving foreigners—Isambard Kingdom Brunel, the Rossettis, earlier Herr Haendel—who brought additional luster to the native stock. A quick glance at today's boat migrants signals the passing of that priority. The Russians have dropped out of the ratings, while the Prussians and Turks have some support but not among the Channel boat people. France is the country from which the intrepid boat people set sail, but curiously no migrant wishes to take advantage of the asylum and stay there. They all head for that borne from which no traveller is returned, Britain.

England is subsumed in Britain, a fact widely observed in the mainland. It is impossible for the migrants to become English, a condition of birth and upbringing. No such test applies to British. It is doubtful if all of the travellers even aspire to be British. It is enough to make the landfall in Britain,

after which they can make a serious living in crime. Sufficient documents can be found or forged to placate the authorities. Eventually the dynamics of chain migration will lead to the official minority status of the English, for the threat to the English is not illegal but legal migration. It is a process urged on by leading politicians, who believe that a safe route to legal migration is the answer to the nation's problems. The chronic housing shortage is thus made permanent.

The latest census asks us whether we consider ourselves 'English' or 'British,' a truth before which jesting Pilate did not stay for an answer. The nation is being transformed before our eyes, with scarcely a genuine challenge other than Migration Watch UK.

For a glimpse of this transformation, consider the Coronation of the late Queen Elizabeth II in 1953, now often revisited on TV. The mist procession passes before us in the black-and-white images of the day, the colour version being oddly less real and suggestive of the era's Hollywood movies. All the participants are white, there being no demographic reason why things should be different. The actors come from vanished castings. The Archbishop of Canterbury really looks like a prelate, not a term that comes readily to mind of the current primate, or York. The Maids of Honour are all of aristocratic family and are stunningly attractive. They would have been presented at Court, a practice which ceased in 1958 together with debutantes. In that same fatal year Macmillan created Life Peers, a category now widely despised which led to the marginalization of the hereditary peers. 92 survived in the Lords through a deal brokered by Marquess Cranborne, a direct descendant of the first minister of Elizabeth I. His action led to his sacking by William Hague, one of the founders of modern Britain. Cranborne then quit the Lords, declining to submit details of his finances as the new law required. We are driven to the melancholy conclusion that our current hereditaries are too impoverished to fear that inquisition.

And it is true that no prime minister has gone to the Lords

since James Callaghan. They would feel uncomfortable in the company of those they had elevated.

The figures to appear in the Coronation film came out of Debrett. We must wait till May 2023 to find out what the Coronation of Charles III tells us about the state of the nation. The imagination touches lightly on diverse Maids of Honour, a distinction which the planners will veto. Diversity would be controversial, and 'honour' even more so. So there will be no special place for the English. The unforgiving cruelty of the camera tells us the way we were, and the way we are now.

And yet the eternal English remain. That superb film *An Englishman Abroad* (1983), written by Alan Bennett and directed by John Schlesinger tells of an encounter in Moscow between the actress Coral Browne and the exiled spy Guy Burgess. He is an alcoholic living in a drab apartment and wants one thing above all others. The comrades, he says, are not good at clothing. Can she arrange to have a suit made by his old tailors? She can, and a diverting sequence shows her at his Savile Row tailors and their records. No questions are asked at 'Mr. G. Burgess' though a slight twitched eyebrow indicates that his identity is understood. The word is always discretion. At the nearby store however her request for pyjamas meets indignant opposition before being overborne by Browne, who points out that countless adulterous deeds have been performed by wearers of those same high-grade jimjams. The commission is concluded and the clothing safely received by Burgess. The final wintry scene is of Burgess stepping out over a bridge, stared at by the Russians as he flaunts the splendour of his well-cut suit. The swelling background music is *Pinafore*, for Burgess, a traitor to his country, remains an Englishman.

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Ralph Berry has spent his career in Canadian universities, ending with the University of Ottawa. After that, he took a Visiting Professorship in Kuwait University, followed by the University of Malaya. In recent years he has written for *Chronicles* magazine. His hinterland is Shakespeare, but not as a figure of Tudor history. Shakespeare's works are a mirror to today's issues and themes, through which we can better understand today's politics.